

Notes on the Program

by James Bagwell

Composer, pianist, and conductor **Lukas Foss** (1922-2009) was once described by musicologist Wilfred Mellers as “a pocket history of American music during the 20th century.” Indeed his compositional style is hard to define. His music ranges from essentially neo-classical, through postmodern deconstruction, minimalism, serialism, and the improvisatory. He once told *The New York Times*: “I would agree that my curiosity has led me absolutely everywhere. But I make one qualification: I have never done anything at the O. K. time. In other words, I’ve never been a bandwagon jumper. I’ve never belonged to any school. I’ve never written a 12-tone piece when it was fashionable to do so.”

Born in Berlin, Foss began studies in piano and theory with Julius Herford. Herford introduced him to the works of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven among others. On a side note, Herford came to the United States in the 1930s and eventually became a mentor for Robert Shaw; in the 1970s, he was the choral scholar at Indiana University, where he trained some of the finest choral conductors of that generation. A refugee from Nazi Germany, Foss moved to the United States in 1937. He later became a fixture at Tanglewood, where he studied conducting with Serge Koussevitzky. In 1953, Foss succeeded Arnold Schoenberg as head of the composition department at the University of California at Los Angeles. New Yorkers will remember Foss as the conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic from 1971 until 1990.

Commissioned by the Stockbridge Bowl Association (an early environmental protection organization in Massachusetts) in 1955-56, *Psalms* consists of three sections. Part I is a short setting of Psalm 121, verses 1-2, and verse 4 of Psalm 95. The second and longest part of the piece is a highly rhythmic and imitative setting of Psalm 98. The third movement is a setting of the first three verses of the 23rd Psalm. The work was written during Foss’s early neo-classic period, which is clearly reflected in the fugal writing in Part II; it is scored for mixed chorus, soprano and tenor soloists, and two pianos.

The musical career of **Harold Farberman** (b. 1929) has taken him from the percussion section of the Boston Symphony Orchestra to the podium of major orchestras throughout the world; from composition studies with Aaron Copland to commissions for Lincoln Center and the score for an Academy Award-winning film. In January, Mr. Farberman recorded his fourth opera, *Diamond Street*, a one-act comedy set in 19th-century Hudson, New York. He now teaches a master class for conductors at Bard College.

Mr. Farberman composed *Talk* in 2008 with The Dessoff Choirs in mind. He writes about the piece:

I live in a small town in New York’s beautiful Hudson Valley and generally have breakfast in a small diner in the company of local villagers.

The conversation is generally about the up-front, difficult topics-of-the-day and therefore an invitation for speculation and “face the facts and tell it like it is!” exchanges and solutions.

The four movements are attempts to convey particular points of view of a variety of fascinating fellow morning diners.

1. “Cataclysmic” started with a warning by one of the locals of what’s ahead for the world and provided the following proof: “Did you know that the word cataclysmic contains the words last act and tic as in the tic-toc of a clock, except it’s a broken time-piece?”

2. *The man who is attached to cataclysm has a long-time fidgety friend who is attached to the premise that a disaster is imminent and whatever it is, it is his fault. "Paranoia" is the result.*

3. *The polar opposite of the above diners is a reserved, focused, well-contained man. He is a student of American Indian tribes in the Valley and always offers sound advice for living life differently, and quietly, in tune with nature. The entire accompaniment is the note 'G.'*

4. *"Double Talk" is any argument on any topic. Same evidence, alarmingly different views. It's a Hudson Valley remake of Rashomon.*

Kyle Gann (b. 1955) teaches music theory, history, and composition at Bard College. He was the new-music critic for *The Village Voice* for 19 years, and is the author of five books on 20th-century music. He also writes the "American Composer" column for *Chamber Music* magazine. He studied composition with Ben Johnston, Morton Feldman, and Peter Gena. Mr. Gann's music is often rhythmically complex, as in tonight's *Transcendental Sonnets*, and microtonal (not the case tonight). In 2007, Dessoff performed the world premiere of Mr. Gann's setting of "my father moved through dooms of love" by e.e. cummings. This evening, the group presents the New York premiere of *Transcendental Sonnets*, originally scored for mixed chorus, soprano and tenor soloists, and orchestra; it will be heard in this performance with piano. In an introduction (written in August 2001) to the score, Mr. Gann supplies the following notes:

Jones Very (1813-1880) was the son of two cousins who never married: his father a roving sea captain, his mother an outspoken atheist. This was a difficult beginning for a young man in 19th-century Salem, Massachusetts, and Very compensated by becoming intensely religious, and by enrolling at Harvard, where he won the distinguished Bowdoin prize for his essays, graduated second in his class, and was afterward hired as a Greek tutor. In September of his third year as tutor, 1838, he began telling his students that the Holy Spirit was speaking through him. The President of Harvard immediately removed him, and Very was placed in an asylum for a month and released when his caretakers confirmed that he was harmless. In the next year and a half, Very wrote over 300 poems of an ecstatic nature, some of them written from the points of view of God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. "[N]one can hear," he wrote with touching poignancy, "the man grown silent in the praise of God."

Luckily, before the onset of his madness—if madness it was—Very had been befriended by several members of the Transcendentalist movement, including especially Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. His supporters were struck with the insight with which Very dissected and deconstructed the souls of the people he met and harangued, prominent ministers among them. As the redoubtable Transcendentalist scholar Perry Miller puts it: "By 1839 insanity was a hazard the Transcendentalists were prepared to run.... The Transcendental theory of genius practically demanded one or two mad poets; most Transcendentalists were not quite prepared to sacrifice themselves, and Very vindicated the theory by proving a willing victim." In 1839 Emerson collected and edited some sixty of Very's poems and essays and had them published in book form.

Very's poetic output from this period comprises a little-known and fertile fount of Western mysticism. As a poet he has been aptly criticized for the narrowness of his range and the monochromaticism of his tone—and yet the elegantly natural concision of his language and the penetrating power of his metaphors result in many unforgettable passages. The intensity of his ecstatic state sometimes melts away syntax, leaving behind

passages worthy of a post-Calvinist Gertrude Stein. Very foresaw that his ecstasy would last not much more than a year. In late 1839 it faded, and although he was finally licensed to preach, he had retired by 1843, and lived out his last four decades in shadowy obscurity, still writing poetry that—by then devoid of the Holy Spirit's infusions—had become mechanical and pedestrian.

A regular pilgrim to Walden Pond since the early 1980s, I have nurtured a lifelong fascination with Transcendentalism; this is not the first time I have set its poetry. All of the poems by Very I chose for Transcendental Sonnets are from the 1838-39 period, and all of them are sonnets—overwhelmingly Very's favorite genre, and the one in which he did his most eloquent work. "The Son" is one of his best-known, most widely reprinted verses. Many of his finest poems are dark portrayals of an earth peopled by the walking dead, those who live outside daily communion with God: I felt that I should impose on the audience no more than two of these, "Enoch" and "Faith." I was touched by "Enoch"'s sad image of a lonely God walking on the earth and its quintessentially Transcendentalist point that the true temple of God isn't churches of stone and wood, but the human soul. "Love" appealed to me for its very musical image of a long journey brought around again to its starting point. The final song is made up from two of his most mystical sonnets, both titled "The Word"; I omit the last six lines from the first poem, which paint too contrasting a mood.

In setting texts I always allow the text to lead and to suggest the style of the music, with the result here that the songs suggest historical idioms more directly than anything else I've written. The project, as I saw it, was to find within the context of postminimalism a style, or several styles, of contrapuntal choral singing which would be gratifying to sing. The first movement, "The Son," was drawn very much from the structure of the poem, with the addition that the four parts of the choir each introduce their lines of text independently, in echoing but contrasting melodies. The remaining four movements follow—though always within a postminimalist context, with its limitation of harmonic materials—a stylistic progression from the music of Very's youth to the present day. "Enoch" represents the 18th-century American hymn and fugal tune (one might say a "Stravinskyized" William Billings); "Love," a 19th-century romantic choral style; "Faith," a more dissonant, modernist relationship of harmonies; and "The Word," a postmodern conception fusing aspects of minimalism with the rhythmic ideas of Henry Cowell and Conlon Nanarrow, attempting more than the others to capture Very's ecstatic state. I hope that this symphony of American psalms will be a testament to our native, Yankee brand of spirituality.

I offer my inexpressible thanks to James Bagwell and the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir for making the composition and performance of this work possible. While working on it, I had a feeling that I was born to write this piece: that the spirit of Jones Very had been following me for many years, impelling me toward Walden Pond, to Emerson's house, to the bookstores of Concord, Massachusetts, endlessly asking, When are you going to write my songs? I could dedicate the piece to no one more appropriate than my father, who sang in choruses his entire life, and who especially loved music for chorus and orchestra.