

Three Water Songs

Program notes by the composer

This triptych arose from a concept I proposed for a composition contest. The set was later commissioned (in 2022) by Ember Vocal Arts, Deborah Simpkin King, Conductor, and The Greenwich Village Chamber Singers, Michael Sheetz, Conductor.

I chose as my first two texts “All Day I Hear the Noise of Waters” by James Joyce and “Waterfall at Lu-shan” by the 8th-century Chinese poet Li Po. I then crafted a third, original text about an environmental problem that increasingly concerns me and now turns up often in the news, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

I set each text separately, without connectors between the three pieces. All three settings are *a cappella*, adding optional simple atmospheric nonpitched percussion parts (triangle, cymbal, tam-tam, snare and tenor drums). The first two are carefully-detailed art-folios, using evocative atmospheric madrigalisms on their obvious images, in my characteristic tonal-modern style with conventional meters and rhythms. These are in the “civilized aesthetic art song” realm. By contrast, the last setting (GPGP) develops into a vigorous semi-chanted satirical rant about the horrifying modern environmental issue of plastic in the oceans. A trillion microparticles and growing daily. . . how do you even wrap your mind around that?

“All Day I Hear the Noise of Waters” is a super-gloomy, mediocre existential-woe-genre poem with obvious imagery—thus *ideal* for setting to music, like the mostly cliché verses that the Elizabethan lute-song and madrigal composers made golden ditties from. My setting uses mostly four-part writing (with a few *divisi*), and moderate vocal ranges. It is suitably dour in mode and manner, slow, melodic, built around a sad descending-then-rising tune that starts over an *ostinato* of slightly sliding notes in the men on the word “moan” (could I be more obvious?). A middle section varies these structural elements and evokes the crying seabird; the final section is a return of the opening texture, with an almost-resolving harmonic conclusion. Wet gloom prevails.

Li-Po’s famous poem, “Waterfall at Lu-shan,” though Chinese, has some features of a sort of double-length Haiku—no narrative, just description; simple glimpses of something striking in nature; then a pithy summary phrase giving a single flash of inspiration. In this setting, all voices are divided (eight parts), and there is more high writing. A nearly-static opening in the upper voices evokes the sunlight on the glistening stones, and then in the low voices water plunging into the bottom pool. A section of busier overlapping individual lines in a cheerful new key suggests the sparkle and splash of many rivulets of falling water in sunlight. The central Milky Way image is evoked by a quiet whole-tone scale rising slowly across all voices that then seeps back down to accumulate in a swelling cluster, and suddenly the energetic falling waters end the piece, first in many individual overlapping streams again, then the full chorus all combine in a big homophonic phrase to climax on an electrifying God Chord at the final word “Heaven.”

For the third piece I took a completely different tack, in certain sections applying some late 20th century modernist techniques—for a purpose. The piece offers interesting performance challenges in its variety of textures and techniques, from semi-experimental to traditional: First, murky low sustained chromatic clusters evoking dark ocean depths in the men’s voices, here intentionally out of tune and woozily wavering individually—and a suspended sound-fog of plastic microparticles in the women’s, to evoke the Patch environment: its shallow depth, its density, its ickyness, its vast spread.

Then in quick succession a solo octet announcing the Patch, echoed by the plenum; alternating spoken rhythmic group chants, spoken solo “narrations” in amplified mock-National Geographic style, unison tunes, chordal outbursts, descending cluster build-downs, a short traditional harmonized pseudo-anthem

for the Plastics Cartel, a tip of the hat to Frank Zappa's "Plastic People" (his quoted phrase itself a bitter parody of the 60s party hit "Louie, Louie"), and a climactic pseudo-gospel celebration on "Who Cares if We Choke the Ocean's Surface"? , "Masters of the Planet", and "Man/Woman the Destroyer". The piece ends on a chanted *tutti* challenge—**Are We Proud?**—and a final taste of microplastic-infused ocean water . . .

(There are also options for stamping and clapping punctuations in lieu of the percussion, plus hand gestures and simple movement.)

The entire piece is like a sound track with narration for a creepy short documentary video (and could be so used). The message is a sardonic scolding rant about a real problem, sometimes semi-tongue-in-cheek or slightly goofy; not sincere but satirical when seeming enthusiastic, and in the end slightly grim—even a bit cynical. Deal with it.

All Day I Hear the Noise of Waters

by **James Joyce** (public domain as of 2012)

All day I hear the noise of waters making moan,
Sad as the sea-bird is when, going forth alone,
He hears the winds cry to the water's monotone.

The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing where I go.
I hear the noise of many waters far below.
All day, all night, I hear them flowing to and fro.

**

Waterfall at Lu-shan

by **Li Po** (public domain for over 1200 years)

Sunlight streams on the river stones.
From high above, the river steadily plunges--
three thousand feet of sparkling water--
the Milky Way pouring down from heaven.

**

GPGP (Are We Proud?)

by David Avshalomov 2020

(ihhhhhh . . .)

Let us now trumpet the **Great Pacific Garbage Patch**.

GPGP!

GPGP!

Twice the size of Texas
six hundred thousand square miles

GPGP! GPGP!

A hundred thousand tons of plastic debris
between Hawai'i and California
caught in the North Pacific Gyre
(a circulating current pattern)

GPGP

It's mostly microparticles,
not an island of big objects
The floating plastic breaks down
under sun, wind, and salt water,
but it takes *thousands of years*
to break down completely

GPGP

The haze of plastic extends down
about three meters from the ocean surface
There are also lotsa toxic chemicals in there as a bonus
There's one-hundred eighty times more plastic than marine food in this zone
Plastic debris also kills over a million seabirds
and a hundred thousand marine mammals *every year*
by ingestion and entanglement
Whales swallow a million microparticles with every mouthful of seawater
The microplastics are even entering the human food chain from the sea—
even floating in the **air we breathe**.

Think it's a problem?

You betcha!

Think it's a problem?

You betcha!

Think it's a problem?

You betcha!

G, P, G, P! GPGP!

Who did this?

Who did this?

WHO DID THIS?

WE DID!

Every country dumps their plastics
into waters that run out to sea.
Stuff we make from petroleum products,
and when we're done with it we just discard it.

Throwaway culture. The Modern Human Way.

GPGP, GPGP, GPGP, GPGP

The Patch keeps getting bigger.
It help accelerate climate change—
already past the point of no return.

Sure, scientists study it
and measure it
and analyze it
and recommend ways to clean it up.
But nobody is—*yet*.

GPGPGPGPGPGPGP

Who cares if we choke the ocean surface?
Who cares if we starve its living creatures?
Who cares if the creatures all eat plastic?
Who cares if we suffocate the corals?
Who cares, who cares, who cares___ *if the oceans die-eee?*

After all, we are Masters of the Planet
our Scriptures say so, *right?*
Masters, Masters of the Pla—net.
So we can do what we want with it, RIGHT?

PLASTIC PEOPLE, OH BABY NOW, YOU'RE SUCH A DRAG!

Let us highlight this awesome achievement:
Unchecked, the Garbage Patch will surely extend
to cover all contiguous oceans,

until we can say that we have

killed

all

the

Giant

WATERS!

Who is more powerful than Man, the Destroyer?

Who is more powerful than Woman, the Destroyer?

Who is more powerful than We, the Destroyers?

-

GPGP

Are we *Proud*?

-

GPGP

Are we *Proud Proud Proud ?*

-

GPGP

Are we *Proud*?

Are we *Proud*?

-

GPGP

Are we *Proud*?

Are we *Proud*?

Are we *Proud*?

-

Are we *Proud Proud Proud Proud PROUD?*

-

-

ARE __ WE __ PROUD?

(ihhhh)