CHORAL SINGER

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Kevin Siegfried

"At the Water's Edge"

A tiny stretch of the New England seacoast has inspired numerous American writers, poet Robert Frost and novelist John Irving among them. It is where Maine meets its neighbor to the south, at the only spot where otherwise land-locked New Hampshire reaches out to the Atlantic Ocean. The border between the two states is described by another writer, Sara Orne Jewett:

Two large rivers join just below the village at the head of tidewater, and these, with the great inflow from the sea, make a magnificent stream, bordered on its seaward course now by high-wooded banks of dark pines and hemlocks, and again by lovely green fields that slope gently to long lines of willows at the water's edge.

This slice of coast, with inland access via natural waterways, figures prominently in American history. But if you were to approach Kevin Siegfried's "At the Water's Edge" seeking a recounting of

Indian wars or heroic deeds, you would not find them. This lovely choral work, commissioned by the Community Chorus at South Berwick (Maine), celebrates vistas little changed since Jewett, a Berwick native, described them in the late 1800s. Siegfried's guiding principal for all four movements was to attain the folk-like lyricism that attracted him in the text.

At first, Siegfried was asked to write only four or five minutes of music based on one of several Jewett texts suggested to him. But that was before he became familiar with the author's work. A relatively new resident of the coastal area, he was drawn in by her poetry and prose, "so connected to his own local landscape." He soon developed a larger vision.

The composer selected four very different texts with the idea of creating one larger piece from what he calls "miniatures." This stylistic inspiration came from the work of the late Daniel Pinkham. Siegfried greatly admires Pinkham's ability to build up a large work

through many short movements. "Without any obvious effort to be profound," Siegfried says, in the end Pinkham achieves precisely that, "through the dynamic contrast of smaller forms." The Berwick commission provided an opportunity to try his hand at this approach.

I. Top of the Hill

Siegfried describes the first movement as "a little hymn to the landscape of the town and the community" – a tender evocation reminiscent of Thornton Wilder's "Our

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Repertoire

Kevin Siegfried

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Town" (see Resources). And there is, indeed, a hymn-like richness of voices moving together in four-part harmony through *cut time*. However, the composer warns against performing the movement too rigidly or too fast. "It should be very *rubato*… the lines free, dwelling on the words" as they demand. "The text should be the rhythmic guide." This becomes abundantly clear where he intercuts the 2/2 meter with brief passages of 3/2, such as "breathe the sweet air in," and "the whole year's fairest one" (see music, right).
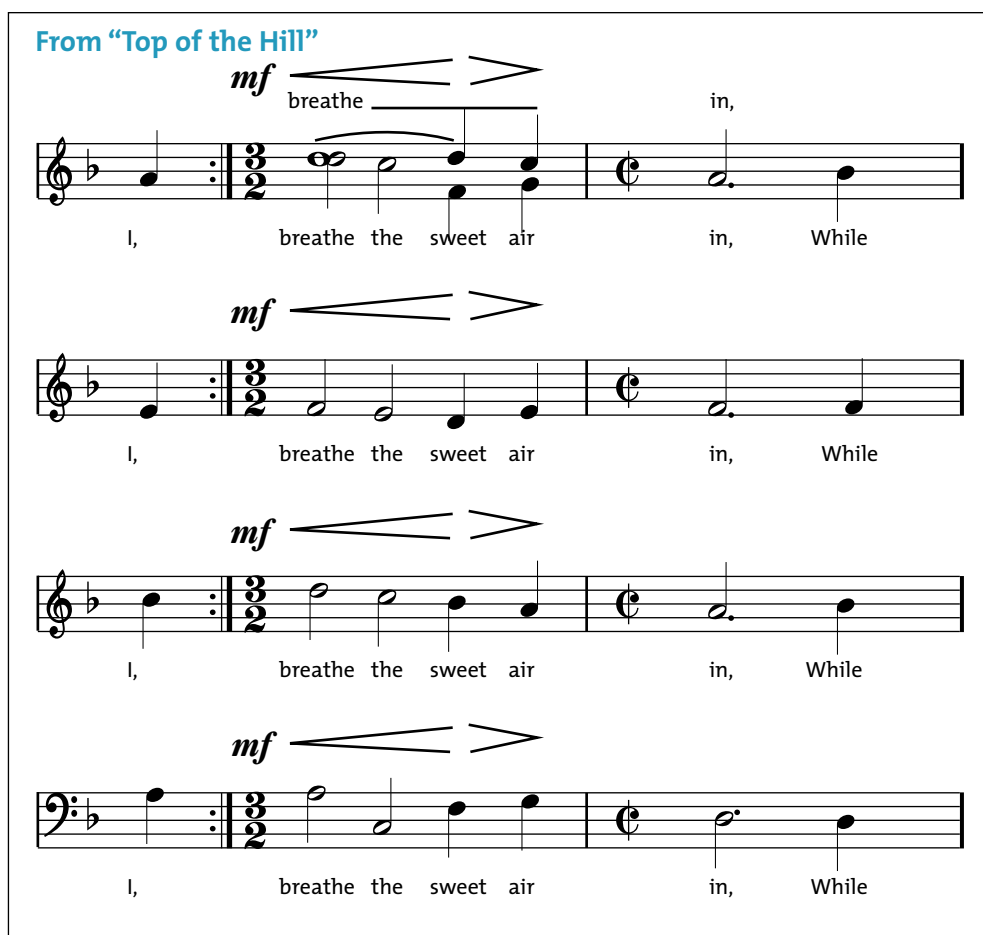
II. Boat Song

In October 2002, Daniel Pinkham explained to *Choral Singer* readers that his compositions were *affective* (see "Doctrine of Affections," *CS*, Apr. 03, p. 4). That is, in his music he sought to *affect* the listener emotionally through his interpretation of the text. The opposite of this approach is called *programmatic*, in which the music is meant to *represent* what is going on in the text (see "Getting with the Program," *CS*, May 05, p. 3,).

If ever a text cried out for the representational approach, it is Sarah Orne Jewett's "Boat Song." In Jewett's cadences the reader cannot fail to detect the gentle lapping

From "Top of the Hill"

and overlapping of "little waves that plash and call." Siegfried's setting of "Boat Song" achieves this aurally through successive passages of 3/4, 3/8, 7/8 (see illustration, p. 7).

Yet, Siegfried "did not choose this notation." He explains, "This is the approach we take with other people's music… we imagine them setting out their tools and logically going about constructing their

work." But it's not always so. According to the composer, he "worked on the idea in his head for a long time… and then just transcribed it." The 3/4, 3/8, 7/8 metric juxtaposition came to him already fully formed. As the music stared at him from the page, it became clear that "this was indeed the right mechanism to keep things going." While "At the Water's Edge" is principally an *a cappella* work, somewhere along the line it also became clear to Siegfried that "Boat Song" had to have a harp accompaniment. Why a harp?

Repertoire, cont.

"The gentle attack of the harp seemed best matched to the text of this movement," and suggestive of the "folk-like lyricism" of Jewett's poetry. For practical purposes, he is, however, open to the accompaniment being performed on the piano, or better yet, "maybe even a hammer dulcimer!"

III. In Restless Waves

The third, extremely short movement is the composer's one nod to the region's historic fishing/seafaring past.

God bless them all who die at sea!
If they must sleep in restless
*   waves,*
Oh, make them dream they are
*   ashore,*
With grass above their graves.

The words are the last stanza of a longer poem "Gloucester Mother." This "little bit of darkness, conflict and unrest," he says, "came to him from out of the blue" in the final stages of composition.   In re-reading his original thoughts about Jewett's work, Siegfried concluded this kind of reflective stanza was needed in order to bring about an effective resolution in the fourth movement.

IV. The Eagle Trees

According to the composer, Sarah Orne Jewett "saw New England as a thorny tree with sweetness at the core: a tough shell that hides a tender sensibility. New Englanders have an objective solidity that could be a metaphor for the trees." The verses of this poem about the watchful "great pines" "have a strength and severity something like the poet observes." They are set in a stately 4/4.

The poignant refrain of the poem brings in the image of the river, which is "central to the seacoast region for the people on both sides of it."

Companionship of birds and
*   trees!*
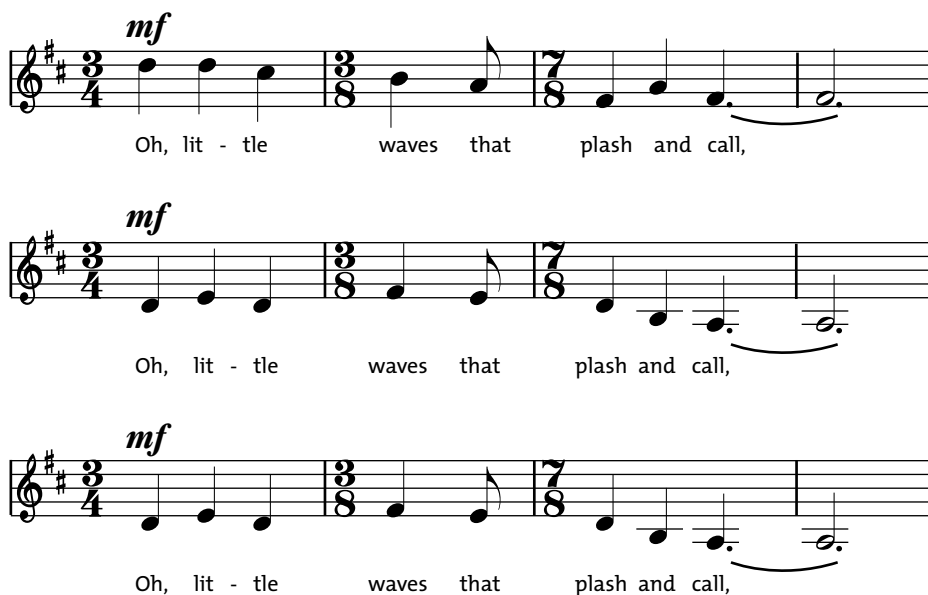*The years have proved our*
*   friendship strong,*
We share each other's memories,
The river's secret and its song.

From the outset, Siegfried fell in love with this refrain and knew it had to play an important role in the movement. He sets it lyrically in 3/2, ushering in the "tender sensibility" mentioned above.

"At the Water's Edge" premiered in March 2006. It is available for license directly from the composer. A commercial recording by The Tudor Choir (see Resources) is due to be released later this year. In the meantime, the composer has graciously given *CS* permission to host "Boat Song" from a live demo. "New compositions are so reliant on recordings," he says. *CS* hopes this small sample from "At the Water's Edge" will inspire many choruses to perform this evocative work. ▌

From "Boat Song"

Oh, lit - tle   waves that   plash and call,

Oh, lit - tle   waves   that   plash and call,

Oh, lit - tle   waves   that   plash and call,