

# Musical Collaboration Creates ‘A Heaven of Song’

THREE ACADEMY POETS HAVE THEIR WORDS SET TO MUSIC



NICOLE PELLON

**Music Instructor Ryan Turner and the Concert Choir rehearse “Three Horizons.”**

Listen to the performance at [www.exeter.edu/webextraswinter2011](http://www.exeter.edu/webextraswinter2011).



**T**he fall performance of “Three Horizons,” a musical premiere commissioned by Exeter’s Concert Choir, was an evening of superlatives, by all accounts. Based on a collaboration of the Concert Choir; PEA English Instructors Todd Hearon, Matt Miller and Ralph Sneed; and Dover, NH-based choral composer Kevin Siegfried, the approximately six-minute piece brought together “an amazing cross-pollination of artistic talents,” says Miller. “I was grateful to have been included, and humbled by the artistry of everyone else involved.”

“I’d been wanting to work with a living composer and have a piece commissioned for Concert Choir,” explains Ryan Turner, music instructor and Concert Choir director since 2006. When Turner’s wife, Adjunct Music Instructor Susan Consoli Turner, suggested using the work of PEA poets for lyrics, he recognized the tremendous potential. Turner immediately turned to Hearon, Miller and Sneed, all prize-winning poets whose work he

describes as having “a lyricism that lends itself to music.”

## Finding the Right Composer

Turner, who believes that “music may be the ultimate Harkness conversation,” wanted to focus on the collaborative aspects of the project, from beginning to end. “I knew that Kevin would be very hands-on in the process,” he explains. When Siegfried asked early on about “the strengths and weaknesses of the ensemble,” Turner knew he had found a composer whose instinct to engage with students would give them a role in the creation, and would result in a musical piece appropriate to the choir’s capabilities.

“The unique feature of this commission was the fact that I would be setting the poetry of three different contemporary poets,” explains Siegfried, who teaches at The Boston Conservatory and is known internationally for his choral compositions. “‘Three Horizons’ is essentially a study in contrast and juxtaposition. The distinct musical voice of each movement creates an environment through which to listen and experience the poetry. . . . The resulting musical work is like an art gallery wall that displays three different art objects by the same artist: a watercolor, a sculpture made of glass and metal, and a video installation.”

## Selecting the Poems

The poems that make up the composition are very different in structure, tone and mood. Siegfried was first drawn to Miller’s “Club Icarus,” which describes a father watching his young daughter as she falls from a plane crash, to be saved at the last second by uplifting wings. “I was intrigued by the rhythms of the text and by the way it breathlessly moves across the page. I ended up changing meter nearly every measure to realize the spoken rhythms of the text, and gradually modulating the choir upward throughout the piece to create a sense of falling through the sky.”

“Surfer’s Eulogy” by Sneeden appealed to Siegfried for its form, “lulling and musical in its repetitions. Each line ends with one of three word endings: ‘return,’ ‘horizon’ and ‘goodbye.’ I wrote three melodies for each of these line endings, which mirrored the form of the poem.”

Excerpts from Hearon’s “Strange Land” rounded out the trio because it, like the others, was “suggestive of a kind of landscape or horizon . . . with its evocative and lyrical imagery.”

**“It Felt Like It Somehow ‘Belonged’ to Us”**

Concert Choir met with the poets during an early rehearsal so that members could ask about the authors’ intentions, and get a more complete understanding of the poems. At this rehearsal, the poets heard the music performed for the first time, marveling at how it enriched their work. For Turner, this rehearsal was a Harkness high point: “I was most impressed with how the students interacted with the poets. Their level of understanding and desire to engage with the lyric was inspiring.”

A week later, Siegfried came to rehearsal to hear the evolving sound, answer questions and provide direction. Conversation was broad—including sung pronunciation of words and tempo. Experienced as a teacher and clearly comfortable with the Harkness model, Siegfried suggested that the students decide how to resolve the last piece—whether to finish on an a cappella note or close with piano. Working with Turner, the students experimented, choosing an a cappella ending initially, and after rehearsing a bit more, returning to the composer’s original composition, which called for a piano ending.

For Concert Choir member Tiffany Tuedor ’13, alto, the highlight of the project was being able to “ask the teachers and composer questions about the poems and music. I had a deeper understanding of the pieces after hearing from the artists directly. The product felt much more believable after the critique. I was very grateful to be a part of the performance and I hope that Mr. Siegfried and the poets were proud.” Tuedor’s favorite movement was “Surfer’s Eulogy” because of the “three very different pieces of music that intertwined together. The warm, rich tones of the humming choir and the crisp, articulate aspect of the chanting choir worked together to complement the piano.”

“‘Three Horizons’ was a new experience,” says Theo Motzkin ’11, baritone. “It demonstrated how fluid music can be. Usually, you’re presented with a score, and you have to sing what’s written—but when you’re working on a piece that’s been specially commissioned for you, the execution is a little more flexible. . . . We didn’t really change anything in the end,

but the possibility was always there. Specially commissioned works allow for a different sort of relationship with the music; it felt like it somehow ‘belonged’ to us.”

Although none of the poets had ever imagined their poetry set to music before the project, they were delighted with the results.

“I was chilled and amazed by what Kevin did with the poem and the way the kids performed it,” says Miller. “Kevin really nailed the feelings I was going for. The sense of falling and yet some angelic uplifting ran underneath it. He and the singers raised a little poem scratched in a notebook to something bigger than I ever envisioned it could be.” Miller adds, “Kevin’s composition and the work of Ryan and the choir helped to raise my poem a little bit out of its primordial muck to get closer to a heaven of song.”

Sneeden—whose poem is in villanelle form and builds on the image of a surfer, now dead, paddling toward the horizon—felt a similar growth in his poem’s dimensions. “As a writer, I’m always working to dampen the stiffness of formality, to mute the mechanics. When the poem was sung, all of that seemed to break down; the poem’s essence became more mysterious, worked against all of that formality, the ‘rules’ I was obeying. I’ve always thought that music amplifies form (especially rhyming), but it was just the opposite. . . . For me, Kevin’s and Ryan’s work seemed to capture, literally and synaesthetically, the way that ocean waves fold into each other, overlap.”

“Three Horizons” is PEA’s first commissioned original work of music to use lyrics by faculty poets. Jackie Thomas, who retired as Academy librarian in 2010, sponsored the project through funds from the Friends of the Academy Library.

“Three Horizons” premiered on November 21, 2010 in Phillips Church. Turner conducted Exeter’s Concert Choir, with piano accompaniment by Radmila Repczynski.

**“The resulting musical work is like an art gallery wall ...”**

—Nicole Pellaton

---

*“Strange Land” by Todd Hearon is the title poem of his collection Strange Land, published in spring 2010. “Club Icarus” by Matt Miller will be published in the Harvard Review. “Surfer’s Eulogy” by Ralph Sneeden was published in Sneeden’s collection Evidence of the Journey, published in 2007.*