

## **Forces of Nature: Celebrating the Earth**

*“It is simply unbelievable how happy flowers are.” ~ Osho*

Since time remembered, humankind has been moved by the power and beauty of nature. The changing seasons, thundering waves, blowing winds, the secret conversations of birds and the warming reassurance of the sun: myriad forces mark the vast repertoire of life’s daily persistence.

Music has long drawn upon the sounds and rhythms and moods of nature. In *Forces of Nature: Celebrating the Earth*, Melodia Women’s Choir has selected unique choral reflections that open doors to the spirit behind the natural world.

Our first selection, **Samuel Barber’s** *Sure On This Shining Night*, sets the mood of wonder when “high summer holds the earth.” With lyrics from a poem by **James Agee**, the song is one of the composer’s most famous works. Barber originally wrote the piece for solo voice and then adapted it for mixed choral voices. **Emily Crocker**, a choral director and award-winning composer in Milwaukee, has arranged the work for women’s voices.

*Mountain Nights #1*, a wordless song by **Zoltán Kodály**, is pure atmosphere, using clusters of notes and a Hungarian folk rhythm in the alto melody. The piece builds to an exciting climax and finishes much like it begins, this time with an eerie soprano solo that hangs in mid-air.

*Ver (Spring Song)* is a later composition from a pair of medieval songs in Latin by one of Israel’s most eminent composers, **Yehezkel Braun**. Braun, winner of the Israel Prize in 2001, is a scholar of modal harmonies and spent a year at the Benedictine Monastery in Solesmes, France in 1975 to study Gregorian chant.

“There came a wind like a bugle; it quivered through the grass,” wrote **Emily Dickinson**. In *Nature*, **Ernst Bacon** takes this evocative poetry for his text. The shifting tonalities in the voices narrate a whirling scene, while the piano plays like the wind, furiously blowing through a drowsy town at dusk, and disappearing as suddenly as it came. As Dickinson concludes: “How much can come/And much can go,/And yet abide the world!”

The mini-cantata, *Four Seasons*, composed by Chinese-born American, **Zhou Long**, draws on ancient Chinese poetry from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Zhou is recognized as an innovator for blending the aesthetic concepts and musical elements of East and West.

These miniatures include an impressive variety of vocal sound effects: onomatopoeic vowels create echoes of birds, while vocal *glissandi* (slides between notes) imitate traditional instruments like the *erhu*, a small violin played vertically and balanced on the knee. Zhou’s elegant vignettes describe the seasons. In *Spring*, bamboos sway behind blossoming peach trees; in the steamy mists of *Summer*, the sight of a mountain emerges and retreats; in *Autumn*, a crescent moon mirrors the water as Li-Bai, a revered Taoist poet, sails the Yangtze; and, in *Winter*, a cry of birds haunt the leaden sky.

We have culled a quintet of songs from *A Goodly Heritage*, a cantata for women’s voices by the English composer, **Gordon Jacob**. Jacob integrates verse from **Christina Rossetti**, **Richard Lovelace**, **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, **John Bunyan** and **William Shakespeare** to create a pastoral panorama: lambs “woolly white,” a day in the life of a grasshopper, the deepening stillness of evening, an insistent cuckoo, and the supreme pleasure of simply lying in the grass.

Next, Melodia is honored to present two pieces by Welsh-born composer, **Hilary Tann**, one a U.S. and one a New York premiere. Tann's *Contemplations* is a reverie of water and woods with lyrics from Psalm 98 and a poem by Anne Bradstreet, the first published woman writer in Colonial America.

The second selection, *Wellspring*, was commissioned by the Llangollen Festival and Melodia presents its U.S. premiere performance. Based on a poem by **Menna Elfyn**, the text echoes the words of a Welsh hymn -- "Today, the well has open'd." The sentiment is in perfect harmony with "Kenya - Water is Life," an organization supported by this concert that is dedicated to building wells in needy African communities and was founded by former Melodia singer Joyce Tannian.

Our final selection in *Forces of Nature* is a sextet of pieces, *earthsongs*, by **Ronald Perera**. Commissioned by the Smith College Glee Club, *earthsongs* is drawn from the profound and sometimes whimsical early works of the poet, **e.e. cummings**. The songs are, in the words of the composer, "a celebration of the renewing forces of spring, the instinctual, erotic side of human nature, and the hand of God in the natural world."

*O sweet spontaneous earth* erupts in a joyous swoop of renewal and rebirth. The verses poke fun at the wheedling, cloying attempts of academics to define and contain the earth's wonders. Nature consistently replies only one way -- "with spring."

A second work, *in Just-spring*, paints a season of delights -- "mudluscious" and "puddle-wonderful." Children at play practically tumble over each other, while an odd balloon vendor adds his own tune, utilizing the hidden talents of whistlers to sound the final measure.

Perera's *as is the sea marvelous* ebbs and flows in a simile for eros, as waves of affection break upon the shore of a lover's lips. Triumphant horn calls are heard over a galloping piano accompaniment in *All in green went my love riding*, which is full of tongue-twisting alliterations and hints of medieval allegory and Greek myth.

The renewal of the elements in *when god lets my body be* describes the circle of life and death, memories embedded in nature and a lover's recall. The final composition, *i Thank You God*, is, in Perera's words, "a hymn to the Creator." Voices and piano build to a canon in four at several different speeds. The sheer joy and happiness of "this most amazing day" cannot be contained.

*Program notes contributed by Colleen Christi, with Cindy Cooper and Cynthia Powell.*