

High Bridge

Performed October 25, 2003

This evening's concert features two works, Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Toward the Unknown Region* and Charles Fussell's *High Bridge*, with texts by two of America's most distinctive poets, Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. The two poets had much in common, including their use of powerful, evocative and often unconventional imagery. Their poetry clearly resonated with the two composers; Vaughan Williams repeatedly turned to the poetry of Whitman as has Fussell with that of Crane. In between the two choral works is an equally evocative and innovative soundscape by Ingram Marshall, *Fog Tropes*.

Although Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was to become the pre-eminent English composer of his generation, he started slowly and did not publish his first composition until he was thirty. He had read history at Cambridge and taken a doctorate in music history at the Royal College of Music, and much of his activities had involved editing early English music, collecting English folksong, and editing the Anglican hymnal, for which he did compose a number of hymn tunes. He had been introduced to Whitman's poetry by fellow undergraduate Bertrand Russell, and in 1904 Vaughan Williams was struggling to set the Whitman poems which would become *A Sea Symphony*. It was Gustav Holst who suggested that he set that aside and select a text that both would set in an informal competition. The text they chose was Whitman's 1868 poem *Darest thou now, O soul*, which Vaughan Williams completed as *Toward the Unknown Region* in 1905. The piece was premiered in 1907 at the Leeds Festival to great acclaim and became Vaughan Williams' first important composition.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) had burst onto the scene of American letters with the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Written in free verse, his poetry was exuberant, expansive, colorful, sensuous, sometimes erotic, and above all, highly personal, much of it being written in the first person and even referring to himself by name. He himself wrote several "anonymous" reviews of the work, creating a larger than life persona for the poet. Although *Leaves of Grass* attracted little attention at first, Whitman continued to add material. With the third edition in 1860, which contained the *Children of Adam* and *Calamus* poems in which he openly addressed his homosexuality, he began to achieve a measure of critical success.

Personally, however, he was mired in what he called a "slough of despair." Constricted by a dysfunctional family, depressed by the loss of his job as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Times* and disconsolate over a failed love affair with a younger man, he spent his days looking for companionship with the stage drivers who moved goods and people through the city and his nights drinking with a rather Bohemian crowd of writers. Ironically, it was the Civil War which proved to be his salvation. When his brother George was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, Whitman went to Washington in search of him.

While George was not badly wounded, Whitman was greatly affected by the plight of the enormous number of wounded soldiers, and spent the balance of the war in military hospitals, serving as an unofficial nurse, writing letters for them, listening to their stories and bringing them small treats and gifts. He took a clerical job with the Paymaster's Office and began writing freelance articles to fund his hospital work. He resolved to present himself as the picture of health to serve as an inspiration to the wounded and improved both his appearance and his lifestyle. His volunteer work restored purpose and humanity to his life; his great gift to the wounded was that he saw past their wounds and disfigurement and treated them as individuals and friends. The experience was profoundly moving for Whitman and provided a wealth of material which found its way into a steady stream of prose and poetry, including a collection entitled *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, from which the text of *Toward the Unknown Region* was taken.

For such an early work, Vaughan Williams found his own voice to a remarkable extent. There are brief hints of Brahms and the more extensive influence of Wagner, especially in the handling of the brass, but the beautiful, long melodic lines and the exquisite sensitivity with which all the text is set are Vaughan Williams at his finest. He develops two principal themes: a solemn opening which is rather conventionally harmonized for the chorus, and a beautifully expansive and lyrical melody ("nor touch of human hands.") The music builds to a huge climax before concluding with a stirring anthem whose melody is strikingly similar to a hymn tune he had written for the Anglican hymnal and which he archly had called *Sine nomine* (Without a name).

American composer **Ingram Marshall** became interested in the possibilities of electronic music as a graduate student at Columbia in the 1960's, where he studied with Vladimir Ussachevsky. After working briefly at the NYU Media Arts studio in Greenwich Village, he went to study with Morton Subotnick at the California Institute of the Arts, where he became fascinated with the Javanese gamelan which was installed there. He studied Javanese and Balinese traditional music both there and in Indonesia, and has made frequent use of gamelan rhythmic forms and the Balinese gambuh flute in subsequent compositions.

Fog Tropes was originally commissioned in 1979 as a "soundscore" to accompany a piece by performance artist Grace Ferguson. Marshall recorded foghorns, seagulls and other sea sounds from around San Francisco Bay and added falsetto voice and gambuh, all of which was extensively electronically processed (which in those days meant analog processing and was a considerable technical accomplishment.) Composer John Adams invited Marshall to perform the work at the San Francisco Symphony's New and Unusual Music series in 1982, and suggested the addition of live horns to the taped music, creating a sort of trope or overlay. (Musically, a trope is an insertion or embellishment added to a traditional plainsong chant.) It has since received numerous additional performances and has become one of Marshall's most popular compositions.

Fog Tropes has recently been released on CD on the New Albion label, and in the liner notes Marshall explains, "A lot of people are reminded of San Francisco when they hear this piece, but not I. To me it is just about fog, and being lost in the fog. The brass players should sound as if they were off in a raft floating in the middle of a mist enshrouded bay."

Composer Charles Fussell is Professor of Composition at Boston University, Artistic Director of New Music Harvest, Boston's first city-wide festival of contemporary music, and co-founder and Director of the New England Composer's Orchestra. He earned advanced degrees in both composition and conducting at the Eastman School of Music and also studied at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik. He is the recipient of numerous awards including Fulbright, Ford and Copland Foundation Grants and grants from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. *Wilde - A Symphony for Baritone and Orchestra*, which was a collaboration between Fussell and librettist Will Graham, was runner-up for the 1991 Pulitzer Prize. *High Bridge* is Fussell's third commission from Mendelssohn Club. His 1992 *Specimen Days* was recently released on CD on the Koch International label and his 1993 *Invocation* was featured on NPR's First Art radio program. *High Bridge* is also Fussell's fourth composition based on the poetry of Hart Crane.



Although Hart Crane (1899-1932) spent most of his professional life in New York City, he was born in Ohio, the son of a wealthy and pragmatic candy manufacturer and a strong-willed mother. Their divorce when he was seventeen was devastating to him. He quit high school and went to New York, ostensibly to be tutored so that he could enter Columbia, but in reality to further his budding writing career. He made a number of important contacts and did some writing but ultimately was forced to return to Ohio to work in one of his father's candy stores. This did not last and he soon found himself writing advertising copy to support his poetry, finally returning to New York in 1923. Although he had begun to earn a reputation as a poet and even sell some poetry, he was never able to support himself with his poetry and took a variety of what he called hack jobs editing and writing advertising copy. He read voraciously and was very articulate in his criticism and discussion of poets from the Elizabethans to Stein and Pound. This was something of a contrast to his own writing style, which was densely strewn with striking, idiosyncratic and sometimes incomprehensible images and metaphors. He was addicted to wordplay and puns, some of which could be rather enigmatic.

He also developed a reputation for hard living. He drank heavily, got into brawls and cruised the waterfront speakeasies looking for sailors to pick up, which as often as not left him either beaten up or in jail. He considered this edgy lifestyle to be essential for his art, but in fact it made it extremely difficult for him to write and publish, and makes his literary output all the more extraordinary.

In 1924 he began work on the collection of poems which were to become his most famous work, *The Bridge*. Crane had always been fascinated by the Brooklyn Bridge, which was the engineering marvel of its day and a powerful symbol to Crane of the modern age and man's achievement. He was delighted to learn that the apartment where he lived while working on *The Bridge* was the same apartment from which Washington Roebling, the bridge's builder, had supervised its construction after having been crippled with the bends while setting the bridge's footings. Crane envisioned *The Bridge* as an epic work, along the lines of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, embodying the entire country and its entire history in its various poems. While the bulk of the poems were written by 1926, he struggled to revise them for publication, hindered by his increasingly self-destructive lifestyle. When *The Bridge* was finally published in 1930, Crane achieved some measure of success, winning the top award from Poetry Magazine and receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship. He used the fellowship to travel to Mexico, where he intended to write another epic poem based on Cortez and Montezuma. He fell into his old habits, however, drinking furiously and getting into trouble with the Mexican authorities. On April 27, 1932, while on his voyage home, Hart Crane committed suicide by jumping off the ship into the Gulf of Mexico. He was thirty-two years old.

Fussell's *High Bridge* consists of five movements, with the outer four being settings of four poems from *The Bridge*. It opens with *The Harbor Dawn*, in which you are introduced to Crane's striking imagery right away: fog-insulated noises, gongs in white surplices, Cyclopean towers. Fussell is fascinated not only with Crane's language but with the sounds of the words themselves, and his ever-shifting rhythmic patterns are matched to the cadences of the poetry. *The Harbor Dawn* is a tender love poem and is the one movement which in *High Bridge* is unalloyed with any hint of melancholy or unease.

Cutty Sark joins two of Crane's favorite themes, the sea and alcohol, into a rambunctious, drunken spree. There is the somewhat disjointed narration in which Crane adroitly mimics inebriated word slips, the stream-of-consciousness ramblings of the drunken sailor whom the narrator meets, and the song "Stamboul Rose" playing on the nickelodeon in the background, all set to an infectious dance-like beat. Fussell maintains the somewhat complex organization of the poem by giving the narration and drunken sailor texts to the baritone and tenor soli and the Stamboul Rose music to the chorus. As the narrator takes his leave of the sailor and returns home across the bridge, the nickelodeon music intersects with reality as the narrator recalls the vanished tall ships on which he perhaps once sailed. As the chorus sings their names the narrator joins in somewhat wistfully and the movement ends, suddenly quiet.

The third movement is for orchestra only, a musical portrait of the poet which uses some of the material drawn from the other four movements. The fourth section, *Indiana*, is largely set in a beautiful duet for the soprano and alto soli. The poem is in the form of a letter from a mother to her son, who is going off to sea. She speaks almost matter-of-factly about the family history and their hardships, their trek to Colorado as part of the gold boom, their bitter disappointment, her husband's death on their return trip, and her son's birth. She lingers over one transcendent moment, when she sees an Indian woman with a baby. She holds her own baby up and as the two women's eyes meet they are

united in that moment. The letter ends with a plea that her son come back to visit her once more before she dies, very poignant despite (or perhaps because of) the plainness of the language, and beautifully set by Fussell.

The final movement, *Virginia*, is a highly rhythmic scherzo. Crane's wordplay is at its enigmatic best, mixing overlapping allusions, metaphors and images of dice, New York weekends in the park, spring flowers, a fairy tale heroine and the Virgin Mary (whence the poem's title.) Fussell joins wholeheartedly in this wordplay: the "reign" of the crap-shooting gangs in Bleecker Street delightfully falls in descending phrases like a spring rain. After working itself up to a frenetic climax, the music slows and quiets, with the orchestra adding a somewhat pensive and uneasy coda which brings *High Bridge* to its conclusion.

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