

## PROGRAM NOTES: A Great Way to Recite a Poem

The Longfellow Chamber Chorus  
Sunday, August 3, 2008  
The Longfellow National Historic Site Music Festival

The beauty of a well-constructed parlor song is how, beyond the words, music opens a conduit of feeling from poet to composer, from singer to listener—this exploitation of emotion is the key to success of Romantic period artists. Like many people in 19th-century America and throughout the Victorian world, Thomas Lorenzo Jephson, 1808-1897, would have believed that singing was a great way to recite a poem. In 1879, the 71-year-old Irish immigrant—teaching music in St. Charles, Minnesota—sent a manuscript score of his new parlor song, *My Arm-Chair*, to 72-year-old Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “Tho' an entire stranger to you personally,” wrote Jephson, “I have been a loving admirer of your poems for years and of you through them.... Would you be willing to let me have...a photograph of America's Song King sitting in the Elm [sic] Throne? Would it be asking too much?”

Singing continues to be a great way to recite a poem. There were 51 entries in the 2007-08 Longfellow Chorus International Composers Competition. Bob Moore of Jacksonville, Florida, and David Hamilton of Auckland, New Zealand, both chose the same poem, *The Singers*, and both set the poem in the same key—D Major, the ‘key of God.’ “Terrific setting,” wrote Moore in an email to Hamilton after hearing a recording of The Longfellow Chorus singing the premieres of both works on February 24, 2008. “Thanks for that! I enjoyed yours as well,” replied Hamilton to Moore from Auckland, where February is usually the “sunny, hot month.”

“I cannot express to you in words the great pleasure I have had in setting the accompanying songs to some of your sterling poetry,” wrote John Blockley, 1800-1882, to Longfellow, on March 16, 1861. In the poem *Footsteps of Angels*, Longfellow conjures the ghostly image of his first wife, Mary Potter, 1812-1835. *The Rainy Day* describes the poet’s mood during a wet day in 1841 at the Longfellow family home in Portland; perhaps more than any other Longfellow poem used as a parlor song text, *The Rainy Day* captures the sentimental Zeitgeist of the Victorian era.

Today’s premieres of *Daybreak*, by Christopher Wicks, a composer in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, and *Longfellow’s King’s*, by Daniel Morel of Denver, Colorado, bring to eleven the total number of Longfellow Chorus Composers Competition winners premiered this year by The Longfellow Chorus. In compliance with our competition submission guidelines, *A Psalm of Life*, by Roseburg, Oregon, composer Jason Heald, and *Four Songs of the Coast*, a mini song cycle by Keene State College professor emeritus Bill Pardus, are especially accessible, audience-friendly contemporary settings.

John Liptrot Hatton, 1809-1886, was one of Longfellow’s favorite composers; *King Witalf’s Drinking Horn* is a darkly humorous work. Longfellow scholar Christoph Irmscher’s spouse, Lauren Bernofsky, composed our setting of *Christmas Bells*, a poem Longfellow wrote in response to the outbreak of the Civil War. *The Slave’s Dream*, by Swedish composer Johan Gustav Emil Sjögren, 1853-1918, may have been based on the story of a West African prince, Ibrahima, 1762-1808, enslaved in Mississippi. Ibrahima was also the subject of a recent PBS documentary, *Prince Among Slaves*. About his gospel-style setting of *The Slave Singing at Midnight*, composer Peter Durow writes, “Your competition prompted me to

explore [Longfellow's] poetry. Thank you...for encouraging new music." Durow has since been appointed to the music faculty at SUNY Potsdam.

Published by Longfellow in 1875 in both Italian and English versions, *The Old Bridge at Florence* presents a series of riddles about Ponte Vecchio. Emanuela Ballio studied composition in Milan. Her florid, dramatic setting fuses the avant-garde with neo-romanticist elements. *A Psalm of Life*—appearing in both Sanskrit and English musical notation—is part of Sourindro Tagore's *English Verses set to Hindu Music in Honour of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales*, 1875. Edward Rice, born in Brighton, first presented his 1874 burlesque parody of *Evangeline* in Boston's Globe Theater. Longfellow politely declined Rice's invitation to attend. Later, after hundreds of New York performances, this comic opera helped Rice establish a career as a popular early Broadway producer. Actress Faye Templeton, a Broadway icon, made her debut as 'Gabriel, the Roaming Romeo' in 1885.

RONDEL, by Edward Elgar, 1857-1934, is a neglected musical gem. An advisory on the sheet music cover of the 1914 Boosey & Co. edition of *Ships that Pass in the Night*, by T. W. Stephenson, b. 1855, leaves the impression that not everyone took this popular setting of a Longfellow cliché seriously: "This song may be sung in public without fee or license. The public performance of any parodied version, however, is strictly forbidden."

In theory, it is not a good idea for a composer who enters a competition involving new choral settings of poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to change the text of the original poem. Chilean tango pianist Micky Landau's humorous, jazzy *Finale* draws its text from Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Landau's version ends with the un-Longfellow-like sound of the village clock striking one: "Dong." No doubt Longfellow would smile. Melissa Tosh of the University of Redland writes, "I need to send 'Thanks' once again.... I'm up for promotion to full professor;" the first prize we gave her for *Autumn Within* "constitutes a wonderful addition to my portfolio."

—Charles Kaufmann