

An Archive of the musical compositions by Herb Bielawa

Composition: **Sojourner Songs** – SATB a cappella

1. Something 1:51
2. A Small Bird 1:31
3. The Journey 1:23
4. Dance 2:00
5. Your Face 2:18
6. The Magic 1:18

Date: 2004

Recording: by San Francisco Choral Artists directed by Magen Solomon

Program Note:

Several years ago I received a letter from John Gracen Brown inquiring whether I would be interested in setting some of his poetry. His poems are so short, however, that I couldn't find my way with them. In time, however, I did take up the challenge. The general process involved repeating key words of a poem many times and doing this in as rhythmic and gracious way as possible. Gracen Brown's work is undeniably minimalist, so the music also took on some of the same characteristics. This was fine with me because, although I am not a minimalist myself, this particular approach for choral music could be refreshing I thought. In *Dance*, although the harmonic rhythm is quite slow, the note rhythm is sprightly, dance-like. *Your Face* is a love poem which contemplates the face and frame of a lover. To give the piece appropriate grace it features a web of smooth, slowly undulating scalar strands over which is a short songlike melodic fragment. All sections of the chorus take turns presenting both. *The Magic* is a swiftly moving "patter song" reiterating endlessly the mere 12 words of the poem. The harmonic rhythm is quite slow but the note rhythm is, again, fast and scattered. At any given moment each section of the chorus has a vocabulary of only four notes being sung in various transmutations. Toward the end the original poem is presented in its original form as a hovering veil buoyed up by the busy motoric pattering behind. Composing these pieces required an unusually keen attention to the issues of parsing, slicing, and reiterating very few words, while also creating a piece of genuine music. It's not easy.

Texts by John Gracen Brown:

*Something*  
Something pulls me close to you  
and I know not how or why.

*A Small Bird*  
I A small bird chirps  
And the warm sun  
Streams across the sky.

II A small bird chirps  
Is it Spring . . .  
Or is it Fall?  
III A small bird chirps,  
And a cool breeze  
Moves across the earth.  
IV A small bird chirps  
And the soul  
Is lifted.

*The Journey*

The music takes me to where I do not  
know . .  
but there is where I want to go.

*Dance of the Flowers*

The large, fluffy flowers  
Dance and dance  
Among themselves. The  
yellow, the red,  
The orange, and the blue.  
Dance and Dance  
And wave  
Within the wind—  
And in the golden sun.

*Your Face*

Too brief  
and yet too long  
I have studied  
your delicate face  
and frame.

*The Magic of the Hour*

The magic of the hour  
Is enhanced  
By the charm of the melody.