

We Composed It Collaboratively, Like A Forest

by Stephen Jaffe and Richard Powers

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A Forest Unfolding is a collaborative work inspired by recent scientific research into the rich communication and subterranean connectivity between trees. Four writers—the environmentalists Bill McKibben and Joan Maloof, along with the novelists Richard Powers and Kim Stanley Robinson—selected prose passages and poems on the relations among people and trees. They presented these selections to four composers —Eric Moe, Melinda Wagner, Stephen Jaffe, and David Kirkland Garner—who set these words into a linked sequence of recitatives and arias. The resulting whole traces a narrative arc beginning with human estrangement from nature and ending with a glimpse of the endless cooperation that knits a forest together.

The composers themselves communicated and cooperated with one another throughout the process, sharing thoughts on the relations between the texts, exchanging material and musical ideas, and shaping the structure of the larger piece. Their initial substantial discussions already constituted the first steps of composing. They asked which of the proposed texts should be set and in what order. They discussed how they might collaborate while still preserving their individual voices. These early discussions entertained many approaches to collaboration: one of us imagined a single composer creating music for the first stanza of Wendell Berry’s “Native Trees,” leaving another composer to finish it. Others advocated a more defined sequence of songs and interleaved instrumental music in order to produce the fullest possible effect on the listener.

In setting these words to music, the composers needed to engage in musical terms rather than to hew too closely to the rhythms of spoken text. Given so important a subject and such meaningful words, we needed to avoid preaching. (The pitfall of preaching would be to risk alienating listeners by delivering lofty words in an over-solemn tone, rather than keeping their attention through music’s

enchantments). These texts explore the intimate relationships humans share with trees. They revel in the music and interconnectedness of trees, their intelligence and collective agency. They lament our species' alienation and insatiable greed. To have an audience feel part of the circle of telling, the words and music had to be delivered in a variety of manners: spoken and sung, effervescently and with reflection.

We settled on a structure and process that preserved the composers' individual styles: our work is more like a forest than like a garden. We shared sketches—seeds—as we settled on texts. Roots spread. As we noticed the space others were growing into, we sought a musical intertext that could bind the music together. Ideally, that piece would have a textual connection to the theme of natural reciprocity, imbrication, and interdependence. What to choose? Medieval music offered one obvious source, but its religious overtones were too culturally specific and prescriptive. Nineteenth century songs offered another possibility: one of us thought of evoking Franz Liszt's setting of Goethe's poem "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh" ("Over the treetops...silence"). In response, Richard Powers worried that "Romanticism's fascination with nature is, alas, often really a fascination with the brooding and isolated self!" Ultimately we settled on *Der Abschied*, ("The Farewell"), the last song in Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, to lend connective tissue to the whole. The shared fragment—really just a few oscillating notes—never intrudes in a way that distracts the listener into thinking about Mahler. But Mahler's inscription, in its distilled essence, was inspiring, indeed generative as the composers continued to work individually and together. As they gave their musical voices to texts by Anne LaBastille and Henry David Thoreau, Mahler's few shared notes suggested the possibility of renewal and regeneration.

In late fall, Melinda Wagner, Eric Moe, and Stephen Jaffe selected three poems by W.S. Merwin and Wendell Berry, setting each for the soloists, soprano Toni Arnold and baritone Alex Hurd. As Melinda, Eric, and Stephen sent drafts, and some instrumental music, David Kirkland Garner wove everything together with interstitial recitatives. David also composed a culminating aria drawn from the harmonic and melodic underpinnings of his colleagues' songs and

music. In this way, a collective process of many makers yielded an integral work in the cantata tradition about the need for human reintegration with the rest of the deeply collaborative living world. Our greatest hope is that our listeners extend this collaboration and join us for this shared walk in the woods.

A Forest Unfolding was conceived by Richard Powers, Laura Gilbert, and Jonathan Bagg. It was commissioned by Electric Earth Concerts for premieres on August 12, 2018 in Peterborough, New Hampshire and August 18th at the Portland Chamber Music Festival in Maine.

Stephen Jaffe is a composer and Mary and James H. Semans Professor at Duke University. Among his recent works are *Migrations* (Chamber Concerto No. 4) for violin and ensemble.

Richard Powers is the author of *The Overstory* and eleven other novels, including *Orfeo* (2014). A recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, his works have been recognized with the National Book Award and many other honors.