

Sing to Me!

for a *cappella* SATB Choir div.

Music by
John Muehleisen

Poem by
Ella Wheeler Wilcox
(1850–1919)

*Commissioned by Edmonds Community College
in Honor of the 10th Anniversary of the
Committee on Arts, Culture, and Civic Engagement*

*Dedicated with love and gratitude to my dear friends
Laurie Cappello and Kirk Marcy,
whose shining example of Love and Devotion
provides the key to unlocking the deeper meaning of this work.*

Sing to Me!

Sing to me! Something of sunlight and bloom,
I am so compassed with sorrow and gloom,
I am so sick with the world's noise and strife, –
Sing of the beauty and brightness of life –
Sing to me, sing to me!

Sing to me! Something that's jubilant, glad!
I am so weary, my soul so sad.
All my earth riches are covered with rust,
All my bright dreams are but ashes and dust.
Sing to me, sing to me!

Sing of the blossoms that open in spring,
How the sweet flowers blow, and the long lichens cling,
Say, though the winter is round a-bout me,
There are bright summers and springs yet to be.
Sing to me, sing to me!

Sing me a song full of hope and of truth,
Brimming with all the sweet fancies of youth!
Say, though my sorrow I may not forget,
I have not quite done with happiness yet.
Sing to me, sing to me!

Lay your soft fingers just here, on my cheek;
Turn the light lower – there – no, do not speak,
But sing! My heart thrills at your beautiful voice;
Sing till I turn from my grief and rejoice.
Sing to me, sing to me!

– *Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919)*

Program Notes

The following are not program notes in the conventional sense, but the circumstances surrounding the creation of this piece were not conventional either; in fact, they were quite extraordinary. That said, I should really refer to the process by which *Sing to Me!* came into existence as “co-creation,” a wonderful term I have borrowed from my dear friend, the composer Robert Kyr. It's a term that goes way beyond conventional collaboration and implies a deeper sense of shared vision and experience. The following, then, is not as much program notes as it is the story of an experience of co-creation.

On Finding the Right Text for *Sing to Me!*

Every commission is a unique journey, and the process of composing *Sing to Me!* was no exception; in fact, it is one of the most unique and profound experiences I have had composing a new work. Here's the back-story of how the occasion and the life circumstances surrounding this commission influenced my choice of text.

When Kirk Marcy—Director of Choral Activities at Edmonds Community College (EdCC)—first approached me to compose a piece for the college's Symphonic Choir, he already knew that it would be commissioned in honor of the 10th Anniversary of the EdCC Committee on Arts, Culture, and Civic Engagement (ACCE), which administers a campus-wide program whose mission is “to provide diverse and enriching initiatives to our campus and global

community through innovative programming, unique partnerships, and lifelong learning opportunities.” The program grew out of a desire for Edmonds Community College to be a leader in the artistic, cultural, and civic life of the community. To compose a work to celebrate the mission of such a visionary organization was a great inspiration.

As Kirk and I talked in more detail about the commission at our first meeting in June 2012, I asked him for some basic descriptors for his vision for the work, to which he replied with concepts such as Celebration, Coming together, Upbeat, Engaging. I also asked him what his goals were for the work and what outcomes he was seeking. Out of this discussion came phrases such as “The piece should embody the mission of the ACCE program,” “Students should feel like they’re part of something significant,” “Should be an emotionally moving experience for the community, administration, and students,” and “The students should positively remember this experience and the piece 20 years from now.” After considering these lofty goals and the occasion, I thought, “Yikes! How am I going to find a text that captures all these great ideas, let alone compose a piece that embodies them?”

Then everything changed. A month later, in July 2012, Kirk’s dear wife, Laurie Cappello—the choir director at Cascade High School in Everett, WA—was diagnosed with stage-4 ovarian cancer. Although Kirk and I had planned to get together again during the summer to discuss the piece a bit more, needless to say, he had more important things to which to attend. As I followed the progress of Laurie’s treatment on the Facebook page dedicated to supporting this wonderful family through their experience, I was deeply moved by Laurie’s extraordinary faith that all would turn out fine, that she still had a future and a purpose as a choral director, and that she had a lot more music to make with her students. I also became aware of Kirk’s and Laurie’s deep devotion to one another (each one called the other “my hero”). Along with their friends, family, and Facebook support group, we were all on the journey with them, weighing in on the updates and adding our own words of encouragement and support. I also visited them in the hospital in November 2012 after Laurie’s operation, and was deeply moved by their love and devotion to one another, by Kirk’s unflagging support, and by Laurie’s indomitable and positive spirit.

When Kirk and I finally met again a month later in mid-December, 2012, after Laurie was through about two-thirds of the months-long treatment program, our conversation about the commission was very different than when we had originally met in May. None of the criteria for the commission had changed from the earlier meeting, but now there was a new layer of meaning based on the experience that Kirk and Laurie had been through, which informed not only our discussion, but also our concept of the commission. I remember so clearly Kirk saying to me, “I’m not sure exactly how, but I know the experience that Laurie and I have gone through is going to influence this piece somehow.” When I asked Kirk for more specifics, he shared the following phrases with me: “Sing for Life,” “Living for Today and for the present,” “Thankfulness for one more day with my wife,” “A cause to celebrate the successes of the journey,” “Transformative,” “Beauty out of strife,” and most profoundly, “The darkest moments can reveal some of the brightest lights.”

With these new concepts as well as the original purpose for the commission serving as the backdrop against which I would read potential texts, I began the second leg of this compositional journey, you might even say my favorite part of composing journey (and sometimes the most challenging): I began looking for a text...and looking...and looking...and looking...looking at dozens of texts by a wide variety of poets in my large collection of poetry books at home. I normally find the right text much earlier in my search than I did for this commission, but sometimes it can take longer to find the text. And in those cases, what might otherwise be a sense of despair at not finding a text right away is replaced with a sense that the text I ultimately find will be something very special and precious because none of the previous texts had measured up.

Before continuing, I should point out one thing you should understand about composers who base their compositions on texts: We know, we *absolutely* know when we’ve found the right text; likewise, we also know when the text we’re reading is not going to work. How do we know? That’s hard to articulate. Suffice it to say that the search for the right text is an odd mix of reason and intuition, of mind and heart, of “science” and art.

Back to the search: Not having found anything in my own poetry collection, I decided to take a different approach by moving to the internet using search terms that related to the various thoughts and themes Kirk had provided. As I recall, it was while using the search term “hope” that I found the poem *Sing to Me!* by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. With all that Kirk and I had talked about related to the ACCE program and to the experience he and Laurie had shared, I

knew after my first reading of *Sing to Me!* that I had found the text that could capture the celebration of ACCE's 10-year history as well as the deeply moving journey that Kirk and Laurie (and all of their friends, family, and students) had been on for months. Here was a poet whose name and work I had not heard of before, until I read that she is best known for a famous line from her poem *Solitude*: "Laugh, and the world laughs with you; Weep, and you weep alone."

When I'm looking for a text, one of the things that confirms I've found the right one is if I have some sort of immediate musical reaction to it, if I internally hear a musical idea associated with the text. That happened very quickly with *Sing to Me!* In fact I heard the theme I would use for those words upon my first reading of the poem, and when I realized it could serve as a recurring musical idea due to the ample repetition of the text throughout the poem, that locked in the certainty. I also knew it was the right text because of the celebratory nature of the phrase "Sing to me!" and the references to hope, to jubilation, and to rejoicing, which fit well with the commission's original purpose of celebrating the 10th anniversary of the ACCE program. In addition, the juxtaposition of "Sing to me! Something of sunlight and bloom" and "I am so compassed with sorrow and gloom" aptly describe the emotional roller coaster that must characterize the journey of anyone dealing with serious illness. What also won me over was the ultimate triumph of hope over despair, of grief turning to joy. I also found that the intense intimacy of the final stanza so poignantly represented Kirk's and Laurie's devotion to one another. The words "...do not speak, But sing! My heart thrills at your beautiful voice" so appropriately represented not only their relationship, but also the role that music and singing has played in their lives and in Laurie's unflagging confidence that she has more music to make with the students in her choirs. The text, "My heart thrills at your beautiful voice" could equally apply to Laurie's reaction to Kirk and to hearing the encouraging sound of her students' voices when she was in the midst of her treatment. The final statement of hope ("Sing till I turn from my grief and rejoice") not only puts singing in the role of enabling the turn from grief to joy, it reinforces the central role that singing plays in our lives in general and its profound impact on our minds and hearts

So, as I wrap up these program notes, you're probably thinking, "What about the music? He hardly mentioned the music." For me the most important part of the journey of composing any work based on text is finding the right text. If I can find the most appropriate text for the occasion and for the context of the commission, the music will take care of itself. In the case of *Sing to Me!* the backstory to finding the text is so rich and so central to both the choice of the text and to the resulting music that I wanted to share it so that listeners might have a deeper understanding of both the text and of the music that arose organically from it.

This is a work about singing, to be sure, but it's also about hope and faith. It's about the healing power of singing and of love and about their ability to draw us together in a common purpose, whether it applies to students coming together each week to sing in a community college choir as they bring a sonic brushstroke of beauty into the world; or to celebrating the collaborative work of a program designed to enrich the artistic, cultural, and civic life of its community; or even to rejoicing in and giving thanks for the example of two individuals devoted to one another on a journey of uncertainty infused with the light of profound faith. Singing brings us together and imbues us with hope in the midst of despair and challenge. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the Estonian Choral Union, which holds annual choral festivals based on a tradition dating back to 1869. These festivals became a beacon of hope and of protest during the Soviet occupation of Estonia, and today more than 40,000 singers participate in the festival, with nearly 200,000 in the audience in a demonstration of solidarity and community. Ultimately, *Sing to Me!* celebrates all these things, and the music will speak for itself. But most of all—like no other art form can—the music will speak the text and all it represents directly into our hearts and souls with a message of beauty and of hope and of love.

John Muehleisen
June 1, 2013

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Dedicated to Laurie Cappello & Kirk Marcy

Poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

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2013

Allegro energico ♩ = 126 **f**

Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

Sing to me,
Sing to me,
sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me! sing to me!
Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!

Allegro energico ♩ = 126 **f**

* Piano

* for rehearsal only

S
A
T
B

Sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing of sun - light and bloom, —
Sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing of sun - light and bloom, —
Sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing of sun - light and bloom, —
Sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing of sun - light and bloom, —

Pno.

9 *p* *agitato* *mf* *mp*

S I am so com-passed with sor-row and gloom, I am so sick with the

A I am so com-passed with sor-row and gloom, I am so sick with the

T I am so com-passed with sor-row and gloom, I am so sick with the

B I am so com-passed with sor-row and gloom, I am so sick with the

Pno. *p* *mf* *mp*

12 *f* *legato*

S world's noise and strife, Sing of the beau-ty and bright-ness of

A world's noise and strife, Sing of the beau-ty and bright-ness of

T world's noise and strife, Sing of the beau-ty and bright-ness of

B world's noise and strife, Sing of the beau-ty and bright-ness of

Pno. *f* *legato*

17 *f* *f* *legato*

S life- Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing that's

A life- Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing that's

T life- Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing that's

B life- Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me! Some-thing that's

Pno. *f* *f* *legato*

22 *p* *mf* *p*

S ju - bi-lant, glad! I am so wea-ry, my

A ju - bi-lant, glad! I am so wea-ry, my

T ju - bi-lant, glad! *mf* Sing to me, sing to me! *p* I am so wea-ry, my

B ju - bi-lant, glad! *mf* Sing to me, sing to me! *p* I am so wea-ry, my

Pno. *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

28 *mf* *legato* *f*

S soul so sad. All my earth rich-es are cov-ered with rust, _____

A soul so sad. All my earth rich-es are cov-ered with rust, _____

T soul so sad. are cov-ered with rust, with rust,

B soul so sad. are cov-ered with rust, with rust,

Pno. *mf* *f*

28

34 *mf* *legato* *f* *f*

S All my bright dreams are but ash-es and dust. Sing to me,

A All my bright dreams are but ash-es and dust. Sing to me,

T are but ash-es and dust. Sing to me,

B are but ash-es and dust. Sing to me,

Pno. *mf* *f*

34

39 *mf* *legato*

S sing to me! Sing of the blos-soms that o - pen in spring, _____

A sing to me! _____ *mf* Sing to me,

T sing to me! Sing of the blos-soms that o - pen in spring, _____

B sing to me! _____ *mf* Sing to me,

39 *mf*

Pno.

45 *mf* *legato*

S _____ How the sweet flow-ers blow, _____

A sing to me! How the sweet flow-ers blow, _____

T _____ and the long li-chens cling,

B sing to me! and the long li-chens cling,

45 *mf* *legato*

Pno.

51 *mf* > *mp* *f legato*

S Say, _____ There are bright sum-mers and

A Say, _____ There are bright sum-mers and

T *mf* *f legato*
8 Say, though the win-ter is round a - bout me, There are bright sum-mers and

B *f legato*
There are bright sum-mers and

Pno. *mf* *f*

56 *ff maestoso*

S springs yet to be. Sing to me, sing to me! Sing me a song full of

A springs yet to be. Sing to me, sing to me! Sing me a song full of

T springs yet to be. Sing to me, sing to me! Sing me a song full of

B springs yet to be. Sing to me, sing to me! Sing me a song full of

Pno. *ff*

62

S hope and of truth, *mf* Brim-ming with fan-cies of *f* youth!

A hope and of truth, *mf* Brim-ming with fan-cies of *f* youth!

T hope and of truth, *mf* Brim-ming with all the sweet fan-cies of *f* youth!

B hope and of truth, *mf* Brim-ming with all the sweet fan-cies of *f* youth!

Pno.

68

S Say, *mf* *mp* I have not quite done with *f* *mf*

A Say, *mf* *mp* I have not quite done with *f* *mf*

T Say, though my sor-row I may not for - get, — *mf* *f* *mf* I have not quite done with *mf*

B I have not quite done with *mf*

Pno.

73

S
hap-pi-ness yet. *f* sing to me! *f* sing to me! *ff*

A
hap-pi-ness yet. *f* sing to me! *f* *ff*

T
hap-pi-ness yet. *f* Sing to me, _____ *ff* Sing to me, _____

B
hap-pi-ness yet. *f* Sing to me, _____ *ff* Sing to me, _____

Pno.

78

*Adagio lusingando** $\text{♩} = 72$

S
G. P. *p* tenderly Sing to me. _____ Lay your soft fin-gers just

A
G. P. *p* tenderly Sing to me. _____ Lay your soft fin-gers just

T
G. P. *p* tenderly Sing to me. _____ Lay your soft fin-gers just

B
G. P. *p* tenderly Sing to me. _____ Lay your soft fin-gers just

Pno.

* lusingando = caressing, alluring

just here, on my cheek; *rit.* -----

84

S here, on my cheek; just here, on my cheek; just here, just here, just

A here, on my cheek; just here, on my cheek; just here, just here, just

T here, on my cheek; just here, on my cheek; -----

B here, on my cheek; just here, on my cheek; -----

84 *rit.* -----

Pno.

90 *a tempo* *p* *pp* *molto rit.* -----

S here, Turn the light low-er - there - no, do not speak,

A here, Turn the light low-er - there - no, do not speak,

T Turn the light low-er - there - no, do not speak,

B Turn the light low-er - there - no, do not speak,

90 *a tempo* *p* *pp* *molto rit.* -----

Pno.

96 *a tempo* *pp* *p* *ff*

S But sing! My heart thrills at your beau-ti-ful voice;

A But sing! My heart thrills at your beau-ti-ful voice;

T But sing! My heart thrills at your beau-ti-ful voice;

B But sing! My heart thrills at your beau-ti-ful voice;

Pno. *pp* *p* *ff*

102 *accel.* *f* *ff*

S Sing till I turn from my grief and re-joice.

A Sing till I turn from my grief and re-joice.

T Sing till I turn from my grief and re-joice.

B Sing till I turn from my grief and re-joice.

Pno. *f* *ff*

Allegro energico ♩ = 126

f

S
A
T
B

Sing to me,
sing to me!
sing to me!
Sing to me, sing to me, sing to me!

f

Allegro energico ♩ = 126

Pno.

106

f

S
A
T
B

Sing to me, sing to me!
sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!
sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!
Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!

ff

109

S
A
T
B

Sing to me, sing to me!
sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!
sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!
Sing to me, sing to me! Sing to me, sing to me!

ff

109

Pno.