Making Peace
for SATB Choir (divisi),
Tenor + Soprano Saxophone (1 player),
and Piano

Music by:
John Muehleisen

Poem by:
Denise Levertov

A joint commission by Choral Arts (Seattle)
and the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory Singers,
Robert Bode, conductor

Dedicated to the memory of the poet Denise Levertov (1923–1997)
and her passion for peacemaking
Making Peace

A voice from the dark called out,
‘The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
*imagination of disaster*. Peace, not only
the absence of war.’

But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can’t be imagined before it is made,
can’t be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid.

A feeling towards it,
dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have
until we begin to utter its metaphors,
learning them as we speak.

A line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making,
revoked its reaffirmation of profit and power,
questioned our needs, allowed
long pauses . . .

A cadence of peace might balance its weight
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
an energy field more intense than war,
might pulse then,
stanza by stanza into the world,
each act of living
one of its words, each word
a vibration of light— facets
of the forming crystal.

Program Note

*Making Peace* was commissioned as part of a Festival in honor of the famed poet Denise Levertov, whose last years were spent in Seattle. Shortly after moving there, she converted to Catholicism and was a member of St. Joseph Parish, where the work is being premiered. Levertov was a uniquely spiritual person, and the path and diversity of her spiritual journey is legendary. Her passionate embrace of Catholicism shaped much of her later poetry, particular that written during the last decade or so of her life in Seattle (1989–1997). Levertov is buried in Lake View Cemetery, only a few blocks from St. Joseph’s Parish.

When I was asked to compose a work for the Levertov Festival, I was excited to finally set something by this wonderful poet, whose work I had admired for years. As I was looking through several volumes of her poems in my poetry collection, I immediately stopped looking when I read *Making Peace*. Rarely have I had the experience of discovering so many layers and threads of meaning, imagery, and metaphor as in the journey of setting this poem. Levertov’s *Making Peace* is a virtuosic tapestry that poetically weaves together disparate elements of language, music, and poetry itself, all to underscore her passionate advocacy of peacemaking as a way of life and her believe that
society can be transformed through transformative love. Regarding the influence of her faith on her later poetry, one Levertov biography says, “In the works of her last phase [in Seattle], Levertov sees Christianity as a bridge between individuals and society, and explores how a hostile social environment can be changed by Christian values.” All this from someone who started her spiritual journey as a self-avowed agnostic.

For those who know my choral works, they will realize that this is quite a different piece for me, not sounding like most of my other works. This “departure” is inspired in part by Levertov’s poem itself, but also by the unique combination of choir, saxophone, and piano, an ensemble suggested by conductor Robert Bode, when he commissioned the work. Being a saxophonist myself, I relished the idea of composing something for my own instrument and, in particular, for Seattle’s own Michael Brockman, who teaches both classical saxophone and jazz studies at the University of Washington and is Artistic co-Director of the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra. I had been aware of his prodigious talent for years, but we had never had the pleasure of meeting in person. Once we did meet over an extended lunch with Robert Bode, Michael was very generous in sharing his time and talent as we explored different ideas for the saxophone writing in this work, even improvising several possible passages together, with me playing piano. No doubt my own background in both classical and jazz saxophone, as well as Michael’s similar background had a significant influence on my musical decisions. As a result, there are manifestations of both jazz and classical traditions in this work: harmonically, melodically, and rhythmically.

In keeping with the general movement in Levertov’s poem, from the amorphous darkness and stasis of the opening to the brightness and energetic pulsing rhythms of the final stanza, the music follows a similar path, increasingly energized and driven by the saxophone and piano, while the choir conveys the meaning and imagery of Levertov’s text. For example, in the musical setting of the third stanza of the poem—“A feeling towards it, dimly sensing a rhythm, is all we have until we begin to utter its metaphors, learning them as we speak.”—the work finally begins to manifest a clearer sense of rhythm, albeit haltingly at first, as the choir struggles to communicate through disjointed, fragmented melodic and rhythmic utterances our faltering attempts to discover how to make peace. This section culminates in the initial text of the next stanza—“A line of peace might appear if we restructured the sentence our lives are making”—which finally achieves a sense of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic fluency. There are many musical analogies in this work to Levertov’s masterful use of language, which she uses to describe how individuals and societies struggle with making peace, both internally and externally. As with many of her poems, she also uses her linguistic artistry as a platform for sharing her deeply held belief that peace can eventually permeate “each act of living.”
Misterioso (senza misura con rubato) $\frac{1}{2} = 50$

Play into piano tentatively (as if struggling to rise up and break free)

\( \text{Misterioso (senza misura con rubato)} \quad \frac{1}{2} = 50 \)

$\frac{3}{8} \text{ tenuto} \quad \text{(sempre through m. 9)}$

\( \text{locally} \)
Making Peace

Largo misterioso  $q = 56$

S

A

T

B

T. Sax

Pno.

Play normally, facing audience

---

The poets must give us imagination of peace,

---

The poets must give us imagination of peace,

---

The poets must give us imagination of peace,

---

The poets must give us imagination of peace,
Making Peace

to oust the intense, familiar imagination of disaster.

Peace, not only the absence of war.

S

A

T

B

T. Sax

Pno.
But peace, like a poem, is not there a head of itself,

But peace, like a poem, is not there a head of itself,

But peace, like a poem, is not there a head of itself,

But peace, like a poem, is not there a head of itself,

But peace, like a poem, is not there a head of itself,
Peace,
Peace, peace
Peace,
Peace, peace
Peace,
Peace, peace
Peace,
Peace, peace,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be imagined before it is made,
Pno.

T. Sax

Pno.
can't be known except in the words of its making.

peace, peace, peace

peace, peace, peace

peace, peace, peace

peace, peace, peace,

poco accel.

words of its making,
Making Peace

\section*{Risoluto $\frac{\text{\textcurlyquotes}}{\text{\textcurlyquotes}} = 74$

\begin{align*}
\text{S} & \quad \text{gram-mar of jus-tice, syn-tax of mu-tual aid.} \\
\text{A} & \quad \text{gram-mar of jus-tice, syn-tax of mu-tual aid.} \\
\text{T} & \quad \text{gram-mar of jus-tice, syn-tax of mu-tual aid.} \\
\text{B} & \quad \text{gram-mar of jus-tice, syn-tax of mu-tual aid.} \\
\text{T. Sax} & \quad \text{\\} \\
\text{Pno.} & \quad \text{\\} \\
\text{Recitativo e parlando $\frac{\text{\textcurlyquotes}}{\text{\textcurlyquotes}} = c.\ 58$

\begin{align*}
\text{S} & \quad \text{A feel-ing towards it, dim-ly sens-ing a ry-thm, is} \\
\text{A} & \quad \text{A feel-ing towards it, dim-ly sens-ing a ry-thm, is} \\
\text{T} & \quad \text{A feel-ing towards it, dim-ly sens-ing a ry-thm, is} \\
\text{B} & \quad \text{A feel-ing towards it, dim-ly sens-ing a ry-thm, a ry-thm, is} \\
\text{T. Sax} & \quad \text{\\} \\
\text{Pno.} & \quad \text{\\} \\
\end{align*}
as we speak. A feeling towards it, dimly sensing a rhythm, is

Poco piu mosso \( \bar{=} 78 \)
is all we have un-til we begin to utter its meta- phors,

learning them as we speak.

learning them as we speak.

as we speak. as we speak. as we speak. as we speak.

as we speak.

as we speak. as we speak.

as we speak.
As we speak. A line of peace might appear.

Adagio tranquillo $\frac{4}{4}$  \( \text{Pno.} \)

\begin{align*}
58 & \quad \text{P} \\
60 & \quad \text{p} \\
62 & \quad \text{44}
\end{align*}

Change to Soprano Sax.

Adagio lirico con moto $\frac{4}{4}$  \( \text{Pno.} \)

\begin{align*}
58 & \quad \text{P} \\
60 & \quad \text{p} \\
62 & \quad \text{44}
\end{align*}

A line of peace might appear if we restructured the sentence our lives are making, with growing intensity.

Adagio lirico con moto $\frac{4}{4}$  \( \text{Pno.} \)

\begin{align*}
58 & \quad \text{P} \\
60 & \quad \text{p} \\
62 & \quad \text{44}
\end{align*}

A line of peace might appear if we restructured the sentence our lives are making, with growing intensity.

Adagio lirico con moto $\frac{4}{4}$  \( \text{Pno.} \)

\begin{align*}
58 & \quad \text{P} \\
60 & \quad \text{p} \\
62 & \quad \text{44}
\end{align*}

A line of peace might appear if we restructured the sentence our lives are making, with growing intensity.
Making Peace

Recitativo e parlando $\frac{3}{4} \text{ = } c. 58$

A cadence of peace might balance its weight on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence, an

Adagio lirico con moto $\frac{3}{4} \text{ = } 64$

molto legato

A different fulcrum; peace, a presence, an

T

B

S. Sax

Pno.
Making Peace

S

84

\( f \)

p

p

\( 86 \) molto legato

\( \text{energy field more intense than war, might pulse then, stanza by} \)

A

84

\( f \)

p

p

\( \text{energy field more intense than war, might pulse then, stanza by} \)

T

84

\( f \)

p

p

\( \text{energy field more intense than war, might pulse then, stanza by} \)

B

84

\( f \)

p

p

\( \text{energy field more intense than war, might pulse then, stanza by} \)

S. Sax

84

\( f \)

p

p

\( \text{energy field more intense than war, might pulse then, stanza by} \)
one of its words, each word a vibration of

one of its words, each word a vibration of

one of its words, each word a vibration of

one of its words, each word a vibration of

light— facets of the forming crystal.

light— facets of the forming crystal.

light— facets of the forming crystal.

light— facets of the forming crystal.
Largo misterioso $\frac{3}{4} = 56$

The poets must give us imagination of

Peace, not only the absence of

The poets must give us imagination of

Peace, not only the absence of

The poets must give us imagination of

Peace, not only the absence of

The poets must give us imagination of

Peace, not only the absence of
Making Peace

A feeling towards it, dimly sensing a rhythm.

But peace, like a poem,
A line of peace might appear

A line of peace might appear

A line of...