

Prairie Waters by Night

#1 from *Two River Nocturnes*
for SATB Choir (divisi)

Music by
John Muehleisen

Text by
Carl Sandburg

*Commissioned by the Jerome Foundation
for the final concert season
of the Dale Warland Singers, April, 2004*

*The 2015 revision of this work was premiered by
the Central Washington University Chamber Choir
conducted by Megan McCormick*

Publication Note: The second of the *Two River Nocturnes*, titled "River Moons,"
is also available from Muehleisen Music, Catalog No. JM 121 (www.johnmuehleisen.com)

Prairie Waters by Night

CHATTER of birds two by two raises a night song joining a litany of running water—sheer waters showing the russet of old stones remembering many rains.

And the long willows drowse on the shoulders of the running water, and sleep from much music; joined songs of day-end, feathery throats and stony waters, in a choir chanting new psalms.

It is too much for the long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes down; and the willows drowse and sleep on the shoulders of the running water.

Carl Sandburg (1878–1967)
Cornhuskers. 1918

Program Note

Prairie Waters by Night was written as one of four pieces commissioned by the Dale Warland Singers for a “suite” of works by four different composers tied together by the theme, *A River Journey*. The works were premiered on a concert of the same name by the Dale Warland Singers as part of St. Paul, Minnesota’s **Grand Excursion** celebration in April 2004. The other composers and works were Bill Banfield (*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*), Steve Heitzeg (*Elegy on Water*), and Kirke Mechem (*The Rivers of Babylon*).

Prairie Waters by Night marks for me a “rediscovery” of the poetry of Carl Sandburg, whose extensive catalog of poetic work has for several decades fallen out of favor with many readers of poetry. As I was searching for a text for this work, I focused on works about the Mississippi and on writers and poets from Minnesota and the Midwest. I had for a long time owned a copy of *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, but had never found inspiration until this opportunity arose.

I was struck by the peaceful, pastoral, nocturnal quality of the text and by the beauty of the colorful language Sandburg uses to describe the various images of nature (the birds, the water, the stones, the willows, the moon). I was particularly drawn to the wonderful musical metaphors that Sandburg used throughout the poem: “chatter of birds...raises a night song...and the long willows...sleep from much music; joined songs of day-end, feathery throats and stony waters” and the way that he tied together all of the elements of nature “in a choir chanting new psalms.” The text was so well suited for the occasion and for a choral work that it was a clear choice.

The music serves to amplify the images in the text and to bring them to life through song: the “chatter of birds,” the “running water,” the clarity of the “sheer waters” and the veiled nocturnal quality of the drowsy willows as they “sleep on the shoulders of the running water.” So much of the poetry of the past 100 years arose from the stranglehold of the nihilistic and expressionistic aesthetic of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which focused primarily on the dark side of humanity; while the expression of beauty was frequently relegated to a distant back seat, to an “old fashioned” and, for many, irrelevant world. What a joy it has been to rediscover Sandburg’s poetry, with its expression of the natural world in images of peace, beauty, and awe; poetry that uplifts, refreshes, and renews in the spirit of the writings of one of America’s greatest writers on Nature: Henry David Thoreau.

In this 2015 revision I:

- Corrected several errors from earlier versions of the score.
- Reworked dynamics in several passages to create more dynamic contrast.
- Notated several divisi passages in both the women and the men on multiple staves rather than having three-part divisi passages on a single staff in each part.
- Added divisi indicators at the end of staff systems to signal when vocal parts divide into two staves or return to a single staff for extended passages.
- Re-notated two 5/4 bars as 2/4 + 3/4 to more clearly reflect the rhythmic structure and emphasis of those measures (mm. 59–60 and 61–62).
- Changed measure numbering from the beginning of each staff system to every 2 measures.
- Cleaned up the notation for the S2/A1 repeated A ostinato in mm. 1–22.
- Recomposed the soprano passage in mm. 37–39, which had never worked to my satisfaction.
- Re-voiced the SA passage in mm. 72–79 for better voice-leading and singability.

The 2015 revision was premiered by the Central Washington University Chamber Choir, conducted by Megan McCormick on her Masters Recital (*The Poet Expressed: Composer John Muehleisen and his approach to text.*)

John Muehleisen
Mukilteo, WA
Dec. 2003, rev. April 2015

Prairie Waters by Night

Commissioned by the Jerome Foundation
for the final concert season of the Dale Warland Singers, April, 2004

Carl Sandburg (Cornhuskers, 1918)

John Muehleisen
2003, rev. 2015

Ritmico meccanico ♩ = 64 2 *mp sempre*

Soprano 1
*cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

Soprano 2a
Alto 1a
mp sempre
*cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

Soprano 2b
Alto 1b
mp sempre
*cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

Alto 2
mp sempre
Chat-ter

Tenor

Bass

Piano (for reh. only)
Ritmico meccanico ♩ = 64 2 *mp sempre* *sempre staccato through m. 22 unless otherwise noted*

* **Pronunciation:** The "a" in "cha" should be pronounced the same as the "a" in "chatter."
Articulation: "Cha" and "Chat-ter" are always staccato.

Soprano 2a/Alto 1a and Soprano 2b/Alto 1b: In mm. 1–22, Soprano 2 and Alto 1 sections divide in two, with half of the S2s and A1s singing S2a/A1a, while the other half of each section sings S2b/A1b. While this allows for breathing and prevents vocal fatigue, the two alternating groups should strive for equal timbre and volume on their respective sets of "cha."

Three-Part Divisi in Women and/or Men: For passages in which the women and/or men divide into three parts, please distribute the voices evenly amongst the three parts unless otherwise noted.

Prairie Waters by Night

S1 *(mp)* 4 cha cha cha Chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter 6 chat-ter chat-ter

S2a *(mp)* cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A1a *(mp)* cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b *(mp)* cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A1b *(mp)* chat-ter chat-ter

A2 *(mp)* chat-ter chat-ter

Pno. *(mp)*

S1 8 chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

S2a cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A1a cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A1b chat-ter

A2 chat-ter

T *mf* molto espressivo e legato Chat - ter of birds

B *mf* molto espressivo e legato Chat - ter of birds

Pno. *mp* *mf*

Prairie Waters by Night

10 12

S1 chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

S2a
A1a cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b
A1b cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A2 chat-ter chat-ter

T 8 two by two _____ rais - es a night song _____ T1 T2

B two by two _____ rais - es a night - song _____ B1 B2

10 12

Pno.

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Prairie Waters by Night

4

14

(mp)

S1
chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

S2a
A1a
(mp)
cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b
A1b
(mp)
cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A2
(mp)
chat-ter

T 1
f 3
Chat - ter of birds two by two

T 2
f 3
Chat - ter of birds two by two

B 1
f 3
Chat - ter of birds two by two

B 2
f 3
Chat - ter of birds two by two

Pno.
mp 14 *f* *(mp)*

Prairie Waters by Night

16 18

S1 chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

S2a A1a cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b A1b cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A2 chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

T1 8 rais - es a night song join - ing *p*

T2 8 rais - es a night song join - ing *p*

B1 rais - es a night song join - ing *p*

B2 rais - es a night song join - ing *p*

Pno. 16 18 *p* *mf*

Prairie Waters by Night

6

(mp) 20 22

S1 chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter chat-ter

S2a cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

S2b cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

A1 chat-ter of run - ning wa - ter

A2 chat-ter of run - ning wa - ter

T1 join - ing a lit - a - ny of run - ning wa - ter

T2 join - ing a lit - a - ny of run - ning wa - ter

B1 join - ing a lit - a - ny of run - ning wa - ter

B2 join - ing a lit - a - ny of run - ning wa - ter

Pno. p f p

Prairie Waters by Night

8

The musical score consists of seven staves. The vocal parts are S1, S2, A1, A2, T, and B. The piano accompaniment is labeled 'Pno.'. The score includes lyrics and performance markings such as dynamics (*p*, *mf*, *mp*) and rehearsal marks (30, 32). The lyrics are: 're - mem-ber - ing' (for S1, S2, A1, A2, T) and 'show-ing the rus-set of old stones' (for B). The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the bass line at measures 30 and 32.

* 3-part Alto divisi thru m. 38 as written
(1/2 of altos on A1, Half on A2);
Emphasize Alto 1 line

Prairie Waters by Night

34 36 38 *mp* man - y rains, man - - - y

34 36 38 *mp* man - y rains, — man - y rains. man - y

A1 *p* re - mem-ber - ing**

A2 *p* re - mem-ber - ing**

T *p* re - mem-ber - ing**

B *p* stones**

34 36 38 *mp* *p*

Pno.

** stagger breathing as needed

Prairie Waters by Night

40 *p* *mf* 42 *mp*

S1 rains. And the long wil-lows drowse on the S

S2 rains. And the long wil-lows drowse on the

A1 (p) *mf* *mp* long wil-lows drowse on the A

A2 (p) *mf* on the shoul-ders of the run - ning

T

B (p)

Pno. 40 *p* *mf* 42 *mp* *mf*

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Prairie Waters by Night

44 *mf* 46 *mf* 48 *f*

S wa - ter, and sleep from much mu - sic;—

A wa - ter, and sleep from much mu - sic;—

T run - ning wa - ter, and sleep from much mu - sic;—

B run - ning wa - ter, and sleep from much mu - sic;—

Pno. *mf* *mf* *f*

44 46 48 50 52

S joined songs of day - end, feath - er - y

A joined songs of day - end, feath - er - y

T joined songs of day - end, feath - er - y

B joined songs of day - end, feath - er - y

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

Prairie Waters by Night

S
throats_ and ston - y wa - ters, in a choir_ chant - ing

A
throats_ and ston - y wa - ters, in a choir_ chant - ing

T
throats_ and ston - y wa - ters, in a choir_ chant - ing

B
throats_ and ston - y wa - ters, in a choir_ chant - ing

Pno.

S
new psalms. It is too much_ for the

A
new psalms. It is too much_

T
new psalms. It is too much_ for the

B
new psalms. It is too much_ for the

Pno.

S
long wil-lows when low laugh-ter of a red moon comes

A
long wil-lows when low laugh-ter of a red moon comes

T
long wil-lows when low laugh-ter of a red moon comes

B
long wil-lows when low laugh-ter of a red moon comes

Pno.

S
down; and the wil-lows drowse and sleep

A
down; and the wil-lows drowse and sleep

T
down; ah ah

B
down; ah ah

Pno.

Prairie Waters by Night

72 *p* \leftarrow *mp* *simile* 74 76

S1
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,

S2
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,

A1
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,

A2
sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep,

T
8 *mf*
on the shoul-ders, on the shoul-ders

B
mf
on the shoul-ders, on the

Pno.
72 *p* \leftarrow *mp* *simile* 74 76
mf

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78 *p* *mp* *p* 80 *mf* 82

S1
sleep, sleep, on the shoul-ders of the run - ning wa-ter.

S2
sleep, sleep, on the shoul-ders of the run - ning wa-ter.

A1
sleep, sleep, on the shoul-ders of the run - ning wa-ter.

A2
sleep, sleep, on the shoul-ders of the run - ning wa-ter.

T
8

B
shoul-ders

Pno.
78 *p* *mp* *p* 80 *mf* 82

DO NOT COPY

Prairie Waters by Night

The musical score is arranged in a system with seven staves. The vocal parts are S1, S2, A1, A2, T (Tenor), and B (Bass). The piano accompaniment (Pno.) is shown in a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The lyrics are: "run - ning wa - ter, run - ning wa - ter, run - ning wa - ter." The score includes dynamic markings: *mp* (mezzo-piano), *p* (piano), and *pp* (pianissimo). Measure numbers 84 and 86 are indicated. The piano part features triplet patterns in both hands. A large watermark "DOMOT COPY" is visible across the score.