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.
- Cleared up the notation for the S2/A1 repeated A ostinato in mm. 1–22.
- Re-composed 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
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 $\frac{j}{4} = 64$

Soprano 1

Soprano 2a/Alto 1a

Soprano 2b/Alto 1b

Alto 2

Tenor

Bass

Piano (for reh. only)

sempre staccato through m. 22 unless otherwise noted

sempre

* 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.

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Prairie Waters by Night

S1

S2a

A1a

S2b

A1b

A2

T

B

Pno.

chat-ter chat-ter

cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha

chat-ter

two by two raises a night song

two by two raises a night song

chat-ter chat-ter
Prairie Waters by Night

S1

S2a

A1a

S2b

A1b

A2

T1

T2

B1

B2

Pno.

Chat-ter chat-ter
cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
Chat-ter of birds two by two
PRarie Waters by Night

S1

chat-ter chat-ter

S2a

A1a

cha cha cha cha cha cha cha cha 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 cha cha

A2

chat-ter

T 1

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

T 2

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

B 1

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

B 2

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

Pno.
* 3-part Alto divisi thru m. 38 as written
(1/2 of altos on A1, Half on A2);
Emphasize Alto 1 line
** stagger breathing as needed**
rains. And the long willows drowse on the

long willows drowse on the shoulders of the running

on the

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V - water, 42 42 42 42 42 42
S - water, 42 42 42 42 42 42
A - water, 42 42 42 42 42 42
T - running water, and sleep from much music;
B - running water, and sleep from much music;

Pno. - joined songs of day-end, feather-y

PERUSAL SCORE
DO NOT COPY
throats and stony waters, in a choir chanting

new psalms. It is too much for the

new psalms. It is too much for the

new psalms. It is too much for the
Prairie Waters by Night

long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes

long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes

long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes

long willows when low laughter of a red moon comes

and the willows drowse and sleep.

and the willows drowse and sleep.

and the willows drowse and sleep.

and the willows drowse and sleep.

and the willows drowse and sleep.

and the willows drowse and sleep.

when low

when low

when low

when low

when low

when low

laugh-ter of a
laugh-ter of a
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laugh-ter of a
laugh-ter of a
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red moon comes
red moon comes
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red moon comes

red moon comes

red moon comes

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red moon comes
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wil-lows drowse
Prairie Waters by Night

sleep, sleep, on the shoulders of the running water.

sleep, sleep, on the shoulders of the running water.

sleep, sleep, on the shoulders of the running water.

shoul-ders

shoul-ders

shoul-ders of the running water.

shoul-ders of the running water.

shoul-ders of the running water.
Prairie Waters by Night

S1, S2, A1, A2, T, B, Pno.

Running water, running water, running water.