

The Stars Still Shine

for SATB choir divisi

Music by:
John Muehleisen

Poem by:
Charles Anthony Silvestri

*Commissioned by Dolce Canto
Peter Park, Artistic Director*

*This commission was made possible by the Dale Warland Singers Commission Award
presented by Chorus America and funded by the American Composers Forum*

*Dedicated to Dolce Canto (Missoula, Montana)
in honor of their 15th Season and their 2016 tour to South Korea*

The Stars Still Shine

Upon an ancient mountaintop there grow
A pair of pines—majestic, tall, and grand—
As cranes, at home where heaven touches earth.

A sea of mist enshrouds the vale below;
Unspoken dreams and secrets dark and deep
Beneath uncertain waters hidden lie.

But high above the mist the stars still shine
Their flick'ring light, until the sun shall rise
And splendid shatter all our darkening,

And two proud pines beneath the earth entwine;
Embracing roots, they gravel down to touch
The sacred fire—the source of life, of love.

- *Charles Anthony Silvestri*

About the Poem

THE STARS STILL SHINE weaves together the binary motif of separation and unity with imagery of the four elements of Earth, Air, Water and Fire. For me, trees have always been especially sacred. They are beautiful, ancient, mysteriously powerful, present in the sacred imagery of many traditions. Trees represent for me the *axis mundi*, the great spiritual axis of the universe, simultaneously soaring up to heaven and delving under the earth. While apparently separate above ground, below the surface they intertwine, effectively mingling the four elements together.

- *Charles Anthony Silvestri*

Abridged Program Note (for concert program)

My musical setting of *The Stars Still Shine* closely follows the clear structure and rich imagery of Tony Silvestri's beautiful poem. The setting of the first stanza begins with a musical depiction of the ancient mountaintop with its pair of pines, including a mysterious sliding motion in the men's music. As a nod to the fact that the work will be performed on the group's South Korean tour, much of the melodic material in the opening section is based on a pentatonic (5-tone) scale commonly used in Asian music. At the beginning of the darker second stanza, the music likewise takes on a more foreboding tone by way of an repeated ostinato on the words "[a] sea of mist...", which paints a vivid musical picture of the mist that "enshrouds the vale below." This effect is achieved via blurred clusters of notes that eventually yield to music that represents "secrets dark and deep" that are hidden "[b]eneath uncertain waters."

After a brief interlude based on the musical motive for the "sea of mist," the music for the third stanza of the poem takes a decidedly brighter and more hopeful turn as it parallels the poem's imagery, leading to a dramatic climax on the eponymous phrase "the stars still shine," the turning point of both the poem and the music. The fourth and final stanza returns to the opening stanza's

image of the two pines, along with a return to the opening men's music and a varied return of the music in the women's voices that described the two pines from the first stanza. This section eventually leads to the main climax of the piece on "The sacred fire," which is depicted by bright sonorities in the women and deep rich sonorities in the men. The subterranean sacred fire eventually bursts through the surface on "the source of life, of love." The work closes with a short coda that repeats the earlier text, "And two proud pines beneath the earth entwine..." above the men's sliding chords, ending with a music image of the entwined roots of the two trees.

Extended Program Note

Genesis of the Work. *The Stars Still Shine* grew out of a series of conversations I had with Peter Park—Artistic Director of Dolce Canto—about opportunities for us to work together. In late 2013/early 2014 Peter invited me to partner with him and with Dolce Canto to compose a work they would take on tour to South Korea in 2016. He also wanted to use this commission as the proposed project in their application for the prestigious Dale Warland Singers Commission Award, which is presented by Chorus America and funded by the American Composers Forum. After discussing the basic concept for the work, we wrote up the proposal and submitted the materials to the Awards committee. Happily, the project was awarded the 2014 Dale Warland Singers Commission Award.

An important part of the proposal included collaborating with the esteemed American poet Charles Anthony Silvestri, who has produced original poetry for works by an increasing roster of well-known choral composers, including Eric Whitacre, Ola Gjello, and Dan Forrest. What a pleasure it was to collaborate with Tony on this project and to get to know his poetry "from the inside out." The deeper I dug into his beautiful poem, the more inspiration it provided musically. As Tony says, "Collaboration between composer and poet is magic. It opens for the composer opportunities for organic and dynamic creation not possible with previously published poetry, and gives the poet the thrill and responsibility that his words will be sung—not read—and will be heard attached to an emotional soundtrack. There's magic and power in the marriage of words and music." One of the great pleasures of working with Tony is his keen understanding that the words of his poem will be sung, which leads him to favor, for example, rich open vowels that are more singable than closed vowels (e.g. "ah" vs. "ee"), which gives a particularly rich and warm tone color to both his poetry and to the resulting composition.

The Poem. Once the project had a green light, Peter, Tony, and I met during the 2014 Chorus America Conference in Washington, D.C., where we also received the Dale Warland Singers Commission Award. That initial meeting was full of lots of great brainstorming, and Tony left the meeting with the task of embodying in his poem the concepts that are central to the work, especially the opposing notions of Separation and Unity. Tony represents this duality in his poem with the image of two pines, which appear *separate* above ground, but whose roots are entwined below ground in *unity*. A related duality is that of the Visible versus the Hidden, the latter of which works on two levels. On the one hand there are hidden things that contribute to the separation or that are symptoms of it, represented in the poem by the obscuring "sea of mist" and the "uncertain waters" that hide "[u]nspoken dreams and secrets dark and deep." On the other hand, the very Unity that is central to this poem is also hidden from sight beneath the ground.

A second, related, theme is that of Hope, especially hope in the face of division; a hope that—despite division on the surface (the pines)—can transcend whatever has caused those divisions; a hope that can heal and bind through the common values, the cultural heritage, and the humanity shared between those who find themselves divided. That hope is represented in the poem by the third stanza, the first line of which is "But high above the mist the stars still shine." Thus light becomes the image of hope, and is reinforced in the second line of the stanza in the image of the rising sun. Another image of

hope is represented in the final line of the poem in which the source of this hope is revealed as “[t]he sacred fire—the source of life, of love.”

A third aspect embodied in the poem is the fact that the commission will be included by Dolce Canto in their upcoming tour of South Korea, where they will join forces with Korean choirs in three different cities to perform the work together. In response to that, Tony incorporated several elements that have significant meaning in Korean culture, including the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, all of which appear in various guises in the poem. Together, these elements represent the principle of universal harmony and are displayed in symbolic form in each corner of the South Korean flag. Also present in the flag is the symbol for yin and yang, which represents contrasting yet complementary forces that are interconnected. This philosophical concept is present in the poem as described in the first paragraph of this section concerning the poem.

Structurally, the four stanzas of the poem comprise a very concise narrative, replete with images of nature frequently found in Asian poetry. The first stanza presents the image of the two pines—“majestic, tall, and grand” on an “ancient mountaintop,” yet separate from one another. The second stanza reveals hidden, dark, and foreboding forces “[u]ncertain dreams and secrets dark and deep” enshrouded in “a sea of mist” and lying hidden “[b]eneath uncertain waters.” In the third stanza the brightness of hope emerges out of the murky depths of the preceding stanza—exemplified in the images of the stars and the rising sun—gradually dispelling the previous images of darkness. The fourth stanza returns to the imagery of the opening, but in this final stanza the two pines, presented separate above ground in the opening stanza, are now revealed as being united below ground in the form of the entwined, embracing roots. While the third stanza reveals the exterior brightness of the stars and the sun in the sky, the final stanza parallels that brightness in the interior image of the sacred fire of life and love deep in the heart. My musical setting of Tony’s beautiful images closely follows the structure of his poem and uses musical analogs to amplify the images in his poem.

- John Muehleisen (Dec. 16, 2015)

About the Music

As mentioned above, my musical setting of *The Stars Still Shine* closely follows the structure and imagery of the poem. The description of the music below includes references to the measure numbers in the score.

The setting of the first stanza begins with a musical depiction of the ancient mountaintop with its pair of pines (mm. 1–5). The primal fifths of the opening *ostinato* (a repeated musical pattern) represent the ancient mountaintop, while the *portamenti* (vocal slides between pitches) foreshadow the mystery and foreboding of the second stanza of the poem. As a nod to the fact that the work will be performed on the group’s South Korean tour, the pitches of the opening section are based on a pentatonic (5-tone) scale commonly used in Asian music, in this case based on the notes C-Eb-F-G-Bb. After the initial statement of the *ostinato* in the men’s voices, the women enter with the opening line of the poem above a continuation of the men’s *ostinato*. The first line of the poem is based on the same pentatonic scale (mm. 6–10) as the *ostinato*, thus lending a somewhat Asian flavor to this section. This material is developed in several passages that represent the two pines reaching from earth to heaven (mm. 11–21), climaxing in their description as “majestic, tall, and grand” (mm. 22–24). The music for the end of the first stanza closes with a peaceful passage in which the pines are described “[a]s cranes, at home where heaven touches earth,” represented by descending passages in the sopranos and basses (mm. 25–31).

At the beginning of the darker second stanza, the music likewise takes on a darker, more foreboding tone by way of a new *ostinato* on the words “[a] sea of mist...” (mm. 32–38). At this point, an important new musical element is introduced in the use of the pitch B-natural, which is at odds with

the Bb in the prevailing key signature of 3 flats. The chromatic nature of the B-natural intrudes upon the stable, harmonious, and diatonic tonality of the opening stanza and destabilizes the music, giving rise to the new mysterious ostinato, whose blurred cluster of pitches parallels the poem's "sea of mist," which "enshrouds" and obscures "the vale below" the trees that stand upon the ancient mountaintop. The tonality takes a decidedly minor turn in this section to C minor, and after the ostinato establishes itself in mm. 32–33, a haunting new melody grows out of the pitches of the ostinato on the words "A sea of mist enshrouds the vale below" (mm. 34–38). The balance of this section (mm. 38–49) is characterized harmonically and melodically by a conflict between the chromatic intrusion of the B-natural with its implications of the C-minor tonality and the Bb of the more diatonic harmony, which struggles to re-establish itself throughout the music of the second stanza, but which ultimately loses to the B-natural (notated as a Cb in the score) on the words "secrets dark and deep" in the last line of the second stanza (m. 49).

The next section—a musical interlude—pits the stable, harmonious ostinato of the first stanza (now in the basses) against fragments of the destabilizing, blurred cluster of pitches of the second-stanza ostinato that represents the "sea of mist" (mm. 50–57), this time in tenors and altos. The conflict and struggle between the Bb and the B-natural can be heard clearly throughout this interlude both harmonically and melodically, with echoes of the type of chromatic inflections known as "cross-relations" that were used frequently in various styles of Renaissance choral music in which two versions of a pitch are used in close proximity to one another (e.g. Bb and B-natural or F-natural and F#).

Following this interlude, the music for the third stanza begins (m. 58) with the perfect fifth of the opening music, while the soprano and alto voices sing the opening words of the third stanza (mm. 59–61) to the same melody used for the opening words of the second stanza (mm. 34–35). This time, instead of the melody descending to the dark depths, the pitches rise to a luminous climax on the words "the stars still shine." This is the turning point of the work, the point at which the warmth of the diatonic Bb overcomes the chromatic intrusion of the B-natural. In fact, from this point to the end of the work, the B-natural and all other chromatic inflections are completely absent, and the stable diatonic tonality from the first section of the work prevails. On the word "shine" (m.61), the key changes from 3 flats to 4 flats, adding additional richness to the harmony and tonality of the work by moving from the C minor tonality to the warmer, richer major mode of Db Lydian. This is the point in the work in which hope, in the form of light, overcomes the darkness of the second stanza. Because of this important transitional point in both the text and the music, Tony and I decided that the title of the poem and of the composition would be derived from the text "the stars still shine."

The flick'ring light of those stars is represented by the overlapping, descending lines in the women's voices as the stars shine their light down from the heavens onto the earth below (mm. 62–63). A contrasting rising melodic and harmonic passage on the words "until the sun shall rise" (mm. 64–65) paints an unabashed musical image of the dawn—a further infusion of light. Eventually the passage comes to rest and resolution on the words "And splendid shatter all our darkening" (my favorite line in the poem!), a passage that is further enriched by the addition of a fifth flat and a modulation to the even richer major mode of Gb Lydian (mm. 66–67). The final chord of this section on the word "darkening" symbolizes the shattering of the darkness by the rising sun. The final chord in this section, although peaceful and relatively quiet, is filled with light, thus transforming how we hear the word "darkening" by transforming it with a "harmonic light" (m. 67).

The music for the fourth stanza serves as a sort of recapitulation of the music from the opening of the poem by returning to the expansive open-fifth ostinato from the beginning of the work (mm. 1–5), this time in the basses only (mm. 68–70). Because of the recent key change, the ostinato is transposed down a whole step from C-G to Bb-F, which further reinforces the eradication of the earlier intrusive and destabilizing chromatic B-natural by virtue of the repetition of the stable Bb-F interval

throughout the ostinato. Above the ostinato the tenors and altos sing a broader, rhythmically augmented version of the music for the opening line of the poem—"Upon an ancient mountaintop" (mm. 6–8), this time to the text "And two proud pines beneath the earth entwine" (mm. 71–74). Sopranos join in on the words "Embracing roots, they gravel down to touch..." (mm. 74–78), culminating in the ultimate climax of the piece on the words "The sacred fire—" (mm. 79–80). The next passage, on the words "The sacred fire—the source of life, of love," (mm. 81–85) is based on the music for the words in the opening stanza "there grow a pair of pines" (mm. 17–21). The rising lines of this section also echo the music for the rising sun in the third stanza. This passage culminates on the word "love," set to a chord filled with musical "light" (m. 85).

Because of the importance of the image of the two pines—separate above ground but unified below—I decided to end the composition with a coda of sorts (mm. 87–94) based on a repetition of the opening line of the final stanza of Tony's poem, a decision which I hope the poet will allow me in the spirit of "compositional license." On the final word "entwine," I use a musical metaphor in which the melodic lines are "entwined" with one another in the form of a canon between the altos/tenors on the one hand and the sopranos on the other, with the word "entwine" repeated several times (mm. 91–94) to reinforce the image of unity in Tony's hopeful poem.

- *John Muehleisen (Dec. 16, 2015)*

A *(p)* *mp* 8 *mf*

S on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ Up - on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ Up-

A *(p)* *mp* *mf*

on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ Up - on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ Up-

T *(p)* port. *mp* port. port. *mf* port.

8 (Oh)

B *(p)* port. *mp* port. port. *mf* port.

(Oh)

Pno. *(p)* *mp* *mf*

10 *f* *mf* **B** 14

S on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ there grow A pair _____ of pines- _____

A on an an-cient moun-tain-top _____ there grow A pair of pines- _____

T 8 there grow there grow A pair _____ of pines- of pines- _____

B there grow there grow A pair of pines- of pines- _____

Pno. 10 *f* *mf* **B** 14

The Stars Still Shine

16 18 20 *mf* *f* *Adagio con moto* ♩ = 66

accel. ----- *rit.* -----

S A T B Pno.

A pair of pines— ma-
 there grow — A pair of pines— A pair of pines— ma-
 there grow — A pair of pines— ma-
 there grow — A pair of pines— there grow — A pair of pines— ma-

16 18 20 *mf* *f* *Adagio con moto* ♩ = 66

accel. ----- *rit.* -----

22 24 26 *mf* *legato*

marcato N.B. *ff* *mf* *legato*

S A T B Pno.

jes-tic, tall, and grand— As cranes, at home where heav - en
 jes-tic, tall, and grand— As cranes, at home where heav - en
 jes-tic, tall, and grand— As cranes, at home where heav - en
 jes-tic, tall, and grand— As cranes, at home where heav - en

22 24 26 *ff* *mf* *legato*

The Stars Still Shine

E Largo misterioso ♩ = 52

touch-es earth. stagger breathing as needed touch - es earth.

touch - es earth. touch - es earth.

touch - es earth. A sea of mist A

touch - es earth. A sea of

touch - es earth.

where heav - en touch-es earth.

28 30

Pno.

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Unis.
mp 34

S
A sea of mist en - shrouds the
stagger breathing as needed

A 1
sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A

A 2
stagger breathing as needed
mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of

T 1
pp stagger breathing as needed
Oo

T 2
pp stagger breathing as needed
Oo

B
mp
A sea of mist en - shrouds the

Pno.
mp 34

F

Slightly Faster ♩ = 56

mp 36 stagger breathing as needed 38 *mf*

S vale be - low; Un-spok-en dreams and se-crets

A1 *pp* sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist Un-spok-en dreams and se-crets

A2 *pp* mist A sea of mist A sea of mist A sea of mist Un-spok-en dreams and se-crets

T1 *pp* (oo) and

T2 *pp* (oo) and

B *mp* vale be - low; be - low; and

F

Slightly Faster ♩ = 56

mp 36 *mf* 38

Pno. *pp* *mf*

mp

40 *p* 42 44 *non cresc.*

S — dark and deep and deep — Be - neath un - cer - tain wa - ters hid - den

A1 — dark and deep and deep — Be - neath un - cer - tain wa - ters hid - den

A2 — dark and deep and deep — Be - neath un - cer - tain wa - ters hid - den

T Unis. 8 *p* se - crets dark and deep and deep — Be - neath un - cer - tain wa - ters hid - den T1 T2

B *p* se - crets dark and deep and deep — Be - neath un - cer - tain wa - ters hid - den

Pno. 40 42 44 *p* *non cresc.*

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lie stagger breathing as needed G **Largo misterioso** ♩ = 60

46 (p) mf 48 mp

S lie. dark and deep

A 1 (p) mf stagger breathing as needed mp pp

A 2 (p) mf stagger breathing as needed mp pp

T 1 (p) mf mp pp

T 2 (p) mf mp pp

B (p) mf mp p port.

lie. se-crets dark and deep Oh

46 48 G **Largo misterioso** ♩ = 60

Pno. pp p

The musical score is arranged in a system with seven staves. The vocal parts are S (Soprano), A1 (Alto 1), A2 (Alto 2), T1 (Tenor 1), and T2 (Tenor 2). The Bass part is labeled 'B' and the Piano part is labeled 'Pno.'. The score is in 3/4 time and the key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Measure numbers 52, 54, and 56 are indicated above the vocal staves. Dynamic markings include *mp* (mezzo-piano), *pp* (pianissimo), and *p* (piano). Performance instructions include *port.* (portamento) and hairpins for crescendo and decrescendo. The vocal parts have lyrics 'Oo' written below the notes. The piano part features arpeggiated chords and sustained bass notes. A large diagonal watermark 'DONOT COPY' is overlaid across the score.

The Stars Still Shine

Largo risoluto ♩ = 50 **mp** *58* *poco accel.* ----- **H** **Adagio luminoso** ♩ = 60 **f** *60* *molto*

S 1 But high a-bove the mist the stars still shine Their

S 2 But high a-bove the mist the stars still shine

A Unis. **mp** *molto* **f**
But high a-bove the mist the stars still shine

T Unis. **p** *molto* **f**
Ah

B **p** *molto* **f**
Ah

Pno. **Largo risoluto** ♩ = 50 **p** *58* *poco accel.* ----- **H** **Adagio luminoso** ♩ = 60 **f** *60* *molto*

62 *f* 64 *ff* *mf*

S 1 flick' - ring light, Their light, un - til the sun shall rise Ah

S 2 *f* Their flick' - ring light, Their light, *f* un - til the sun shall rise *ff* And *f*

A *f* Their flick' - ring light, *f* un - til the sun shall rise *ff* And *f*

T *f* un - til the sun shall rise *ff*

B *f* un - til the sun shall rise *ff*

Pno. 62 64 *f* *ff* *f*

PERUSAHAAN SCORING
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66 (*mf*) *rit.* ----- I Adagio nobile ♩ = 64 70

S 1
 (ah)

S 2
f *mf*
 splen - did shat - ter all our dark-en-ing,

A
f *mf* *mp*
 splen - did shat - ter all our dark-en-ing, And two _ proud _

T
f *mf* *p*
 Ah And two proud _

B
f *mf* *p* port. port.
 Ah Oh stagger breathing through m. 76

Pno.
 66 *f* *mp* *p*
 I Adagio nobile ♩ = 64 70

DO NOT COPY

72 74 Unis. *mf* 76

S Em-brac - ing roots, they grav - el down to

A *mf* pines be - neath the earth en - twine;— Em-brac - ing roots, they grav - el down to

T *mp* *mf* Unis. pines be - neath the earth en - twine;— Em-brac - ing roots, they grav - el

B *mp* port. *mf* port. they grav - el

Pno. *mp* *mf*

78 *f* *ff* 80 *J* *accel.* 82 *f*

S touch The sa - cred fire— the

A *f* *ff* *f* touch The sa - cred fire— The sa - cred fire— the source of life, the

T *f* *ff* *f* down The sa - cred fire— The sa - cred fire— the

B *f* *ff* *f* down The sa - cred fire— The sa - cred fire— the source of life, The sa - cred fire— the

Pno. *f* *ff* *f* *J* *accel.*

Baritones sing optional upper notes if needed Unis.

molto rit. 84 *ff* 86 G.P. **K** **Largo nobile** ♩ = 60 88

S source of life, of love.

A source of love. And two proud pines be -

T source of life, of love. And two proud pines be -

B source of love. Oh stagger breathing through end of piece *port.*

Pno. *ff* *mf* *p*

84 *molto rit.* 86 G.P. **K** **Largo nobile** ♩ = 60 88

S en - twine; en - twine; Oh

A stagger breathing through end of piece *mp* *p*

T neath the earth en - twine; en - twine; en - twine; stagger breathing through end of piece *mp* *p*

B *port.* *port.* *port.*

Pno. *mp* *p* *rit.*

90 92 94