

NOTES FROM THE COMPOSER

I never meant to write a symphony. . . .

In one sense, Fred Lewis Pattee started it all when he read his ode at the dedication of Schwab Auditorium on June 16, 1903. Ninety years later I read Vivian Doty Hench's *History of State College* which covered the first fifty years of our town's growth, and I realized that a centennial was approaching which deserved commemoration.

At the start my plan was quite modest. My immediate model was *Frostiana*, the classic choral work by Randall Thompson, which set seven Robert Frost poems for the 200th Anniversary of Amherst, Massachusetts. So I began to search for a poet whose lyrics I could set for a small choral work to be sung by my own choral group, the Penn State Glee Club, and the Women's Chorus (now the Oriana Singers).

The search for a handful of lyrics resulted in finding a treasury of poems, each of which suggested a different musical setting. I found lyrics by Theodore Roethke and his student John Haag that seemed appropriate for a children's chorus. Charlie Mann showed me the unpublished Roethke poem "The Summons," and I knew I had a poem that called for the power and magnitude of the Choral Society and the Nittany Valley Symphony. Thus began the odyssey that led me to set some sixty-five texts for thirteen choral groups and eight instrumental ensembles. My search for lyrics led me from our established poets, through the many poets published in *Pivot*, and ultimately through the complete corpus of *Froth*. I found poems for high school chorus, madrigal choir, barbershop chorus, and lyrics of a highly personal and intimate nature that called for solo voices.

It took four years and an entire sabbatical to complete this work. I am deeply indebted to the University for enabling me to spend that wonderful year working with these poems, fashioning the voices of these many choirs to the shape of the music I imagined behind these words.

A few words about titles: *Mountain Laurels* pays homage to our state flower but the title also refers to the ancient Greek custom of awarding a laurel wreath to the winner of their annual poetry competition. *Summer Evenings* alludes to Hector Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*, a similarly eclectic song cycle for various solo voices.

These four years have sped by so quickly for me, living daily with the words of my unsuspecting collaborators and hearing in my mind's ear our dedicated performers as I wrote notes and rhythms, voice lines and accompaniments. *Mountain Laurels* is, of course, a celebration of the literary traditions of State College and honors the poets and their poetry. But it is more. It is a celebration of our musical traditions and a celebration of community itself. The sharing of words and music is an act both intimate and communal. This work is a gift to the poets and the performers, but most of all, it is for you, the audience. And if this evening reacquaints you with the enchantment of poetry and the magic of live performance, then the gift was worth the effort.

My many helpers are acknowledged elsewhere. But I want to thank here everyone who encouraged me along the way, the institutions and artist colonies who endured my relentless explorations, and the wonderful friends who bailed me out at the end.

Now I give you *Mountain Laurels*. From the poets and the performers and myself I offer this gift and the wish that State College's next hundred years be as full of the appreciation of beauty and learning and community as is this year of celebration.

Bruce Trinkley
COMPOSER