

*Ice, Wind, War & Spring* (2019) for mixed chorus and orchestra by Kareem Roustom

**Program Notes:**

When Fawzi Haimor asked me to compose a work to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen I was thrilled and honored. When he subsequently mentioned that there would be only one other work on the program, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, I took a deep breath and paused; I was intimidated. I then decided to move ahead anyways realizing that the key to such a work would be the text. Schiller's *Ode to Joy* offered me much to think about in seeking out my own text; one that would compliment & contrast the Beethoven/Schiller themes of universal brotherhood with a more personal, and intimate experience. I set out to write a work that would eventually stand on it's own, but also one that sought to ask the questions the Beethoven's Ninth answers.

*Ice, Wind, War & Spring* is a work that celebrates the seventy-five years since the founding of Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen, but it is a work that also commemorates the seventy-five years since end of World War II. The work is divided into three sections but is through-composed. The first section, with sixteenth century French text by Antoine de La Roche-Chandieu (1534 - 1591) and Simon Goulart (1543 - 1628), gives voice to the victims of the violence of war. Movements I, II, III are settings of *Octonaires*, which are eight line poems, popular in sixteenth century France, written by Chandieu (I & II) and Goulart (III). Both men were Huguenots who witnessed and survived the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 when French Catholics killed between 5,000 to 30,000 Protestants. Chandieu and Goulart wrote these poems shortly after this tragedy. Stemming from the stoic tradition of Seneca these poems are meant to offer conciliation and consolation in times of great instability. As the musicologist Dr. Melinda Latour writes in her forthcoming book, these poems are meant to offer a "reparative focus on emotional regulation and the related appeal to curb worldly attachments by regularly meditating on death and loss." A number of these Octonaires were set to music by Paschal L'Estocart (born 1539 or 1540), and his settings were very popular. Some of the polyphonic writing in my work is inspired by L'Estocart's musical style. I am deeply grateful to Melinda Latour for introducing these poems to me and for helping me understand them.

In movements I & II the imagery of Chandieu's text is reflected in my orchestration and in varying moods of the music; gentle but probing, yet ominous. The 'ice' of movement I is heard in the harmonics of the strings and the bowed vibraphone and glockenspiel.

In movement II the speed of water, wind, and arrow are heard and felt in the fast moving passages of winds and strings. A Wind Gong adds additional color. Both poems remind us of the temporary nature of earthly objects and joys.

In movement III, Goulart's text warns us of the folly of war and the empty words that kings, princes, presidents, 'leaders' use to deceive men into fighting wars. As Goulart points out, even these 'great men' will eventually face the same fate as the rest of us.

The second section is sung in English and is based on text by the American poet Walt Whitman (1819 - 1892). This section gives voice to the foot soldiers who fought each other, but who later in life tried to find meaning long after the violence has ended. Whitman's *Reconciliation* is from a collection titled *Drum Taps*, and it was the first text that I had chosen for this work. The contrast of Whitman's attitude about words versus Goulart's was just too great and too powerful to place these two poems together. Whereas Goulart's almost mocks the empty words of kings and princes:

Mon âme, où sont les grands discours?  
De ces hautains, fils de la terre?  
(*My soul, where now are the highflown words  
Of those proud ones, the sons of earth?*)

Whitman's line:

*WORD over all, beautiful as the sky!*

is telling us that words (poetry in this case or art in general), reign supreme and can be part of a remedy that helps heal the wounds of war. This is what Whitman's poem *Reconciliation* sets out to do. Nevertheless, Whitman's 'reconciliation' is ultimately one sided simply because the former foe is dead. However, the speaker in Whitman's text finds the divine in his enemy; this sentiment is one that is much more personal than Schiller's. Compare the Schiller's vague *schöner Götterfunken* (bright spark of divinity) and all embracing *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* (All men become brothers). Then consider Whitman's much more humble and personal divinity and brotherhood;

*For my enemy is dead—a man divine as myself is dead;  
I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin—I  
draw near;  
I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face  
in the coffin.*

Whitman's text evokes emotions that are palpable, immediately imaginable, and easily comprehended. Compare Whitman's 'kiss' with Schiller's:

*Seid umschlangen, Millionen.  
Diesen Kuß der ganzen Welt!  
(You millions, I embrace you.  
This kiss is for all the world!)*

By choosing this text, I counter Beethoven/Schiller's almost incomprehensible "millions" with Whitman's intimate interaction; idealism versus realism. Whitman was too old to fight in the American Civil War (1861 - 1865), but he volunteered at hospitals in Washington D.C. He raised funds to buy fruit and sweets that he would give to wounded

soldiers. He would read to these soldiers, write letters for to their families, he would comfort them, and often he would just sit with them as they counted their final breaths. Eventually, this work took its toll on Whitman and resulted in a nervous breakdown. However, the time he spent with these soldiers inspired much of his post-Civil War poetry.

The final section of this work is sung in German and is a setting of a late Rilke poem titled *Vorfrühling* (Early Spring). This movement meditates on the hope that artists (or anyone) can find in the renewal of the cycle of life; after a dark winter always comes spring. Whitman alludes to this as well. Rilke was, like many, utterly horrified by the savagery of World War I and could not write poetry for several years. He came to question whether art, in a time of deep violence and division, was any use at all. He wrote to a friend:

*Art is superfluous... Can art heal wounds, can it take the bitterness away from death? It does not quiet despair, it does not feed the hungry, it does not clothe the freezing.*

(These are questions that are still valid today and ones that I consider on a regular basis.) After at least four and a half years of writing nothing, Rilke eventually found the strength to write again. *Vorfrühling* was one of the last poems that he wrote, only months before his death. I am deeply indebted to my friend and colleague Thomas Stumpf for his guidance on setting German text.

I have now visited Reutlingen on two occasions and I spent the better part of a day at the Heimatmuseum-Reutlingen. Understanding the history of Reutlingen, from it's earliest days to the darkest times that are reflected in the exhibit about the years of the National Socialists, has been enormously helpful in writing this work. While writing *Ice, Wind, War & Spring* I often thought of mayor Oskar Kalbfell and his dedication to rebuilding Reutlingen's infrastructure *and* it's cultural institutions. The *con sordino* (muted) brass fanfare that is heard at the beginning of this work honors the past, and the *senza sordino* (without mutes) brass fanfare at the very end of this work celebrates the present. This work is dedicated to maestro Fawzi Haimor and the Württembergische Philharmonie Reutlingen.

Kareem Roustom

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## **Text: *Ice, Wind, War & Spring* (2019) by Kareem Roustom**

Antoine de La Roche-Chandieu (1534 - 1591)

### **I. La glace est luisante et belle**

La glace est luisante et belle:  
Le Monde est luisant et beau.  
De la glace on tombe en l'eau,  
Du Monde, en mort éternelle.

Tous deux à la fin s'en vont.  
Mais la glace en eau se fond:  
Le Monde et ce qui est sien  
S'esvanouit tout en rien.

### **Ice is glittering and beautiful**

Ice is glittering and beautiful:  
The World is glittering and beautiful.  
From the ice one falls into the water,  
From the World into eternal death.

Both vanish in the end.  
Ice melts into water,  
The World and all its trappings  
Dissolve into nothing.

### **II. L'eau va vite en s'escoulant**

L'eau va vite en s'escoulant,  
Plus vite le traict volant,  
Et plus vite encore passe  
Le vent qui les nues chasse.

Mais de la joye mondaine  
La course est si tressoudaine,  
Qu'elle passe encore devant  
L'eau et le traict et le vent.

### **Running water flows fast**

Running water flows fast,  
Faster the flying arrow,  
And even faster  
The wind chasing the clouds.

But the course of worldly joy  
Is so fast  
That it surpasses  
Water, arrow and wind.

Simon Goulart (1543 - 1628)

### **III. Mon âme, où sont les grands discours?**

Mon âme, où sont les grands discours?  
De ces hautains, fils de la terre?  
Où sont les magnifiques cours  
Des Rois qui au ciel on fait guerre?

Je cuide voir, en y pensant,  
Une fumée s'amassant

Au feu d'un bois sec, qui l'haleine  
Du vent écarte par la plaine.

### **My soul, where now are the highflown words?**

My soul, where now are the highflown words  
Of those proud ones, the sons of earth?  
Where now the splendid courts  
Of Kings who warred against heaven?

I seem to see, on thinking on it,  
A gathering cloud of smoke

From a dry wood which the breath  
Of the wind spreads across the plain.

#### **IV. Reconciliation**

Walt Whitman (1819–1892). Leaves of Grass.

WORD over all, beautiful as the sky!  
Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in  
time be utterly lost;  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly  
softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world:  
...For my enemy is dead—a man divine as myself is dead;  
I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin—I  
draw near;  
I bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face  
in the coffin.

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#### **V. Vorfrühling / Early Spring**

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 - 1926)

Härte schwand. Auf einmal legt sich Schonung  
an der Wiesen aufgedecktes Grau.  
Kleine Wasser ändern die Betonung.  
Zärtlichkeiten, ungenau,  
greifen nach der Erde aus dem Raum.  
Wege gehen weit ins Land und zeigens.  
Unvermutet siehst du seines Steigens  
Ausdruck in dem leeren Baum.

Harshness vanished. A sudden softness  
has replaced the meadows' wintry grey.  
Little rivulets of water changed  
their intonation. Tendernesses,  
hesitantly, reach toward the earth  
from space, and country lanes are showing  
these unexpected subtle risings  
that find expression in the empty trees.