

The image of the 'wreath' symbolises both celebration and remembrance and the associated feelings of joy and pathos; the wreath also represents the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth. In this way, *The Wreaths of Time* seeks to commemorate important moments in American Political and Social history and honour those individuals who found themselves caught up in the vicissitudes of their times: the embattled farmer fighting for his country's freedom; a child caught up in the tragedy of War; one woman's struggle for equal rights; an old black man; a victim of social injustice; a poet celebrating the joy of life; one man's courageous fight for Gay rights and our hopes for a better world.

All artists, but particularly poets, are observers and commentators of their age and through their eyes they teach us about ourselves and the world; they are a bridge between the past and the present. In *The Wreaths of Time*, I have chosen to set poems that either comment upon an event or describe the circumstances in which a person finds themselves. The cycle's opening song, **Concord Hymn**, commemorates the 'American War of Independence' that began on the 17<sup>th</sup> April 1775, when the first battles took place in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. At the North Bridge in Concord, four hundred colonial militia fought one hundred British soldiers, a battle that resulted in casualties on both sides.

In 1837, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) composed a dedicatory poem for the unveiling of a monument in Concord, commemorating the confrontation that ignited the Revolutionary War. Emerson's poem is a moving tribute to those who died on both sides and captures both the spirit of freedom and the noble sentiments that gave birth to a nation. The poem also contains the famous line 'and fired the shot heard round the world'. Yet, within a generation, Emerson's noble words would be shattered by a divisive conflict that would wreak destruction upon his fledgling country. While, Herman Melville (1819-1891) is principally known as a writer of fiction, he was also a poet and in 1866, a year after the end of the American Civil War, he published a volume of poems entitled, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. Melville dedicated the work, "To the Memory of the Three Hundred Thousand Who in the War For the Maintenance of the Union Fell Devotedly Under the Flag of Their Fathers."

The first poem in the collection **Misgivings**, was written a year before the war began in 1860. It is a dramatic and bleak narrative, full of apprehension and foreboding as the poet reflects upon the terrible consequences of war, *I muse upon my country's ills/ The tempest bursting from the waste of Time/ On the world's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime*. In this *Scherzo burlesque* I have tried to capture the poem's underlying sense of uneasiness and turbulence.

Inez Milholland (1886-1916) was one of America's early suffragettes. As one of the leaders in the National Woman's Party, she addressed statewide meetings calling for equal voting rights for women. In 1916 while on a cross-country campaign, she collapsed delivering a speech in Los Angeles and died a few days later. In 1923, on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Rights Movement, a ceremony was held in the Capitol to unveil a marble sculpture to three suffragettes, but Inez was not one of them. For the occasion, Edna St Vincent Millay (1892-1950) composed a sonnet, 'The Pioneer', which called for women to continue the fight for equality. It is not known

whether the poem was a tribute to the three suffragettes or Inez Milholland herself, but in 1928 Millay retitled the poem, **To Inez Milholland**.

The poet, Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1966) has until recently languished in the margins of literary history. But in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century she was the most widely known black woman poet in the USA; she wrote over 200 poems, 28 plays and 31 short stories. The poem, **Old Black men** comes from her second volume of published poetry 'Bronze: A book of Verse' published in 1922. The poet's poignant narrative, combined with a simple rhyming scheme, adds greatly to the poem's emotional power. But it is the bleak and fatalistic final couplet that moves one deeply, *And they have learned to live it down / As though they did not care*.

Odgen Nash (1902-1971) is known for his satirical wit and comic verse and his ability to write poetry that conceals a deep understanding of the human condition. In **No Doctor's Today, Thank you**, Nash conveys brilliantly the wonder and beauty of life and those fleeting moments of euphoria that make us feel good to be alive. The poet's plea is clear, that despite life's difficulties, we must endeavour to celebrate the joy of existence, *This is my euphorian day, I will ring welkins and before anybody answers I will run away*'. Nash even suggests by comparison, that heaven (welkins) itself will not be as exhilarating. For this whimsical song I decided to set only a small section of his lengthy prose poem. Here, the poet suggests that when retirement looms, one must seize the opportunity to try something new, even if it happens to be taming a Caribou!

On my first visit to San Francisco in 1995, I was taken to the Castro district, where the assassination of the gay rights campaigner Harvey Milk, was still in the forefront of people's minds. On the 27th November 1978, Harvey Milk and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were shot and killed by Milk's fellow City Supervisor Dan White; a board member who had campaigned on a platform of law and order and family values. The poet, Todd S.J Lawson witnessed the distress and outrage from a shocked community and, in the days that followed, he wrote **In Memoriam**; a poignant eulogy to both Milk and Moscone. The poem's narrative conveys the image of a solemn procession moving *From Castro down Market* as it slowly makes its way to City Hall. The palpable silence is only broken by the sobbing of the inconsolable mourners. In my setting, I have tried to evoke this moving scene by underpinning the vocal narrative with a slow march like figure, heard in the lower strings. The music's relentless tread is only interrupted when the singer intones the desolate lines, *As if drums were begging to be muffled / As if tears were asking to be heard*. When the procession reaches City Hall, the crowd watches as child places a lighted candle on the steps. At this point the music reaches a dramatic climax on the words, *The drums had stopped*. This is followed by an impassioned reprise of the music heard earlier on the word 'tears', in the line *as if tears were begging to be heard*. However, this time the word 'tears' is repeated three times; a musical gesture that underscores the poet's inconsolable words, *tears could not*. Today, some forty-seven years on, one feels that Harvey milk would be proud of what he achieved and that his hope for a more tolerant society has now been realised. In one of the last speeches he delivered on the steps of San Francisco City Hall, he said "The only thing they have to look forward to is hope ... Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are

too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es will give up”.

It is in this spirit of hope that I chose to end the cycle with of a setting Langston Hughes 'life-affirming poem, **Dreams**. Hughes (1901-1967), became one of the most influential and widely admired Black poets of America, becoming a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance after his first poem was published in 1921. The poem, 'Dreams 'was published in 1923 in the magazine 'The World Tomorrow', and in its two short stanzas, it explores the enduring power of dreams and the warning to never to let dreams die. It has been suggested that Martin Luther King drew inspiration from this poem for his famous line “I have a dream”.

While the subject matter of the *Wreaths of Time* is selective and is an English composer's personal response to those defining moments in US history, it is nevertheless a sincere tribute to a great Nation; one I have come to know and admire over the last 30 years. This is why I was so delighted to receive this commission from Brian Thorsett with whom I have had the immense privilege of collaborating over many years. Tonight's premiere with the Dante String Quartet is the outcome of his singular vision and deep commitment to forging closer ties between our two countries.