

***SONGS OF ASCENTS:***

**A COLLABORATION OF SINGER, COMPOSER AND ANCIENT TEXT**

**by**

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### Abstract

Interaction of composer, text and performer is a significant and fertile facet of Western music. From the Troubadour poet-composer through the composer-singer teams of Jacopo Peri and Vittoria Archilei, Mozart and Catarina Cavalieri to the twentieth century's Britten and Pears, singers and composers have often demonstrated a significant collaborative relationship. The goal of this paper (lecture-recital) is to introduce the newly composed song-cycle *Songs of Ascents* as contemporary fruit of the collaboration between composer Larry Nickel and tenor, Ray Harris.

The first chapter will survey the working relationships of two twentieth-century composer-tenor teams: Roger Quilter (1877-1953) and Gervase Elwes (1866-1921) and Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) and Peter Pears (1910-1986). These collaborative models will provide context for issues relating to text selection and setting, performance considerations and ultimately their contribution to the repertoire. Chapter two will discuss the work of Larry Nickel, placing this song cycle within the context of his development as a composer, particularly with respect to his vocal music. The author's work as tenor soloist, including previous work with Nickel will also be briefly presented. Chapter three constitutes the main body of this paper and analyzes the Psalm texts and Nickel's musical setting of eight of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). The paper concludes with suggestions for this cycle's future performance potential and encouragement for others to pursue such collaborative ventures.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Models of Collaboration: Two Composer-Tenor Teams**

#### **Introduction**

The art of collaboration might be described as a negotiated necessity. It is a necessity because of the multi-faceted nature of creating, producing and presenting any fully-formed work of art. The composer needs the librettist/poet; the singer needs the composer and usually a performing collaborator; and, in a broader sense, the creative task requires the support of finances, promotion and numerous logistics to be co-related and cooperatively considered. Collaboration in music, while a necessity, is also a negotiated and often evolving relationship. The mutual inspiration, encouragement and practical support garnished in a team/partnership approach to music-making are an enriching experience. The interaction of poet, composer and performer/s ideally brings the best out of each contributor, and the sum is greater than the parts.

Collaboration is so extensive and significant in the history of Western music, that it is possible to study only a defined and specific set of models. This chapter will examine the working relationships of two twentieth-century composer-tenor teams. The rationale for selecting these three models is threefold: they are both singer-composer/pianist teams whose careers have had significant mutual impact; they are selected from the twentieth century, thereby making social and artistic comparisons somewhat easier, and that the singers were tenors, gives a particular relevance to this study.

Several issues arise from studying the work of Roger Quilter (1877-1953) and Gervase Elwes (1866-1921) and Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) and Peter Pears (1910-1986). These issues relate to their professional associations as performers, their mutual influence in the creation of new vocal repertoire including the choice of texts, performance considerations, and the models they provide for contemporary exploration of collaborative efforts. These partnerships displayed varying levels of professional and personal interdependence and mutual benefit.

## I. Quilter/Elwes

At the age of twenty-three, British composer, Roger Quilter first shared the stage with the older and professionally established tenor soloist, Gervase Elwes. In London, March 11, 1901 Quilter performed at the Crystal Palace with some of the known singers of the time, including Frederic Austin, John Coates and Elwes.<sup>1</sup> Exactly when and how the two musicians met is uncertain. Quilter had high regard for the musicality and fine tenor voice of Gervase Elwes, who championed the work of contemporary English composers (including Elgar and Vaughan Williams). Elwes was well-connected with significant musical figures of his day. He came from an established Northampton County family and often held ‘Jamborees’ at his main estate at Billing Hall, Northampton, where noted performers, critics, composers and academics would meet.<sup>2</sup> Elwes first sang as an amateur, and then in 1903 began making professional appearances which included major festivals and solo recitals. At these recitals Elwes would program the works of younger composers, like Quilter. Many composers dedicated their songs to Elwes and these recital performances often led to subsequent publication.<sup>3</sup>

Roger Quilter was educated at Eton and the Hoch Conservatory, Frankfurt (c. 1897-1901). He studied piano with Ernst Engesser and composition with Ivan Knorr. He had associations with other young composers from the Frankfurt school, including Percy Grainger, Balfour Gardiner and Cyril Scott. The concert of March 1901 launched Quilter’s songwriting career, as Denham Price sang the *Four Songs of the Sea* at that Crystal Palace event. Other singers who subsequently performed his songs were Harry Plunket Greene, Ada Crossley, John Coates, as well as Elwes.

On April 23, 1904 Elwes sang Quilter’s ‘Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal’, with the composer at the piano at a concert at Bechstein Hall, London. A review in the *Globe* describes Quilter as a “well-known” composer.<sup>4</sup> This program was performed again June 30 at Chesterfield Gardens. Elwes approached Boosey & Co. (later to become Boosey and Hawkes), and it was published later that year. Elwes was to write to his wife in

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Langfield, *Roger Quilter: His Life and Music* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 22.

September 1904 concerning one of his recitals: “Roger Quilter’s new song having a great success – he was there and delighted.”<sup>5</sup> After this point in their careers it seems Quilter and Elwes saw a great deal of each other, developing a friendship as well as an ongoing professional relationship. July 1905 Quilter spent time at the Elwes’ estate in Billings and enjoyed family life in a setting conducive to creativity. During this time he composed the cycle of six songs with piano interludes, *To Julia* (Op. 8). In many significant ways it was Elwes who advanced Quilter’s career and the cycle composed at Billing Hall was dedicated to him.<sup>6</sup>

While few specific details are recorded regarding any possible collaboration in the composition of *To Julia*, it seems Elwes had encouraged and inspired Quilter’s writing of the cycle. Quilter wrote, “. . . going through a Herrick fever . . . I think perhaps devotion is the keyword to the cycle.”<sup>7</sup> The selection of the poetry of Robert Herrick, and perhaps even the ‘devotion’ could be attributed to the influence of Elwes. A few months later, on October 31, Elwes and Quilter collaborated together in recital at Aolean Hall, London, performing works by Schubert, Schumann, Vaughan Williams, Brahms, and a premiere of *To Julia*. The performance was evidently well received and the reviews were positive.<sup>8</sup>

Gervase Elwes was regarded as a skillful and sensitive interpreter of English song. It was his attention to details in the text and the nuance of vocal line that gave his performances their appeal, perhaps more than his vocal or technical abilities as a singer.<sup>9</sup> A review written several years later (1925 in *The Chesterian*) by Scott Goddard remembers Elwes’ performance:

One of the lasting memories of concert-going during the first quarter of the twentieth century . . . will be the exquisite interpretations of his [Quilter’s] songs, the composer at the piano, by Gervase Elwes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Hold, *Parry to Finzi: twenty English song-composers* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2002), 137. See also Trevor Hold, *The Walled-In Garden, a study of the songs of Roger Quilter (1877 – 1953)* (Rickmansworth: Triad Press, 1978), 25 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> J.A. Fuller Maitland, H.C. Colles, “Elwes, Gervase (Cary)”, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 12 October 2004) <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>10</sup> Hold, *Parry to Finzi*, 138.

It was this interpretive sense, along with an understanding of English song and poetry that most likely influenced and inspired Quilter at this stage of his songwriting career. Quilter readily acknowledged appreciation and indebtedness to his singing collaborator. In a letter dated May 25, 1917, Quilter wrote to Elwes, "I am sure you know what I feel about your singing of my songs – it can't be put into words. It has been the greatest stimulus and happiness in my life's work."<sup>11</sup> Two years later, on April 3, 1919, Quilter wrote, "It is sheer joy and inspiration hearing you sing and playing for you." Quilter was to acknowledge that Gervase Elwes' "perfect renderings did more than anything else to make the songs known and liked."<sup>12</sup> Others in the circle of musician-friends, including Rose and Percy Grainger, also credited Elwes with a remarkable ability to understand and interpret Quilter's songs.

The creative interaction between Quilters and Elwes included evaluative and critical attributes as well. Quilter wrote *Seven Elizabethan Lyrics*, intending them to be performed in recital in February 1908. When he played them for Elwes, there was evidence that the singer was not initially enthused by them. He nevertheless performed them on November 19, 1908, after some reworking of the settings, at Bechstein Hall, with Quilter at the piano.<sup>13</sup> Elwes was later to record the last song of the set 'Fair House of Joy' and dedicated it to the memory of his mother, Alice Cary-Elwes (d. March 1907).

Gervase Elwes was to sing and promote the compositions of other young English musicians, and his influence was to be felt on them as well. His association with Ralph Vaughan Williams is seen in his performance of *On Wenlock Edge*, in various stages of its development.<sup>14</sup> In a concert which was co-sponsored by Elwes and James Friskin on January 26, 1909, Elwes performed the third song of the cycle 'Is My Team Ploughing?' He first performed the entire cycle on November 15, 1909 at Aolian Hall in a program sponsored by Elwes and Vaughan Williams, and he was later to record the work, March 1917.<sup>15</sup>

Gervase Elwes was traveling to sing at Harvard University on January 12, 1921 when he was killed in a train accident. This sudden and tragic end to a twenty year

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 19. From Lincolnshire County Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Discussed by Hold, *Parry to Finzi*, 235.

<sup>15</sup> Hold, *Parry to Finzi*, 235.

association had personal and artistic implications for Roger Quilter. He wrote a heartfelt letter of condolence to Elwes' wife, Lady Winefride, dated January 16, 1921.

... the dear man will be missed so tremendously by countless people ... I feel as if a part of me had been taken away – he was the greatest inspiration to me always ... I feel now that whatever I write in music will be somehow influenced by him ...<sup>16</sup>

Elwes' influence as a performer had secured recognition and popularity for Quilter's songs. Perhaps this reputation limited Quilter's career, as he was seldom to write for any medium larger than solo song repertoire. Although his songs have been well known over many years, and broadcast consistently for 30 years, it is thought by some that his best work was done before 1923, during his years of association with Gervase Elwes.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Britten/Pears

There is such a wealth of biographical, anecdotal and critical material available on composer Benjamin Britten and his partner, tenor, Peter Pears, that this brief study will not attempt to delve into these areas; rather it will focus on their early years and work together, particularly as it applies to Britten's first successful opera, *Peter Grimes* (1945). In this early period (1936-1945) we see their working relationship as singer/pianist, the first decade of their almost forty years living together, and their collaborative work on *Peter Grimes*.

Britten and Pears met in 1936 and performed their first recital together 1937 at Cambridge in aid of the Spanish Civil War Relief. Most of the major roles in Britten's works are for tenor, and were composed specifically for Peter Pears. The two performed extensively together in recitals "that remain cherished memories to those who heard them."<sup>18</sup> The pattern of these early recitals was to remain largely unaltered throughout their careers. It opened with a set of early English songs (Dowland or Purcell), then some Schubert and always included Britten's own works, often the folksong arrangements and song cycles. Regarding Benjamin Britten as a collaborative partner at the piano, Pears

<sup>16</sup> Langfield, *Roger Quilter*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Valerie Langfield, "Quilter, Roger (Cuthbert)", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 14 October 2004) <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>18</sup> Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 17.

was later to say, "Ben was extraordinarily sensitive as a pianist, both to what I wanted to do with a song, and in what he wanted to achieve."<sup>19</sup> Paul Hamburger in his assessment of Britten in his work at the piano says,

When Britten plays his own songs for Peter Pears we not only derive that exhilarating impression of effortless partnership, of his playing the piano as if it were not a piano . . . but we also get a piano recital thrown in for our money.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding Pears and his vocal and interpretive abilities, Philip Reed comments on

his searching interpretations of the Lieder repertoire, with Britten as his equally intelligent partner at the piano. . . . Although he was never the possessor of a supremely beautiful voice *per se* Pears was undoubtedly a remarkable singer in respect of what he could make of a particular song – words and music – his expressive, thoughtful, musical delivery going straight to the meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Britten responded sympathetically and effectively as both pianist and composer to the inspiration of others.<sup>22</sup> It was in the dual role of recitalists and partners that Britten and Pears traveled to the USA in 1939.

The inception of *Peter Grimes*, a truly comprehensive example of collaboration at several levels, occurred in the summer of 1941. Britten and Pears had been invited to stay in the home of American pianist Ethel Bartlett and her husband Rae Robertson in California. One day they came across an issue of *The Listener* (May 29, 1941) which published a reprint of a BBC broadcast of a talk by E.M. Forster on the work of the Suffolk poet George Crabbe (1754-1832).<sup>23</sup> Crabbe had come from Aldeburgh, not far from Britten's birthplace of Lowestoft. In this article were excerpts from Crabbe's poem *The Borough* (1810). Reading this poem gave Britten and Pears such feelings of longing for home and a sense of rootlessness, that it thoroughly moved them both. Pears obtained a secondhand copy of Crabbe's *Life and Poetical Works* from a bookstore in San Diego,

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<sup>19</sup> Blyth, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Hamburger, "The Pianist." In *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Works From a Group of Specialists*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, 314, 315. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1972).

<sup>21</sup> Philip Reed, ed. *The Travel Diaries of Peter Pears* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 37. Oliver observes that in Britten's recital partnership with Peter Pears he became, in the view of Gerald Moore, the finest accompanist in the world.

<sup>23</sup> For a complete version of the E.M. Forrester article see Philip Brett, ed. *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 3 ff.

and they read through the entire poem *the Borough*. They found the work moving and evocative, and when they read Letter 22 in which Crabbe narrated the “somber story of the lonely fisherman Peter Grimes,”<sup>24</sup> the inspiration for an opera based on this marginalized character began to emerge. It was likely that Pears saw first how the story could be adapted into a libretto. He was to say, “either of us might have said it, and together we’d have picked it up.”<sup>25</sup> The two started working on sketching out various adaptations of the poem to a dramatic creation that could work as opera. Initially it was the sense of place and location that attracted Britten. He evidently felt there were two main characters in *Peter Grimes*; the fisherman and the sea.<sup>26</sup> The central character of Grimes also created a crucial dramatic problem: how to cobble together a hero out of this dark figure. Crabbe’s Grimes was ‘untouched by pity, unstung by remorse, and uncorrected by shame.’<sup>27</sup> The transformation of Peter Grimes reflected both an artistic desire to create a hero who could elicit some sympathy, as well as the optimistic, compassionate streak in Britten and his view of human nature. They sought to adapt this figure to more a Byronic, tragic cast, to depict ‘the relationship between the single man and society.’<sup>28</sup> These two self-exiled British men living in America as pacifists during WWII, who were also living outside the norms of their society in their homosexual relationship, felt keenly the role of ‘the outsider’.<sup>29</sup>

Crabbe’s Grimes was tough, edgy and beyond remorse. Nature and time had made an indelible impression on Peter Grimes, and the result was a destructive, diseased, solitude figure. In ‘The Borough’ it is through dreams that Grimes addresses us, and Crabbe would often wake in the middle of the night to record his dream-thoughts before

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Headington, *Britten* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Headington, *Britten*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Oliver, 14. “Britten was drawn strongly to the character of Grimes the outsider, no less strongly to the landscape against which that character is silhouetted. He was, he said, ‘firmly rooted in this glorious country.’”

<sup>27</sup> Headington, *Britten*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Pears quoted in Headington, *Britten*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Much has been written of the ‘outsider’ subtext. See Michael Wilcox, *Benjamin Britten’s Operas* (Somerset: Absolute Press, 1997), 28, which is, according to Wilcox “a glance at Britten’s operas from the theatrical point of view of a gay dramatist.” He observes, “The ambiguities in the title role – social, political and sexual – present a supreme challenge to all its interpreters”, 19. Also the Groves article by Philip Brett, “Britten, Benjamin - Return to England” *Grove Music Online* ed. L.Macy (Accessed 21 October 2004) <<http://www.grovemusic.com>> quotes author Colin MacInnes, “Grimes is the homosexual hero. The melancholy of the opera is the melancholy of homosexuality.”

he forgot them.<sup>30</sup> In the opera the character of Grimes needs to be modified to reflect remorse, conscience, pity, and to become an object of sympathy. Britten and Pears portray a lead character pitted against society; against the community; and the community is to blame.<sup>31</sup> This accounts for some of the effective chorus writing in the opera. Britten empowers 'the community' with memorable music such as the opening chorus, the storm ensemble, the round and ensembles of the second and third acts. Yet it is always the solo voice of Grimes which surfaces and dominates.

Developing the ideas for *Peter Grimes* came slowly and evolved over the next several months. Britten and Pears had decided to return to England, and, boarding a Swedish cargo ship, the *Axel Johnson*, they sailed from New York, traveling up the coast stopping at Halifax, Nova Scotia before making the trans-Atlantic voyage, arriving home a full month later. This time on-board allowed them to continue work on the sketches for the opera. Pears recalls,

What I did discover in that old Crabbe volume a few years ago were the sketches which Ben and I (in my own handwriting in fact) made of the first shape, the first kind of scenario, of *Grimes*, on fading paper with a print of the ship at the top. Thereafter of course, I really came to the conclusion, much as I should like to have written the libretto, that I simply wasn't capable. And so we asked Montagu instead.<sup>32</sup>

Montagu Slater, a poet and novelist was called on to be the librettist for *Peter Grimes*.<sup>33</sup> Work was painfully slow at times, and there were tensions in this phase of the collaboration. Pears described it as 'not unhappy, but certainly tense'.<sup>34</sup> The tension evidently arose from the difficulty Montagu had in providing Britten with what he wanted, resulting in a delay in his composition schedule. The completed draft of the libretto was accomplished by the end of 1943.

The return to Britain in 1943 held mixed emotions. The exultation of returning home was tempered by the demand to face a tribunal for their actions as conscientious objectors. While both Britten and Pears were allowed on appeal to go free, it caused tension in some circles. Peter Pears joined the Sadler's Wells Opera Company and

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<sup>30</sup> Brett, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Brett, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Headington, *Britten*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> For a complete discussion of Slater's role as librettist in this project see 'Montagu Slater' by Donald Mitchell in *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes*, Brett, 22-46.

<sup>34</sup> Brett, 38.

launched into active work singing lead roles in *Così fan tutte*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *La traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *La Bohème* and *Prodana nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*). Due to wartime activities, the company was on a kind of perpetual tour, and so Pears and Britten were separated for much of this time. The positive aspect of this for posterity is the considerable correspondence which gives insight into various aspects of the progress completing *Peter Grimes*.

According to Donald Mitchell “. . . Pears’s voice was to be a central creative preoccupation with momentous consequences for the history of Britten’s music.”<sup>35</sup> As early as 1937 Britten had written an orchestral song, *The Company of Heaven*, with Pears’s voice in mind. ‘Being Beauteous’, the seventh song of *Les Illuminations* was dedicated to Pears, and in 1940 the *Michelangelo Sonnets* was the first song cycle written particularly for Pears and also dedicated to him. Britten’s writing for Pears was both a challenge and a perfect fit for the instrument. As Michael Oliver expresses it, “Britten’s love for Pears inspired a remarkable succession of works written for his voice, but from the very beginning challenged that voice to realize its potential.”<sup>36</sup> This period was an intensely creative and productive time for Britten as composer. Mitchell suggests,

it was a release of creativity embodied in the extraordinary series of vocal works and operatic roles that poured out of Britten from 1940 until the very end of his life, music destined for and generated by Pears.<sup>37</sup>

From an earlier period, in a letter from Britten to Pears dated October 24, 1937 while Pears was traveling in America he says, “I’ll have written about four more volumes of music by the time you come back . . . I’m feeling on first-rate terms with the Muse at the moment.”<sup>38</sup> About the same time Britten writes Pears, “Just written a terrific Rimbaud song – with string orchestra- my best so far I think. Actually for Sophie at Birmingham –

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<sup>35</sup> Donald Mitchell, ed., *Letters From a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver, 62.

<sup>37</sup> Oliver, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 518. This exuberant expression is from the first extant letter to Pears.

but eventually also for P.P. everywhere!”<sup>39</sup> This brimming enthusiasm and passion to write for Pears found ongoing expression in the task of writing *Peter Grimes*.

The correspondence extant during the composition of this opera, gives several insights into the collaborative relationship of Britten and Pears. It is clear Britten was continually contextualizing this work as it affected Pears’ performance of it. He writes on January 10, 1941, “It is also difficult to keep going fast and yet paint moods and characters a bit. I can’t wait to show it to you. Actually in this scene there isn’t much for you to do. (I haven’t got to the love duet yet).”<sup>40</sup> At times, Britten reveals his progress on the work as if it is a gift to be cherished: “I’m writing some lovely things for you to sing – I write every note with your heavenly voice in my head.”<sup>41</sup>

It is also apparent from the correspondence that Britten played through sections for Pears as they were completed, allowing for his input, insight and reaction:

Ben, my darling, Peter Grimes was quite madly exciting: Really tremendously thrilling. The only thing you must remember is to consider that the average singer hasn’t much gift for intensity off his own bat, so make sure that the tempi etc. make a tense delivery inevitable. Actually I feel very much that you have already done this . . . P.G. [Peter Grimes] is an introspective, an artist, a neurotic, his real problem is expression, self-expression. Nicht wahr? What a part! Wow!<sup>42</sup>

A few months after this letter, Pears writes Britten expressing his frustration with *Bohème*, but sees it as good preparation for the intensity of the Grimes role. “Phew! It’s dirty music! However, it’s all probably good training for Peter Grimes, which is, after all what I was born for, nicht wahr?”<sup>43</sup>

Britten also seems to be upset at times about the intensely dark and violent nature of the character he is creating and attempting to portray. In his imagination he sees Pears becoming this ‘outsider’ on-stage. In a letter dated July 16, 1944 he writes to Pears, “Well, your scene with the apprentice is going on well. It is difficult to do, & I get

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 616. The Rimbaud song is referring to ‘Being Beautious’

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 1181. Referring to ‘the truth . . . the pity . . . and the truth . . .’ the duet for Grimes and Ellen Orford.

<sup>41</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 1187. From a letter dated February 11, 1944.

<sup>42</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 1189. Written March 1, 1944.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 1198. After a performance of *Bohème* at New Theatre, London, May 19 for Queen Elizabeth, consort of George VI, and her two daughters.

terribly upset by what I'm creating, but it is nearly done, & I think will be good & effective. There's a lot of stuff to get your teeth in to [sic]!"<sup>44</sup>

This struggle with the nature and underlying menace of the Grimes figure has been the subject of some critique. Britten was to say before the New York debut of Grimes, "the more vicious the society, the more vicious the individual."<sup>45</sup> Britten sets his Grimes against a society of a pious, hypocritical community, evoking a character partly-visionary, partly-dysfunctional. From twenty-first century perspective Grimes was a sick man who abused workhouse boys with a violence and savagery that is disturbing both socially and artistically.<sup>46</sup> In an interview, Canadian tenor Jon Vickers discussed the controversy and intensity of the Grimes role. He stated that he didn't accept the role of Peter Grimes with the Metropolitan Opera Company until he had met with the director, Sir Tyrone Guthrie. Vickers said to Guthrie,

I will not play this opera from the standpoint that Grimes is a homosexual: to limit it to that would be to deny it the greatness of the work. Peter Grimes is a study in the entire human psychology of human rejection. It may have been written by a homosexual for a homosexual, but this work is timeless and universal and it's wrong to think that homosexuals are the only ones who ever felt rejected. Sir Tyrone absolutely agreed with me, and he, Colin Davis and I revolutionized the work.<sup>47</sup>

Pears wrote an article for the BBC's magazine *Radio Times* in March 1946 and ends the paragraph with the statement, "There are plenty of Grimeses around still, I think."<sup>48</sup>

In their collaboration, Britten would confer with Pears on various musical elements, particularly related to vocal line and text, as seen in this statement, "I would be consulted about the vocal line if the piece in hand was a work written for me. We also discussed the texts in the first place. Ben needed to find a poem or even a line that suggested a musical idea before he would alight on it for setting."<sup>49</sup> Britten was concerned not only for the part Pears was to sing, but also the entire setting, as seen in his

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<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, 1210.

<sup>45</sup> Wilcox, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Wilcox, 28, argues: "What Britten and Pears were doing by creating this image of Grimes as an outsider destroyed by an unsympathetic and sick society, was deflecting attention from the true storm at the centre of Britten's life, which finds surrogate expression in this opera and elsewhere, namely his own passion for boys."

<sup>47</sup> Jon Vickers quoted in the article by Ulla Colgrass, "A Tenor Cast in The Heroic Mold," *Music Magazine*, November/December 1986, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Oliver, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Pears quoted in Alan Blyth, 18.

words from a letter of late October 1944. "I'm writing a nice background for you to sing against."<sup>50</sup>

These letters provide a portrait of the working process of the composition of *Peter Grimes*. While not giving every detail, some general impressions and conclusions can be drawn from their collaborative relationship. There was clearly mutual respect and deference to areas of strength. Ideas regarding text and vocal setting would be of utmost importance in their dialogue. The influence of the tenor voice of Pears was carefully considered in the compositional process. Selecting, adapting and portraying the text seemed to be a mutual labour. This study of the composition of the opera *Peter Grimes* gives helpful insight into the development of one of the great operatic offerings of the twentieth century, and a window into two great musical minds.

In this collaboration we have the unique advantage of hearing recordings which display the ideas and desires of the composer and original performer, unlike trying to piece together authentic performance practice preferences from earlier eras<sup>51</sup>. Pears says that Britten "was not dogmatic over interpretation of his work, but he knew what he wanted and regarded original productions of his works as definitive".<sup>52</sup> As a result Britten often disliked successors to his works and saw them as lacking or excessive in some way. His music was written with the singer's personality and character in mind, and there had to be a fit between voice and character; casting was a crucial business. In this respect, Britten has undoubtedly made a most significant contribution to the repertoire for tenor solo voice in the twentieth or perhaps any preceding century. While the writing was stylized to suit his partner's voice, it has been successfully rendered by many artists of the last half of the previous century. In recollection, Peter Pears said, "He made my career by all the wonderful works he wrote for me. On the other hand, he said he would not have achieved anything without me."<sup>53</sup> In writing for the voice, artistry and personality of Pears, Britten has provided for all succeeding tenors repertoire of extreme depth, artistry and beauty.

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<sup>50</sup> Mitchell, *Letters*, 1228.

<sup>51</sup> Brett, "Final Testaments," *Groves*, "their exchange of letters is deeply expressive of their remarkable partnership."

<sup>52</sup> Pears quoted in Blyth, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Blyth, 23.

## Chapter II

### Larry Nickel, the Developing Composer

The biographical material in this chapter is drawn primarily from an interview/conversation with the composer.<sup>54</sup> In response to several questions we discussed a range of compositional issues and I have included those particularly relating to his composition of *Songs of Ascents*. I have deliberately written this section in an informal literary style. Larry and I have been friends and colleagues for over thirty years. We share the same personal faith as practicing Christians and have been active in the church and Christian education.

#### I. Early musical development

In 1970 Nickel attended Columbia Bible Institute (C.B.I.)<sup>55</sup> during an exciting and heady time with hippie music groups and 'Jesus People' bands springing up everywhere. Coffee-houses were prevalent and allowed emerging groups opportunity to perform. Everyone was writing songs – including Nickel. He would spend all night in a practice room at the College, while everyone was sleeping, experimenting with his new-found, and thrilling experience of writing something brand-new. Nickel formed a group called 'The Sound of Light' in 1970. This group allowed a budding composer a practical performance expression for some of his newly composed material, several of which were psalms and scripture settings.

In his youth Nickel was a Beatles fan. He listened to everything they produced, from their first album in 1964 through "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band,"

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<sup>54</sup> Larry Nickel, interview by author, December 10, 2004, Cecil Green College, U.B.C., tape recording. See Appendix 4, Interview with composer Larry Nickel.

<sup>55</sup> Now Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, British Columbia.

“Let It Be” and later works. They were doing things that Rock musicians had never done before, using elements of *musique concrète* with tape-splicing techniques, altered playback effects; the areas of experimentation of twentieth century serious composers. In so doing, the Beatles were making new expressions popular and palatable to a wider audience. Nickel says that at first listening to “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart’s Club Band”, “I didn’t know what to make of it”, but he learned every note on the recording. Nickel says of his immersion in the Beatles’ music that he ‘got lucky’, because he wasn’t listening to the Rolling Stones or other Rock groups of the sixties. This fusion of pop, rock and serious musical expressions proliferates today and pervades Nickel’s writing style as well.

In his years of studying music at UBC in the 1970’s, Nickel worked with instructors and musicians Cortland Hultberg, James Fankhauser, Welton Marquis and others of that generation. They opened his ears, with interest, to music of Hindemith (*Six Chansons* were performed by Hultberg’s UBC Chamber Singers in which Nickel sang 1975-77) and Elliot Carter (*Agnus Dei*). The vocal lines, harmonic expressions, and newness of the music attracted Nickel. Chamber Singers specialized in performing new music. During his University years, Nickel began making transcriptions of recordings of various vocal-jazz influenced groups, in particular *Singers Unlimited*, and the arrangements of Gene Puerling. These four singers would use overdubbing techniques in the studio to create a lush, harmonically complex ‘soundscape’. Complex chords, often up to eight voice-parts, were stunning and had an immediate impact on Nickel. He transcribed “London by Night” for the University Chamber Singers. He would listen carefully, line-by-line to the recording, beginning with soprano and bass lines, and then working inward to the middle voices, created his transcription. This process was a significant move for Nickel, because it led to original arrangements for choir in a *Singers Unlimited* style, which influenced his early choral music. He did an arrangement of ‘Amazing Grace’ for University Singers, directed by James Fankhauser, who had it performed in concert, on tour and finally recorded it on a 1978 UBC album.<sup>56</sup> This method of learning compositional technique has its roots in history, as students of the

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<sup>56</sup> *The University Singers: The University of British Columbia* / James Fankhauser, director, Burnaby, B.C.: Praise Records, 1978.

great composers would study their master's music as they wrote out parts for performers.

In the years 1973-77, Nickel and the author worked and sang together in a folk-Christian band, a renewed incarnation of "The Sound of Light". The group included soprano, Lena Schroeder; alto, Gwen Dueck; tenor and guitarist, Ray Harris; bass and guitarist, Larry Nickel; bass guitarist, Gord Nickel (Larry's brother); and fiddle/mandolin player Daryl Klaus. In many ways, Nickel considers the writing, arranging and recording experiences for this group his most significant education during this period. He was writing music with a specific group of musicians in mind, and an audience to be considered. It was extremely practical music-making, and Nickel's experience and exposure as a songwriter flourished in these years.

In these early years, Nickel would often write his own texts for his music, reflecting the practice of the singer-songwriter in the folk tradition. Over the past twenty years, Nickel has increasingly used texts that 'have stood the test of time', texts that have been around for more than fifty years. As a Christian he sees the scriptures as timeless and appropriate poetic expressions. The Bible's texts contain beautiful poetry, imagery, allegory, metaphor and have provided many of the texts for his vocal music.

## **II. Vocal and Choral music**

Another significant influence for Larry Nickel's formation and expression as a composer has been the professional and artistic settings he has worked in, and the opportunities and demands they have provided. It has always been important for Larry to know for whom he is writing, and how this music needs to work. Knowing the performing ensemble and the occasion of the performance helps the composer. You also need to take practical things into consideration, such as rehearsal time available to prepare the performance and competency of the musicians. Nickel has written for every level of ensemble, from elementary school choirs, such as the Pacific Mennonite Children's Choir (most of the singers take music lessons), ordinary church choirs, accomplished amateur choirs (*e.g.* Vancouver Cantata Singers), and his own High School groups. Nickel comments on writing he has done for professional studio musicians, and says that even there one must consider the limitations of time and capability. It is possible

to write music that sounds complex, which doesn't really have to be that difficult to perform. It has a lot to do with voice-leading.

Larry Nickel has been 'composer-in-residence' for the West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir (WCMCC), a recording ensemble that has existed in various manifestations since 1990, under the direction of Tony Funk.<sup>57</sup> In this association, Nickel has been able to write particular music for a known ensemble of fine singers. In a way, writing for the WCMCC has defined his writing style and has helped him to evolve and mature.

Nickel is striving to expand his skills and exposure as a composer, and to that end he decided in 2003 to pursue a doctoral degree in composition, studying with Stephen Chatman at U.B.C. About five years ago Nickel discovered the work of contemporary English composer James McMillan. His *Seven Last Words of Christ* Nickel found to be 'an absolutely stunning work'. Other recent compositional influences include Russian composer Shostakovich, as well as the minimalists Steven Reich and Philip Glass. These are composers who 'know how to write outside the box', but not so far outside that they lose their listener.

Nickel's current writing displays significant influence of Stravinsky. The rhythmic and harmonic language Nickel uses in the *Songs of Ascents* reflect his study of the music of Stravinsky. His use of modes and scales has provided avenues of experimentation and exploration for Nickel. Another composer he has been studying and drawing from is Olivier Messian. Nickel tells that Messian's use of modes has challenged and influenced him as a composer. Recently, Nickel composed a piece based on the nine-note scale.<sup>58</sup>

One of the prompting and encouraging influences in the compositional development for Larry has been people asking him to write for them. In order to develop as a composer, Nickel feels he needs the appropriate opportunity and setting. At one point he became very discouraged with his writing. A short time after this, in the fall and winter of 1988, he almost died of viral encephalitis. As he was convalescing he wrote twenty-two arrangements called *Songs My Father Taught Me*. These songs were recorded

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<sup>57</sup> See Appendix 3, Nickel's discography.

<sup>58</sup> *Enneadic Studies, for Wind Ensemble, Presto and Waltz*, Larry Nickel, 2004, unpublished.

by the newly-formed choral group WCMCC almost two years later.<sup>59</sup> These songs were published and have sold over ten thousand copies, and are still being requested. This music is sung, mostly in churches, around the world. This personal, health crisis in Nickel's life coincided with an artistic crisis, and a new direction emerged. After this pivotal point in his career, doors started opening. He was a practical composer as High School teacher and church musician, and he was successfully writing appealing music for these purposes.

After this period, Nickel began writing through-composed music, moving away from strictly strophic forms. He found this new music was not getting as many performances as the earlier music. As he began receiving commissions from groups like Vancouver Cantata Singers, he realized what a great experience it was to write for an ensemble of really competent musicians, who would not be attracted to simpler strophic music. During the past year Nickel has received almost thirty commissions, including one from the National Arts Center Orchestra (Ottawa). This has opened a spectrum of possibilities for expanding his compositional expression.

One of the key influences and encouragements in Nickel's work has been collaborator and friend Tony Funk. Funk is an accomplished singer and choral conductor and is founder and director of WCMCC. Their collaboration has spanned over fourteen years and has resulted in numerous recordings.<sup>60</sup> Funk has challenged Nickel to write piano parts that worked around the vocals, rather than doubling what the vocals were doing. Nickel has worked to expand the richness and diversity of his accompaniment parts. A key component in this respect is the privilege of writing for pianist Betty Suderman, someone who Nickel feels "knows how to bring music into a line, that I didn't even realize was there." Knowing that he is writing for her has always pushed him to be more expressive and creative in his keyboard writing.

The role of collaboration has worked itself out in various ways in Nickel's compositional pilgrimage. Very often he will take on a writing challenge at the suggestion of a friend or colleague. In particular, his brother, Gordon, has often provided

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<sup>59</sup> Larry realized the best way to allow his music a fair and meaningful hearing, and to expose it to a larger audience, was to form a group of competent singers who would record these songs. A group of friends, family, church and community members mainly from Abbotsford came together in summer of 1990 and did the recording of *Songs My Father Taught Me*, under the direction of Tony Funk.

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix 3 for discography.

this challenge. Gord, who is a year younger than Larry, and has earned his Ph.D. in biblical studies, has always been keenly interested in language, expression of ideas, and culture. He has suggested some projects that he wanted Larry to undertake, such as a setting of the *Songs of Isaiah* (1988). Gord also wants Larry to write an opera based on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The summer of 1988, Larry didn't have a commission to work on, and he decided to write a set of eight songs, based on the book of Isaiah in the Bible. A number of soloists (including the author) have performed the *Songs of Isaiah*. Originally set for high voice, he has prepared transpositions so that baritones and mezzos can also perform them.

The current collaboration project, resulting in *Songs of Ascents*, was initiated by me. I have been deliberating for almost five years over the process of finding and commissioning a composer to write some original material for my voice. I have performed as tenor soloist for over two decades. My early performing experiences came about through University contacts, singing for my voice teacher at the time, James Fankhauser, and also singing solos for Cortland Hultberg in the University Chamber Singers. After University I sang several times for organist and director Fred Carter, who worked out of St. John's Anglican in Vancouver. We performed the Passions of J.S. Bach (1978, 1979) and Britten's *St. Nicholas* (1980). In 1981 I joined the Vancouver Chamber Choir under Jon Washburn, and sang several tenor solos with that professional ensemble. In the 1980's I performed a considerable amount of early music, working with Ray Nurse in various vocal ensembles for Vancouver Early Music. I was also singing Oratorio with community choirs in Vancouver and Victoria, including the Handel Society (White Rock), Valley Festival Singers (Abbotsford), and Amity Singers (Victoria). In 1988, while completing my M.Mus. at Western Washington University, I sang for Robert Scandrett and studied voice with Bruce Pullan. As sessional voice teacher on the faculty of Trinity Western University (1988-2001) I sang numerous times in concert with their ensembles, under the direction of Wes Janzen. I was also active in recital and other concert work during this time. In 1999 I began work towards my D.M.A. in voice performance at U.B.C. About this time, I felt that I would like to help create and perform some original music written particularly for my voice. I have always had a close affinity for the Psalms, having read, studied and performed settings of them for many years. I also

set several Psalms to music myself when I was interested in composing in the 1970's and early 1980's. This decision to participate in the creation of some original music based on the Psalms led to the collaborative venture which comprises the basis of this lecture recital.

### III. Collaboration process for *Songs of Ascents*

The nature of the collaborative process in the creation of *Songs of Ascents* could be described in three distinct phases, and may be labeled: originating, conferring and performing. The originating phase involved the genesis of the idea, the collection and arrangement of the texts and the selection of a composer-collaborator. I had been particularly moved and influenced by Eugene Peterson's *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, a study of the Psalms of Ascents (Psalm 120-134).<sup>61</sup> Upon studying these psalms in the spring of 1997, I selected seven from this 'collection', (Psalms 120, 121, 122, 123, 131, 133 and 134).<sup>62</sup> The rationale for choosing these particular psalms was based on three criteria: the length of each text; the theme of each individual psalm; and thirdly, how these texts could work in combination as a thematically satisfying statement. The length of text was a consideration because I wanted the psalm text to be used in its entirety. For example, two of the psalms not selected for the cycle, Psalm 124 (eight verses) and Psalm 132 (eighteen verses), were both beyond the ideal length of three to six verses. Admittedly, Psalm 121 and 122 contain eight and nine verses respectively, but their selection was based on thematic and contextual considerations. In considering the themes or content of each psalm, I tried to use psalms that speak directly of pilgrimage (e.g. 120, 121 and 134) or to the themes of devotion and trust (e.g. 123, 131 and 133). My intention of including various languages in the settings was to represent the international, trans-cultural and universal appeal of these texts. I wanted to use two ancient languages. Hebrew, the original language of the Psalms, as well as Latin, the language of the early Western church, seemed obvious choices. For contemporary languages I chose English, French and German, because of their influence in art song, and their international appeal.

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<sup>61</sup> For a fuller analysis of the texts, see chapter three.

<sup>62</sup> Later, in discussion with academic advisor J. Evan Kreider, it was decided to include Psalm 130. The thought was to explore the various musical settings of this text. This was never pursued due to length and primary focus of this paper.

There is symmetry in the placement of the languages used in the cycle. The opening and closing songs are in Hebrew, the second and seventh song in Latin, the inner songs are modern languages.

I had chosen the texts and the basic outline of the cycle, but had not yet decided on a composer. I contacted the Canadian Music Center in the summer of 1997 and discussed general protocol regarding approaching, commissioning and paying a composer, and was admittedly daunted by the cost of such a venture. At this point I put the project on hold. When it came to deciding on a lecture/recital topic, I remembered this idea, and thought it would be a marvelous way to contribute something original and hopefully significant to contemporary vocal literature for tenor solo. I knew that Larry Nickel was about to begin his studies in composition at U.B.C. (2003), and thought I would approach him with the idea for this concept. The psalm-cycle would be mutually beneficial, as he needed to write for a range of idioms, and I needed a composer who could work within my non-existent budget. The project was approved, admittedly with some hesitation because of the absence of precedent and the pressure of time, and our collaboration has been renewed with great enjoyment. Nickel was thankful for the challenge of setting these Psalms in a song-cycle format. It ties in very well with another large writing project he is currently working on, *A Requiem for Peace* scheduled to be performed at U.B.C. December 3, 2005 at the Chan Center. Fortuitously, a number of the psalms I chose from the Psalms of Ascents speak to the issue of world peace. These songs adapt ideally for his big project, and allow the composer to then display a time-honored practice of using one particular piece in a variety of compositions. Like the song cycle, the Requiem is also multi-lingual, and multi-cultural, including significant ancient texts.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> When we first discussed the ideas of a psalm-cycle, Larry didn't realize he would be embarking on a Requiem. The ideas were evolving concurrently and came together at this point in his thinking. This larger composition will also feature another level of collaborative effort as Bruce Pullan has offered inestimable help and support to Larry as a composer and endorsed his ability to create a work of this magnitude. There will be significant collaboration in the performance forces used in the U.B.C. premiere, as University Singers and Choral Union, both under Pullan's direction, together with choirs from Trinity Western University and the U.B.C. Symphony Orchestra will all participate. Bruce Pullan spoke affirmatively of Larry's capabilities and said we need competent composers writing artistic music for church and community choirs – music that will be performed in particular settings and fulfilling specific functions.

<sup>13</sup> Much of this conferring phase took place via e-mail, and I have included selected passages of this correspondence in Appendix 6.

In January, 2004 I provided Nickel with the selected texts in the desired languages as well as supporting material, including a pronunciation tape for the Hebrew and some reference information regarding the Psalms of Ascents and their place in the Psalter. There followed a period of planning and preparation as we entered what may be called the conferring stage of our collaboration.<sup>13</sup> In preparation for the writing of these songs, Nickel attended my fall 2003 Voice Recital (UBC) and listened to the recording of that performance as well as other recent vocal work I was doing. He wanted to familiarize himself afresh with my voice and its qualities, so his writing could feature the strengths and capacity of my singing. We discussed specific issues relating to my range, the timbre and fluidity of my voice, as well as my ability to sing extended legato passages. During this period our work together consisted of discussions regarding adaptations of texts to suit the settings, it also included confirmation of the involvement of musicians Betty Suderman (piano) and Calvin Dyck (violin) and several logistical concerns relating to the timeline for completion of the composition. Originally I was hoping to perform these works in the fall of 2004, but we soon realized this was impracticable. Nickel and I met on two specific occasions once the works had been in progress. On the first occasion we discussed musical ideas and themes which might work in the cycle. The second occasion we met to listen to his first draft of the works, which was a setting for voice and piano.<sup>64</sup> After this meeting, I carefully worked through the songs, suggesting changes and editing various passages, particularly relating to phrasing, interpretive ideas and some pronunciation details.<sup>65</sup> In our experience of collaboration there were no sessions of sitting together at the piano or computer keyboard working out musical and interpretive ideas. Essentially, after suggesting the media, texts and languages, I delegated the compositional task to the composer, and, aside from the discussions mentioned, left the composing to him. Once the works were near completion we changed several details and the editorial process will continue after the pieces have been performed and before the scores are made available for other interested singers.. Another level of collaboration was the work Nickel was doing with his teacher, Stephen Chatman. Every week they would work through the songs, discussing specific compositional issues and making several

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<sup>64</sup> September 20, 2004.

<sup>65</sup> See chapter three for specific analysis.

changes through this process. In a very real sense, Chatman was serving as a mentor/collaborator in the creation of *Songs of Ascents*.

The third phase of this collaboration will culminate in the performance of the *Songs of Ascents*. In preparation for performing the psalm-cycle I have done a detailed textual/ musical analysis which is presented in chapter three of this paper. I have also prepared the pieces musically, working them into the voice and becoming familiar with details of phrasing, articulation and interpretation. In preparation for performance I have also worked with Betty and Calvin and received their input and suggestions. Beyond the premiere and recital presentation of the *Songs of Ascents*<sup>66</sup> the performance phase of this collaboration will conclude with a recording of the cycle.

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<sup>66</sup> At the time of writing a premiere is scheduled for Wednesday, February 16, 2005 at Bakerview Church, Abbotsford at a noon recital. The lecture-recital at U.B.C. is to take place Sunday, February 20, 2005.

### Chapter III

#### *Songs of Ascents; Ancient Text*

##### **I. Psalms of Ascents (Psalm 120-134)**

Biblical scholars feel that the Hebrew psalms have been sung and prayed for millennia, possibly up to three thousand years.<sup>1</sup> They have also been transcribed, translated and transmitted in various forms perhaps more than any other collection of ancient texts. As poetry they have definitely stood the test of time. In early Hebrew practice, the psalms were first chanted, prayed and sung orally, only later to be collected and written down.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that the Book of Psalms as it now exists in Hebrew and Christian scriptures gradually emerged from smaller collections of texts. The Psalter is not an arbitrary selection of 150 unrelated texts, but displays clear and intentional editing and compilation into Five Books, with smaller sub-collections.<sup>3</sup> The fifteen Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) comprise one such smaller collection and served as inspiration for this song cycle *Songs of Ascents*.

The Psalms of Ascents all bear the superscription *shir hamma 'alot*<sup>4</sup> which has occasioned much scholarly dispute, but is most commonly translated "Psalms (songs) of Ascents". While there is some uncertainty as to the meaning of this superscription, the traditional explanation is that these were songs sung by pilgrims as they 'ascended'

<sup>1</sup> See William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Also Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, ed. *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 245. "Precise dating of most psalms is impossible, though certain features of later biblical Hebrew can be detected in some of the poems." Also, "Other psalms may well go back to the early generations of the Davidic dynasty, that is, the tenth and ninth centuries B.C.E." 244.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Psalms, Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 11, observes "in the Psalms singing and praying . . . were still united; psalms are sung prayers or prayed singing. As songs they are at the same time what we would call poetry . . . . Thus the psalms still unite in themselves what for us are three separate types of compositions, which in the course of subsequent centuries have split apart. They are *prayers* (words directed to God in supplication or rejoicing), *poetry* (poetical expressions of thought), and *song* (they go beyond the mere speaking or even recital of a poem and become music).

<sup>3</sup> The Five Books: (Psalms. 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150) are demarked by 'doxological postscripts' (Psalm 41:4; 72: 18-20; 89:53; 106:48 and 150), they also bear 'superscriptions' which categorize and characterize smaller sub-collections. See William L. Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 69.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew transliterations used for this paper reflect the phonetic transliterations used by Nickel in the score, making the text and score more readily accessible to non-Hebrew speakers/singers. See also Appendix 7., the Hebrew pronunciation guide for singers.

toward Jerusalem on pilgrimage. We can therefore think of these psalms as a “songbook for pilgrimage”.<sup>5</sup> Others have referred to these psalms as ‘songs of steps’ referring perhaps to their literary structure as well as a reference to climbing the (fifteen) steps of the temple (see below for text analysis). *The Mishnah* makes the following observation:

...and countless levites [played] on harps, lyres, cymbals and trumpets and instruments of music, on the fifteen steps leading down from the Court of the Israelites to the Court of the Women, corresponding to the Fifteen Songs of Ascents in the Psalms; upon them the levites used to stand with instruments of music and make melody. From *Mishnah, Sukkah* 5:4<sup>6</sup>

Also from *The Mishnah*, Middoth 2:5,

Fifteen steps led up from within it [the Court of the Women] to the Court of the Israelites, [i.e. male Israelites who were not priests] corresponding to the fifteen Songs of Ascents in the Psalms, and upon them the levites used to sing.<sup>7</sup>

Some have suggested these psalms have specific historic reference to a return from exile<sup>8</sup> after the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.). The superscription is variously translated ‘Songs of Degrees’ or ‘Gradual Psalms.’<sup>9</sup> The psalms were not likely originally composed for this usage, and some of them reflect other usages, but they became canonically significant in their new adaptation and collection. Most likely these songs were chanted and sung at the three annual festival processions as the pilgrims ‘went-up’ to Jerusalem (Exodus 23:14-17 and Deuteronomy 16:16).<sup>10</sup> It was during the later, Second Temple period that these texts became incorporated into a temple liturgy.<sup>11</sup> In his excellent study of the Psalms of Ascents, Loren Crow discusses their socio-historical significance in drawing devout Jews back to Jerusalem, to the temple to reaffirm religious and political loyalties.<sup>12</sup> He argues on the basis of linguistic evidence, geographical

<sup>5</sup> For some of the other suggestions or variations of interpretation, see H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 862 ff. who summarizes the four major interpretations.

<sup>6</sup> *The Mishnah*, translated from the Hebrew with introduction and brief explanatory notes by Herbert Danby, London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1933, 180.

<sup>7</sup> *The Mishnah*, Middoth, 2:5, 593.

<sup>8</sup> Leupold, 863.

<sup>9</sup> Willem A. VanGemmeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 768 states, “these psalms were a major part of the Great Hallel psalms, and the Mishnah relates the fifteen songs to the fifteen steps of the Temple where Levites sang these songs of ascents”. See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1972, “Some assume a reference to some peculiar gradational style of musical execution.” 1319. Also “The rendering ‘ascents’ assumes a connection with the return from Babylon (cf. Ezra 7:9).” 1320.

<sup>10</sup> The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of the Harvest (firstfruits), and the Feast of the Ingathering (end of the year).

<sup>11</sup> VanGemmeren, 769, dated the collection in the final years of the Babylonian exile.

<sup>12</sup> Loren D. Crow, *The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134), Their Place in Israelite History and Religion* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 159ff.

references and cultural indications that these songs show editorial, redactional work which enhances their unity and function as a collection. In answering the question, "how did the editor intend for this collection to be used?" he concludes that original folk song material was appropriated to provide "a powerful rhetorical tool in an effort to convince Israelites from outlying areas to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem."<sup>13</sup>

The psalm texts were used by early Christians as part of the expanding liturgical repertoire, and were probably sung and chanted in the context of early Christian worship. The use of antiphonal and responsorial psalms, such as the Psalms of Ascents, took root and flourished in the early church.<sup>14</sup> Their use and interpretation was extensive and is noted in the works of Origen of Alexandria and Augustine. The method of interpretation was most commonly allegorical, as seen in this commentary on the Book of Psalms by Origen (185 - 254 AD),

[The interpreter] will join to the others the fifteen songs of ascents . . . and by examining the excellences of each of the songs he will acquire from them steps for the soul in its progress, and by a spiritual understanding will bring together the order and coherence of these matters. Then he will be able to make clear with what noble steps the bride walks through all these and arrives at the wedding chamber of the bridegroom.<sup>15</sup>

The most influential ancient mystical interpretations of the Songs of Ascents were those of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). In his commentaries and, assumedly his public teaching, these psalms were seen as songs for the Christian on the life journey, which was to lead, in their words, 'to fuller communion with God.' The contemporary teacher and writer Eugene Peterson wrote just a quarter of a century ago:

These fifteen psalms were likely sung, possibly in sequence, by Hebrew pilgrims as they went up to Jerusalem to the great worship festivals. Jerusalem was the highest place geographically in Palestine, and so all who traveled there spent much of their time ascending. But the ascent was not only literal, it was also a metaphor: the trip to Jerusalem acted out a life lived upward toward God, an existence that advanced from one level to another in developing maturity. What Paul describes as "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Crow, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages* (New York: Norton, 1940), 60ff.

<sup>15</sup> quoted in Crow, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in The Same Direction, Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 14.

Characteristics of the texts of these fifteen psalms also provide significant unifying factors in their existence as a sub-collection in the Psalter. Aside from the superscription, they exhibit a literary technique known as step parallelism (*anadiplosis*), where a word or phrase in one line of poetry leads into a following line. This provides effective linking of thought and transition in the poetry. The poetic use of parallelism in Hebrew and other Semitic languages is common. Sentences and ideas, as well as sounds are rhymed. This has been part of the genius of their transmission as poetry over the millennia.<sup>17</sup> Another unifying aspect of these poems is their brevity, notable particularly in their placement in the Psalter following Psalm 119, with 176 verses. The average length of each poem in the Psalms of Ascents is six verses (the longest being Psalm 132 with 18 verses, the shortest are 131 and 133 with 3 verses each). Seven of the fifteen poems speak of Zion or Jerusalem (Psalms 125, 126, 128, 129, 132-134), and are songs of the community.<sup>18</sup> While they utilize different genres, they all have application in a communal, cultic setting. These psalms reflect the range of poetic genres, including lament and praise, both communal and individual.<sup>19</sup> They include excerpts of wisdom sayings (Psalms 127: 1-2; 3-5; and Psalm 133), and community psalms of praise (Psalms 124 and 129). The collection concludes with a doxology (Psalm 134) which relates this set structurally with the larger grouping of the Psalter into Five Books (see above). The placement of these Psalms of Ascents within the long Book V (Psalm 107-150) is significant. Book V contains several clear sub-collections, and the center of the book is the longest poem in the Psalter, Psalm 119. They repeatedly reaffirm the necessity to rely on Yahweh alone, and to return to Zion. It is the theme of pilgrimage, of life-journey, of return to the source that unifies this collection. As Claus Westermann observes, "The very journey to a sanctuary was itself considered part of the sacred activity by people of earlier ages... the departure from home and the arrival at the sanctuary. These two key points of the journey are the two foci about which the pilgrimage song revolves."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Westermann, 23. Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature*, New York: Basic Books, 1992 observes "Semantic parallelism, though by no means invariably present, is a prevalent feature of biblical verse." 173.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie C. Allen, "Psalms" *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 220.

<sup>19</sup> Westermann, 23, "*Lament and praise* are the two dominant tonalities that characterize the Psalms of Israel."

<sup>20</sup> Westermann, 100.

It is this pilgrim-theme that draws one to the texts, which are suitable as expression of both artistic and spiritual yearning. The dual themes of leaving and arriving are appropriate for any stage of one's life-journey. As Peterson notes,

There are no better 'songs for the road' for those who travel the way of faith in Christ, a way that has so many continuities with the way of Israel. Since many (not all) essential items in Christian discipleship are incorporated in these songs, they provide a way to remember who we are and where we are going. . . . If we learn to sing them well, they can be a kind of *vade mecum* for a Christian's daily walk.<sup>21</sup>

## II. Analysis of the Songs

### Psalm 120<sup>22</sup>

The genre of this text is a complaint or lament of the individual, a call for divine aid, for deliverance, and also of repentance. It opens with the call '*Adonai*, in my distress', and ends with the word "war". "Not a happy song, but an honest and necessary one".<sup>23</sup> In form it consists of an introduction (v. 1), followed by two strophes of three lines each (vv. 2-4; 5-7). A closer division of its form could be as follows: Superscription, Invocation (v. 1), Petition (v. 2), Contest/ challenge (v. 3) Curse (v. 4), Complaint (vv. 5-6), Affirmation/Denunciation (v. 7). The step parallelism technique can be seen in the repetition of *lâshon remiyyâh* 'deceitful tongue' and *svaht sheker* ' (vv. 2-3). It is also seen in the echo of *shâkhantiy* 'dwell' and *shâkhnâh-lâh* 'dwelling' in verses 5 and 6. Crow refers to this device as "a more subtle poetic device than first appears."<sup>24</sup> The device also allows for thematic contrasts as in verses 6 and 7 with the opposing of 'peace' and the desire for 'war'. The opening strophe treats the idea of deceit, lying lips with consequences sharp as 'arrows' and 'burning coals of broom' (a juniper-like desert plant).

The second strophe (vv. 5-7) depicts the pilgrim as living among those opposed to the ways of Yahweh (those of Meshekh and Kedahr). Meshekh was a tribal center distant

<sup>21</sup> Peterson, 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> For the complete texts in translation, see Appendix 1 Texts.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Crow, 35. In the analysis of the Hebrew poetry Crow demonstrates this step parallelism.

from Palestine in present-day Russia. The Kedahr were a nomadic Bedouin people of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>25</sup> The poet may be saying metaphorically 'from the ends of the earth'. In this way, the psalm was reinterpreted as a song for those living in a hostile environment – longing for their homeland, Jerusalem. These place names represent the strange and barbaric, the hostile and unfriendly 'other' world, the world that prompts pilgrimage. The psalmist longs for 'shalom', but is only met with a clamor for conflict and war (*mil'cha'mah*).

Nickel's setting of Psalm 120<sup>26</sup> reflects the formal structure of the Hebrew poem as well as highlighting specific textual colorings within the song. The first strophe begins with the call to 'el Adonai' (m. 15) and ends with the repeated word 'retahmim' (m. 52). Transitional material (mm. 53-56) introduces the second strophe (m. 57) with the lament 'oyah'. The second strophe is a return melodically to the A-section (m. 15), reinforcing the strophic structure of the Hebrew poem.

Parallelism within the text is also reflected in the music. The repeated words 'deceitful tongue' (*lashon remiyyah*), are set in inexact sequence (mm. 29-30 and mm. 36-37) which provides a musical reflection of the poetic device. (The first phrase is set higher, ending on D natural in the voice, the second is set lower, almost as an echo or parallel, ending on C natural and a return to the F minor tonality). Another example of Nickel showing the textual device of parallelism is in the setting of the words *shalom* 'peace' and *mil'cha'mah* 'war' (mm. 77- end). 'Shalom' has a pleading, descending motive on the second syllable, as does 'mil'cha'mah'. In discussion with Nickel, I suggested he use a stronger setting for the word for war, and end perhaps with more agitation and harshness (mm 87- end). He felt the more plaintive and searching setting was stronger, as it reflects for him, a deeper longing and hunger for elusive peace. A balance between these views was achieved by marking the dynamic level up and keeping the vocal tone strong to the end of the phrase. This also helped vocally, as the assigned diminuendo on the final pitch was somewhat problematic.

The instrumental setting for the text also provides some careful attention to the Hebrew text. The solo violin opening is insistent, restless, and sweeping in its movement

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, 25.

<sup>26</sup> All references to the Nickel setting of the *Songs of Ascents* will match measure numbers found in the complete setting for violin, piano and voice.

toward the piano entry (m. 7) and ultimately the first vocal entry (m. 15). The rhythmic grouping of eighth-notes (3+3+2) in 4/4 setting gives a sense of urgency and an unsettled feeling. It seems reminiscent of a Britten technique of repetition to establish tension within tonality. The bi-tonality of the opening piano chords, as well as being effective coloristically, can perhaps be seen to symbolize the 'two-world-dilemma' of folk on pilgrimage. The violin motive (m. 17) is repeated, raised by a major third (m. 21), then repeated and extended (mm. 25 ff.). This evokes a 'call-motive' and returns exactly (mm. 59 ff.), and with variation at the end of the piece (mm. 83 – end). The effect enhances the dialogical quality of voice/violin and violin/piano (pilgrims in conversation?). The 'arrows' are prepared for in the piano part (mm. 39 ff.), and reappear in the violin (mm. 72 ff.), with the voice having an accented, declamatory setting of *chitse gibbor shinunim* 'arrows, mighty, sharp' (mm. 43-46).

The resolve for peace and for turning from lying lips and hearts set for war is portrayed beautifully by this setting of Psalm 120, ending with a pleading, melismatic wail in the vocal line, underscored by the return of an insistent rhythmic violin part, as at the opening (mm. 89 – end). In preparation for setting the Hebrew text Nickel met with Rabbi Bregman from Temple Shalom in Vancouver and recorded the Rabbi's pronunciation of both texts (Psalms 120 & 134). There are evidently some dialectical variants in the Hebrew pronunciation<sup>27</sup>, but the composer worked out a very careful phonetic transcription based on Bregman's recording.<sup>28</sup>

### **Psalm 121**

The theme of this psalm is two-fold; a confession of trust (vv. 1-2) and a response or benediction (vv. 3-8). Peterson sees it as a song of Providence.

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<sup>27</sup> According to Robert Alter in *The World of Biblical Literature*, "...our knowledge of the phonetics of biblical Hebrew involves a margin of conjecture." 175.

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix 2. Also, Bregman's original recording is available from the author or composer, as well as the notes used for determining accurate syllabic stress and proper singing pronunciation of these Hebrew texts.

The promise of the psalm – and both Hebrews and Christians have always read it this way – is not that we shall never stub our toes, but that no injury, no illness, no accident, no distress will have evil power over us, that is, will be able to separate us from God's purposes in us.<sup>29</sup>

The genre of the psalm is a blessing. The three strophic divisions of the psalm are: verses 1-2; 3-5; and 6-8.<sup>30</sup> The first is an Affirmation of Confidence, the second is Consolation, and the third is Blessing for the Journey. The form follows the shift from first person singular to second person singular (v. 3). Interpretive options include the possibility that this is a form of dialogue, perhaps cultic in nature (priest and pilgrim), or a form of benediction or blessing as in a father to a pilgrim son. This psalm has been thought to be a farewell liturgy or a blessing for the close of a festival.<sup>31</sup> The antiphonal nature of this psalm has led to this application of its place in the liturgy, but it need not be restricted to this view.

Examples of step parallelism occur in all three strophes. In verses 1 and 2 we see the repeat of *auxilium* 'help'. Verses 3 and 4 refer to *dormitet* 'sleep'. The third strophe verse 7, includes *custodit, custodiat* 'the Lord keeps'. The reference to 'mountains' *montes* indicates the nature of the journey for the pilgrim. There is danger, threat, hazard on the way. The mountainous territory around Jerusalem was known for the dangers from attack and robbery.<sup>32</sup> Or perhaps the reference is to 'the high places' of cultic worship of 'other gods'; there would be no help there. Another possibility is as metaphor for the heights (*i.e.*, heaven, or Zion) where Yahweh dwells and would therefore be a source of divine help. Robert Alter asserts,

Elsewhere in the Psalms the lofty mountains and the subterranean seas are used as images, or cosmic gauges, of God's world-embracing justice.<sup>33</sup>

The entire thrust of the song is that God protects. Crow makes the following observation:

At the beginning of this song, then, the idea of lifting one's eyes to the mountains means to scan the horizon, not searching out some place from which to seek help, but rather recognizing that help from YHWH comes no matter where one is. The remainder of the psalm expands on this theme.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Peterson, 38.

<sup>30</sup> The three strophe division is not represented in most English versions, but reflects the Hebrew text. See Allen, 153.

<sup>31</sup> Allen, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Peterson, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Crow, 40.

Psalm 121 is described as a “genuine and specific psalm of blessing”<sup>35</sup> It is not referring directly to a journey to Zion, so much as general, providential help in terms of safety and preservation. It is significant to note the prevalence of the name Yahweh (*Domino*, *Dominus*). Westermann comments on the theme of blessing,

It is striking that nowhere in the entire book of Psalms is blessing spoken of so much as in the small collection of pilgrimage songs, Psalm 120-134. This seems to show that an essential goal or the chief goal of a pilgrimage in Israel was to receive the blessing.<sup>36</sup>

In Nickel's setting of Psalm 121 there is only partial observance of the strophic nature of the poem. Within a general A-B-A form, the piece is more through-composed, with no clear demarcation, particularly at the shift to the third strophe (verse 6, see mm. 55-56). Strophe one enters with the voice (m. 6) on the word *levavi* 'I lift', on the ascending octave D, the fifth of the G minor tonality. The second strophe (v. 3) begins at the B-section of the piece (m. 33), again on the pitch D, but this time it is the major third of a Bb major tonality. It is interesting that the B-section, with its corresponding change of tonality, is also the point the text shifts from first person to second person (v. 3ff). The return of the A-section (m. 63) is the beginning of verse 7, mid-way through the final strophe, but at a significant line in the blessing, 'the Lord keeps you' *Dominus custodit te*. As one would expect, the voice is on the pitch D of the opening section, but it is noteworthy that this same pitch is almost like a pedal-tone in the piece. At the opening it is a fifth, at the middle it is a third, and at the end (mm. 86,87) it serves as a dominant D, and helps segue directly into Psalm 122 (in G major).

The treatment of step parallelism and word-painting is seen in some particular ways. *Auxilium* (m.12 and m. 14) is a direct echo, with the word set in a sequence lowered exactly by a major second. The setting of *dormitet* echoes rhythmically but not in pitch (m. 38 and m. 43), with the dotted-eighth, sixteenth, and half note articulation. The words *custodit te* or *custodiat* are used six times in the text (v. 3, 4, 5, 7, 7, 8) This means it occurs three time in the second strophe, and three times in the third strophe. Nickel sets this word quite consistently rhythmically in two different ways (*cf.* m. 39 and m. 44 with m. 64 and m. 68). This metrical echoing reinforces the step parallelism of the

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<sup>35</sup> Westermann, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Westermann, 103.

text. Two other examples of word-painting are the ascending octave on *levavi* (already mentioned), and the melismatic, soaring treatment of *animam* 'soul' (m. 69). Finally, there is the beautiful, suspended effect at the end of this psalm with the threefold statement of *saeculum*. Robert Alter acknowledges the "archetypal sweep" of this psalm. "The speaker lifts his eyes to the mountains and, in a characteristic biblical association of terms, moves from mountains to heaven and earth and their Maker."<sup>37</sup>

## Psalm 122

The decision to move directly into this third song of the cycle is effective, linking the idea of God's providence to the theme of worship and celebration. This psalm is truly a pilgrim song, with extensive word play on the name of the city, Jerusalem (*jeru*=city; *salem*=peace).<sup>38</sup> It is an invitation, similar to those found in other scripture references (I Samuel 11:14; Isaiah 2:3; and Jeremiah 31:6). The psalmist is filled with a warmth and regard for Jerusalem that has more to do with religious emotion than in-depth theological thinking.

There are various ways to analyze the form of the poem (and none of them reflect exactly what Nickel has done in his setting).<sup>39</sup> Most commentators divide the poem into three sections, but it is not clearly strophic in form, as Nickel has indicated in his through-composed setting. A working analysis is the following division: Account of Pilgrimage (vv. 1-2); Praise of Jerusalem (vv. 3-5); blessings on Jerusalem (vv. 6-9). In the last section there is a six-fold alliteration on the words peace, prayer and prosperity. In form it is similar to other 'Songs of Zion' (such as Psalms 46, 48 and 76), and "features Zion's universal role in grandiose terms."<sup>40</sup>

It is the violin that serves as connecting point between the preceding work and Psalm 122, moving from a lyrical, flowing line into the lively, inviting sixteenth-note passage that sets the tone for this song of rejoicing *Ich freute* 'I rejoice'. For the first time in the cycle, we hear a walking figure in the accompaniment, as the piano employs a Schubert-like harmonic underpinning, hinting at the footsteps approaching the city. The

<sup>37</sup> Alter, *Literary Guide*, 254. He also comments, "The poem is a powerful realization of the meaning of 'guarding' and 'guardian.'" 254.

<sup>38</sup> See Crow, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Allen, 155 ff. presents two different models, including those of analysts Gunkel and Dahood.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Gunkel quoted in Allen, 155.

composer uses rising melodic lines and melismatic settings of words *freute* and *Israel* (m. 48), *Glück* 'luck, fortune' (m. 76-77) and finally *suchen* 'seek' (m. 94-98). This combination of rhythm and pitch creates a soaring sense of momentum, aptly capturing the keen urgency of the pilgrim approaching the temple.

The form of the composition might be mapped as follows: A-section in G major (mm. 1- 43); B-Section in A major (mm. 44- 60); C-Section or a bridge in B minor (mm. 61-79); A1-Section in G major (mm. 80 – end). The beginning of each musical section coincides with a new verse, but not necessarily a new section of the poem, depending on how one dissects the text (e.g. A- vs.1; B- vs.4; bridge – vs.5; A1- vs.8). A final observation on the setting of this text, in the words of the composer,

Finding the most appropriate, most singable Biblical translation was a challenge. For example, I had three versions of Psalm 122 in German. Each translation had good points. So, when repeating a phrase, I sometimes borrowed from two translations, giving further elaboration, clarity and meaning to the text.<sup>41</sup>

There were some vocal and textual issues that needed to be worked out in this piece. When sung as a complete cycle, this is the first point at which some minor vocal fatigue can occur. I decided to approach the section beginning measure 43 ("da die Stämme . . .") in a lighter, gentler vocal tone. This helps maintain energy for the remainder of the piece. Also, there were some text issues relating to the German, for example measure 29, the word *Füse*, which contains two syllables was originally set on two tied half-notes, not allowing for the second syllable. This was adjusted to a half-note tied to a dotted-quarter and an eighth note for the final syllable. Another text detail was changed at measure 77 - 78. The words "in deinen Palästen" had been set originally so that the emphasis was on the first syllable of *Palästen*. This was altered by changing the half-note E in measure 77 to a dotted-quarter, then the five eighth-notes could prepare for a strong emphasis on the down-beat of measure 78 with the second syllable of *Palästen*. These are just two examples of many where the composer and I dealt with textual and musical issues in an efficient and cooperative manner. Nickel shows his understanding of and sensitivity to the issue of vocal stamina at this point in the cycle by the rest given in the

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<sup>41</sup> Composer's notes, see Appendix 2.

twelve measure introduction to Psalm 123, the fourth song in the cycle. There is also another significant vocal respite coming in Psalm 130, with its twenty measure prelude.

### **Psalm 123**

The genre of Psalm 123 is a communal complaint, mixed with a psalm of confidence. It fits the formal pattern of a confession of trust. This mixture of trust, confidence and complaint leads other commentators to see this as a psalm of service, of looking to God.<sup>42</sup> The structure of the poem is two strophes, (vv. 1-2 – four lines; vv. 3-4 – two lines). In the first strophe the form is chiastic: (ABB<sub>1</sub>A<sub>1</sub>). Step parallelism is seen between verses 2 and 3 in the threefold request for mercy. Leslie Allen refers to this psalm as “a word-picture drawn of a household of a master, mistress and slaves” portraying an ideal atmosphere of dependence, support and communal acknowledgement. Another perspective on this song states:

As Psalm 123 prays the transition from oppression (“the contempt of the proud”) to freedom (“have mercy upon us”) to a new servitude (“as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master . . . so our eyes look to the LORD”), it puts us in the way of learning how to use our freedom most appropriately, under the lordship of a merciful God.<sup>43</sup>

In the musical setting of this psalm the elements are gentle, calming and tranquil. Tonally, the song is stable, staying mostly in G major with only momentary excursions into other tonal fields (Ab is suggested briefly – m. 20 and Db m. 47-48). The dynamic range is controlled, with an extended crescendo to *forte* (mm. 31-37, mm. 48-49) and *forte* again in m. 67, more as an affirmation of trust, than any dramatic contrast. The vocal line is fluid throughout, with little unprepared rhythmic activity, and only as much as is demanded by the text itself. The form of the piece is clearly ABA (A-m. 13; B-m. 39; A-m. 63), which reflects closely the suggested form of the poem. The threefold statement of ‘mercy’ of the poem is extended to four in the setting (m. 37, m. 39, m. 41 and m. 47). The rhythmic setting of each statement is almost identical, and reflects a natural speech-rhythm (quarter-note followed by two eighth-notes). The overall impression of the setting is restful and reflective. This is partly achieved through the pacing of the instrumental sections (mm. 1-12, mm. 52-60). The violin line anticipates

<sup>42</sup> According to Peterson, 57, who sees this as a song of service, “In Psalm 123 we observe that aspect of the life of discipleship that takes place under the form of a servant”.

<sup>43</sup> Peterson, 63.

the statement of trust, “I lift my eyes to you” in m. 1 and again in mm. 10-12 of the prelude. There are interesting pairings of ensemble in this piece, beginning with solo violin for four measures, adding piano for duet for eight measures, then voice and piano sound together. At the close of the piece, all three ‘voices’ sound together to bring this ‘confession of trust’ to its conclusion.

### Psalm 130

With this psalm we come to some well-traveled musical/textual terrain. This text has been set for voice by many master composers, and was selected as a later thought (see above) for inclusion in this set. Psalm 130, often referred to as *De profundis* from its opening words in Latin, has been set by composers as diverse as Josquin and Schoenberg. It has had solo settings by Brahms and Honegger, and choral settings by Schütz, Bach and Schoenberg.<sup>44</sup> Regarding the composing process Nickel says, “I spent, on average, one week – 40 hours – writing each piece. Psalm 130 turned out to be a 2 week project because the lyrics cover such a transformation of thought.”<sup>45</sup> From his own analysis of this piece, the composer observes, “Psalm 130 – from the depths into the light; D minor to D major through minor thirds (D minor – F – Ab – Cb major – D major). Tempo increasing, pitches into the sweet zone, tone opening up.”<sup>46</sup> The setting of this psalm is a challenge for the composer due to its intimidating historic precedents and its textual tension. One commentator labels this an Individual and Communal Complaint, with a relatively straightforward form-analysis: (Invocation – v. 1; Initial Plea – v. 2; Confession –v. 3; Affirmation – v. 4; Personal Prayer – vv. 5-6; Exhortation – vv. 7-8).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A sample of vocal settings include: J.S. Bach, *Cantata 131*, “Aus der Tiefe rufe ich”; Johannes Brahms, *Three Psalms*, op. 85; Marc Antoine Charpentier, *Musique pour les funérailles de la reine Marie-Thérèse*; Josquin des Prez, *De profundis: clamavi a 4*; Heinrich Schütz, *Psalmen Davids (130) «Aus der Tiefe rufe ich»*; Arnold Schoenberg, *De profundis: Psalm cxxx* (mixed voice – six parts). At one stage of this research project there was discussion about doing a comparative study of a Nickel setting with one or more of these other settings. Due to length and relevance to topic, it was decided to leave this as an interesting aside.

<sup>45</sup> Composer’s notes, Appendix 2.

<sup>46</sup> Composer’s notes, Appendix 2.

<sup>47</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2 and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 75.

Others find the form somewhat more difficult to decipher. Allen declares that it does not clearly represent one form.<sup>48</sup> Crow observes, “The text of Psalm 130 is by no means clear in all respects. . . . The meter of Psalm 130 is not thoroughly regular. . . . Scholars have long noted the fact that vv. 7-8 are somewhat out of place in the psalm.”<sup>49</sup> For our purposes the structure can be described as four strophes with two-pairs of lines each: (vv. 1b-2; vv. 3-4; vv. 5-6; vv. 7-8). Examples of step parallelism are present in the words ‘cry’ and ‘hear’ (vv. 1, 2); ‘iniquity’ and ‘forgiveness’ (vv. 3, 4); ‘wait’ (vv. 5, 6); ‘hope’ and ‘redemption’ (vv. 7, 8).

At every significant text shift, at the opening of each strophe, our setting reflects the change in some notable way. The piece begins with an extended prelude (20 mm., compared to an average of 8 mm.). The attempt to depict ‘the depths’ is apparent in three techniques: pedal-tone D pitch in the bass; beginning in the low register of piano and violin then gradually ascending, and establishing a D minor tonality then introducing the dissonant intervals of a tri-tone (G#) and the minor second (C#) at several points. In using these coloristic means, the composer establishes a backdrop or context from which to emerge. This is also the longest piece of the cycle (5:08), and is placed at mid point (Psalms 120 - 123 require just over 12 minutes of the 25 minute cycle), and by its conclusion the cycle is  $\frac{3}{4}$  through. The placement, length and compositional techniques used in setting Psalm 130 make it a pivotal part of the entire song-cycle.

At the entry of the voice (m. 21), the opening of strophe 1 is set in the low vocal register, highlighting both the word ‘depths’ and the accompanying sentiment of searching, questing and calling for help. At the repeating of the phrase ‘out of the depths’ (m. 23), it is set a third higher, and followed by three statements of ‘I cry’, each ascending to a high G resolving to F# (m. 29) where we first arrive at D major (and a sense of hope).<sup>50</sup> Strophe 2 begins with the words “If you O Lord” (m. 40) and with this we move into the second tonal area of the piece (suggesting F major m. 41). The next section, strophe 3 (m. 67) and represents a shift in texture and tempo. The fermata over the chord in the piano suspends the movement momentarily. The voice enters in free time

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<sup>48</sup> Allen, 193.

<sup>49</sup> Crow, 87, 88 and 89 respectively.

<sup>50</sup> I discussed with Nickel the possibility of lengthening the ‘searching’ section of the piece, as it seems a relatively short quest (10 mm.) until the ray of hope is introduced in the form of the D major tonality. He felt convinced that the ‘searching’ quality would be felt throughout the entire first section, until m. 39.

(rubato) with the text “I wait for the Lord”. This suspension of time, this waiting, is echoed in the reiteration “my soul waits for the Lord” (mm. 70-71). This depiction of ‘waiting’ is not only effective word-painting and emotive expression of the text, it is also significant that it occurs at the mid-point of this song (and of the entire cycle), highlighting the ‘pilgrim’s’ reality: hopeful waiting. The last section, Strophe 4 begins (m. 84) with “O Israel put your hope in the Lord”. The song is now in the third of its tonal centers, a convincing Ab, and in a broader tempo (quarter=82). In our work together on this piece, I commented that this section had a ‘pop’, Andrew Lloyd Webber feel to it. I felt that it did not seem to fit the gravity and intensity of the opening section, with its dark, dissonant, probing effect. Nickel changed it to its present form (mm. 84 ff.)<sup>51</sup>

The tonality shifts more quickly now, to B major (m. 88 - after only 4 mm in Ab). The final tonal center is D major (“from the depths into the light”) arriving (m. 99-end), preceded by a common-tone transposition in the pitch D in the solo voice (m. 97).

Step parallelism (see above) is also prominent in this psalm and receives careful treatment: “I cry” three times (m. 25, twice in m. 27) is set to a plaintive descending minor-second motif. The parallel idea to this is “hear” and “be attentive” (m. 31, mm. 31, 34). This is set to a rising melodic line, balancing the descent of “cry.” In vv. 3 and 4 of the text, the parallel thoughts are “iniquity” (m. 47, 49) and “forgiveness” (m. 59, m. 61). The two settings of “iniquity” are in sequence and reinforce the dark reality of the text, while the two settings of “forgiveness” also in sequence, are ascending both in the motif, and in the pitch range (the first statement begins Bb to C; the second statement begins Eb to F). Strophe 3 treats the word “waits” and has been discussed above. The final parallelism is “hope” (m. 85, m. 89) and “redemption” (m. 91, m. 99, 101 and 103 - which is the last word of the piece, although not literally of the psalm text). “Hope” is placed on the down-beat, with strong tonal support giving a sense of arrival and conviction. “Redemption” is placed as an answer rhythmically to the statement of “hope”. The final three statements of “full redemption” while not identical, are like echoes of assurance. Each is set a dynamic marking lower (forte, mezzo-forte, mezzo-piano), and

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<sup>51</sup> See Appendix 6, note # 10 (11 October 2004).

each clearly emphasizes the fifth or root of the D major chord; harmonically and psychologically – we are home.<sup>52</sup>

### Psalm 131

The brief and enigmatic Psalm 131 is a psalm of confidence in Yahweh, and a confession of faith. Some scholars have suggested that this psalm text derived from a poem placed in the sanctuary as part of a thank-offering service.<sup>53</sup> It contains beautiful metaphors, including ‘an exalted heart’, ‘haughty eyes’ and a ‘weaned child’. The psalm is a poetic expression of humility and intentionally rejects the way of the proud.

Structurally, the poem is in two strophes (v.1, v.2) with the addition of a final exhortation (v.3). The first strophe contains three negatives, and the second strophe repeats ‘my soul’. There is no evidence of step parallelism in the poem. The threefold negative of verse one is actually a positive, as it reflects a longing for humility, and is balanced by the positive affirmation in verse two, *fait taire* ‘to quiet’ the soul.

One is struck by the pervading sense of simplicity in this setting of Psalm 131. This is achieved in several ways: this is the first piece in the cycle with no violin in the prelude material; the use of a simple, choral texture in the piano to support the entry of the voice (m. 5); the violin is only used in the bridge material, as a reflective interlude (mm. 12-15), the voice, violin and piano never sound simultaneously; and there is little virtuosity displayed in any of the parts; rather, the lines are a flowing, graceful *sostenuto*.

A second general observation is the influence of the French *chanson* on this piece. The art songs of Fauré and Duparc are clearly recalled in the harmonic and flowing vocal lines of this piece. The composer refers to his study of the school of French song as being informative and instructive as he approached the entire song cycle, but it is most apparent in this song. A final thought is drawn from a study of the composer’s sketches. The

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<sup>52</sup> Peterson (1980), 141, “For the person who suffers, has suffered, or will suffer Psalm 130 is essential equipment, for it convinces us that the big difference is not in what people suffer but in the way they suffer. . . . The psalm does not exhort us to put up with suffering; it does not explain it or explain it away. It is, rather, a powerful demonstration that our place in the depths is not out of bounds from God. We see that whatever, or whoever got us in trouble cannot separate us from God, for ‘there is forgiveness with thee’ . . . redemption, not the suffering, is ultimate.”

<sup>53</sup> Allen, 198. Crow, 94 ff, suggests that the text, perhaps originally spoken, sung or prayed by a woman (cf. v. 2b) was found in the archives and later edited and used in this collection of pilgrim songs. This interpretation of feminine imagery, while perhaps somewhat naïve, may have made this psalm more meaningful for women on pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

sketches show that the song is harmonically derived, being one of the few sketches where the composer includes chord analysis. The form of an opening A-section, with bridge material being harmonically conceived at first, then leading into the A-prime section is apparent in the sketch. This indicates also, that Nickel thought of this at a most basic level as a song with melody and simple harmonic accompaniment, which he later develops. There are several ideas in his working sketches, some of which are incorporated in the final version, others not.

### Psalm 133

This is a psalm of religious community in the fullest sense. Its origins are rooted in the wisdom tradition (v.1),<sup>54</sup> and it perhaps owes its place in this collection due to the references to Zion and the theme of unity among family (tribe). It has been argued that it is an expanded proverb extolling the virtues of unity in the community. In form it most closely resembles a "Song of Zion", with a structure that could be described as concentric: Exclamation (v. 1); Metaphors – center of poem (v. 2-3a); Hymn to Zion (v. 3b). Each line in the Hebrew text ends with a superlative. At the close of the poem is an alliterative pair (in the original) 'Zion' and 'commanded'. This closing pair corresponds to the emphasis on 'good' and 'pleasant' in the first verse. Crow makes the following observation:

The comprehensibility of Psalm 133 is perhaps due more to its rich and vivid imagery than to clarity in the usual sense. Like the "tone poems" of Franz Liszt or Richard Strauss, this psalm aims to convey mood rather than to communicate specific ideas.<sup>55</sup>

The poetic imagery is portrayed strikingly in this setting. Nickel seeks to show the ideas of unity and blessing in community in contrast to dissonance and strife. A flowing, calm plainchant at the opening of the piece, *quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum*

<sup>54</sup> Crow, 109, "Psalm 133 begins with what seems to be a proverbial saying about the value of "dwelling of brothers together." The axiomatic character of the saying seems to find support in the phrase "how good!" which occurs often in the wisdom literature."

<sup>55</sup> Crow, 119.

'how pleasant to live together as brothers in unity' emerges in contrast to increasing dissonance established in the piano prelude (mm. 1-8). The attempt is to signify both the desire for unity and its often elusive reality. A tri-tone relationship is established by the piano with the Ab major against D major (m. 5). A tri-tone dissonance occurs again at the end of the song (mm. 103- end) beneath the words "*in unum*" 'in unity', a reminder of the vigilance required to live in unity.

Other examples of harmonic dissonance as a backdrop for unity in community appear in this piece. Nickel refers to a harmonic clash in measure 27 (F# against C)<sup>56</sup>. It is unprepared, as it comes out of a predominantly C minor tonality (mm. 13ff). The attempt is to depict the jarring reality of a world rife with conflict, yet celebrating the rich joy of harmony. The tri-tone relationship, set at *forte* (m. 27), then echoed (m. 29) at *piano*, follows a flowing section in 6/8 (mm. 13-28). The evenness and tranquility of the 6/8 section resumes at measure 35. The general sense in this piece is tranquility and orderliness, but always with the background threat of disunity.

Rhythmic elements in this song also attempt to depict a spirit of unity. The predominant rhythmic pulse is a gently flowing 6/8 in the vocal part throughout, and in the piano part at significant points (e.g. the establishing of a steady pulse at m. 13). Specific examples of juxtaposing rhythmic groupings of two against three are seen between voice and piano (mm. 17ff.), between right hand and left hand in the piano (mm. 31 ff.) and in all three parts (mm. 98-100). Again, in rhythmic language, the composer is depicting the stability of unity, even against a background of possible opposition.

Blessings which descend are a second metaphor of the poem. In the text it is portrayed by flowing "precious ointment" (v. 2) and "the dew of Hermon" (v. 3).

The oil flowing down Aaron's beard communicates a sense of warm, priestly relationship. The dew descending down Hermon's slopes communicates a sense of fresh and expectant newness. Oil and dew. The two things that make life together delightful.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See composer's notes, Appendix 2.

<sup>57</sup> The symbolism of the oil is described by Peterson, 174, "The picture comes from Exodus 29 where instructions are given for the ordination of Aaron and other priests . . . . Oil, throughout scripture is a sign of God's presence, a symbol of the Spirit of God."

The piano portrays the image of the oil in a flowing, gently descending sixteenth-note passage (mm. 62, 63). Later in the piece the idea of descending dew is conveyed (mm. 85ff.) lightly cascading from the upper register of the keyboard, and mirrored in the pizzicato 'drops' of the violin.<sup>58</sup> The setting of these two distinct metaphors evokes peaceful, quiet receptivity of outpoured blessing.

### Psalm 134

*Songs of Ascents* concludes with a benediction, *hine barachu* 'O, bless'. The psalm is simultaneously a call to praise, a blessing, and dismissal of the congregation; a most appropriate finale to these processional songs. In form it has two unequal parts, a call to praise (vv. 1, 2) and a short priestly benediction (v. 3).<sup>59</sup> Nocturnal worship was held in the sanctuary at Jerusalem. It is likely that these words were first addressed to the professional leaders of worship, those who worked and worshiped through the Temple's night shift. The clear reference to a cultic, temple worship setting is the two-fold use of 'sanctuary' and 'house of the Lord'. It is a simple binary form, and the contrast is between God in the temple, and God of the cosmos 'maker of heaven and earth.' The parallelism is in the words, 'house of the Lord' (v. 1) and 'temple' (v. 2); 'Zion' and 'heaven and earth' (v. 3).

In the final song of this cycle the theme of blessing is set in a bright tempo (quarter=132; *con brio*), with a crisp, rhythmic declamation of the text (mm. 11ff.) and a G minor tonality, moving to its relative major, Bb (m. 68). It is the shortest song of the set, due to length of text and tempo, but also because it conveys a sense of 'going on our way.' In this song all three participants (voice, violin and piano) take part freely and equally, as if in dialogue. The form of the piece is ABA: A (m. 11), B (m. 33), A (m. 64) and corresponds to a change of mood at verse 2 (m. 33) and verse 3 (m. 43). In keeping with the Hebrew text the composer has included some folk-Hebraisms in the music, for example the use of augmented seconds (mm. 22, 46), the rhythmic impulse in the piano

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<sup>58</sup> Peterson, 176, "This heavy dew, which was characteristic of each new dawn on the high slopes of (mount) Hermon is extended by the imagination to the hills of Zion – a copious dew, fresh and nurturing in the drier barren Judean country. The alpine dew communicates a sense of morning freshness, a feeling of fertility, a clean anticipation of growth."

<sup>59</sup> Allen suggests, "it is possible that a gap is to be assumed during which the religious community sang in praise."

(mm.3ff), and the use of minor mode is reminiscent of much Hebrew folk music. The parallelisms are not featured prominently in this setting, rather the text throughout reflects a dramatic, dynamic speech-based rhythm, with little clear attempt at word-painting (with the exception of the dolce section, mm. 56-60 and the words 'O se *shamayim va arets*' who made heaven and earth).<sup>60</sup>

The people who learn what it is like to receive the blessing, persons who travel the way of faith in all kinds of weather and over every kind of terrain, become good at blessing....In Judaism to this day all forms of prayer which begin with praise of God are called *berakoth*, that is, blessings.<sup>61</sup>

### III. *Songs of Ascents* as a song cycle

As a complete song cycle *Songs of Ascents* displays both elements of unity and elements of contrast. Elements that unify these songs as a complete cycle include voicing and instrumentation, text and theme as well as some musical, motivic ideas. Regarding voicing, of course the entire cycle is set for tenor or high voice and piano with violin in the full and final arrangement. As the composer observes, "The songs were originally written for only piano and tenor, with the enhanced rendition including violin." In the original proposal I had suggested "a setting for tenor solo, piano and optional clarinet." The selection of instrumentation was based on practical and historical considerations. As for the practical issue, the richness and versatility of the piano in partnership with the voice is unparalleled. While wonderful cycles for voice and guitar, voice and harp, voice and string quartet exist, their performance is often limited by access to these forces. The piano remains the most practical and historically rich musical partner to the solo voice. Added to this the working relationship of pianist Betty Suderman and Calvin Dyck and their collaboration on other projects with both myself and Larry, and the choice of instrumentation was cast.

Most of this chapter has dealt with issues of text, so little more need be said here, except to note that the selection of psalm texts, and the variety of languages is both a

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<sup>60</sup> The composer's effort to familiarize himself with Hebrew is apparent in this psalm. He says, "I visited a Rabbi at the synagogue for direction with the Hebrew texts." (Composer's notes, Appendix 2).

<sup>61</sup> Peterson, 186.

unifying element in the cycle, and an element that provides variety. Most song cycles are in one language only, and so the use of five different languages for the eight psalms is somewhat different. However, the thematic unity of the psalms themselves, as belonging to the collection of fifteen 'Psalms of Ascents' (Psalm 120-134) balances this diversity of language. The selection of the eight texts in the song cycle provides unity in regards their length and the balance of topics or themes treated in each song. In this respect the songs reflect both unity and diversity.

In the original proposal for this project I suggested the inclusion of unifying musical elements. By this I was thinking of either motivic or returning subjects or themes to link and relate the pieces. At the same time, each piece needed to be able to stand alone, and be able to be performed independently. Nickel chose one or two subtle musical ideas which were employed at various points in the pieces, such as the descending minor third interval (Psalm 120, mm. 89-90; Psalm 123 mm. 16 and 66). Another consideration to provide both unity and variety is the use of keys and tempi (see Appendix 2). The keys are closely related, often one piece functions as harmonic preparation for the next, as in Psalm 121 (G minor) and Psalm 122 (G major); or moving from Psalm 131 in A minor into the relative key of C major in Psalm 133. There is only one segue indicated in the cycle (from 121 to 122), but all the other pieces flow effectively from one to the other. The composer avoids an obvious harmonic relationship for songs of ascent in the choice to not move through the key centers in an ascending order.

#### **IV. Future performance potential for *Songs of Ascents***

In conclusion, I believe that this newly created song cycle has the potential to find its place in the wider repertoire for tenor solo in recital and sacred concert. At the present time there are several singers, including Melanie Kreuger (soprano), Colin Balzer and Ben Heppner (tenors) who have expressed interest in seeing and possibly performing these songs. Also the composer has adapted three of these songs for use in his *Requiem for Peace*. Psalm 133 is set for choir and orchestra, while psalm 120 will retain its solo setting.

Individual songs from *Songs of Ascents* could also be selected and performed in various combinations in recital. One could choose to do pairings of languages from the cycle, for example the Hebrew songs (120 & 134), the Latin (121 & 133) or the English (123 & 130). The four modern language songs (122, 123, 130 & 131) could be performed as a set of approximately fourteen minutes. For a shorter set, approximately eleven minutes, the ancient language settings (120, 121, 133 & 134) could be chosen.

The collaboration process resulting in the creation of this newly composed song cycle has certainly been a gratifying experience both musically and academically, and I would wholeheartedly encourage other singers and composers to work together in the creation of new music.

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**Appendix 1.**  
**TEXTS**

<p><b>PSALM 120</b> Source: <i>Jewish Publication Society</i>, 1917. Phonetic transliteration</p> <p>INVOCATION</p> <p>1. El Adonai bahtsahrahtah li karahti va-yah ahneni:</p> <p>PETITION</p> <p>2. Adonai hahtsila naf-shi, mi-svaht sheker mi-lashown rahmiyah.</p> <p>CONTEST/CHALLENGE</p> <p>3. Mah yiten le-cha mah yosif la-cha lashown rahmiyah?</p> <p>CURSE</p> <p>4. Chitse gibor shinunim eem gahchaley retahmim.</p> <p>COMPLAINT</p> <p>5. Ohyah li ki garti Meshek shach-nahti im ah-ha- le Kedahr.</p> <p>6. Rahbaht shach-nah lah naf-shi im sohneh shalom.</p> <p>AFFIRMATION/DENUNCIATION</p> <p>7. Ani shalom veh-chi ah-dah-ber he-mah le-mil-cha-mah.</p>	<p><i>The New Revised Standard Version</i>. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.</p> <p>1. In my distress I cry to the LORD, that he may answer me:</p> <p>2. "Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue."</p> <p>3. What shall be given to you? And what more shall be done to you, you deceitful tongue?</p> <p>4. A warrior's sharp arrows, with glowing coals of the broom tree!</p> <p>5. Woe is me, that I am an alien in Meshech, that I must live among the tents of Kedar.</p> <p>6. Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.</p> <p>7. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.</p>
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**PSALM 121**(Psalm 120 *Latin Vulgate*, 1907)**AFFIRMATION OF CONFIDENCE**

1. Levavi oculos meos in montes, unde  
veniet auxilium mihi.
2. Auxilium meum a Domino, qui fecit  
caelum et terram.

**CONSOLATION**

3. Non det in commotionem pedem tuum:  
neque dormitet qui custodit te,
4. Ecce non dormitabit neque dormiet, qui  
custodit Israel.
5. Dominus custodit te, Dominus protectio  
tua, super manum dexteram tuam.

**BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY**

6. Per diem sol non uret te: neque luna per  
noctem.
7. Dominus custodit te ab omni malo:  
custodiat animam tuam Dominus.
8. Dominus custodiat introitum tuum et  
exitum tuum: ex hoc nunc, et usque in  
saeculum.

*N.R.S.V.*

1. I lift up my eyes to the hills —  
from where will my help come?
2. My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth.
3. He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4. He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5. The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade at your right  
hand.
6. The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night.
7. The LORD will keep you from all evil; he  
will keep your life.
8. The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.

**PSALM 122**

Sources: *Luther Bibel*, 1545;  
*Die Elberfelder Bibel*, 1985;  
*Hoffnung für alle* – modified.

**ACCOUNT OF PILGRIMAGE**

1. Ich freute mich über die, so mir sagten:  
 "Wir gehen zum Haus des HERRN."
2. Unsre Füße stehen in deinen Toren,  
 Jerusalem.

**PRAISE OF JERUSALEM**

3. Jerusalem ist gebaut, daß es eine Stadt  
 sei, da man zusammenkommen soll,
4. da die Stämme hinaufgehen, die Stämme  
 des HERRN, wie geboten ist dem Volk  
 Israel, zu danken dem Namen des  
 HERRN..
5. Denn daselbst sind Stühle zum Gericht,  
 die Throne des Hauses Davids.

**BLESSINGS ON JERUSALEM**

6. Wünschet Jerusalem Glück! Es möge  
 wohl gehen denen, die dich lieben!
7. Es möge Friede sein in deinen Mauern  
 und Glück in deinen Palästen!
8. Um meiner Brüder und Freunde willen  
 will ich dir Frieden wünschen.
9. Um des Hauses willen des HERRN,  
 unsers Gottes, will ich dein Bestes  
 suchen.

*N.R.S.V.*

1. I was glad when they said to me,  
 "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"
2. Our feet are standing within your gates,  
 O Jerusalem.
3. Jerusalem — built as a city  
 that is bound firmly together.
4. To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the  
 LORD, as was decreed for Israel,  
 to give thanks to the  
 name of the LORD.
5. For there the thrones for judgment were  
 set up, the thrones of the house of David.
6. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
 "May they prosper who love you.
7. Peace be within your walls,  
 and security within your towers."
8. For the sake of my relatives and friends I  
 will say, "Peace be within you."
9. For the sake of the house of the LORD  
 our God, I will seek your good.

**PSALM 123**

*New International Version, 1984 - modified*

**DEPENDENCE**

1. I lift up my eyes to you,  
to you whose throne is in heaven.
2. As the eyes of the servant  
look to the hand of his master,  
as the eyes of a maiden look to the hand of her lady,  
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,  
till he shows us his mercy.

**COMPLAINT**

3. Have mercy on us, O LORD,  
have mercy on us,  
for we have endured much contempt.
4. From the proud, we have endured so much ridicule.

**PSALM 130**

*N.I.V.* - modified

**INVOCATION**

1. Out of the depths I cry to you O LORD,

**INITIAL PLEA**

2. LORD, hear my voice, may you be attentive to my cry for mercy.

**CONFESSION**

3. If you O LORD should keep account of our iniquity,  
then who could stand before you?

**AFFIRMATION**

4. But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.

**PERSONAL PRAYER**

5. I wait for the LORD my soul waits for the Lord.
6. And in His Word I put my trust;  
my soul waits for the LORD  
more than the watchman waits for the morning.

**EXHORTATION**

7. Oh Israel, put your hope in the LORD  
for in the Lord is unfailing love,  
with Him there is full redemption.
8. The LORD Himself will redeem  
Israel from all iniquity – full redemption.

**PSALM 131**

Sources: *French Darby*, Grand Rapids MI: Christian Classics, 2002;  
*Louis Segond*, Alliance Biblique Universelle, 1910.

*N.R.S.V.*

**EXPRESSION OF HUMILITY**

1. Éternel! mon coeur n'est pas hautain, et mes yeux ne s'élèvent pas; je ne m'occupe pas de choses trop grandes et trop élevées pour moi.

1. O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

**AFFIRMATION OF TRUST**

2. N'ai-je pas soumis et fait taire mon âme, comme un enfant sevré auprès de sa mère? Mon âme est en moi comme l'enfant sevré.

2. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

**EXHORTATION**

3. Israël, attends-toi à l'Éternel, mets ton esprit en l'Éternel maintenant et toujours!

3. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

<p><b>PSALM 133</b></p> <p>(Psalm 132, <i>Latin Vulgate</i>, 1907)</p> <p><b>EXCLAMATION</b></p> <p>1. Ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum</p> <p><b>METAPHORS</b></p> <p>2. Sicut unguentum in capite, quod descendit in barbam, barbam Aaron, quod descendit in ora vestimenti eius:</p> <p>3a. sicut ros Hermon, qui descendit in monte Sion.</p> <p><b>HYMN TO ZION</b></p> <p>3b. Quoniam illic mandavit Dominus benedictionem, et vitam usque in saeculum.</p>	<p><i>N.R.S.V.</i></p> <p>1. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!</p> <p>2. It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.</p> <p>3a. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.</p> <p>3b. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.</p>
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**PSALM 134**

Source: *Jewish Publication Society*, 1917.

*N.R.S.V.*

Phonetic transliteration

**CALL TO PRAISE**

1. Hin-ne bara chu et Adonai kol avdet  
Adonai ha omadeem bebet Adonai  
balelot.
2. Se oo ye-de-chem kodesh uvarachu et  
Adonai.

1. Come, bless the LORD, all you servants  
of the LORD, who stand by night in the  
house of the LORD!
2. Lift up your hands to the holy place,  
and bless the LORD.

**BENEDICTION**

3. Ye ba re-che-cha Adonai mi-tsion O se  
sha-ma-yim va-arets.

- 3 May the LORD, maker of heaven and  
earth, bless you from Zion.

## Appendix 2. Composer's notes

<b>Psalm 120</b>	I Call on the Lord <i>Repentance</i>	4/4 140	Hebrew	2:10	F minor
<b>Psalm 121</b>	I Lift My Eyes <i>Providence/Confidence</i>	3/4 68	Latin	3:55	G minor
<b>Psalm 122</b>	I Rejoiced <i>Worship/Celebration</i>	4/4 136	German	2:46	G major
<b>Psalm 123</b>	I Look to You <i>Service/Submission</i>	4/4 86	English	3:16	G major
<b>Psalm 130</b>	Out of the Depths <i>Redemption</i>	3/4, 2/4 68 – 86	English	5:08	D minor D major
<b>Psalm 131</b>	My Heart is not Proud <i>Humility</i>	4/4 64	French	2:16	A minor
<b>Psalm 133</b>	How Good and Pleasant <i>Community/Unity</i>	6/8 60	Latin	3:49	C minor/major
<b>Psalm 134</b>	Come Bless the Lord <i>Blessing/Benediction</i>	4/4 160	Hebrew	1:48	G minor – Bb major

*Songs of Ascents* – the composing process,  
Larry Nickel

I spent, on average, one week – 40 hours – writing each piece. Psalm 130 turned out to be a 2 week project because the lyrics cover such a transformation of thought.

For each piece, the first day or two was spent studying, researching and speaking the text. I visited a Rabbi at the synagogue for direction with the Hebrew texts (Psalm 121 and 134) and also German and French friends for Psalm 122 and 131. Finding the most appropriate, most Biblical translations was a challenge. For example, I had three versions of Psalm 122 in German. Each translation had good points. So, when repeating a phrase, I sometimes borrowed from two translations, giving further elaboration and clarity to the meaning of the text.

By speaking the texts over repeatedly, I was able to determine various options for meter and phrasing from the accents and inflection of the words. I was looking for a wide range of meters and tempos.

The songs were originally written only for piano and tenor, with the enhanced rendition including violin. This makes the set more versatile.

Psalm 133 – speaking of brothers in unity – C major against F# major, 2 against 3, groups of 3 against groups of 4. Cascading motifs – descending oil and dew.

Psalm 130 – from the depths into the light; D minor to D major through minor thirds – D minor – F – Ab – Cb (B major) – D major. Tempo increasing, pitches into the ‘sweet zone’ tone opening up.

### Appendix 3.

#### Discography of composer Larry Nickel

*Dwelling Place.* The Sound of Light. Self-published, capac, 1974.

*Another Day of Grace.* The Sound of Light. Self-published, capac, 1975.

*Songs My Father Taught Me.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir.\* Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1991.

*Through An Open Window.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1993.

*A Mennonite Tapestry.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1994.

*When I was A Child.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1998.

#### Recordings featuring at least three Nickel compositions/arrangements

*Columbia Sings.* Columbia Bible College Choir. Clearbrook, B.C. : Columbia Bible College, 1971.

*Dogwood Country.* Alan Moberg. Vancouver: capac, 1975.

*Songs of Earth Echoes of Heaven.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1996.

*Come Heart's Delight.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1997.

*Meditation: violinist Calvin Dyck, pianist Betty Suderman.* Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1998.

*A Rare Benediction.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1999.

*As Evening Shadows Fall.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 2000. My Heart, My Home – WCMCC\* (2001)

*The Time Of Eternity.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 2002.

*And Night Shall End.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 2003.

*By Light Indwelled.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 2004.

*Canadian Safari.* Chor Leoni Men's Choir. Skylark Music, Catalogue #9801 Distributed by SRI, Peterborough, ON. Recorded in Vancouver, 2004.

*Carols For the Infant King.* West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 1992.

*A Vancouver Christmas: The University Singers.* (Compact disc.) Vancouver, Orpheum Masters, 2003.

*One Small child:* violinist Calvin Dyck, pianist Betty Suderman. Abbotsford: MCC Supportive Care, 2004.

*\*Larry has been composer-in-residence for this choir. WCMCC directed by Tony Funk.*

**Appendix 4.**

Interview with composer Larry Nickel

December 10, 2004

Green College, U.B.C.

**Questions Discussed:**

For the full interview, refer to the recorded conversation on tape, available from the author.

1. What first attracted you to composing and songwriting as a form of artistic and personal expression?
2. What were some of the early influences on your vocal writing style? (composers, songwriters, styles).
3. What kinds of poetry, texts and influences inspire you?
4. Discuss how your professional/artistic setting shapes the type and kinds of composing you have done. (i.e. as a High School Teacher, as composer for West Coast Mennonite Chamber Choir etc.).
5. Describe how your compositional style has evolved over the last few years (including composers who are inspiring and shaping your music).
6. What have been some highlights so far in your career as a composer?
7. What other collaborative experiences (commissions or dedicated compositions – like ‘Songs of Isaiah’ and others) have you been involved in?
8. Describe how you felt this collaborative venture worked, resulting in the creation of ‘Songs of Ascent’?
9. What are some upcoming projects for you?
10. What words of advice/recommendations would you have for today’s young songwriters/composers?

## Appendix 5.

### Psalm Cycle

#### Seven Songs of Ascent

#### Proposed DMA Lecture-Recital for Ray Harris – (proposed Fall 2003)

**Decription:** As partial fulfillment of the DMA in voice performance, I am proposing the composition of a song cycle based on seven psalms (Psalm 120, 121, 122, 123, 131, 133), by the DMA student composer Larry Nickel. This original song cycle would be a setting for tenor solo, piano and violin. Mr. Nickel is currently studying composition at UBC with Steven Chatman, and has agreed to do this work as part of his degree requirement. The songs would be set in five different languages, representing the universality of the texts. The cycle would be composed with unifying musical elements, but each piece would also be able to be performed independently.

The lecture recital would consist of the performance of these original settings, approximately 20 – 23 minutes, followed by the presentation of a research document exploring a musical/textual analysis of the work, (perhaps including the practice of commissioned works in the solo vocal repertoire and some suggestions as to how this new work will contribute in the future).

#### Seven Songs of Ascent

No. 1. Psalm 120 “I Call on the Lord” Theme: Repentance	Hebrew
No.2. Psalm 121 “I Lift up my Eyes” Theme: Providence/Confidence	Latin
No. 3. Psalm 122 “ I Rejoiced” Theme: Worship/Celebration	German
No. 4. Psalm 123 “I Look to You” Theme: Service/Submission	English
No. 5. Psalm 131 “ My Heart is not Proud” Theme: Humility	French
No. 6. Psalm 133 “How good and Pleasant” Theme: Community	Latin
No. 7. Psalm 134 “Come, Bless” Theme: Blessing/Benediction	Hebrew

The symmetry of texts: Open and close with Hebrew – original texts  
 Nos. 2 & 6 in Latin – Historic resonance  
 Center three (modern languages)

## Appendix 6.

### Correspondence of Collaboration:

A selection of relevant e-mail correspondence relating to the composition of *Songs of Ascents* –

#### 1. Ray Harris, "Lecture-Recital progress", 14 March 2004, personal email.

Hello Larry,

Another update - good news.

I met Bruce Pullan today at a voice recital at UBC and spoke to him regarding our Song Cycle project.

(He said you had mentioned it to him, and he thought it was a very good idea for my Lecture-recital)

He recommends the following:

You are meeting with him sometime soon to discuss the Requiem. He asked you to come prepared to discuss this Psalm Cycle (maybe you could give him a copy of my original proposal - attached)

we'll talk soon,

Ray

#### 2. Ray Harris, "D.M.A. proposal", 18 April 2003, personal email.

Hello Nancy,

I have been talking with Larry Nickel. He is presently working on drafts for my song-cycle. He is working on some commissions and D.M.A. assignments right now and is aiming to have my pieces completed July 1st. In our last correspondence about this project you suggested you wanted to hear the pieces before you and David [Metzer] could give final approval. I don't think this is possible at this time. However, Larry would like to meet with you soon and show you a selection of his work to give you (and David) a clear idea of his style and capabilities. I am sure if you met with him and discussed his ideas regarding this Psalm song cycle it would answer any questions or concerns you might have. (You could also speak with Stephen Chatman and I understand Larry and Bruce are working on a project as well).

#### 3. Larry Nickel, "Hi Ray", 16, October 2003, personal email.

I've been envisioning our project for piano, cello, violin and voice. Dr. Suderman, Dr. J. Friesen, Dr. Cal Dyck and Dr. R. Harris. Let's talk soon.

Larry Nickel

**4. Larry Nickel, "Lecture Recital progress", 15 April 2004, personal email.**

Hi Ray,

I'm happy to see that things are still in the works. However, although I have the texts all ready to go, I haven't started writing yet, because it seemed like the idea might fall through - last I heard.

. . . I will need July to finish your project - but I would like a firm thumbs up from your advisors

. . . By the way, [Ben] Heppner has asked if he can use these pieces when they're done. These songs would also work for Jennifer Farrell, Melanie Krueger or Lena! [Hauser] (in Switzerland), who've expressed interest.

Larry Nickel

**5. Ray Harris, "Re: Lecture Recital progress", 15 April 2004, personal email.**

. . . Your timeline can stay the same. If we can work together a bit in May/June, then you could aim for completion of the pieces by July 1st, I will present the songs in July to Nancy and Evan Kreider, then we can proceed from there. This means my lecture/recital will be after Christmas, probably late January or Feb. I've already informed Betty and Calvin of the change.

We'll be in touch, Lar.

See you sometime in May.

Ray

**6. Larry Nickel, "Hi Ray", 23 April 2004, personal email.**

It was great having lunch with an old friend. I also had good visits with Evan [Kreider] and Nancy [Hermiston] today.

Three options:

1) Psalms of Ascent

2) Four texts done two different ways

3) anti-War poetry in different languages - which would eventually become foundational to the Requiem for Peace - but premiered by you

Nancy REALLY went for option three. She talked about how R. Strauss would write songs - which, later before orchestrated in a bigger context - arias in an opera etc.. She says that this in itself would make good fodder for research. She's very happy to see us collaborating. She also said that the Songs of Isaiah were the best of your September recital - largely because of the heart you gave them. Nancy said that everyone - Pullan, Rolloff, Chatman, etc, were behind the idea. (she's covered)

Nancy did not like option 2 . . .

So, what do you think? #1 or #3? Which one appeals to you the most, Ray. it seems you've got the go ahead to do what you want for your last hoorah.

Blessings!

Larry

**7. Ray Harris, "Re: Hi Ray", 24 April 2004, personal email.**

I also really enjoyed lunch and a visit to your lovely residence.  
Let me think about my options for a few days. I'll get back to you early next week.  
Thanks,  
Ray

**8. Larry Nickel, "Re: Hi Ray" 24 April 2004, personal email.**

Ray - whatever you decide is fine with me. Do what you want to do. Should you opt for #3 - we could get Gord [Nickel, Larry's brother] in on it.  
Cheers,  
Larry

**9. Larry Nickel, "Nickel/Harris Lieder", 19 July 2004, personal email.**

Hi Ray,  
I'm slaving away at your music these days - writing and re-writing. I've decided, at this point - to write for just voice and piano, including everything I want to hear. The transition to voice, piano and violin would likely mean toning down the piano part so that things don't get too busy. I've been doing a lot of listening to "lieder" these day - for example - Edith's [Wiens] rendition of R. Strauss's pieces. . . . I'm paying attention to form - the way key phrases are repeated and developed musically. . . . listening to Mahler's "Kindertotenlieder" and his "Da Lied von der Erde" - also Schubert's "Winterreise" - which Colin [Balzer, tenor and friend] says are the quintessential lieder. - also Ravel, Debussy, Faure, Durufle -  
Larry

**10. Larry Nickel, "hi Ray", 11 October 2004, personal email.**

When are Cal and Betty returning? I'm just finishing up the violin parts - they will be challenging. I needed to rewrite a few piano parts in order to make it all work. I changed that AL Webber moment. [referring to an 'Andrew Lloyd Webber moment in Psalm 130, mm. 84-91]  
What's the next stage in the collaboration process?

**11. Ray Harris, "Re: hi Ray", 11 October 2004, personal email.**

Hi Lar,  
Cal and Betty return later this week, Friday I believe. I'll contact them early next week. You and I could plan to meet again sometime the week of Oct 18 to discuss any revisions. I haven't met with Nancy or Evan yet - their schedules haven't allowed. I'll be in touch. Thanks for the continued work.  
Ray

**12. Larry Nickel, "Hi Ray", 24 October 2004, personal email.**

It would be great if you could come in and put a cincher on our project.

**13. Larry Nickel, "Re: hi Ray", 24 October 2004, personal email.**

Fine. Any day is good. You haven't heard or seen Cal's parts yet – they're blazin'!

**14. Ray Harris, "Re: hi Ray", 24 October 2004, personal email.**

Hi Lar,

I've been looking at the songs, making notes, and am ready to meet soon.

Ray

**15. Larry Nickel, "Re: progress report", 04 January 2005, personal email.**

I have new and improved copies - with that oversight taken care of - dynamic for the violin in the right place and those errata you and I went over - fixed. I'll fax over the page you need ASAP.

## **Appendix 7.**

### **Hebrew Singing Pronunciation Guide**

**H**ebrew has been phonetically transliterated into English for ease in pronunciation. Letters not listed are pronounced approximately as in English.

A, a = ah - a as in father  
E, e = eh - e as in let  
I, I = ee - i as in machine  
O, o - o as in note  
U, u - u as in duke  
- eu as in feud  
Ch, ch - ch as in loch (guttural kh)  
Gg, gg - gg as in eggs  
Ss, ss - ss as in lesson