The Legacy of

Randall Thompson

About this Recording

The Soldiers' Chorus of The United States Army Field Band is pleased to present this first in a series of recordings honoring the lives and music of individuals who have made significant contributions to choral music and education.

Designed primarily for educational assistance, these recordings are a means of making accessible and preserving America's choral heritage for young musicians now and in the future. Knowledge of and appreciation for professionals such as Randall Thompson are sure to inspire those charged with the important and gratifying task of carrying on our great choral traditions.

This compact disc was recorded March 22–30, 1995, in the John Addison Concert Hall, Harmony Hall Regional Center, 10701 Livingston Road, Fort Washington, Maryland 20744. This recording was reprinted in 2008.

The Legacy of
Randall Thompson

The Formative Years

Although born in New York City, Randall Thompson (1899–1984) grew up in the small town of Lawrenceville, New Jersey. His father, an editor of poetry and English instructor at the Lawrenceville School, fostered in young Randall a deep interest in the literary arts. This influence is evident in the well-crafted verse and prose which Thompson sought as the basis of his choral music.

Thompson's earliest substantive musical training started in 1911, when he entered the Lawrenceville School. There he studied with Francis Cuyler van Dyck, the school's organist and math teacher. Later, at the age of 15, his first experience as a professional musician began when he assumed the duties of his gravely ill teacher. His tenure as school organist lasted only a few months, but the $150 stipend helped to nurture professional ambitions, and in 1916, he entered Harvard University to pursue a career in music. He returned in 1948 to teach at his alma mater as one of this nation's preeminent composers and music educators.

Harvard: Shaping His Philosophy

Thompson's musical mentor at Harvard was the renowned choral editor and conductor, Archibald T. Davison, who introduced him to the early choral masterworks of Palestrina, Monteverdi, and Bach. While these composers were to have a great impact on Thompson's choral art, more important at that time was his encounter with George Herbert Palmer, an aging professor emeritus whose discipline was philosophy and moral ethics.

Palmer taught that individuality expressed in art or any other human endeavor, rendered outside of the societal structure, is morally invalid. The proper moral course is followed when one uses his individual talents within a social system to ensure that system's survival.

Randall Thompson absorbed this ethic and demonstrated it with uncanny continuity throughout his life. This is profoundly evident in both the development of his choral art and his reputation as an educator. His aesthetic creed: "A composer's first responsibility is, and always will be, to write music that will reach and move the hearts of his listeners in his own day . . . ."[1]

His commitment, however, went well beyond his listeners' hearts, as his primary audience was the musician, for whom he composed. Nearly all of his choral works were commissioned, or otherwise requested, by amateur choral groups and it was to them that he remained ardently loyal in his art. This was abundantly clear in his 1949 address to the Intercollegiate Music Council when he stated that "many of the greatest composers'

greatest works are choral, and they can all be sung by amateurs. What would be the good of writing a choral piece that only professionals could sing? If a piece is too difficult for amateurs to sing, the chances are that it is not good enough."[2]

Italy: Finding His Artistic Voice

After Harvard, Thompson won a three-year study grant to the American Academy in Rome (1922–25). While in Italy, he received lessons in composition from Gian Francesco Malipiero, who influenced Thompson's work in several significant ways. Malipiero believed that choral music as an art form was worthy of the highest concentration in one's creative output—an opinion which ran counter to the prevailing trend toward "absolute music." He also immersed the young American in the works of the early contrapuntal masters, thereby encouraging a neoclassical approach in his developing style. As in his study at Harvard, Thompson was exposed to the well-honed techniques of Palestrina and Monteverdi. Their expertise in the expressive setting of text, crafted within the narrow parameters of their cultural aesthetic, resonated well with Thompson's own view of the composer in society. One finds their influence in his connective voice-leading, traditional harmonic language, and wide emotional scope.

While other composers of his day advocated serial techniques and other modern idioms, Thompson worked and taught from the writings of early theoreticians such as Gioseffo Zarlino (1517–1590), Johann Josef Fux (1660–1741), and Giovanni Battista Martini (1706–1784), whose teachings

were immortalized by Bach, Handel, Haydn, and Beethoven. Contrary to modern trends, Thompson's rules were time-honored: "Above all, place the voices where they will sound. Avoid inappropriate chromaticism. Avoid extreme ranges. Avoid unnecessary *divisi* in the individual parts. And finally sing the individual parts to yourself. If you can sing them, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are good; but if you can't sing them, there's something wrong, and you had better do some serious re-touching."[3] Such teachings made him something of an anachronism among his peers, yet highly revered by the people for whom he composed.

Conclusion

The majority of Thompson's choral compositions are extended works and song groups, slightly weighted toward the a cappella medium and sacred verse. Much of his compositional output has declined in popularity, but as with all important composers, there are a handful of works that endure. *Alleluia* is perhaps the most widely known American choral composition in history—a staple in choral libraries everywhere. The song

group *Frostiana* continues to find favor with choral singers of all abilities and *The Peaceable Kingdom* stands as a model for its dramatic text painting and exceptional compositional technique. These truly are milestones in the American choral arts, yet this great legacy may be superseded by the aesthetic idea that lies within. In 1980 he wrote, "... the farther we move from the natural limitations of the human voice, the farther we move from the nature-given laws of music."[4] This principle is the cornerstone of his work and the basis of his success in reaching those listeners of his own day, and moving our hearts today.

Program Notes

O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro

(To the fountains of Bandusia, 1925)

While at the American Academy in Rome, Thompson became friends with Huntington Brown, a linguist studying Latin. Brown challenged him to read the works of Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace, 65–8 B. C.), from which he took this text. The two of them made excursions into the countryside surrounding Rome, both to Horace's farm and to the "alleged site of the Fountain of Bandusia."[5] Written under the close supervision of his teacher Malipiero, this piece is one of the *Five Odes of Horace* composed between April 1924 and January 1925. At the time, Malipiero had just begun his editions of the music of Monteverdi, whose influence is seen here. (Note: the pronunciations used are those of classical Latin rather than church Latin.)

> O Fount Bandusia, brighter than crystal, worthy of sweet wine and flowers, to-morrow shalt thou be honoured with a firstling of the flock whose brow, with horns just budding, foretokens love and strife. Alas! in vain; for this offspring of the sportive flock shall dye thy cool waters with its own red blood. Thee the fierce season of the blazing dogstar cannot touch; to bullocks wearied of the ploughshare and to the roaming flock

thou dost offer gracious coolness. Thou, too, shalt be numbered among the far-famed fountains, through the song I sing of the oak planted o'er the grotto whence thy babbling waters leap.

Translation by C. E. Bennett

Americana

(1932, excerpts)

The American Mercury was a controversial magazine edited from 1924 to 1933 by the famous Baltimore satirist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956). Aimed at young intellectuals, it was a combination of political and literary commentary that could be compared to the Harold Ross editions of *The New Yorker*. Mencken was well known for poking fun at established institutions and figureheads; he was interested in exposing what he considered to be stupidity and pomposity in American public life, ranging from religion to politics. With this publication he hoped to steer the course of American opinion; his message to literati and intelligentsia was meant to encourage changes.

Americana was one of several monthly features in the publication. It was a gathering of unintentionally humorous items either contributed by "alert" (Mencken's word) readers or gleaned from printed sources nationwide. Under the glare of his one-line editorial introduction for each entry, the inherent absurdities came to light and Mencken's intent was

fulfilled: to show America to herself exactly as she was. (These editorial comments are in small italicized print in the following texts.)

Such was the tongue-in-cheek material Thompson found in a New York public library, perhaps while reading other features in the magazine such as *The Music Room*. (It contained music criticism, reviews on books about music, and commentary on the world of music, all written by Mencken, who was an avid amateur musician.) Thompson's witty settings further magnify the humor of these unusual texts.

May Every Tongue

(Washington—*Christian sentiment of the Rev. Dr. Mark Matthews, veteran instrument of the Lord in Seattle, as reported by the Post-Intelligencer.*)

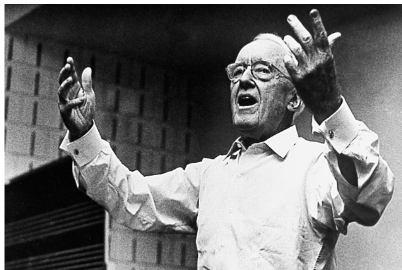
> May every tongue be paralyzed and every hand palsied that utters a word or raises a finger from this pulpit in advocacy of Modernism.

God's Bottles

(Leaflet Issued by the N. W. C. T. U.*)

APPLES ARE GOD'S BOTTLES: The sweet juice of the apple God has placed in His own bottle. What a beautiful rosy-red bottle it is! These red bottles hang on the limbs of a tree until they are all ready for us to use. Do you want to open God's bottle? Bite the apple with your teeth and you will taste the sweet juice God has put in His bottle for you.

GRAPES ARE GOD'S BOTTLES: These purple and green bottles you will find hanging on a pretty vine. See! So many little bottles are on a single stem! Put a grape in your mouth and open God's bottle. How nice the juice tastes! Some men take the juice of apples and grapes and make drinks that will harm our bodies. They put the drinks in glass bottles, but we will not drink from such bottles. We will DRINK FROM GOD'S BOTTLES.



*National Women's Christian Temperance Union

Loveli-lines

(California—*Literary intelligence: Announcing*)

Loveli-lines [6]
by Edna Nethery

Loveli-lines is composed of thirty-three Individualistic Verse poems all abrim with Joy, Love, Faith, Abundance, Victory, Beauty, and Mastery.
Each one will lift you to the Heights of Consciousness.
Bound in cloth of Happy blue: trimmed and lettered in gold.
Order from
Edna Nethery
Riverside, Calif.
One Dollar

The Peaceable Kingdom

(1936)

The Peaceable Kingdom (premiered on March 3, 1936, in Cambridge, Massachusetts) stands as a benchmark in American *a cappella* choral literature for its colorful and expressive text painting, mastery of compositional techniques, and broad emotional scope. The work is also evidence of Thompson's genius in fusing seemingly disjunct sources of inspiration. He was able to amalgamate experiences that left him with equally

strong impressions but were separated by time, geography and genre. Three such incidents, referenced in the following paragraphs, contributed to the creative process for this work commissioned by the League of Composers for the Harvard Glee Club (all men) and the Radcliffe Choral Society (all women).

Ideas of writing a sacred cyclical work began at the American Academy in Rome, where he heard performances of a secular genre of music known as the madrigal comedy. Here he witnessed the "unity" (his word) and dramatic potential inherent in sequencing pieces for a desired effect and began to imagine their use in a sacred context. *The Peaceable Kingdom* is conceptually patterned after Orazio Vecchi's (1550–1605) *L'Amfiparnasso (The Slopes of Parnassus*, 1597), a comedic madrigal cycle.

Both subject and title for this work emerged from the composer's impressions after viewing a painting by Edward Hicks entitled, "*The Peaceable Kingdom*." (A photo reproduction of it graces the cover of the published score, E. C. S. Publishing #1730.) The painting depicts and quotes Isaiah 11:6–9: "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb . . . For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." Thompson's ensuing fascination with the subject of Isaiah led him to examine and cull from all 66 chapters this cycle of verses based on the theme, "[t]he righteous shall be rewarded and the wicked destroyed."[7] In true cyclic fashion, the text in the first movement includes, ". . . my servants shall sing for joy of heart" while the last proclaims, "Ye shall have a song."

Pianist John Powell (1882–1963) introduced the composer to the

Appalachian shape-note hymns of the South. The 5th movement, *The paper reeds by the brooks*, makes use of a device often found in them, that of putting the melody in the tenor line. This cradling of the melody within the choral texture creates something fresh and, along with the subtle nature of the piece, serves to renew the listener's ear. It is often excerpted from the complete work and easily stands alone, much as a hymn would.

Randall Thompson's extraordinary crafting of his music illuminates and supports these carefully chosen verses. His remarkable gift for melodic invention, unerring instinct for good text, and ability to create completely original music while working within the confines of classic composition are the hallmarks of his great talent. This was considered by many to be his finest work at the time, and, along with his nurturing philosophies concerning choral music, has earned him his unofficial title, "dean of American choral music."

I

Say ye to the righteous, it shall be well with him:
for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.
Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him:
for the reward of his hands shall be given him.
Behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart,
but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart and shall
howl for vexation of spirit.

(Isaiah 3:10, 11; 65:14)

II

Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it
were with a cart rope.

Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!
Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!
Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink!
Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink, that continue till night, till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operations of his hands.
Woe to the multitude of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas!
Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth.

(Isaiah 5:8, 11, 12, 18, 20, 22; 17:12)

III

The noise of a multitude in the mountains, like as a great people; a tumultuous noise of the kingdoms of nations gathered together; the Lord of hosts mustereth the host of the battle. They come from a far country, from the end of heaven, even the Lord, and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined unto them shall fall by the sword. Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart

shall melt. They shall be afraid: pangs and sorrow shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed at one another; their faces shall be as flames.

(Isaiah 13:4, 5, 7, 8, 15, 16, 18)

IV

Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand.
Howl, O gate; cry, O city; thou art dissolved.

(Isaiah 13:6, 14:31)

V

The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and everything sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more.

(Isaiah 19:7)

VI

But these are they that forsake the Lord, that forget my holy mountain.
For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands.

(Isaiah 65:11; 55:12)

VII

Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth?

(Isaiah 40:21)

VIII

Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord.

(Isaiah 30:29)

The Lark in the Morn

(1938, arrangement on a Somersetshire folksong)

The Lark in the Morn is unique among works of Thompson who emphasized original composition over arranging in his teaching. The song comes from an extensive collection of English folk songs by Cecil B. Sharp. The first performance was in Berkeley, California, on December 2, 1938.

As I was a-walking one morning in the Spring,
I met a pretty damsel, so sweetly she did sing;
And as we were a-walking unto me this did she say:
"There is no life like the ploughboy's all in the month of May."
The lark in the morn she will rise up from her nest,
And mount up in the air with the dew all on her breast;
And like the pretty ploughboy she will whistle and will sing,
And at night she will return to her own nest back again.

Alleluia

(1940)

The ritual singing of *Alleluia* for the opening ceremony each summer at the prestigious Tanglewood Music Center festival in western Massachusetts has been referred to as being reverential—like a

"benediction."[8] Just as it was on July 8, 1940, for the first season, it is sung by the entire student body, with more than 400 members from around the world. Their performance creates a bond among them and to the esteemed traditions that are Tanglewood. The work never fails to provide a glimpse of that which is greater than ourselves, to both performer and audience.

Each summer the student body has less than an hour to rehearse what will be the final statement of the opening exercise—their rendition of *Alleluia*. The pragmatic composer kept the text to a single word, thereby ensuring that all necessary diction could be quickly learned.

Tanglewood (officially known as the Berkshire Music Center before 1984) was founded by Serge Koussevitsky (1874–1951), a native Russian. He described his center for the arts as, ". . . my blood and tears—and my greatest joy."[9] For Tanglewood's inaugural ceremony Koussevitsky specifically wanted a living American composer to write an American choral fanfare. That he had originally hoped to establish such a center for the arts in Moscow deepens the significance of his request of Thompson. By insisting upon an American composer, Koussevitsky paid homage to the country in which his ambitions came to fruition.

Thompson's response was tempered by the circumstances in Europe, particularly the fall of France, so rather than a joyful fanfare he offered the more introspective *Alleluia*. (His inspiration came from Job 1:21: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.") He acknowledged that it was a solemn piece, but he had no heart for writing anything else. Though he composed something much different than what was expected, he succeeded in establishing a living tradition which bears testimony to his skill and depth of understanding, both of music and of people.

Now I lay me down to sleep
(1947)

This charming little motet set to the words of a common child's prayer was Thompson's response to complaints from students about having to set Latin texts. He composed it in class at the blackboard while teaching them counterpoint, and at a conference on teaching, advised his peers to do the same, " . . . thinking out loud and conferring to the class as to the advantages of doing this or that."[10]

> Now I lay me down to sleep,
> I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep;
> If I should die before I wake,
> I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.
> Alleluia.

The Last Words of David
(1949)

When Serge Koussevitsky was asked to select the composer who would write a work to celebrate his twenty-fifth anniversary with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, he once again chose Randall Thompson. As the composer was compiling contributions for the book *College Music*, his travels led him to discover the text for this work in a Gideon Bible. It was premiered at Tanglewood with the Berkshire Music Center Chorus and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on August 12, 1949.

> He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.
> And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth,
> even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the
> earth by clear shining after rain.
> Alleluia. Amen.
>
> (2 Samuel 23: 3, 4)

Frostiana: Seven Country Songs
(1959, excerpts)

Frostiana: Seven Country Songs is based on the poetry of Robert Frost. The work was commissioned for the two hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, where the composer and the poet met and became friends in Thompson's youth. The

composer conducted the premiere of this work October 18, 1959, at an Inter-Faith Convocation in the Amherst Regional High School Auditorium, where it was performed by the interdenominational Bicentennial Chorus. Frost attended and was so enthusiastic about Thompson's music that at the end of the performance, he jumped from his seat in the audience and shouted to the performers, "Sing that again!" This became a running joke with Thompson, who would often pull the same stunt at subsequent performances of the work. *Frostiana* was included at his retirement concert on April 23, 1975, for which he conducted the combined choruses and orchestras of Radcliffe College and Harvard University.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The Pasture

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):

I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

The Telephone

'When I was just as far as I could walk
From here today,
There was an hour
All still
When leaning with my head against a flower
I heard you talk.
Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say—
You spoke from that flower on the window sill—
Do you remember what it was you said?'

'First tell me what it was you thought you heard.'

'Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
I leaned my head,
And holding by the stalk,
I listened and I thought I caught the word—
What was it? Did you call me by my name?
Or did you say—
Someone said "Come"— I heard it as I bowed.'

'I may have thought as much, but not aloud.'

'Well, so I came.'

A Girl's Garden

A neighbor of mine in the village
Likes to tell how one spring
When she was a girl on the farm, she did
A childlike thing.

One day she asked her father
To give her a garden plot
To plant and tend and reap herself,
And he said, 'Why not?'

In casting about for a corner
He thought of an idle bit
Of walled-off ground where a shop had stood,
And he said, 'Just it.'

And he said, 'That ought to make you
An ideal one-girl farm,
And give you a chance to put some strength
On your slim-jim arm.'

It was not enough of a garden,
Her father said, to plow;
So she had to work it all by hand,
But she don't mind now.

She wheeled the dung in the wheelbarrow
Along a stretch of road;
But she always ran away and left
Her not-nice load,

And hid from anyone passing.
And then she begged the seed.
She says she thinks she planted one
Of all things but weed.

A hill each of potatoes,
Radishes, lettuce, peas,
Tomatoes, beets, beans, pumpkins, corn
And even fruit trees.

And yes, she has long mistrusted
That a cider apple tree
In bearing there today is hers,
Or at least may be.

Her crop was a miscellany
When all was said and done,
A little bit of everything,
A great deal of none.

Now when she sees in the village
How village things go,
Just when it seems to come in right,
She says, '*I* know!'
'It's as when I was a farmer—'
Oh, never by way of advice!
And she never sins by telling the tale
To the same person twice.

Choose Something Like a Star

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud—
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, 'I burn.'
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,

It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

The Best of Rooms

(1963)

This beautiful setting seems to radiate directly and naturally from the composer's lifetime commitment to spiritual growth, formalized with his confirmation into Christ Church, Cambridge, in 1958. He was, by accounts of those who knew him, an inspiring individual who lived by his principles. The text is a portion of a poem by Robert Herrick (1591–1674) entitled *Christ's Part* (1647). This work was composed at his beloved second home in Gstaad, Switzerland, January 15–24, 1963. He conducted the first performance in Evanston, Illinois, given by the Northwestern University Chorus on April 7, 1963.

Christ, He requires still, wheresoe'er He comes,
To feed, or lodge, to have the best of rooms:
Give Him the choice; grant Him the nobler part
Of all the house: the best of all's the heart.

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Endnotes

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2. Thompson, Randall. "Writing for the Amateur Chorus: A Chance and a Challenge." Presented as an address to the Intercollegiate Music Council at Yale University, May 1949. Published with retrospective commentary by the composer in "Randall Thompson on Choral Composition: Essays and Reflections." Compiled by David Francis Urrows. *American Choral Review,* v. 22, no. 2, 1980.

3. Ibid.

4. Thompson, Randall. "Randall Thompson on Choral Composition: Essays and Reflections." Compiled by David Francis Urrows. *American Choral Review,* v. 22, no. 2, 1980, p. 10.

5. Benser, Caroline and David Urrows. *Randall Thompson: A Bio-Bibliography.* Bio-Bibliographies in Music, Number 38. Donald R. Hixon, Series Advisor. New York, Greenwood Press.

6. Nethery, Edna. "Loveli-lines." The American Mercury, *The Music Room,* January 1932, p. 64. Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland.

7. Forbes, Elliot. "The Music of Randall Thompson." Musical Quarterly, v. 35, no. 1, 1949, p. 15.

8. Pincus, Andrew L. *Scenes from Tanglewood*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989, p. 180.

9. Ibid., dedication page.

10. Thompson, Randall. *Randall Thompson: A Choral Legacy*. Edited by Alfred Mann. Boston: E. C. Schirmer Music Co., 1983, p. 24.

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