The Freedom Zephyr

For narrator and symphony orchestra

By

DOUGLAS LOWRY

Premiered 7 February 2013
By the
Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra
Ward Stare, conductor
Paul Burgett, narrator

Text from:

The spiritual, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*
Frederick Douglass
Walt Whitman
Ralph Waldo Emerson
Douglas Lowry

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*Drawing up from the battlefields,*
*Through sun-shimmered dust and mist,*
*Would arise the various callings*
*Of the dead and of the living.*
*For the nation would be drawn into a terrible war.*
*Over three quarters of a million lives would be lost.*
*The cause was common,*
*For this was a cause that was not*
*For naught.*
*This was a cause,*
*Yes, this was a cause,*
*That questioned our disposition*
To be bonded together.
It was the hymns and the spirituals
That bonded sound and rhythm to the cause,
Giving loft and meaning
To the prayers and aspirations.
Some said they looked over Jordan;
“Yes, they looked over Jordan,
And what did they see,
But a band of angels
Comin’ for to carry me Home."

It was a freedom zephyr,
Gleaming like an electrum.
Like a sweet chariot swinging low,
They sang in a mosaic of voices authentic:
Of the sweat and the earth and the tribulation,
Sung in secret codes and incantations.
And in those spirituals’ rhythmic sway,
Came a song of their souls,
Rumbling up from the firmament.
And out of this rumbling
Rose a canticle of hope
And noble aspiration.
Yes, and out of this rumbling,
Came a single strand of glistening music,
Borne by the winds and currents
Of emancipation and liberty.
In the words of Frederick Douglass
Came the voice of that very common cause:
“Yes, that governments are to protect.
That the Constitution
Was formed to establish justice,
Promote the general welfare,
And secure the blessing of liberty
For all.”

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1 From the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”
That resistance to tyrants
Is obedience to God.
These are the principles and maxims
That together form the constructive elements
Of this or any government.
It is on this basis that we ground
Our present and our future.”

Yet the questions still remain.
For how do we grow
This shared desire
For resolution?
And in that glorious place
Where rests our destiny,
Also rests our belief
In our common
Resolution.

The passageways of escape,
The midnight transport,
Aboard the invisible zephyr;
The safe houses and secret messages
All bound hope to emancipation.

Yet there still is a restlessness,
An unresolved promise.
A spirit moves us,
Its song possessed
Of an unsettled harmony.
But it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said,
“In the nature of the soul
Is the compensation for the inequalities
Of condition.”

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2 From an address given in Rochester, New York by Frederick Douglass under the title Claims of Our Common Cause.
3 From “Compensation,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays, First Series (1841).
We have before us
The poem writ large.
Its promise presents itself
In the form of a grand and elegant
Hope.
Yes, this great restlessness:
As Walt Whitman said,
“Beat! Beat! Drum!
Blow! Bugles! Blow!
Through the windows …
Through the doors.
Burst like a ruthless force
Over the traffic of cities,
Over the rumble of wheels,
In the streets,
And now to conceive and show
The world what your children
En-masse really are …”

In the calm pastoral,
When anxiety gives earnest pause,
Wish we to live
By a common maxim?
Wish we to commonly soar?
Do we not hold fast
To a shared belief
In a mutually restive place
Of resolution?

It is a Freedom Zephyr,
Gleaming like an electrum,
Comin’
For to carry me
Home.

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4 From “Beat! Beat! Drums!”, War Poems, Walt Whitman