

# *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.”<sup>1</sup>*

*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:  
“That governments are to protect.  
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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<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

*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.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> From an address given in Rochester, New York by Frederick Douglass under the title *Claims of Our Common Cause*.

<sup>3</sup> 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 ...”<sup>4</sup>*

*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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<sup>4</sup> From “Beat! Beat! Drums!”, *War Poems*, Walt Whitman