

Fish (2007)

SSAA w/ saxophone (alto, baritone); cycle in 5 movements

Difficulty rating 4+

Duration: 21'00"

Commissioned by the New York Treble Singers

Partial premiere (Movements 1, 2 and 5): NYC, 03/02/07

[Movements 3 and 4 are being revised. Please contact the composer for more information on the set. Movement 2, *Star-Fish*, is available separately.]

The New York Treble Singers, a 12-voice professional ensemble, were one of the nation's foremost women's choruses. They have recently disbanded with the retirement of their lovely and gifted founder and Music Director, Virginia Davidson. The group premiered the treble version of my Melville setting, *Shiloh*, in early 2006 and shortly thereafter Virginia asked me to write an extended work for them. *Fish* was the result.

Creation, Sex, Love, Death, Mystery, the Afterlife...the real themes of this cycle, despite the fishy business on (or under, as it were) the surface. The work is in arch form, a shape I also used for my recent song cycle, *The Persistence of Song*, and one favored by Bartok among many other composers. The middle movement (C), *The Goose Fish*, is in a moderate tempo and the lightest in tone. Howard Nemerov's text flips schizophrenically between the image of lovers on a moonlit beach and the macabre icon of a dead goose fish "smiling" up at them. The 2nd and 4th movements (B) are both slower and harmonically dense. *Star-Fish* is a dark, erotic text by Eric Ormsby that I've tried to capture with a quietly pulsating energy. *The Gleam*, my own text, takes a different angle on the parable of St. Anthony's sermon to the fishes, exploring the mystique created by the sun-glints off the backs of thousands of surfacing fish. A random section for the singers sparkles through it, contrasted by a lyrical refrain in the baritone sax. The two outer movements (A) each combine a more declamatory section with a brisker, contrapuntal one in 12/8. The cycle opens with text from Psalm 104 and is a prayer of thanks to God for the "teeming" life of the sea. In the final movement, Rupert Brooke's *Heaven*, fish ponder if there's "anything Beyond" their everyday pond. It begins with a section of rhythmicized speech overlaid with breathy, click-y, bubbly action on the sax. This is followed by what might be best described as a "fish food fugue."

1. Prelude

O Lord! How marvelous are your works! In wisdom you have wrought them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

Look at the sea, great and wide! It teems with countless beings, living things both great and small.

--*Psalm 104: 24-25*

2. Star-Fish

The stellar sea crawler, maw
Concealed beneath, with offerings of
Prismed crimson now darkened, now like
The smile of slag, a thing made rosy
As poured ingots, or suddenly dimmed --

I appreciate the studious labour
Of your rednesses, the scholarly fragrance
Of your sex. To mirror tidal drifts
The light ripples across or to enhance darkness
With palpable tinctures, dense as salt.

You crumple like a puppet's fist
Or erect, bristling, your tender luring barbs.
Casual abandon, like a dropped fawn glove.
Tensile symmetries, like a hawk's claw.

You clutch the seafloor.

You taste what has fallen.

--Eric Ormsby

3. The Goose Fish

On the long shore, lit by the moon
To show them properly alone,
Two lovers suddenly embraced
So that their shadows were as one.
The ordinary night was graced
For them by the swift tide of blood
That silently they took at flood,
And for a little time they prized
Themselves emparadised.

Then, as if shaken by stage-fright
Beneath the hard moon's bony light,
They stood together on the sand
Embarrassed in each other's sight
But still conspiring hand in hand,
Until they saw, there underfoot,
As though the world had found them out,
The goose fish turning up, though dead,
His hugely grinning head.

There in the china light he lay,
Most ancient and corrupt and grey.
They hesitated at his smile,
Wondering what it seemed to say
To lovers who a little while
Before had thought to understand,
By violence upon the sand,
The only way that could be known
To make a world their own.

It was a wide and moony grin
Together peaceful and obscene;
They knew not what he would express,
So finished a comedian
He might mean failure or success,
But took it for an emblem of
Their sudden, new and guilty love
To be observed by, when they kissed,
That rigid optimist.

So he became their patriarch,
Dreadfully mild in the half-dark.
His throat that the sand seemed to choke,
His picket teeth, these left their mark
But never did explain the joke
That so amused him, lying there
While the moon went down to disappear
Along the still and tilted track
That bears the zodiac.

--Howard Nemerov

4. The Gleam

The lure, the first sharp slivers of light,
Knives tilted at the blazing sun,
Wondrously angling away at the sky
Above the calm of the sea.

Neatly arrayed in long straight lines,
The smaller swimmers in perfect rows
Closer to shore, with the larger behind,
Guarding the depths of the sea.

Each with its eyes in a wide-set stare
And a curious snout which emerge,
Concerned not a sniff by the dangerous air
Outside of the life-giving sea.

Beneath, a symphony of Chinese fans,
Their tails tread water to keep them in place,
Chasing up whirlpools, disturbing the sands,
The peaceful floor of the sea.

And as Anthony's sermon soars to the horizon,
They come more and more, by hundreds, by thousands
And each breaks the surface with its own true shine
'Til the glints off their skin intersect and combine
And a rippling radiance fills up the air
A dazzling, unearthly, saturating, harlequin gleam,

Reflecting
The mysteries of the sea.

Of the sea, of the land, the skies, and the endless Every-where.

--Jonathan David

5. Heaven

Fish (fly-replete, in depth of June,
Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond;
But is there anything Beyond?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.
Mud unto mud! -- Death eddies near --
Not here the appointed End, not here!
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time.
Is wetter water, slimier slime!
And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.
Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

--Rupert Brooke