

The Answer

for SATB Choir and piano

Text by Sara Teasdale

Commissioned by Skyline High School Choirs
Ann Arbor, MI

Gabriel Movak

2019

DURATION: ca. 6 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: SSA & SATB Choir and Piano

The Answer

by Sara Teasdale

When I go back to earth
And all my joyous body
Puts of the red and white
That once had been so proud,
If men should pass above
With false and feeble pity,
My dust will find a voice
To answer them aloud:

“Be still, I am content,
Take back your poor compassion—
Joy was a flame in me
Too steady to destroy.
Lithe as a bending reed
Loving the storm that sways her—
I found more joy in sorrow
Than you could find in joy.

Sara Teasdale was a celebrated American lyric poet whose works captured themes of love, nature, and inner conflict. Her poetry collections, including *Rivers to the Sea* and *Love Songs*, won her widespread acclaim, with *Love Songs* earning her the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1918. Teasdale's delicate yet passionate style resonated deeply with readers, her poems often exploring the complexities of emotion and human experience.

Born in St. Louis in 1884, Sara Teasdale became one of America's most cherished poets, known for her lyrical and emotionally rich poetry. Her work, celebrated for its simplicity and depth, often explored themes of love, nature, and longing. Teasdale's legacy endures as a powerful voice of emotional clarity and beauty in American poetry.

Performance Notes

TEMPO:

When feasible, it is important that the tempi be performed as indicated in the score.

DYNAMICS:

There are character markings throughout the piece to capture the spirit of each section of music. Additionally, meticulous dynamics are provided for ease of performance, however ensembles should feel free to take liberties in pursuit of your own interpretation. In cases where there are no hairpins or dynamics marked, musicians should maintain their most recent dynamic marking indefinitely. In the rare case that a hairpin is not followed immediately by a dynamic, singers should grow or decay to the next nearest dynamic (i.e. “*f* >” would indicate a move to *mf*).

The markings “*sub.*” — or simply “*s*” — (*subito* [i.e. *sp*]) are often used when a dynamic suddenly changes.

CLEAN CUT OFF NOTATION:

Often, held notes are tied into a 16th note. These are notated to try to ensure a very clean (yet subtle) cut off on the indicated beat, rather than elongating each note by a 16th note. Additionally, the ending consonant (if applicable) is often included.

RUBATO:

Rubato is sometimes indicated and means that it is not necessary to mechanically play the exact tempo (or rhythm in the case of piano). *Rubato*, in the case of this composition, does not mean to drastically slow down the tempo, but rather ebb and flow musically.

CLEFS:

Please pay special attention to changing clefs. For example, the Tenor part utilizes 3 different clefs: treble, bass, and treble octave down. The use of treble clef in the tenor and bass parts in mm. 29-33 should indeed be in the written octave.

STAGGER BREATHING / SNEAK A BREATH:

Singers should stagger breathe freely whenever necessary. When a breath is taken, please re-enter on the note from *niente* and seamlessly so that the re-entry is inaudible.

PIANO PEDALING:

If possible, all instances of notated pedal markings should be followed as written. In the absence of pedal markings, pianist should pedal musically as they see fit, given the character of the passage. *Non. ped.*, *secco*, and *staccato* are used interchangeably to indicate passages that should not be pedaled. Rests of any length above a pedal marking do *not* negate the pedal, but are rather used for rhythmic clarity.

Program Note

Commissioned by Skyline High School Choirs | Ann Arbor, MI

The world premiere of this piece was given by Skyline High School's Bel Canto Choir

Conducted by Lyn CieChanski on October 25, 2019

At Skyline High School in Ann Arbor, MI

The Answer is the result of an ongoing collaboration between myself, Choral Director Lyn CieChanski, and the talented young musicians of Skyline High School. As I often do with vocal commissions, I invited the students to choose the text, fostering a strong sense of ownership and connection to the music. They selected Sara Teasdale's introspective poem, which explores themes of existence, personal resolve, and emotional struggle, all of which are mirrored through detailed musical choices.

Text painting plays a central role in this piece, with the music vividly reflecting the imagery of Teasdale's words. The word "joy," for instance, is always harmonically convoluted, creating a sense of ambiguity and tension in parallel with the texts conflict in finding personal fortitude. The ever-changing key center—the piece is written without a key signature—further enhances this sense of fluidity, as the tonic shifts nearly every few bars. Despite these modulations, careful voice leading ensures the transitions remain smooth for both the singer and the listener.

Throughout the composition, I aimed to balance moments of clarity with harmonic tension, mirroring the inner conflict expressed in the poem. Serene harmonies provide temporary resolution on lines like "My dust will find a voice " while other sections are colored by more ambiguous and dissonant shifts. This approach invites both singers and listeners to engage deeply with the text, experiencing the delicate balance of questioning and resolution that Teasdale so beautifully captures in her poem.

— Gabriel Novak

The Answer

for SATB Choir and Piano

Commissioned by Skyline High School Choirs
Lyn Ciechanski, director | Ann Arbor, Michigan

Sara Teasdale (1884 - 1933)

Gabriel Novak (b. 1995)

Rubato, with longing
♩ = 90

Soprano
When I go back to earth (th) And all

Alto
When I go back to earth (th) And all

Tenor
When I go back to earth (th) And_

Bass
And_

Piano
mp rubato

Ed. *

8 **poco rit.**

S
all my joy - ous (s)

A
all my joy - ous (s)

T
all my joy

B
all my joy

Pno. **poco rit.**

13 **A tempo** **Stark**

S
bo - dy _____ puts off _____ (f) red *mp* \leftarrow *f*

A
bo - dy _____ red *mp* \leftarrow *f*

T
the red and
mf *f* *p*

B
the red
mf \leftarrow *f*

Pno.
A tempo **Stark**

20 **Gently**

S
white *mp* \leftarrow *f* once had been _____ so proud _____ (d)
mp \leftarrow *p* \leftarrow *mp* \leftarrow *mf*

A
white *mp* \leftarrow *f* once had been _____
mp \leftarrow *p*

T
white that once had been _____
f *p* *mp* \leftarrow *p*

B
white *mp* \leftarrow *f* once had been _____
mp \leftarrow *p*

Pno.
Gently

Soaring

26

S
A
T
B

pp oo oh
pp oo oh

f If men should pass a -
f If men should pass a -

Soaring

Pno.

Sneaky

32

S
A
T
B

mf ah *p* With false and fee - ble
mf ah *p* With false and fee - ble
bove (v) *p* With false and fee - ble
bove (v) *p* With false and fee - ble

Sneaky

Pno.

38 **Light but unsettling** **Transparent**

S
 pi - ty *f* My dust *mf* My dust find *p* a

A
 pi - ty *f* will *mf* find *p*

T
 pi - ty *f* ee ee... *mp* al niente

B
 pi - ty *f* ee ee... *mp* al niente-

Pno.
mf **Light but unsettling** **Transparent**

45 **A great release**

S
 voice *mp* ah *f* ah *mf* ah *mp* ah *mf*

A
 voice *p* ah *mp* ah *f* ah *mf* ah *mp* ah *mf* *p*

T
 ah *mp* ah *f* ah *mf* ah *mp* ah *mf*

B
 ah *mp* ah *f* ah *mf* ah *mp* ah *mf*

Pno.
A great release