

PROGRAM NOTE

In 2011, Conrad and Louise Golaski approached me to commission a work in celebration of their fortieth wedding anniversary, to be premiered by the harpist Bridget Kibbey, who was putting together a program of music for solo harp based on folk songs from different regions of the world. The result is *Northern Lights*, a cycle for solo harp that incorporates folk songs from three regions of Canada, bookended by a prelude and postlude of original material that set the mood and interpolate. The three central movements are not folk song arrangements, but rather subject the original melodies to my own harmonic inflections, fragmentation, and juxtaposition with new motives. In this way, the piece builds upon my 2005 harp cycle, *Every Lover is a Warrior*, where I worked with folk songs from Appalachia, France, and Hungary.

Since I spent my first nineteen years in Canada and many of its folk songs are as familiar to me as breathing, choosing and working with its songs presented a special challenge: I needed to cast aside my own associations with the songs, to hear them in a new light, and to “mine” the musical material for its own intrinsic beauty.

In the opening prelude, *Carillon (Church Bells, Montréal)*, my sonic point of departure was the sound of bells in the church where Louise and Conrad Golaski got married.

À la claire fontaine is a lyrical French-Canadian folk song about lost love. I used changes in modality and non-diatonic pitch collections to capture the bittersweet essence of the original words: “It has been a long time that I have loved you; I will never forget you.”

Is the B’ye is an irrepressible Newfoundland jig in dialect, saying: “I am the boy who builds the boat, and I am the boy who sails her...” In this movement I interwove continuous melodic layers with cross-rhythms against the tune and played with the coloristic possibilities of harp harmonics, making a hybrid that fuses a Maritime jig with a Baroque toccata.

The source for *The Huron Carol* (*’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*) is a Christmas song introduced to Canada by the Jesuits with the goal of converting its Native people. It describes the birth of Jesus in a silent, snow-covered winter landscape. Wise men’s gifts are replaced by furs and pelts harvested by the native people in the woods. This movement links the mystery of Christian mysticism with the pristine natural environment in Ontario, the country’s central region.

The postlude *Aurora Rising* is a perpetual-motion movement that accumulates resonance over the entire range of the harp, with special attention to the instrument’s extreme registers. This movement evokes the emergence of the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis).

–Kati Agócs