

Music Notes

Ordinary Saints is a collaborative creative endeavor, comprising portraits by Bruce Herman, poetry by Malcolm Guite in response to the paintings, and integrative instrumental and vocal music by J.A.C. Redford.

Bruce, Malcolm and I became friends through our association with the C. S. Lewis Foundation's Oxbridge Summer Institute. Our initial meetings about *Ordinary Saints* took place in Cambridge, England during the 2017 Summer Institute. A couple of months later, I visited Bruce's studio in order to spend time with the paintings. I had some music manuscript paper with me, along with copies of Malcolm's poems. In addition to becoming more intimately acquainted with the portraits, I also hoped to be inspired with musical ideas which could be carried forward into the scores. That hope was realized: almost all of the sketches I made during that study ended up in *Ordinary Saints*.

The music consists of fourteen individual pieces, six of which are vocal settings of the poems. The other eight are responsive instrumental compositions without voice. I have organized the recordings of the music into three playlists: first, a Suite for Chamber Orchestra, comprising all fourteen pieces, performed by an ensemble of eleven instruments, with the songs rendered instrumentally; secondly, a Song Cycle featuring the six vocal settings of Malcolm's poems, as premiered at Laity Lodge in Texas; and finally, a Suite for Clarinet, Cello & Piano, which comprises the instrumental pieces that were performed at Laity Lodge. One can hear Malcolm reading two of his poems over my compositions, *Summoning Beauty* and *Sitting for Bruce*, in the Suite for Clarinet, Cello & Piano below, or with the chamber orchestra on the Program page of this website.

Following are notes for each of the fourteen pieces:

The Light We Never Noticed

This music was conceived as a response to the entire installation, a kind of accompaniment to one's first walk through the collection of portraits. It underscores the moment when the observer begins a hidden, tentative conversation with each of the subjects represented in Bruce's paintings. The title is taken from a line in Malcolm's poem, *Ordinary Saints*: "Who will...stretch out a finger, feel, along the fold to find the flaw, to touch and search that wound from which the light we never noticed fell into our lives?"

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The title song—first of the six vocal settings of Malcolm's poems—is built from one of the musical motifs that came to me shortly after our initial meeting in Cambridge. As is often the case with my vocal music, the spoken rhythms of a text are captured in my setting of the melody. You can hear both the original musical motif and its textual rhythm in the opening phrase: "The ordinary saints, the ones we know..." The primary atmosphere here is one of memory and reflection. One bit of word painting to notice: from "stretch out a finger", the music ascends steadily to the words "fell into our lives", with "fell" at the peak of the ascent, only to "fall" several pitches to the word "lives."

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Summoning Beauty (A Portrait of the Artist, Bruce Herman)

Bruce's powerful self-portrait includes two other shadow images, a descending female form and an Italian Duomo. Malcolm's masterful poem weaves these two images into a story about their relationship to the artist. He chose "terza rima" as the poetic form for his words, the form perfected by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. I seized on this and mirrored Malcolm's terza rima with a musical structure wherein each 3-lined tercet was addressed by three measures of music in triple meter. Once the music was laid out alongside the poem in this way, I was able to "underscore" the content of each tercet with specifically resonant music. This strategy opened up the possibility of Malcolm reciting the poem over the music.

Here Is Your Father (A Portrait of the Artist's Father, William C. Herman)

The stunning portrait of Bruce's father was the first of the group I ever saw or studied in detail. Every element in the foreground and background of this beautiful painting is entirely devoted to its expressive purpose. And Malcolm's poem is no less poignant and focused. I loved setting these words! Bruce told me many stories about his father. More than one of them had to do with his love for the music of the swing era. Harmonic echoes of the music he enjoyed have found their way into my setting. The highest notes of a musical setting are often matched with words of particular significance to the composer. In this case, the highest notes are paired with the phrases "tarnishes and patina" and "more substance, more humanity."

Red Over Gold (A Portrait of the Artist's Mother, Ruth R. Herman)

One always wants to take special care when writing a poem or piece of music about someone else's mother! For the form and tone of this setting, I leaned heavily on Malcolm's poem as well as the stories Bruce told us about his mother and the wounds she bore. Bruce told us that the wood on which this portrait was painted had a flaw which he initially tried to sand away or paint over. When that proved unsuccessful, he accepted that it was actually an essential feature of the work, just as it was as a metaphor for his mother's life. I answered this wound in the wood with dark timbres and musical dissonance. But Malcolm's words "the singing soul still shining through her skin" prompted a change in atmosphere and at this point I tried to convey a sense of darkness and shadow giving way to dawning, redemptive light.

Unveiling Shapes (Meg, Ben & Sarah, The Herman Family)

Rather than respond independently to the portraits of Bruce's wife, Meg, and their children, Ben & Sarah, I chose to compose music that resonated with the building of their family. I chose an old musical form, the chaconne, which is characterized by a repeating harmonic progression which provides a structure for ongoing variations above it. In *Unveiling Shapes*, this progression is imbued with a sense of perpetual ascent. I gave each variation its own distinct contrapuntal character, like the members of a family, and the interrelationships become fairly complex as they develop. The last variation, however, is a straightforward treatment of the progression played in harmony by the whole ensemble.

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Firefly (*Firefly*, The Artist's Granddaughter, Mary Kathryn Herman)

This is another case where the rhythms of Malcolm's recitation literally generated the rhythms of the music ("Firefly! Firefly! Dancing light in my sky," for instance). Following both the poem and the color and composition of the portrait, I wanted to make the music buoyant and breathless, full of motion and child-like in its playfulness and sense of wonder. In the instrumental introduction, which later returns as an interlude, I tried to create a musical atmosphere of darting and shimmering, quick with the whirl of wings and light. Finally, I decided to add Malcolm's introductory lines ("In every child a cosmos is concealed / In every child a cosmos is revealed") as a concluding coda reflecting back on my setting and making a bookend to frame the combination of recitation and music.

Sitting for Bruce (*Sitting for Bruce*, Malcolm Guite)

The occasion of Malcolm's sitting for Bruce to paint his portrait inspired a set of three sonnets rich in observation and metaphor. In the music, an opening piano ostinato, followed by an expressive melody in the clarinet, creates an atmosphere of self-reflection with a gradually unfolding sense of discovery. This is deeply internal music. The impressionistic polychordal middle section is full of pastel colors, while retaining the fundamental sense of quiet. When the piano ostinato returns, the bassoon carries the melody in its bittersweet upper register. This is the second of the two pieces of music over which we decided that Malcolm might read his poem. At the Laity Lodge premiere, we found that the music ended before the third sonnet did, but we agreed that the silence came at a fortuitous moment that enhanced the poem's expressive conclusion, so we kept it.

Signs of Joy (*Kenny*, Kenny Hansen)

With this music, I wanted to find a way to express the quiet, straightforward joy of everyday, small things. Nevertheless, it is a joy tinged with a hint of melancholy, a lightness of being acquainted with grief. The subject of this portrait, Kenny Hansen, had Downs syndrome. I never knew him, but wanted to honor him as he had been described to me, as one who engaged the world directly, without irony or dissembling, navigating his present tense with an open and expectant heart.

Crossing the Lines (*Crossing the Lines—A Portrait of Osamu Fujimura*)

The music tries first to capture a simplicity reminiscent of traditional Japanese drawings, which is mirrored in the lines of the subject's face, as well as the portrait's background. Osamu Fujimura is the father of another painter, Mako Fujimura, with whom Bruce collaborated on a project inspired by T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. As with all of the paintings of *Ordinary Saints*, a personal relationship with the artist has enriched this one with keen observation and warm affection. The middle section of my setting adds a level of harmonic complexity fitting for the complex humanity and dignified repose of this evocative painting. The music concludes with a return to the opening melody, finished with a quiet coda.

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Scathing Grace (A Portrait of Scott Cairns)

Composing music in response to a portrait of my good friend and collaborator, Scott Cairns, was a joy for me. While shaping my melodic and harmonic material, I remembered Scott's spiritual journey to Mount Athos and his subsequent book, *Short Trip to the Edge: A Pilgrimage to Prayer*. Bruce and Malcolm both picked up on this in their work as well. The music was also influenced by my own experience in an Orthodox service at the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. *Scathing Grace* is structured as a five-section arch: The primary melody in C minor is sounded first in the bass clef under a set of three chords that peal like bells. The second section unfolds as a hymn in four-part harmony. When the primary theme returns, a new counterpoint line is heard above it. Section four is a development of the hymn material from section 2. Finally, the primary theme, the counterpoint line and the hymn melody are all sounded together to bring the piece to its conclusion.

A Shared Motif (A Shared Motif—A Portrait of the Shaw Family)

A Shared Motif was the last music I wrote for the premiere performance of *Ordinary Saints* at Laity Lodge. Frankly, the impetus was practical: I needed another upbeat piece to balance the program and found in this painting and its accompanying poem a perfect image of warm relationship, creative flourishing and joy in hopeful engagement with life. I took the Bossa nova rhythms of Antônio Carlos Jobim as my musical inspiration, along with my own pleasure in playing his tunes with other musicians. Writing about it now, that motivation seems even more apt. A shared motif is precisely what connects the Shaw family with the members of a jazz band!

His Piercing Glance (A Portrait of Jeremy Begbie)

In creating music for Bruce's portrait of Jeremy Begbie, I drew heavily on my own friendship with Jeremy, as had Malcolm. Jeremy's beautifully complex mind deserved a musical form to match it and I settled on a fugue. But not just any fugue. Jeremy has a mischievous streak, a bit of the "trickster spirit" that Bruce captured in his portrait, so I decided to shake up the meter by alternating measures between 7/8 and 9/8 time. Furthermore, I had once heard Jeremy use a C Major triad as a metaphor for the Trinity, a metaphor Malcolm refers to in his sonnet. So I made sure to land on a naked C Major triad at the climax of my fugue, and sound it three times.

Ordinary Saints: Epilogue

This setting of Malcolm's text concludes the cycle with our hope that those having experienced *Ordinary Saints* might find themselves seeing the people in their own lives in new ways, regarding the image of God in them with deeper connection and compassion, forgiveness and love. The text invites the viewer and listener into deeper communion with the faces of those whom C. S. Lewis describes as "immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit." Will our own faces be unveiled in return? Will we find in them hints of an original icon from which all of our faces are derived? The melody of my setting of the *Ordinary Saints* sonnet is reprised before Malcolm's final words are sounded with confidence: "We turn, amazed, to see the ones beside us, face to face, as living icons, sacraments of grace."

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Windhover Chamber Artists

Amy Tatum, Flute

Joseph Stone, Oboe & Cor Anglais

Lea Steffens, Clarinet

Damian Montano, Bassoon

Steve Becknell, Horn

Mark Gasbarro, Piano

Peter Kent, Violin I (Concertmaster)

Sharon Jackson, Violin II

Andrew Duckles, Viola

Carolyn Litchfield, Cello

David Stone, Contrabass

J.A.C. Redford, Conductor