Composer's note

I first read "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" nearly twenty years ago in a collection of poems about music, and have been searching ever since for a chance to set it – not an easy task given its length. Thanks to the generous spirit of Tom Brooks and the Gordon College Music Department, my setting, a choral opera scene relating Orphic events from an arboreal point of view, has finally come to life.

A couple of technical details: the altos should get their initial pitch in some way inaudible to the audience. And the "x" notation in mm. 179-218 is not Sprechstimme, but rather a stylized chanting of the text; the varying positions of the "x"s are to guide inflection and intensity, not pitch.

duration: c. 14:30

A Tree Telling of Orpheus

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained outstretched, unmoving.

Yet the rippling drew nearer—and then my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if fires had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips were drying and curling.

> Yet I was not afraid, only deeply alert.

I was the first to see him, for I grew out on the pasture slope, beyond the forest. He was a man, it seemed: the two moving stems, the short trunk, the two arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless twigs at their ends,

and the head that's crowned by brown or gold grass, bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird,

more like a flower's.

He carried a burden made of some cut branch bent while it was green, strands of a vine tight-stretched across it. From this, when he touched it, and from his voice [which unlike the wind's voice had no need of our leaves and branches to complete its sound.]

came the ripple.

But [it was] now no longer a ripple (he had come near and stopped in my first shadow) it was a wave that bathed me as if rain

> rose from below and around me instead of falling.

And what I felt was no longer a dry tingling:

I seemed to be singing as he sang, I seemed to know what the lark knows; all my sap

was mounting towards the sun that by now had risen, the mist was rising, the grass was drying, yet my roots felt music moisten them deep under earth.

> He came still closer, leaned on my trunk: the bark thrilled like a leaf still-folded.

Music! There was no twig of me not

trembling with joy and fear.

Then as he sang
it was no longer sounds only that made the music:
he spoke, and as no tree listens I listened, and language
came into my roots

out of the earth,

into my bark

out of the air, into the pores of my greenest shoots gently as dew

and there was no word he sang but I knew its meaning. He told of journeys,

of where sun and moon go while we stand in dark, of an earth-journey he dreamed he would take some day deeper than roots...

He told of the dreams of man, wars, passions, griefs, and I, a tree, understood words—ah, it seemed my thick bark would split like a sapling's that grew too fast in the spring

when a late frost wounds it

Fire he sang, ames.

that trees fear, and I, a tree, rejoiced in its flames.

New buds broke forth from me though it was full summer.

As though his lyre (now I knew its name)

were both frost and fire, its chords flamed

up to the crown of me.

I was seed again.

I was fern in the swamp.

I was coal.

And at the heart of my wood
(so close I was to becoming man or a god)
there was a kind of silence, a kind of sickness,
something akin to what men call boredom.

[something]

(the poem descended a scale, a stream over stones)
that gives to a candle a coldness
in the midst of its burning, he said.]

It was then.

when in the blaze of his power that reached me and changed me I thought I should fall my length, that the singer began

to leave me. Slowly moved from my noon shadow to open light,

words leaping and dancing over his shoulders back to me

rivery sweep of lyre-tones becoming

slowly again

ripple.

And I

in terror

but not in doubt of

what I must do

in anguish, in haste,

wrenched from the earth root after root, the soil heaving and cracking, the moss tearing asunder—and behind me the others: my brothers forgotten since dawn. In the forest they too had heard, and were pulling their roots in pain out of a thousand years' layers of dead leaves, rolling the rocks away,

breaking themselves

out of their depths.

You would have thought we would lose the sound of the lyre of the singing

so dreadful the storm-sounds were, where there was no storm, no wind but the rush of our

branches moving, our trunks breasting the air.
But the music!

The music reached us.

Clumsily,

stumbling over our own roots,

rustling our leaves in answer,

we moved, we followed.

All day we followed, up hill and down.

We learned to dance,

for he would stop, where the ground was flat,

and words he said

taught us to leap and to wind in and out around one another in figures the lyre's measure designed. The singer

laughed till he wept to see us, he was so glad.

At sunset

we came to this place [I stand in,] this knoll with its ancient grove that was bare grass then.

In the last light of that day his song became

farewell

He stilled our longing.

He sang our sun-dried roots back into earth, watered them: all-night rain of music so quiet

we could almost

not hear it in the

moonless dark.

By dawn he was gone.

We have stood here since,

in our new life.

We have waited.

He does not return.

It is said he made his earth-journey, and lost what he sought.

It is said they felled him

and cut up his limbs for firewood.

And it is said

his head still sang and was swept out to sea singing. Perhaps he will not return.

But what we have lived

comes back to us.

We see more.

We feel, as our rings increase, something that lifts our branches, that stretches our furthest leaf-tips

further.

The wind, the birds,

do not sound poorer but clearer,

recalling our agony, and the way we danced.

The music!

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