

Orchard in Bloom

These seven hundred trees
pillar a pagan church,
a basilica for bees
where seraphic songbirds
promiscuously perch
to blend their melodies
in canticles whose words
the vernal believer
need never decipher.

From *Set the Ploughshare Deep: a prairie memoir* by Timothy Murphy (1951-2018).
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Program note

The assignment for this commission was “a new work based on nature themes”— a wide net indeed. Our text selection process was the usual enjoyable back and forth; Rick sent some poems; I countered with several more – all very nice, but my thoughts kept returning to a short poem that appears in Timothy Murphy’s *Set the Ploughshare Deep: a prairie memoir*, a mixture of prose recounting the hard life of farming on the North Dakota prairie, and poems that memorialize it in exquisitely rhymed meter.

Timothy Murphy was born in Hibbing and spent his college years at Yale learning poetry from Robert Penn Warren. Although he was already a published poet when he graduated, Warren refused to recommend him for a prestigious academic post, advising him to “Go home, boy. Buy a farm. Sink your toes in that rich soil and grow some roots.” “Orchard in Bloom” is just one of the resulting fruits. The music is an aural orchard, humming with busy insects and birds, accompanied by that buzziest of stringed instruments, the viola.

Performance note

Singing the “zz”s should sound like bumblebees busy in the flowers. When producing the “rr” sounds, think of overtone singing – not so much specific overtones as the general texture of basic pitch plus a cloud of sound above it.

duration: c. 3:30