

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.

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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