

The Night

Most holy Night, that still dost keep
The keys of all the doors of sleep,
To me when my tired eyelids close
Give thou repose.

And let the far lament of them
That chaunt the dead day's requiem
Make in my ears, who wakeful lie,
Soft lullaby.

Let them that guard the sacred moon
By my bedside their memories croon;
So shall I have strange dreams and blest
In my brief rest.

Fold thy great wings about my face,
Hide day-dawn from my resting-place,
And cheat me with thy false delight,
Most holy Night.

Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)
from *Verses and Sonnets*, first published in 1896

Commissioned by Mike McCarthy
Inspired by Kay McCarthy's "Moon River" quilt
Text by Hilaire Belloc

Premiered by VocalEssence and Philip Brunelle; Minneapolis, MN; October 16, 2016
Duration: c. 3:45

Myriad tiny triangles
assembled into Northwind blocks
to make a quilt;
dark grey, midnight blue,
a bit of lilac and russet
shot through with white:
"Moon River."

Mysterious guardian of sleep,
transformer of the day's complaints,
conjurer of dreams,
"The Night" embraces us
with velvet wings.

Inspired by such loveliness
from quilter and poet,
who can resist responding:
"Most Holy Night."

We five composers each chose a quilt from Kay McCarthy's exhibition celebrating her 70th birthday. Almost all of them were vibrantly colorful, but the one called "Moon River" caught my eye – the contrast of light and dark was even more striking than its colors. I had set a Hilaire Belloc poem as part of a previous project, and remembered his "The Night" as one of my favorites from that earlier search for texts. The mention of the "sacred moon" in the third stanza was a perfect fit. The connection between the three art forms is a basic simplicity of materials – the quilt uses a single type of block called Northwind – triangles combine to form squares; each stanza of the poem has a regular 4442 syllabic structure and a regular AABB rhyme scheme; the music is built mostly of simple triads. I hope that the audience will take away from the performance a sense of mystery and delicious repose.