

Gwyneth Walker

# Songs of Ecstasy

musical settings of the poetry of Thomas Merton  
*for Tenor and Organ*

1. Song: “When Rain Sings Light”
2. A Psalm: “The Spirit Sings”
3. Stranger: “Thou Inward Stranger Whom I Have Never Seen”

# Songs of Ecstasy

*Total duration: 16'00"*

*SONGS OF ECSTASY* are musical settings of three poems by Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a Trappist monk who lived for many years in solitude at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. Merton's writings express an imagination sparked by divine revelation, and a soul filled with ecstatic spiritual awareness.

The poems selected for *SONGS OF ECSTASY* are all celebratory in their message. They describe God's presence in nature, in all creatures and creation, within the human spirit and in the mysterious depths of the soul.

The musical settings, while endeavoring to capture the total expression of each poem, focus upon several key words and images. For example, in the first movement, *Song: When Rain Sings Light*, the word "light" recurs many times, often prefaced by the syllable "la" leading into "light" - "la la la light." These are intended to represent specks of light. They open and close the song. Another special image is that of solitude ("with pure and solitary songs"). Thus, the very powerful words, "And speak to God, my God," are sung by the Tenor, unaccompanied, marked "ecstatic."

The second song, *Psalm*, opens with a splendid phrase, "When psalms surprise me with their music, and antiphons turn to rum, the Spirit sings." A mixed-meter rhythmic background creates a Caribbean atmosphere often associated with "rum." Later in the song, a steadily-swaying 7/8 meter is introduced with the African imagery of zebras and antelopes.

*Stranger* has many phrases of special interest. "One bird sits still watching the work of God" is the culmination of the previous three stanzas of poetry. And thus, the musical expression is a point of arrival in the ascent of the phrases. The music then recedes into peaceful expression until the introduction of flowing patterns which provide a background for "one cloud upon the hillside..."

The most significant contrast in this song is the change of modality, from C Mixolydian (with Bb) to C Lydian (with F#). This change occurs with the very central stanza, "Closer and clearer than any wordy master, Thou inward Stranger whom I have never seen." These words describe the Spirit of God within, perhaps mysterious and almost unknown to each of us. The use of the Lydian mode creates the "closeness" and friction of the F# against the G, presented first in the low range, and then ascending at the end. This "stranger" within creates a powerful and urgent closeness, a voice seeking to emerge. And although the music returns to the Mixolydian mode for most of the remainder of the song, the final chord (to end "Our cleanest Light is One!") expands upward to the F#/G dissonance - essential and ecstatic.

## 1. Song: "When Rain Sings Light"

When rain, (sings light) rain has devoured  
my house  
And wind wades through my trees,  
The cedars fawn upon the storm with  
their huge paws.  
Silence is louder than a cyclone  
In the rude door, my shelter.  
And there I eat my air alone  
With pure and solitary songs

While others sit in conference.  
Their windows grieve, and soon frown  
And glass begins to wrinkle with a  
multitude of water  
Till I no longer see their speech  
And they no longer know my theater.

Rivers clothe their houses  
And hide their naked wisdom.  
Their conversations  
go down into the deep like submarines:  
Submerge them, with their pale expressions,  
in my storm.

But I drink rain, drink wind  
Distinguish poems,  
Boiling up out of the cold forest:  
Lift to the wind my eyes full of water,  
My face and mind, to take their free  
refreshment.

Thus I live on my own land, on my own island  
And speak to God, my God,  
under the doorway  
When rain, (sings light) rain has  
devoured my house  
And winds wade through my trees.

## 2. A Psalm: "The Spirit Sings"

When psalms surprise me with their music  
And antiphons turn to rum  
The Spirit sings: the bottom drops  
out of my soul!

And from the center of my cellar, Love,  
louder than thunder  
Opens a heaven of naked air.

New eyes awaken.  
I send Love's name into the world with wings  
And songs grow up around me like a jungle.  
Choirs of all creatures sing the tunes  
Your Spirit played in Eden.

Zebras and antelopes and birds of paradise  
Shine on the face of the abyss  
And I am drunk with the great wilderness  
Of the sixth day in Genesis.

But sound is never half so fair  
As when that music turns to air  
And the universe dies of excellence.

Sun, moon and stars  
Fall from their heavenly towers.  
Joys walk no longer down the blue  
world's shore.

Though fires loiter, lights still fly on the  
air of the gulf,  
All fear another wind, another thunder:  
Then one more voice  
Snuffs all their flares in one gust.

And I go forth with no more wine and  
no more stars  
And no more buds and no more Eden  
And no more animals and no more sea:  
While God sings by Himself in acres of night  
And walls fall down, that guarded Paradise.

### 3. Stranger: “Thou Inward Stranger Whom I have Never Seen”

When no one listens  
To the quiet trees  
When no one notices  
The sun in the pool

Where no one feels  
The first drop of rain  
Or sees the last star

Or hails the first morning  
Of a giant world  
Where peace begins  
And rages end:

One bird sits still  
Watching the work of God:  
One turning leaf,  
Two falling blossoms,  
Ten circles upon the pond.

One cloud upon the hillside,  
Two shadows in the valley  
And the light strikes home.  
Now dawn commands the capture  
Of the tallest fortune,  
The surrender  
Of no less marvelous prize!

Closer and clearer  
Than any wordy master,  
Thou inward Stranger,  
Whom I have never seen,

Deeper and cleaner  
Than the clamorous ocean,  
Seize up my silence  
Hold me in Thy Hand!

Now act is waste  
And suffering undone  
Laws become prodigals  
Limits are torn down  
For envy has no property  
And passion is none.

Look, the vast Light stands still  
Our cleanest Light is One!

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*Dr. Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) is a graduate of Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. She holds B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. Degrees in Music Composition. A former faculty member of the Oberlin College Conservatory, she resigned from academic employment in 1982 in order to pursue a career as a full-time composer. For nearly 30 years, she lived on a dairy farm in Braintree, Vermont. She now lives in her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut.*

*Gwyneth Walker has been a proud resident of Vermont. She is the recipient of the Year 2000 “Lifetime Achievement Award” from the Vermont Arts Council as well as the 2008 “Athenaeum Award for Achievement in the Arts and Humanities” from the St. Johnsbury (VT) Athenaeum.*

*Walker’s catalog includes over 200 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus and solo voice. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E. C. Schirmer of Boston (choral and vocal music) and Lauren Keiser Music (orchestral and instrumental music).*

*Further information concerning Gwyneth Walker and her works is available at [www.gwynethwalker.com](http://www.gwynethwalker.com)*

# Songs of Ecstasy

for Tenor and Organ

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Gwyneth Walker

## 1. Song: "When Rain Sings Light"

"Thus I live on my own land, on my own island  
And speak to God..."

With gentle motion ♩ = 108

Tenor

When rain, (sings

With gentle motion ♩ = 108

\*I Solo, as a speck of light (2')

\*II *p* as an accompaniment

*mp*

*p*

*p* as an accompaniment

6

la-la-la-la-light) rain has de-voured my house \_\_\_\_\_ And wind wades through my

I

II

*mp*

*p*

\*I - Solo (2')

II - as an accompaniment

"Song (When rain)" By Thomas Merton, from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON,  
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11

trees, The ce - dars fawn up-on the storm with their huge paws. Si -

*f*

16 **B** *rit.* **Slower**, *mf*

- lence is loud-er than a cy - clone In the rude door, my shel - ter.

**B** *rit.* **Slower**

*f* *mf* *p*

20 *p*

And there I eat my air a - lone. With pure and sol - i - tar - y

25 *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*

songs. While

*a tempo* (♩ = 108)

29 **C**

8 oth - ers sit in con - ference. Their win - dows grieve, and soon

**C**

*mf*

*mf*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 29-32. The vocal line (treble clef) has a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature. The lyrics are "oth - ers sit in con - ference. Their win - dows grieve, and soon". A dynamic marking of *mf* is present. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and rests in the left hand, with a *mf* dynamic marking.

33

8 frown And glass be - gins to wrin - kle with a mul - ti - tude of

Detailed description: This system contains measures 33-36. The vocal line (treble clef) has a key signature of two sharps and a common time signature. The lyrics are "frown And glass be - gins to wrin - kle with a mul - ti - tude of". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a bass line with a melodic contour in the left hand.

37

8 wa - - ter Till I no long - er see their speech And they no

**D**

**D**

Detailed description: This system contains measures 37-40. The vocal line (treble clef) has a key signature of two sharps and a common time signature. The lyrics are "wa - - ter Till I no long - er see their speech And they no". A dynamic marking of **D** is present. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a bass line with a melodic contour in the left hand.

41 *poco rit.* , **E** Slightly slower

long - er know my the - a - ter. Riv - ers clothe their hous - es And

*poco rit.* , **E** Slightly slower

*p*

45 *poco accel.* **F** *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*

hide their na - ked wis - dom... Their con - ver - sa - tions go down in - to the deep like

*poco accel.* **F** *a tempo* (♩ = 108) *mf*

49 *rit.* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) , *f*

sub - mar - ines: sub - merge them, with their pale ex - press - ions in my storm. But

*rit.* *a tempo* (♩ = 108) , *f*

The musical score is written for voice and piano. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 41-44) features a vocal line with lyrics 'long - er know my the - a - ter. Riv - ers clothe their hous - es And' and piano accompaniment with a *poco rit.* marking and a 'Slightly slower' instruction. The second system (measures 45-48) has lyrics 'hide their na - ked wis - dom... Their con - ver - sa - tions go down in - to the deep like' and piano accompaniment with a *poco accel.* marking and an 'a tempo (♩ = 108)' instruction. The third system (measures 49-52) has lyrics 'sub - mar - ines: sub - merge them, with their pale ex - press - ions in my storm. But' and piano accompaniment with a *rit.* marking and an 'a tempo (♩ = 108)' instruction. The piano part includes various dynamics such as *p*, *mf*, and *f*, and includes a 5/4 time signature change at the end.

53 **G**

Musical score for measures 53-56. The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 5/4. The vocal line starts with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and a half note D5. The lyrics are: "I drink rain, drink wind \_\_\_\_\_ Dis-tin-guish po-ems." The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. A box labeled 'G' is placed above the piano part at the beginning of the system.

57

Musical score for measures 57-58. The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 5/4. The vocal line has a triplet of eighth notes (A4, B4, C5) followed by a half note D5. The lyrics are: "Boil - ing up out of the cold for - est:". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. A box labeled 'G' is placed above the piano part at the beginning of the system.

59

Musical score for measures 59-62. The system includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line has a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and a half note D5. The lyrics are: "Lift to the wind my eyes full of wa - ter, \_\_\_\_". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

61 *rit.*

My face and mind to take their free re - fresh - ment:

63 **H** Grandly ♩ = 80 *mf* *pestatic*

Thus I live on my own land, on my own is - land And speak to

67 **I** *mp* *mf*

God, my God, my God

## 2. A Psalm: "The Spirit Sings"

"...the bottom drops out of my soul  
and from the center of my cellar, Love, louder than thunder  
Opens a heaven of naked air."

With rhythmic energy ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132) but not rushed  
(suggestive of a Caribbean atmosphere associated with the word "rum")

*pp* (more rhythm than pitch)

The piano introduction consists of six measures. The right hand is mostly silent, with a few notes in the first measure. The left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in a 5/8 and 3/4 time signature.

7 A *mf* smoothly

When psalms \_\_\_\_\_ sur - prise me \_\_\_\_\_ with their

A

Measures 7-12. The vocal line begins with a rest, then enters with the lyrics "When psalms \_\_\_\_\_ sur - prise me \_\_\_\_\_ with their". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern as the introduction. A box labeled 'A' is placed above the vocal line at measure 7 and below the piano line at measure 10.

13 *rit.*

mu - sic \_\_\_\_\_ And an - ti - phons \_\_\_\_\_ turn to rum \_\_\_\_\_

*rit.*

Measures 13-18. The vocal line continues with the lyrics "mu - sic \_\_\_\_\_ And an - ti - phons \_\_\_\_\_ turn to rum \_\_\_\_\_". The piano accompaniment continues with the same rhythmic pattern. The tempo marking *rit.* (ritardando) is placed above the vocal line at measure 13 and below the piano line at measure 16.

19 (rit.) **Slowly** **B** **Moderate tempo** ♩ = 100 *p*

(mmm) The Spir - it sings: the bot - tom drops out of my

(rit.) **mf** (to answer Tenor) **Slowly** **B** **Moderate tempo** ♩ = 100 *p*

23 *f*

soul! And from the cen - ter of my cel - lar, — Love, loud - er than thun - der

27 *rit.* *p* *f* **C** **Tempo I** ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

O - pens a hea - ven of na - ked air.

*rit.* **C** **Tempo I** ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132) *pp* (more rhythm than pitch, as at the beginning)

\* Cue-sized notes at various moments in the score are *ossia* parts, to be performed as the singer chooses.

31 *mf*

New eyes a - wak - en. I

37

send Love's name in-to the world with wings. And

43 **D** *rit.*

songs grow up a-round me like a jun - gle.

**D** *rit.*  
*p*

49 *Slowly* ♩ = 80 *p* *f*

Choirs of all crea-tures sing the tunes your spir - it played in E - den.

*Slowly* ♩ = 80

TENOR: gently swing arms forward and back, one arm at a time (one per measure), perhaps as an animal striding through the jungle.

52 *rit.* **E** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

*rit.* **E** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

*pp* (as before)

57 *mf* **F** *f* enthusiastically

Ze - bras and en - tel - opes, and birds of

*mf* colorful Solo **F**

62

par - a - dise Shines on the face of the a -

67

byss. And I am drunk with the great wil - der - ness

72

Of the sixth day in Gen - e - sis, Gen - e - sis.

*rit.*  
*mf*

*Solo* *rit.*

Stop swinging arms

77

But sound is nev - er half so fair as when that mu - sic turns to

*p* *With motion ♩ = 112* *cresc.*

81

air And the un - i - verse dies of ex - cel - lence, ex - cel - lence.

*(cresc.)* *f* *rit.*

**H** 85 *a tempo* (♩ = 112)

Sun, moon and stars Fall from the heav'n - ly

**H** *a tempo* (♩ = 112)

88 , *p sub.* **I**

towers. Joys walk no long-er down the blue world's shore. Though fires loi-ter, -

92 *mf* *f* *mf* *f* *rit.*  
lights still fly on the air of the gulf. All fear a-noth-er wind, a-noth-er thun-der:

*a tempo* (♩ = 112)

95 *mf* *f* *mf* *f*  
Then one more voice snuffs all their flares in one gust.

*a tempo* (♩ = 112)

96 **J** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

And I go forth with

**J** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132) *mf* Solo

*pp* (background)

102

no more wine and no more stars and no more buds and

108 **K**

no no no more E - den and no no no more an - i - mals and

**K**

112 *rit.* **L** Slower ♩ = 100 *f*

no no no more sea: While God sings by him-self in a-ces of night And

*rit.* **L** Slower ♩ = 100 *f*

116 *rit.* ,

walls fall down that guard-ed Par - a - dise, Par - a - dise.

*rit.* ,

119 **M** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

**M** Tempo I ♩ = 88 (♩ = 132)

*p*

*p*

\*Play whichever pitch the Tenor elects to sing.  
Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm

### 3. Stranger: "Thou Inward Stranger Whom I Have Never Seen"

*Thou inward Stranger  
Whom I have never seen...  
Seize up my silence  
Hold me in Thy Hand!*

**Slowly** **Moderately slow** ♩ = 88

*p*

When no one lis - tens To the qui - et trees

**Slowly** **Moderately slow** ♩ = 88

*p*

When no one no - ti - ces The sun in the pool Where no one feels The first drop of rain Or

*accel. poco a poco*  
*cresc. poco a poco (to A)*

sees the last star Or hails the first morn - ing Of a gi - ant world Where peace be - gins and

*(accel.)*  
*(cresc.)* **Faster**

*mf* **Faster**

12 *rit.* *(cresc.)* A *a tempo* (♩ = 88) *f*

ra - - ges — end. One bird sits still

16 *mf* *p*

Watch - ing the work of God: One turn - ing leaf, Two fall - ing — blos - soms,

20 *rit.* B *With motion* ♩ = 112

Ten cir - cles — up - on the pond.

*rit.* B *With motion* ♩ = 112  
*flowing, as a cloud passing by*

23 *mf*

One cloud — up - on the hill - side,

26

Two shad - ows — in the val - ley And the light strikes home. —

29 *poco rit.* **C** *p* Slightly slower ♩ = 100 *f*

Now dawn com - mands the cap - ture Of the tall - est for - tune, The sur -

*poco rit.* **C** *(p)* *f*

31

ren - der Of no less mar - vel - ous prize!

*(f)*

33

*rit.* **D** Tempo I ♩ = 88

*(f)* Ah, Clo - ser and clear - er Than an - y word - y mas - ter,

*rit.* **D** Tempo I ♩ = 88

*dim.* *p*

*p*

36

*cresc. poco a poco (to m. 43)*

Thou in - ward Stran - ger Whom I have nev - er seen, Deep - er and clean - er Than the

*cresc. poco a poco (to m. 43)*

*poco rit.*

50

en - vy has no prop - er - ty \_\_\_ And pas - sion is none. \_\_\_

*poco rit.*

**F** ♩ = 80

53 *f* *ecstatic*

Look, the vast Light stands still \_\_\_ Our

**F** ♩ = 80

54

clean - est \_\_\_ Light is One! \_\_\_

*rit.*