

River Songs (1996) for SATB chorus and chamber orchestra
analysis and commentary by Carson P. Cooman

American composer Gwyneth Walker's ***River Songs*** (1996) is a three-movement work for SATB chorus and chamber orchestra. The orchestra specifications are 1.1.2.1/2.1.1.0/1perc/strings. It is about 19 minutes long in total.

The three songs which make up the work are "Deep River", "A Mule Named Sal", and "The Water is Wide." This was Walker's first work combining chorus and orchestra – coming after a long string of both choral works (unaccompanied and with piano) and orchestral works in her catalogue. Thus, it was a logical progression that an opportunity would arise to combine choral and orchestral forces. The commission was from the Assabet Valley Mastersingers and the Algonquin Regional High School Chorus, who joined together for the premiere in Northborough, Massachusetts under conductor Robert Eaton. Because of the Assabet River, Walker chose to write a series of American songs connected to waterways.

River Songs is one of the finest examples in Walker's catalogue of what she calls "contemporary adaptations." A contemporary adaptation is an original composition which uses a piece of existing musical material, such as a folk song or a hymn tune. Although a contemporary adaptation is a kind of arrangement, it is far more extensive than a typical arrangement in terms of its departures from the source material. It may involve large additional amounts of original music (in addition to the source material) and/or new or additional text. Contemporary adaptations are very important to Walker's output. Examining ***River Songs*** provides an excellent example of how Walker's contemporary adaptations are constructed and their musical functions.

The three songs that comprise ***River Songs*** are related to travel and adventure on American waterways. Each has a source in a traditional American song. The first movement, "Deep River", is based on the African-American spiritual. The second song, "The Mule Named Sal", is based on the traditional American canal ballad entitled "The Erie Canal" (or sometimes "Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal"). The third song, "The Water is Wide", is based on a familiar American folk song. Various elements of these three songs serve as the source material for ***River Songs***.

Although the work was originally commissioned and conceived as a complete set, the individual songs can be performed separately. They can also be performed with piano or with orchestra. Although comments will be made about the orchestration, many examples (for ease of viewing) will be given from the vocal score. Each song will be considered in turn before some general comments about the entire three song set.

Deep River

“Deep River” is an African-American spiritual with a text that, as in many spirituals, speaks of yearning. In the Old Testament of the Bible, crossing the Jordan River was an important metaphor for a journey of progress. Thus, the spiritual text uses the metaphor of crossing the Jordan into “campground” as a metaphor for a personal spiritual quest. It is a yearning for a journey freedom – spiritual and otherwise.

Walker has taken this message of the “journey” and applied it to modern-day river experience. Thus, as will be seen, the insertions and additions she makes to the spiritual’s original lyrics relate to this concept.

One of the most important aspects of a contemporary adaptation is the inclusion of a clear structure that allows the source material and added material to co-exist and interact musically. However, the “new” structure of the contemporary adaptation must be derived from the simple structure of the original source – in this case the spiritual or folk song.

Walker structures the setting as follows:

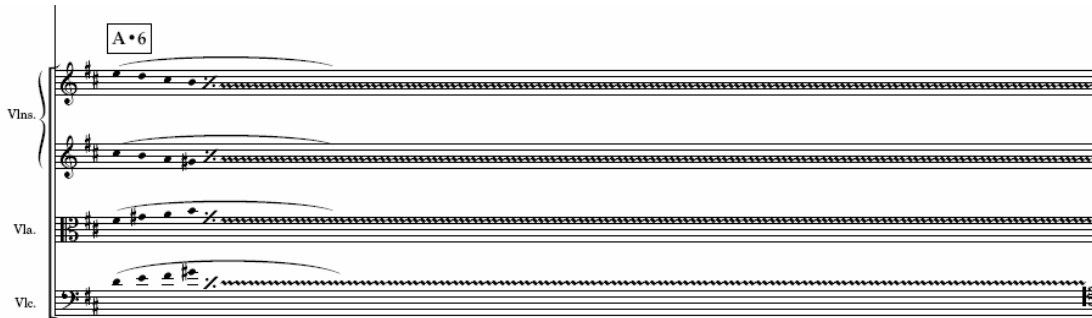
| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Introduction | m. 1 (an extended non-metrical “measure) |
| Chorus | mm. 2-15 |
| Verse 1 | mm. 16-23 |
| Chorus | mm. 24-34 |
| Insertion 1/Soloists | mm. 36-34 |
| Chorus | mm. 44-56 |
| Verse 2 | mm. 57-64 |
| Chorus | mm. 65-77 |
| Interlude (Intro material) | mm. 78-89 |
| Verse 3 (New Insertion) | mm. 90-97 |
| Chorus | mm. 98-110 |
| Insertion 2/Soloists | mm. 111-126a |
| Verse 3 recap | mm. 126b-136 |
| Coda (Intro material) | mm. 137-153 |

The original spiritual is structured simply as an alternation of verses and choruses. As can be seen by the chart, the setting maintains the idea and role of the chorus as an alternation between the verses and extends it with introduction/coda/interludes as well as two “insertions.” Thus, the “new” structure of the setting has the feeling of an extension of the simplicity of the original structure. This is a very important aspect of a successful contemporary adaptation – a clear structure derived from the original.

The setting begins with the Introduction – which is a textural section. Orchestrally, the texture for this section consists of “aleatoric blurs” in the strings (accompanied lightly by the rainstick for “water flavor”). An “aleatoric blur” consists of an unsynchronized pattern

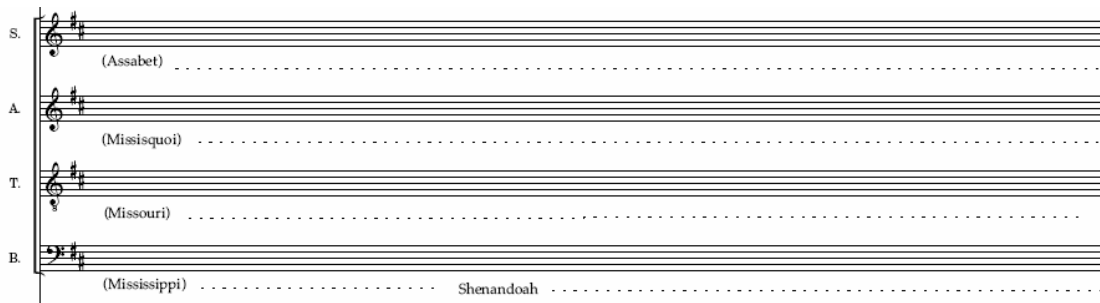
repeated as fast as possible so as to create a pulsing harmonic texture. (This feature is one of the elements of Walker’s mature musical language which comes directly from her early works – in which aleatory often played a large role, within a tonal texture.)

In the case of this song, the aleatoric blurs are designed to create the sounds of the river. Walker has spoken of this texture being inspired by Charles Ives’s orchestral work “The Housatonic at Stockbridge” from *Three Places in New England*.



Over the aleatoric blur in the strings (which gradually increases as the strings add to the texture), the chorus adds its own aleatoric blur by repeating the names of American rivers very quietly – “spoken gently, softly, repeated non-stop, not together.”

The effect of this introduction is to create an atmosphere. The tonal picture represents a river, gently pulsing and flowing.



Harmonically, the string blurs establish the basic key of D major – the tonal center for the entire presentation. With the entrance of the celli at A-2, however, the D major tonality is extended by the inclusion of a sharped 4th scale degree (G#), thus extending the basic D major tonality with the Lydian mode. This “Lydian borrowing” is very common to the tonal language of many contemporary composers, including Walker. This setting of “Deep River” establishes and remains in D-major. However, it borrows pitches and harmonies from both the Lydian and Mixolydian modes.

Over the course of this introduction, the string blurs gradually move upwards until they are in the upper register. The chorus has also shifted from repeating the names of rivers

(Assabet, Missiquoi, Allagash, Shenandoah, Mississippi, etc.) to simply repeating the word “river” itself.

The winds enter at m. 2 (the entire introduction section is technically measure 1, since it has no bar-lines) with firm D-major chords as the string blurs continue and the chorus fades out its speaking. The introduction has ended.

At m. 5, the first chorus is presented by the tenors and basses in unison as the basic harmonic structure of the song is articulated in the harmony of the winds and double basses (under a blur of the upper strings and celli). After this first chorus, the winds provide a measured “flowing” texture in 16th notes.

As this texture is established – a simple harmonic pattern of D, G, D, G(ext) is presented which will return in various places as a transitional chord progression. This creates the feeling of an “instrumental chorus” – thus tapping into the basic verse/chorus structure of the original song.

The sopranos and altos sing the first verse in unison. Note that the verse harmony begins on the relative minor of D major (B minor) and gradually moves back to affirmatively land in D major by the cadence of the verse.

At m. 24, the second chorus appears, presented in canon a measure apart between the lower (T/B) and upper (S/A) voices. At m. 30 comes a small, but significant example of one of the frequent features of Walker’s choral writing and contemporary adaptation – the rhythmic repeating of words.

Measures 30-32 stretch out by a single measure the final phrase of the chorus and repeat “want to cross over.” This repetition adds a sense of urgency to the desire expressed. Though it may seem trivial to point out this feature in the setting, this kind of repetition is an important hallmark of Walker’s text-setting style. It is also significant in the context of this setting, because this section will continue to be extended.

Measures 32-35 employ the same harmonic pattern as followed the first chorus and at m. 36, the flowing texture halts. This is the start of “Insertion 1” and the first soloist section. “Deep River” employs “four soloists standing at edge of chorus” who present the voice of a small group amidst the full choir. The aural effect of the solo quartet is one of focused intensity.

Insertion 1 consists of new text and music inserted into the original spiritual. As was stated early, Walker has cast “Deep River” in a contemporary context and has added the words “Never been so far from home...” sung by the solo quartet. In the original performance of the work (which was commissioned by a high school chorus along with a community chorus), these solo voices were intended to represent young people who had perhaps never before traveled far. They were preparing to set out on a river adventure.

These words express a certain homesickness that may be inspired by the journey that a river brings. These are examples of words added by the composer to this contemporary adaptation. They are folded into the texture and structure of the original song to extend it in new directions. In this case, “running the rapids” is a modern-day river activity.

36 E 4 Soloists or small group standing at edge of chorus

mf *p*
Nev-er been so far from home (mm)

p
run-ning the rap-ids of the Col-o-ra-do

p
run-ning the rap-ids of the Col-o-ra-do

p
run-ning the rap-ids of the Col-o-ra-do

p
run-ning the rap-ids of the Col-o-ra-do

As the soloists sustain the final note (turning to humming) of their interjection, the rest of the chorus adds “Running the rapids of the Colorado.” This is accompanied by sweeping gestures in the orchestral strings and undulating patterns in the tom-toms – painting musically the river rapids adventure.

The soloists add a further interjection “River, river carry me on.” This is answered by “floating on the currents of the Rio Grande” by the chorus and leads immediately back into a presentation of the chorus at m. 44. The flowing texture returns.

Again, the chorus is presented in canon, but the entrances are inverted as the upper voices (S/A) enter first, followed by the lower voices (T/B).

As with the previous chorus presentation, the ending phrase (“want to cross over...”) is extended. However, this time, an additional measure is inserted and an additional repetition of “want to cross over.” This shows a sense of progression and increasing urgency and energy from the previous chorus. During this, the first Mixolydian borrowing

occurs in m. 52 – with a chord root of C natural. Just as Walker has extended the text and rhythm at this moment in the setting, she has also further extended (albeit gently) the harmonic vocabulary that we have had in the setting up to that point.

On each repetition of the phrase “want to cross over”, a different word is accented. The phrases are “crossing over” the barlines of the music.

Again, following the chorus comes the same harmonic pattern as after the two previous ones (D-G-D-G(ext)).

At m. 57, the second spiritual verse occurs (“I’ll go on up to Heaven and take my seat, and cast my crown at Jesus’ feet). This is accompanied by high tremolandi in the violins, representing “heaven”, and flowing patterns in the winds representing the river’s ever-present energy. At the end of this verse, the word “Jesus” is repeated in the manner of the previously discussed “want to cross over...”

Another chorus occurs at m. 65. Although the harmony has remained the same for each of these chorus presentations, the orchestral texture becomes grander each time. However, at m. 71, the orchestral texture drops out to leave the chorus alone (with only a suspended cymbal tremolando) for another iteration through the “want to cross over...” pattern. However, as soon as the chorus lands on “ground”, the flowing pattern and full harmony returns in the orchestra brilliantly.

The image shows a musical score for a section of a piece. It includes parts for Percussion (Perc.), Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), Bass (B.), Violins (Vlns.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vlc.), and Bass. The Percussion part features a 'Suspended Cymbal' with a dynamic marking of *f*. The SATB choir parts all sing the lyrics 'o - ver in - to camp ground.' with a dynamic marking of *f*. The string section includes dynamic markings of *mf* and *f*, and the Viola and Bass parts are marked 'arco'.

The next section to come is the “interlude”, which refers back to the introduction. The harmonic patterns of the strings’ opening aleatoric blur returns, but this time in meter. Over this, the choir recites on pitch the names of rivers again – building to a repetition of the word “river” on a E major 9 chord in first inversion.

Thus, for this section, we have been returned to the world of the introduction. However, greater structure and energy has been imposed on this section (as compared to the flexibility of the introduction) as a result of the river journey that has taken place in the previous sections.

As the chorus’s chanting of “river” reaches a greater intensity, suddenly the solo quartet emerges again with the third verse (“Lord, bless this boat I ride safely on the water. Bring it home in eventide to shelter in your harbor.”) This text, not part of the original spiritual’s text, was created by the composer as part of the “personalization” of this song. As befits the earnest and prayerful petition of this text, the choral parts are marked “with urgency.” After the first phrase is presented in unison, the solo group adds SATB 4-part harmony for the second section.

This leads directly into the next chorus. The chorus begins very quietly, however – with strummed strings and glockenspiel and quiet winds. Instead of a choral canon, this time the lower voices present a harmonic counterpoint to the melody in the upper voices. All

become one, however, for the repeated section of “want to cross over...” Again, the same harmonic pattern leads us to the following section.

The next section is “Insertion 2” which parallels the first one. However, the role of the solo group is different. The full chorus states again “Running the rapids of the Colorado, etc.” although it also adds a few additional “contemporary activity” river references. Instead of its previous declamatory role, the solo quartet adds pulsing 8th note textural gesture on the syllable “la.”

The image shows a musical score for a section labeled '111' and 'L'. It includes parts for 4 Soloists (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "Run-ning the ra - - pids of the Col - o - ra - - do." The piano part features a pulsing eighth-note texture in the right hand and a more active bass line. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *ff* (fortissimo), and performance instructions like *Flowing* and *sim.* (simile). There are also markings for triplets and a *rit.* (ritardando) section.

This section continues to build greater energy, as the strings present wider sweeping gestures until finally in m. 126, with a grand ritardando, the music emerges into another presentation of “Lord, bless this boat I ride...” (the text from the Walker-added third verse). This time, however, the full chorus sings. The solo group emerges from this entreaty to present the final phrase “safely on the water” alone, repeated quietly and dying away to nothing as the winds pick up the sweeping patterns of the strings from the previous section.

The “coda” thus begins with this material and the chorus’s return to unpitched quiet speaking of river names. By the time the chorus has returned to chanting “river” in unison, the aleatoric blurs of the strings return from the opening. The blurs move upwards as at the beginning.

When they have reached their highest point, the chorus makes its final entrance, singing “Safely on the water” quietly and slowly on a unison middle D. Not only is this pitch the

tonal center of the song, but it is one of the only pitches which all sections of a mixed choir can sing comfortably together in unison. Thus, it represents a point of safety, security, and peace.

Walker's setting of "Deep River" thus turns the spiritual into a river journey. Although it ends where it begins – in quiet, pulsing stillness – the extremes of river travel are explored in between.

At the end, we are left with the sense of fulfillment that the journey has been completed, or that it will safely and successfully be completed – whether that be a literal contemporary river journey or the spiritual soul journey referred to in the spiritual's original lyrics.

A Mule Named Sal

"A Mule Named Sal" is an American canal ballad – sung during the times when the Erie Canal of New York State (stretching from Albany to Buffalo) was in its heyday as a method of transporting goods and people.

The canal barges were pulled by mules which walked along towpaths and were connected with ropes to the barge. This song celebrates (!) the unreliable vicissitudes of mule-driven travel.

The original song is in a simple verse and chorus structure in a swing rhythm. Walker has capitalized on that swing rhythm. However, she has "doubled" the rhythms of the songs from its original, so that the swinging 8th become a feature of the accompaniment texture, rather than the original melody (which is presented in quarter notes). This provides for greater clarity of words and allows for extra "excursions" into the texture – as will be shown. The swing rhythm represents the jaunty character of a mule sauntering along the towpath.

The musical language of Walker's setting is influenced by jazz – in particularly the jazz vocal music of the 1920's (the "Swing Era"). Jazz influences have figured prominently in Walker's output and various other choral works of Walker's are in a similar style (a good example is "Bones Be Good" (1992) for SATB chorus and piano from *Dreams and Dances* (1992).

The structure of "A Mule Named Sal" is a bit more free-form than that of "Deep River." However, it is still connected to the verse/chorus structure of the original song.

The original song's verse structure has two distinct sections (the first part beginning "I've got an old mule" and the second starting at "We've hauled some barges"). Then, the chorus "Low bridge, everybody down" returns after every verse. Walker maintains this basic structure.

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Orchestral Introduction | mm. 1-7 |
| Verse 1, Part 1 | mm. 8-23 |
| Verse 1, Part 2 | mm. 24-44 |
| Chorus | mm. 45-64 |
| Interjection (Chorus Extension) | mm. 65-84 |
| Interjection Development (Orchestral Scat) | mm. 85-100 |
| Verse 2, Part 1 | mm. 101-116 |
| Verse 2, Part 2 | mm. 117-136 |
| Chorus | mm. 137-156 |
| Verse 3, Part 1 | mm. 157-174 |
| Verse 3, Part 2 | mm. 175-190 |
| Chorus | mm. 191-214 |
| Choral Scat | mm. 215-230 |
| Coda (Chorus Reprise) | mm. 231-250 |

Walker has added only a few words to this song, and they are similar in nature to the original. The added dimension that Walker brings to this song is “light-hearted feminism”, as will be explained later.

The brief introduction establishes the mood and rhythm of the song. The opening harmonic progression consists of chords over a descending bass line – characteristic of jazz music. This harmonic progression will recur throughout the song as an orchestral ritornello.

As was the case with jazz music from the Swing Era (the peak of the big bands), the three brass players of the chamber orchestra (and their mutes) figure very prominently in Walker’s setting. The key center of C minor is established. As with other of Walker’s jazz compositions, the key will be extended through the chromatic tones (passing and otherwise) that are common of jazz-influenced language.

The cowbell provides a rhythmic beat accompanying the brass. Because Walker’s studio is on a dairy farm in rural Vermont, cowbells (and the influence of the bovine world) have been a characteristic sound in many of her works. Although the barges were not pulled by cows, the cowbell presents a sound world image connected to the mule. This sauntering music depicts the mule walking and turning her head periodically (hence the cowbell ringing).

The upper voices of the chorus enter in m. 8 with the first phrase of the verse, presented energetically. The pizzicato strings enter the orchestral texture at this point. The first verse is presented (mostly) antiphonally between the upper and lower voices of the choir.

The texture of the choral writing is articulated, with energetic bounce. Sometimes the choral writing mimic the texture and technique of the “jazz brass.” See the setting of the word “Albany” with staccato notes followed by a small glissando – a very characteristic brass gesture.

37

The image shows a musical score for four vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The score is for measure 37. The lyrics for all parts are "Al - - - - - ban - y". The music is written in a key with two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The Soprano, Alto, and Tenor parts are in treble clef, and the Bass part is in bass clef. The lyrics are written below the notes, with a long dash under the word "y".

At m. 45, the first appearance of the chorus (“Low bridge”) occurs. This begins with a declamatory singing of “Low bridge” by the chorus followed by a gesture of straight 8ths in the strings, depicting everybody ducking their heads and crouching as the barge approaches one of the myriad low bridges across the canal.

The setting of “Everybody down” is emphasized by the choral basses making a scalar descent on the word “down.”

After this chorus section, the next section is that of an “interjection.” This is inserted material by Walker – an interjection of the chorus to the mule: “Come on, mule! Make my day! Pull that barge any old way!” Musically, it refers back to the chorus which it develops and extends.

The next section is marked on the chart as “orchestral scat.” In this section, the orchestra, led by brass and winds takes on a jazz “scat” section – reminiscent of improvisation in a swing band. Over this, the chorus recites (not on pitch) in meter various phrases – “Come on, mule! Pull!, etc.” The choir members also slap their thighs “as if exhorting a mule to move.” Chorally, the section ends with a glissando. This section demonstrates an important feature of many of Walker’s contemporary adaptations – the inclusion of choral drama to heighten a moment in the song.

46 *slap thigh (as if exhorting a mule to move)* *rising in pitch and volume*

97

S. Hey! _____

A. Hey! _____

T. Hey! _____

B. Hey! _____

The next section is the second verse of the song – again presented in punctuated rhythm. The orchestra engages in text painting such as in m. 104 where the trumpet executes an upper register “lip trill” to represent the “whinny” noise that a mule makes. Likewise, in m. 111 the strings execute an indeterminate high register glissando.

During this verse, in m. 113, the tenor and basses sing a passage in 4-part harmony reminiscent in style of the singing of barbershop quartets also popular in the early 20th century.

T. *mf*
Fif - - teen miles on the E - rie Can - al. _____

B. *mf*
Fif - - teen miles on the E - rie Can - al. _____

The remainder of the verse and the following chorus are similar to their previous appearances in the work – and treated in a similar manner.

At m. 157, an example is shown of another aspect of contemporary adaptations – completely new music to the original song’s words. In this verse (the third verse), the song’s protagonist is lamenting what life would be like without his mule. (“Oh, where

would I be without my pal? One less mule on the Erie Canal, I'll never find a mule as good as Sal...")

Again, the antiphonal nature is important to the presentation of this verse. The upper voices since the opening question to an “anguished” triplet pattern which feels like an improvised blues line. The tenors and basses answer “callously” with open 5ths in straight rhythm.

157 **Q** *more freely*
mf anguished
S. Oh where would I be with - out my pal?
A. Oh where would I be with - out my pal?
T.
B.
Piano accompaniment:
162 **Q** *more freely*
mf callously, off-handedly
T. One less mule on the E - rie Ca - nal!
B. One less mule on the E - rie Ca - nal!
Piano accompaniment:
163 **A**
V

The second section of the verse is again presented antiphonally as the story is told of the time Sal was antagonized – “A friend of mine once got her sore. And now he’s got himself a broken jaw! ‘Cause she tagged him with her iron toe, And kicked him right back

home to Buffalo!” The “iron” toe is represented by snap pizzicato (“Bartok pizz.”) in the violins.

To this story, the tenors and bases reply with an exclamation of “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!”, accompanied by full orchestral chords. The exclamation of “kicked him back home to Buffalo!” provides an example of another updating technique – changing words to make them localized. Walker comments in a note in the score that any city name ending in “o” (such as the “Northborough” of the premiere) could be substituted for Buffalo in the text at this point.

Walker sees this previous section as one of the examples of “light-hearted feminism” in her music – contrasting the women (sopranos and altos), who care about the mule, with the men (tenors and basses), who are callous and do not value her (the female “mule named Sal.”) Walker provides the following commentary:

On this page, the WOMEN sing "Oh, where would I be without my pal?" In other words, the women care for the mule. The MEN, on the other hand, do not value the mule. "One less mule on the Erie Canal" (followed by a thump on a Bass Drum, or low chord in Piano, for finality, as if to say, "That is the end of the mule!").

The women continue to value the mule. And then look, the mule (a female mule named Sal), when antagonized, stood up for herself and kicked the offender ... right back to Buffalo! He deserved it! The men fall back, singing "Whoa! Whoa!"

The next section is another presentation of the chorus, as before. After this section, however, a section of “choral scat” begins. The orchestral music is the same as the earlier “orchestral scat” section. However, this time the chorus joins in and doubles the orchestral parts singing on scat (invented nonsense) syllables. This is a section of exuberant free-wheeling fun. Although it is not actually improvised (as solo jazz scat singing would be), it has the character and energy of improvisation

217

S. ya ba da ba da ba da ba
 A. ya ba da ba da ba da ba
 T. ba da ba da *sing falsetto if necessary*
 B. ba da ba da

At m. 231, the coda begins which reprises the final phrase of the chorus followed by the orchestral ritornello.

However, the chorus moves upwards from its final pitch in a dramatic glissando to shout “Come on, mule!” followed by singing “Make My Day” to a C-minor chord with all the chromatic jazz extension notes added that have occurred throughout the past of the song. (The brass flutter tongue in a mule-like gesture.) Walker calls these sort of chords “Every Note Chords” – in that they contain a very large collection of pitches. For singing “Make my day!” to a mule, such a chord is most appropriate.

245

rit.

S. MAKE MY DAY!
 A. MAKE MY DAY!
 T. MAKE MY DAY!
 B. MAKE MY DAY!

rit.

Coda

Duration: 5'

A Mule named Sal

The intent of this song is one of fun. Although the peak of America’s canal era did not coincide with the music of the Swing Era, Walker’s pairing of this early American song with the jazz context feels natural and appropriate. In this contemporary adaptation, we see how the musical context of an original song can be modified and transported to a new stylistic terrain to update and invigorate the original music.

The Water is Wide

“The Water is Wide” is perhaps the most “extreme” contemporary adaptation of the set of three *River Songs*. In this movement, Walker takes the familiar American folk love song and “ignores” the original tune completely. She keeps only the lyrics and basic structure of the songs, and provides entirely new music.

The text of “The Water is Wide” speaks of love – the speaker is a faithful lover who has been betrayed in the past by false love. He speaks of how there is an energy and zest to love at first, but that it can also fade as time passes. But yet, in spite of this, he perseveres. As with “Deep River”, the imagery of crossing the water (in “a boat that can carry two”) is used to symbolize perseverance.

The work is structured as follows:

| | |
|----------------------|-------------|
| Introduction | mm. 1-7 |
| Chorus | mm. 8-30 |
| Verse 1 | mm. 31-53 |
| Chorus | mm. 54-76 |
| Orchestral Interlude | mm. 77-83 |
| Verse 2 | mm. 84-105 |
| Chorus | mm. 106-127 |
| Orchestral Interlude | mm. 128-140 |
| Verse 3 | mm. 141-166 |
| Chorus | mm. 167-192 |
| Coda | mm. 193-208 |

Marked “peacefully, like rippling water”, the opening of the song presents a lyrical and gentle picture. It establishes an Eb major tonality, which is where the first half of the song will reside.

Harmonically, over the rippling patterns in the upper strings, the lower strings establish a rocking 5ths accompaniment (between F/C and G/D). These 5ths (and others) form the grounding of the harmonic movement in the setting. In general, the diatonic motion of the harmony in the setting always has a 5th at the lowest point (usually the two lower strings). Over this, other chord tones may be added to form a major 10th chord. This harmonic

unifying principle presents a feeling of grounded warmth throughout the setting. The chimes strike softly in the orchestration to portray a distant foghorn.

The chorus enters with the opening melody – a single pitch. Walker’s original melody opens with a great number of repeated notes – emphasizing the floating characteristics discussed in the text.

peacefully, as if floating A

p

The wa - ter is wide, I can - not get

The wa - ter is wide, I can - not get

The wa - ter is wide, I can - not get

The wa - ter is wide, I can - not get

Beginning at m. 22, the text reads “And both shall row my love and I.” Walker sets this section of the text by repeating “and both shall row”, gradually adding the other voices. On the final “row”, the voices move upward step-wise. The “pulling” sensation of this section depicts rowing.

68 25

S. And both shall row, my love and

A. row, And both shall row, my love and

T. row, And both shall row, my love and

B. row, And both shall row, my love and

3 3 3 3

p

The next verse section is set in a very similar manner to the previous chorus. Walker's melody for the "verses" and "choruses" is basically the same music. Throughout this entire section, the flowing patterns in winds (and sometimes strings) continue – presenting a constant flowing pulsing.

For, the chorus that follows the accompaniment changes figuration to be repeated 8th notes (usually outlining a 5th) – "pulsing 8ths". These are accompanied by quiet bongos to focus the rhythm. The voice pairings answer each other antiphonally (with the lower voices mimicking the accompaniment's rhythms.).

After this chorus, the flowing patterns return in the flute to signal the start of the first orchestral interlude. The flowing patterns move to fixate on a C as the top note – which will become reinterpreted in a quick modulation to F major. When the chorus enters at m. 84, for the second verse, it does so on the pitch C. Suddenly in m. 85 the harmony becomes re-interpreted so that we have moved up a step from Eb major to F major.

The naturalness of this harmonic modulation can be explained by viewing the modulation not as moving up a step, but rather as moving by "rotation" of two 5ths (Eb-Bb-F). And, in fact, the bass note in m. 84 (right before the modulation) is a Bb. Thus, since the 5th motion sound has been established under the lush chords earlier in the work, it is a natural progression at this point.

This verse, though based in F major, includes harmonic extensions to paint the text. In m. 86 a Mixolydian borrowing of Eb is used. As the text discusses "false love", the chorus extends the 5th of Eb-Bb down to Db-Ab.

Then, from this Db major borrowing, a chromatic bass moves downward harmonically through the Db scale from Db-C-Bb-Ab-Gb to land on F at m. 103 for a "glorious" sounding return of the F major tonality.

Thus, there is one interlude using each of the two principal accompaniment figurations in the piece.)

This interlude progresses towards m. 141 and the third verse. It is presented in an antiphonal block style, accompanied by the winds and strings simply doubling the choral parts (no figurations). (Another Mixolydian extension occurs in m. 148).

In m. 151, as the chorus sustains “old”, muted high strings begin an aleatoric blur, recalling the textures prominent in the first song (“Deep River”). The text at this point speaks of love “fading away as morning dew.” The chorus fades away repeating these phrases as the strings continue the atmospheric blur. The chorus is fading away into the texture of the blur – like the due itself.

However, like the perseverance of the love itself, at m. 164, the “pulsing 8th note” figuration begins again quietly. The final chorus is sung and builds in intensity as the orchestral texture builds back up again. “And both shall row, my love and I” is repeated over and over again with greater intensity each time until it ends at m. 192. At this point, the pulsing pace increases dramatically and after a Mixolydian extension again to Eb in the bass, the chorus sings a final “my love and I.”

The orchestra sweeps upwards to its coda, marked “triumphantly.” The orchestral texture consists of the flowing pattern (now loud and bold) in the strings with brass glissando chords underneath. The chorus sustains its final F-major chord while the orchestra then crescendos on a tremolando F major chord in the upper register to full volume. The upper registral nature of this conclusion presents a sense of “arrival” – having crossed the water with joy and triumph.

Overall Comments

River Songs presents a remarkable emotional trajectory and shows Walker’s strong ability for planning, structure, and balance. The songs as a set present a microcosm of human emotion, using the American water landscape and folk material as starting points.

“Deep River” represents a very serious message of yearning, and yet Walker has extended it with the ideas of “contemporary river adventure.” “A Mule Named Sal” is intended simply for fun, with a musical updating of the adventure of American canal transport. The final song, however, presents a message about love which is timeless – it needs no ideological updating. Thus, Walker takes the inherent nature of the song’s message (perseverance in love amidst the travails) and amplifies it musically by painting its text carefully and focusing on the hopeful nature, amidst turmoil.

Although the songs are in different key centers, they share an extended tonal harmonic vocabulary that is common to Walker’s work. In keeping with the nature of the original songs, the harmonic structures are not complicated (like one might find in an original

choral work or an instrumental piece.) They generally stay within their tonal centers, with extensions for color or text painting reasons as necessary. They are not “goal oriented” in the same way that other settings might be – but rather find ways to re-imagine the basic diatonic harmonic sphere in which they exist.

One of the unifying features of the three songs is the importance of antiphonal voice pairings – specifically upper voices against lower voices. They are often used to answer each other, or used together to present the same (or similar) material in canon. There is, however, a sense of collaboration and cooperation – not antagonism.

The orchestration of the work lends itself to a soloistic nature. Since most of the winds and brass are solo players, they can take both solo and accompaniment roles. The role of “texture creation” is divided between both winds and strings in the settings. Thus, the orchestra too is brought together in a spirit of cooperation. Effects and colors (brass mutes, string glissandi and pizzicato, etc.) are used as appropriate for the text and styles.

Walker’s contemporary adaptations come out of an important tradition of treating source material (particularly folk material) in new contexts. From Benjamin Britten (in England) to Aaron Copland (in the United States), composers have been attracted to create “contemporary adaptations” of folk material which transcend the simple nature of many arrangements.

As has been shown, one of the most important features of a contemporary adaptation is to extend the original within its own context. Thus, the power and meaning of the original song is never lost. Walker deftly achieves this with grace and balance throughout a large number of her works, and *River Songs* stands as a stellar example of these principles operating within her choral music.

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Carson Cooman is an American composer and musicologist. As a composer, his music has and continues to be performed around the world and has been commissioned by numerous organizations. As a musicologist, he has written many articles and given lectures on subjects relating to American and Australian contemporary music. He holds a degree in composition and musicology from Harvard University.