

Four Are in the River

Jon Jeffrey Grier

Song Cycle for Soprano and String Quartet (2010-2011)

on poems by

Sarah Blackman

I. The Woman Says:

II. The Man Says:

III. The Animal Says:

IV. The Plant Says:

V. The River

Program Notes

In these settings of Sarah Blackman's poems I have made a straightforward attempt to underscore the character of each organism of the title and its relationship with her/his/its environment. The River binds them all together dramatically and musically.

The Woman, though fatigued by the exertion of her daily labors, is nonetheless drawn to an aesthetic, contemplative experience of her surroundings and thinks of herself as an element of those surroundings. Her music is moderate and steady in tempo, the harmony at times placid. Her lines are smooth and lyrical. The beauty of the river stimulates a wistful dream of being washed away among the dapples of sunlight on its surface.

The Man, equally burdened by the efforts required to stay alive, sees his surroundings more as an adversary, yielding sustenance only after great struggle. His rhythm is more accented, his lines are more angular, and his textures are more radically variable and subject to outbursts as he considers one challenge after another. In the end, however, he is also entranced by the river, pondering the "blossom of oil" as it washes past him.

The Animal is full of himself and sees the river in thoroughly pragmatic terms, providing both food and shelter. He is without doubt or confusion. He kills without malice and perceives himself as a component of the endless cycle of life; he delights in his role. Like the Animal himself—perhaps an otter or muskrat—the music is fast, bright, and relentless. Alternating *legato* and *staccato* sections suggest that he is equally comfortable in or out of the water.

The Plant understands nothing beyond its own slow, inexorable progress toward maturity, unaware of the river without which it would not survive. It too is full of itself, endlessly celebrating its success at the one thing it can do—becoming ever more green. After a ‘cello solo suggesting the solitary wait of the seed and a quiet, very low web of counterpoint suggesting the dark soil into which it falls, the music chronicles the plant’s slow but dramatic ascension, followed by a rapid decline at the end of the season.

The unspeaking, inanimate, but life-giving river is the elemental force that all of these share. Its music recalls bits and pieces of each of the others (especially the Woman’s, which is sounded throughout) in their original order, the sections delineated by waterfalls. It ends with the same dappling of sunlight on the surface that all the other movements have (save the Plant, who is unaware of the River). The unspeaking River has actually spoken from the very beginning, lending its tireless forward motion to the lives of all who have depended on it.

Interpretive Suggestions

I. Steady and motoric, with a sense of determination and quiet urgency. The opening spoken phrase by the vocalist (“And the woman says”) need not be spoken in the rhythms notated. Vocal phrases should be generally *legato* and lyrical; small dynamic inflections other than those notated are welcome. All *sul ponticelli* in the violins should be as thin and bright as possible. In *glissandi* in the strings, allow the first pitch to sound clearly for an instant before beginning the slide.

II. Generally more harsh, accented and moody. Begin the movement as soon as possible after the first; the vocalist’s spoken “And the man says:” in bar 3 must be said in the notated rhythm. All *sul ponticelli* should be as thin and bright as possible (and thus through the rest of the movements). Do not hold back at points sudden dynamic change, such as bars 20, 30, 36, and especially 34.

III. Mostly light, fast, and very steady. Begin the movement as soon as possible after the previous, though more time will undoubtedly be needed here. The vocalist’s “The animal says:” must be spoken the notated rhythm. The dotted (staccato) notes should be very short, off-the-string articulations, in stark contrast to the slurred groups. Bars 86-108, though mostly soft, should be rather nervous and tense; singing with a somewhat breathy tone in bars 88-98 will heighten the effect. The music takes on a more aggressive tone in rehearsal J. through K., and strings and voice can all use a tone that is more edgy and harsh. In bars 176-188, the voice can again turn breathy. Do not slow down at the end.

IV. The ‘cello solo should begin as soon as possible and take as much time as feels right to the performer. Violins and viola chant the spoken “And the plant says:” in the notated rhythms.

V. In very strict motoric time, tense, changeable, rather like a chase. Bars 77-84 are a reminiscence of the previous movement; play these with a warm, lyrical tone.

Alternate Instrumental Performance of Voice Part

The soprano who was to perform the premiere of *Four Are in the River* was forced to withdraw due to illness the day before the performance. It was resolved that the best way to rescue the concert—on which two other works were programmed—was to have the voice part performed on viola. This was so well received that this is being retained as a valid alternate mode of performance. Parts for instrumental performance of the vocal part are provided for violin and viola; transposed parts for Clarinet in B_♭, English Horn in F, and Alto Sax in E_♭ are also provided, and the use of these is encouraged. Phrase markings are included in these solo parts which are not included in the voice part in movements I-IV of the score. These markings should not be construed as bowings in the violin or viola parts.

When performing the work in this manner, the poems should be recited—including titles—each before their respective movements; this can be done by the soloist or, if preferred, a designated reciter. The movements are then performed in the normal manner with the soloist (and the violins and viola in mvt. IV) intoning the titles of the poems exactly as notated.

About the Composer

Jon Jeffrey Grier holds a B.A. from Kalamazoo College, where he studied composition with Lawrence Rackley, an M.M. in Composition from Western Michigan University, studying with Ramon Zupko, and an M.M. in Theory and a D.M.A. in Composition from the University of South Carolina, where he studied with Jerry Curry, Dick Goodwin and Sam Douglas. Jon has taught Advanced Placement Music Theory and Music History at the Greenville Fine Arts Center, a magnet school of the arts in Greenville, SC, since 1988. He composes frequently for student and faculty ensembles at the FAC, usually when he really should be grading papers. Jon has also been a writer/keyboardist with various jazz-fusion ensembles since 1984. He lives in Greenville with wife Marion and manic mongrels Roxanne and Gracie Jean.

About the Poet

Sarah Blackman is a poet, fiction and creative non-fiction author originally from Washington D.C. She graduated from Washington College with a BA in English and a minor Creative Writing, and earned her MFA from the University of Alabama in 2007 with concentrations in fiction and poetry. For five years she taught composition, creative writing and literature at the University of Alabama where she also served as the fiction editor for the Black Warrior Review. Sarah's poetry and prose has been published in a number of journals and magazines, including The Gettysburg Review, Third Coast, The National Poetry Review, American Poetry Journal, Oxford American Magazine and The Greensboro Review, The Laurel Review and The Missouri Review, among others. She has been anthologized in the Poets Against the War Anthology and Best New American Voices, 2006, and was the recipient of the 2006 American Poet's Prize and the 2007 Laureate Prize for Poetry. Sarah has been the Director of Creative Writing at the Greenville Fine Arts Center since 2009 and is also the Assistant Prose Editor for DIAGRAM magazine.

About *Four Are in the River* from poet Sarah Blackman

In general these poems are about intersection. A river flows through, giving the illusion of both autonomy and endlessness. A similar illusion is the experience of a life which is figured (imagined) as a series of points along a directional stream. Life flows one way, just as rivers do. Our experience (also imagined) takes place on islands of stillness, but everything ends up in the same place: the ocean. The characters in each of these sections are intersecting with the river. The woman would like to be sublimated by it, swept away. The man would like to trammel it, make its flow straight. The animal sees a reflection of itself and does not think of it as the Other (We humans always see our reflections as people very like us living in the other space of the mirror or the still water. We do not see our selves, but what we think we are like. Foucault calls this a heterotopia; a space that simultaneously contains the physical and the mental. "I dreamt I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder," says Virginia Woolf. "I cannot be sure if this was a dream or if it really happened.") But the animal also does not look at its reflection and think Self. The animal is going where the river goes. It does not rest still on the water and look around.

Finally, the plant intersects with the river by living within a cycle that does not admit intersection. "I am green," the plant says, which is the same thing as saying "I am alive." That this life would not be possible without the river means nothing in the face of greenness, nor should it. The plant does not have an external life—it does not imagine or interpret—and thus, while a plant can smother and cloak, choke or poison, it cannot alter, for good or for ill, the fundamental nature of the world that surrounds it the way a man or a woman can. The way this man and woman do.

Mostly, I wanted to look at a river for a long time. It is shallow and tea-colored; it breaks over the rocks and pools in the dark spaces to their lee. I wanted to look without thinking about where the river goes, without making the moment a narrative, or inserting myself, adrift on my island, into the middle of the stream. From that, I wrote the plant's poem.

Next, I wanted to look through different sets of eyes. I wanted to intersect and interact. From that came everything else.

Four Are in the River

The Woman Says:

I come back to the river.
The water cools my knees like fast hands shaping dough.
I am bread. I will rise.

But I have already plumped to fill my pan.
On the green banks a shadow moves,
a catbird bows on the bulrush, calls in someone else's
tongue.

It is a green world, a cool one.
A blossom of oil washes past,
blossoms of pear and mimosa.

The water is a mirror and a window.
When I see myself I am surprised,
when I see through myself

to the blonde rocks,
the fluting minnows,
the dark water weed

I want to lift my knees and float,
wash away,
to not be found.

The Man Says:

On the banks I build a fire.
First I have to cut the weeds,
heft the wood.

Green wood smokes,
the weeds curl bronze and give little heat.
Time is at my wrist and catches the sun like water.

I have never been here before.
I have come a long journey,
boring through the country like a beetle through pine.

I have appetites to feed. Don't apologize for me.
Four children call from their messy nest
like catbirds, like blonde rocks tossed in the river.

Fire will clean the banks
like scouring a pan,
like a tongue across the plate.

There is not enough for everyone. Don't be fooled.
I catch the fish; I throw a rock at the bird.
A blossom of oil washes past me.

I watch it go.

The Animal Says:

In the dark, the water is light. It lights. It guides.

I kill the fish. I kill the bird.

Good meat. Good teeth. My strong claws.

The rocks shift under my claws.

I kill the fish. My fur is soft as an ember.

In the dark they cannot see, but I see.

Something washes past. It goes. I stay.

My claws are strong. I can slip into the river. I am also the
river.

On the banks a heat flares up, a light.

I see and am seen.

In the world below this world, I am seen.

I am built for the river.

Here in the river, I have been made and unmade many times.

I dive below. I go further on.

It stays. I am gone.

The Plant Says:

I am green.

I am green.

I am green.

I am green.

I am green.

I am green.

I am green.