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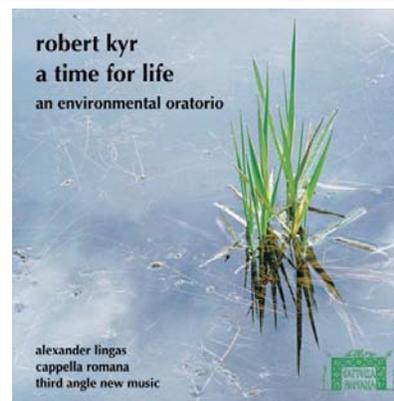
Written by [Carson Cooman](#)

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The Joy of Creation: An Interview with Robert Kyr

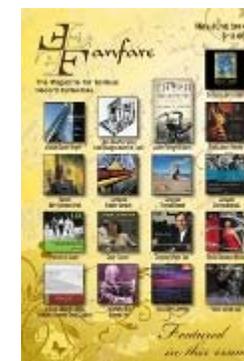
BY CARSON COOMAN

Robert Kyr was born in Ohio in 1952, and his life since has taken him throughout the world in a dizzying array of musical activities. Educated at Yale (B.A.), the Royal College of Music, the University of Pennsylvania (M. A.), and Harvard (Ph. D.), he is currently professor of composition and theory at the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance. His large composition training program there is renowned and has spawned a number of ambitious ancillary projects, including the Pacific Rim Gamelan, the Oregon Bach Festival Composers Symposium, and several other festivals and endeavors. Kyr is a very prolific composer whose catalog includes many works that are large-scale in their dimensions, performing forces, and the topics they address. Though his musical language is undeniably of the present, his inspiration comes most deeply from the past. His contemporary style is quite consonant (and usually modal) in its sonority, but its emotional aesthetic owes a great deal more to the rhetoric of early music than it does to neoromanticism or other consonant strands in the 20th- and 21st-century musical landscape. Though Kyr is a man of gentle personal temperament, he possesses a truly indefatigable store of energy and an irresistible urge to create and



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collaborate—a person who inspires creativity not only in himself but in those around him. The result over the last 30 years has been a body of work that addresses some of the major issues of our time with rare depth and sensitivity.

Q: A Time for Life is one of a number of your pieces inspired by issues relating to the natural world. What is it about this subject that you find consistently stimulating?

A: Living in the Pacific Northwest, I am very close to nature. My home is about 1,000 feet above the valley where the University of Oregon is located, and around my house, I have 70-foot trees. Essentially, I live in a temperate rainforest. This is but one of the ecosystems in which I've lived. I grew up to the west of Cleveland and then pursued all of my studies on the East Coast and in Europe. I taught at the Aspen Music Festival for five summers and did some incredible hiking in the Rockies. I also did seven residencies at the Banff Center for the Arts in the Canadian Rockies. And before moving to the Pacific Northwest, I lived in Southern California and San Francisco at different times. Since 1993, I've also spent about four to six weeks every year in the high desert of northwest New Mexico. Thus, I've lived in most of the ecosystems in the United States.

Living in the Northwest so close to nature has connected me more deeply than ever to this subject. In the other places that I lived, I certainly appreciated nature and had a sense of what is happening to our planet in terms of the environmental crisis. However, it is more evident in the Pacific Northwest where I live much closer to nature. I feel the change in climate very directly, since where I live, it has become progressively colder for most of the year. I also see the effect on the forests of extreme logging (“clear cutting”). We also have pollution from industry and from field burning, and that is of course a concern as well. Any human activity that pollutes nature is felt very profoundly in the Northwest and this is probably why our region is often called “the center of environmental activism.”

As an environmental oratorio, *A Time for Life* is my reaction to the degradation of the ecosystems in which I've lived, and my response to what is happening to our world in general through climate change. To a large extent, humanity is causing the environmental crisis through its flawed policies and refusal to find new ways to live in harmony with nature.

Q: I know you've written many pieces that deal with major issues, such as environmentalism and peace. What do you feel is the role that music can play in addressing these sorts of “big topics?”

A: I think music has a very important role to play in addressing topics of conflict and reconciliation. What is happening to the environment is definitely related to this larger theme.

At the deepest level of who we are, music has the power to connect us most directly with the world's life force. For example, internally, we have a very deep appreciation of nature. It is our home, and it is that which sustains us on the planet. We sense this at a profound level, and music can connect us with those deep places of understanding within ourselves. I hope that *A Time for Life* connects its listeners to the part of themselves that will initiate some meaningful action in the world in order to preserve and sustain the natural environment, wherever one lives and beyond.

Q: As you've also done in other works, you assembled a text/libretto that draws on a great many sources, which you reinterpret in your own words. How do you approach the assembling of the texts for these sorts of pieces?

A: I'm a writer of what I call "text for music" in that I am both the composer of the music and writer of the text. When I was conceiving *A Time for Life*, as with many of my projects, there was a substantial amount of research involved. I always begin by simply doing research into a wide variety of possibilities that I know will inform a new piece in some way. At some point in the research process, I begin to feel that it's time to begin writing. Then, I start to create my "text for music," meaning that I write the text and music at the same time.

Writing music for me is primarily an internal process. I do not write anything on paper until I can hear the whole work from beginning to end, internally and completely. The text and music are thus one entity, and there is no separation between the two of them in my compositional process. That is fundamentally different from a composer who is taking a found text by a poet or writer, and setting it to music. I sometimes call my process " *composing text for music*," because it is inextricably bound to the creation of the music itself, and we don't really have a single word in our language for composing text and music simultaneously.

This means that when I begin to notate the music, I'm free to refine and change the text and/or music, whenever necessary. I don't need to negotiate with another author, so I'm not limited by working with something that cannot be changed. Each composition is a living and fluid being, and it can be refined and transformed during the compositional process. Personally, I find this to be a very exciting way to compose vocal music. It is not static or constrained in any way, but is an open creative process that allows for revision and transformation whenever needed.

In *A Time for Life*, the texts come from a diverse range of sources. One of the great joys of creating the work was to discover that there is a profound connection between the intonations, chants, and prayers of indigenous people and Eastern Orthodox spirituality, especially as it relates to creation, the creator, and nature. This deep connection has never been pointed out before, because scholars have rarely considered those cultures within the same frame. But I found that they share many values related to creation and nature, and artistically, this suggested to me that the dynamic relationship between them could be explored through a work of art.

The first part of my environmental oratorio is entitled "Creation" and it is an exploration of creation stories related to the two cultures. The second part is entitled "Forgetting" and it describes humanity's falling away from creation, through its failure to live in harmony with nature. The third part is entitled "Remembering," and in it, a hopeful future is imagined, in which humanity serves as a responsible steward of the earth and realigns itself with the creative forces of existence. At the very end of the work, the two soloists sing about remembering our deep connection to nature and embracing the forces of creation. Thus, there is a physical and spiritual journey within the oratorio that moves through the destructive behavior of humanity toward the forces of creation and renewal.

Q: For the Capella Romana performances and recording, the piece has been performed with eight voices. Do you see the piece being effective with a larger chorus as well?

A: *A Time for Life* has several versions. While composing the recorded version for eight singers that is on the recording, I was also simultaneously creating a version that involves a full mixed chorus. This larger version traces the journey of eight individuals (soloists), who ultimately join together with others (the full chorus) in order to create a community that aligns itself with the creative forces of existence and is committed to living in harmony with nature.

Q: Was it your choice to use a string trio for the accompaniment?

A: The original version was scored for three medieval string instruments (two vielles and a bass gamba), which produce a rich, haunting sound. While I was writing for medieval instruments, I was also composing the version for modern instruments, which we ultimately decided to record. The medieval instruments are tuned in fourths, and the modern instruments in fifths, so composing double-stopped chords that work well in both tunings was a challenge. The larger choral version can be performed with the modern string trio or in a chamber orchestra version that I've made, which adds woodwinds to a small string ensemble.

Q: This work contains some aleatoric and spatial elements, particularly at the beginning and the end where the singers process in and out of the performance space. When recording a piece like this, how do you account for those elements?

A: A recording is simply another acoustic environment. When one thinks of a "presentation space" (a concert hall or another sort of venue), a piece can be choreographed in many different ways. In my preface to the score, I indicate that the conductor is free to choreograph the music in his or her own way based on the characteristics of each presentation space. The oratorio can be done with different sizes of vocal ensemble, and so it can be performed in an enormous hall seating 2,000 or an intimate hall that seats only 125. It is the same piece, but with many possible realizations, especially when it is choreographed for different performing spaces. When we made the recording, I simply treated it as another possible sonic environment. I love the process of recording, and I think that recorded music can be as vivid and alive as music performed in a concert space.

Q: Many of your works have direct and strong influence from early music. How do you balance the influence of the past with contemporary elements?

A: The music that I'm closest to is the music of the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. The composers that are most important to me (and quite profoundly so) are Hildegard, Machaut, Dufay, Josquin, and Bach. Except for Hildegard, who was composing monody, the others are all contrapuntal masters, and my own music is almost entirely polyphonic.

In *A Time for Life*, the first part is related to chant, and thus, it is basically monodic. The solo chant melodies are sung over a distant canon which is composed of a single melody that is sung simultaneously in different tempos by multiple singers. In the second and third parts, the music of the oratorio is almost exclusively contrapuntal. When I create my own kind of counterpoint, I'm not thinking specifically of the music of the past. I've listened to a wide range of early music and have let it flow freely into my inner world. To use a nature metaphor, my listening to early music prepared the soil out of which my own music grew. But the plant that grows is different from the soil. I don't think that anybody would say that my music sounds like the other composers I named, but the inner life of my counterpoint is internally related to the music of each of them.

Q: When you write purely instrumental music and symphonic works, is counterpoint equally important to you?

A: All of the music that I write, whether choral, vocal, chamber, or symphonic is equally contrapuntal in nature. At the root, I connect all of those genres to the inner life of the kinds of counterpoint that I love to compose. The archetype of this counterpoint is "diversity in unity and unity in diversity," and my music unfolds from this principle. In general, my music is organic in conception and realization, and it always connects motivic aspects of the musical material to the deep harmonic structure and form of the work.

Q: You mentioned that you conceive your pieces internally in their entirety. Once a work is composed and

finalized, do you still retain it within you in that same way?

A: After the piece has been created, I consciously let go of it. I don't think that I've ever continued to hold onto a piece. I'm a composer who truly loves to work with performers, and I've been very fortunate to work with so many wonderful ensembles, such as Cappella Romana. I've never had anything but positive interactions with the performers of my work, and I love being part of the rehearsal process. However, after the performance, I let go of each piece, and within a few days, I turn my attention to a new project.

Q: When you return years later to participate in another performance of an older work, is it ever hard to get back into its details?

A: No, I never have any problem immediately recalling a work. It does not in any way detract from whatever project I'm presently working on. It's like visiting with an old friend. Once the visit is over, I return to my current project. I don't find that the past and present detract from each other in the creative process, and I think that they actually nourish each other in ways that are not entirely conscious.

Q: What are some of your upcoming recordings and projects?

A: My newest recording will be released in Fall 2014 and is a collaboration with Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare of Austin, Texas. Over the past few years, I have had a very close relationship with Craig and his ensemble, and I consider Conspirare to be one of the finest choruses in the world. The new CD is a recording for Harmonia Mundi that contains two large-scale works of mine: *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Songs of the Soul*, both of which were commissioned by Conspirare. *Songs of the Soul* was written for a four-concert festival that Craig and I co-created, entitled *Renaissance and Response*. Each concert focused on the music of one composer: Josquin, Lassus, Victoria, and Bach. Craig asked me to write a response to each composer, and a new motet of mine was performed at the end of each concert. For the final concert, I created a cantata in the manner of Bach. I took my three previous motets, and between them, I wrote movements for solo and duo combinations of soprano and baritone. The voices are accompanied by either string trio or a larger string orchestra (which is how we recorded it). The text is "Noche oscura" (Dark Night) by St. John of the Cross. Alongside this text are Latin and English texts that are drawn from the commentary that St. John wrote about his own poem. The work is a spiritual journey from darkness and despair to a state where "only love remains." The piece ends with a Latin setting of the familiar passage from I Corinthians 13, "Love is patient, love is kind..."

I wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* as a companion piece for *Songs of the Soul*. The work features poetry by St. Teresa of Avila (in *Castellano*), who was a spiritual mentor to St. John of the Cross, and who influenced his theology and writing. *The Cloud of Unknowing* reveals the thematic seeds out of which *Songs of the Soul* had previously grown.

I also am engaged in a very large project right now with the Yale Camerata and its director, Marguerite Brooks. The Yale Institute of Sacred Music has commissioned me to create six works that will be premiered over a three-year period beginning in December 2014 and ending in Spring 2016. The completed series will be five cantatas (roughly 15–20 minutes each), culminating in a 90-minute oratorio for soloists, chorus, and full orchestra. The theme of the oratorio is The Transfiguration of Christ and each of the preceding cantatas focuses on a different aspect of Christ's miracles. In my usual manner, I'm writing the text and music simultaneously.

I'm also involved in another large-scale project with Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare: a new setting of the

Passion, which will be quite different from my first one, *The Passion According to Four Evangelists*. This new Passion will come from a perspective of “first person witness” rather than composite storytelling, and is being developed as part of a community process in Spring 2014. I will be working with the chorus in Austin, and together, we will engage in a series of discussions relating to the Passion. This creative dialogue will flow into my process of composing the piece, and thus, the chorus will be directly connected to the work from its inception, which is very exciting. We’ll be taking the journey of the Passion together.

I call this process “co-creation,” and as a composer, I experience no separation between myself and those who are performing the work. It is not a situation in which the composer writes a piece in isolation and then gives it to the performers, who take it into their own, separate space. For me, everything is connected and unified from beginning to end. I love this collaborative process, and it is one of my greatest joys in creating music.

KYR *A Time for Life* • Alexander Lingas, cond; Capella Romana; Third Angle New Music • CAPELLA ROMANA 411 (53:19)

Though he has written much music in all genres except opera (including 12 orchestral symphonies), it is vocal and choral works for which American composer Robert Kyr is best known. This disc contains an oratorio for vocal octet and string trio inspired by the destruction of the environment, and specifically by the ecological efforts of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. A large percentage of Kyr’s music deals with one of two “big” subjects: the earth and peace. This work is one of the former, and its language is typical of Kyr’s vocal music: heavily modal, atmospheric, and indebted to the sounds and contrapuntal structures of early music, though with a harmonic vocabulary of the present time.

Kyr has collaborated previously with Capella Romana, and the vocal ensemble delivers an excellent performance of the piece he wrote for them. The original version of the oratorio was scored for an accompaniment of three medieval string instruments, and was reconceived for modern string trio for Third Angle, another ensemble with whom the composer has had a long association. Kyr tends to collaborate very closely with performers in writing his works, and thus has many fruitful and longstanding relationships with ensembles.

I find that some of Kyr’s pieces fare better in live performance than on recording, as they often have a gripping narrative in the concert hall that on disc can feel a bit over-extended, particularly in their long modal evocations. However, the music is never less than truly beautiful and is always put together with extreme care and a tremendous honesty of emotional expression. Particularly lovely is a radiant chorale that makes several appearances in the final section of this work. Kyr has been very prolific and most of the works are quite large-scale; thus many more recordings are needed to fully assess his significant output. Several discs on the New Albion label previously featured major works of his, most notably his masterwork oratorio *The Passion According to Four Evangelists*, which I believe is one of the greatest choral works of all time. Though New Albion is now defunct, copies do seem to still be available. **Carson Cooman**