Gwyneth Walker A Thousand Prayers

Songs for High Voice and Piano on the poetry of Anne Sexton

1. Two Hands

2. Welcome Morning

3. What the Bird with the Human Head Knew

4. Snow

5. Look to Your Heart

A Thousand Prayers

duration: circa 13 minutes

A Thousand Prayers is a song cycle based on poems by Anne Sexton (1928-1974 – Weston, MA). All of the texts are found in her book, The Awful Rowing Toward God (published posthumously). The poet struggled with depression throughout her life. These last poems were written after Sexton's meeting with a Roman Catholic priest who, although unwilling to administer last rites, told her "God is in your typewriter." His words gave the poet the desire to continue living and writing.

The composer was drawn to this poetry due to the unique combination of the mundane and the sacred. The poet was seeking God in everyday places, in the daily routines of a homemaker. Is God in the tailor, mending my pantsuit... in Boston, raised up by the skyscrapers? Where then?

Her search is day-to-day, and it is all-consuming. I cannot walk an inch without trying to walk to God. I cannot move a finger without trying to touch God. She keeps her sense of humor: I went to the bird with the human head, and asked, Please Sir, where is God? Her quest is timeless and limitless. Yet, at the end, she finds answers within. Look to your heart that flutters in and out like a moth. God is there.

The musical settings vary between recitative style (when there are many words to present) and cantabile style (when certain key phrases elicit lyrical expression). In addition, there are moments of special imagery, such as the hand clapping in the first song ("Two Hands"), the singer walking about the stage searching for the mysterious bird ("What the Bird with the Human Head Knew"), the falling snow accompaniment ("Snow") and the fluttering tremoli ("Look to Your Heart"). The texts abound in imagery which is explored and enjoyed in the music.

Although Anne Sexton's life was often one of darkness, there are moments of pure ecstasy in her writing. She does indeed find divinity in her typewriter!

Unwind, hands, you angel webs...cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun and applaud, world, applaud.

Widely performed throughout the country, the music of American composer **Gwyneth Walker** is beloved by performers and audiences alike for its energy, beauty, reverence, drama, and humor. 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 divides her time between her childhood hometown of New Canaan, Connecticut and the musical communities of Sarasota, Florida and Randolph, Vermont.

Gwyneth Walker has been a proud resident of Vermont for many years. 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. In 2012, she was elected as a Fellow of the Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Walker's catalog includes over 300 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. A special interest has been dramatic works that combine music with readings, acting, and movement. The music of Gwyneth Walker is published by E. C. Schirmer (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

The Poems

TWO HANDS

From the sea came a hand, ignorant as a penny, troubled with the salt of its mother, mute with the silence of the fishes, quick with the altars of its tides, and God reached out of His mouth and called it man.

Up came the other hand and God called it woman.

The hands applauded.

And this was no sin.

It was as it was meant to be.

I see them roaming the streets:
Levi complaining about his mattress,
Sarah studying a beetle,
Mandrake holding his coffee mug,
Sally playing the drum at a football game,
John closing the eyes of the dying woman,
and some who are in prison,
even the prison of their bodies,
as Christ was prisoned in His body
until the triumph came.

Unwind, hands, your angel webs, unwind like the coil of a jumping jack, cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun and applaud, world, applaud.

WELCOME MORNING

There is joy in all: in the hair I brush each morning, in the Cannon towel, newly washed, that I rub my body with each morning, in the chapel of eggs I cook each morning, in the outcry from the kettle that heats my coffee each morning, in the spoon and the chair that cry "hello there, Anne" each morning, in the godhead of the table that I set my silver, plate, cup upon each morning.

All this is God, right here in my pea-green house each morning and I mean, though often forget, to give thanks, to faint down by the kitchen table in a prayer of rejoicing as the holy birds at the kitchen window peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it, let me paint a thank-you on my palm for this God, this laughter of the morning, lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard, dies young.

WHAT THE BIRD WITH THE HUMAN HEAD KNEW

I went to the bird with the human head, and asked, Please Sir, where is God?

God is too busy to be here on earth, His angels are like one thousand geese assembled and always flapping. But I can tell you where the well of God is.

Is it on earth?
I asked.
He replied,
Yes. It was dragged down
from paradise by one of the geese.

I walked many days,
past witches that eat grandmothers knitting booties
as if they were collecting a debt.
Then, in the middle of the desert
I found the well,
it bubbled up and down like a litter of cats
and there was water,
and I drank,
and there was water,

and I drank.

Then the well spoke to me.

It said: Abundance is scooped from abundance, yet abundance remains.

Then I knew.

SNOW

Snow,
blessed snow,
comes out of the sky
like bleached flies.
The ground is no longer naked.
The ground has on its clothes.
The trees poke out of sheets
and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
I bite it.
Someone once said:
Don't bite till you know if it's bread or stone.
What I bite is all bread, rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope.
There is hope everywhere.
Today God gives milk
and I have the pail.

NOT SO, NOT SO (Look to Your Heart)

I cannot walk an inch without trying to walk to God. I cannot move a finger without trying to touch God.

Perhaps it is this way:
He is in the graves of the horses.
He is in the swarm, the frenzy of the bees.
He is in the tailor mending my pantsuit.
He is in Boston, raised up by the skyscrapers.
He is in the bird, that shameless flyer.
He is in the potter who makes clay into a kiss.

Heaven replies: Not so! Not so!

I say thus and thus and heaven smashes my words.

Is not God in the hiss of the river?

Not so! Not so!

Is not God in the ant heap, stepping, clutching, dying, being born?

Not so! Not so!

Where then?
I cannot move an inch.
Look to your heart
that flutters in and out like a moth.
God is not indifferent to your need.
You have a thousand prayers
but God has one.

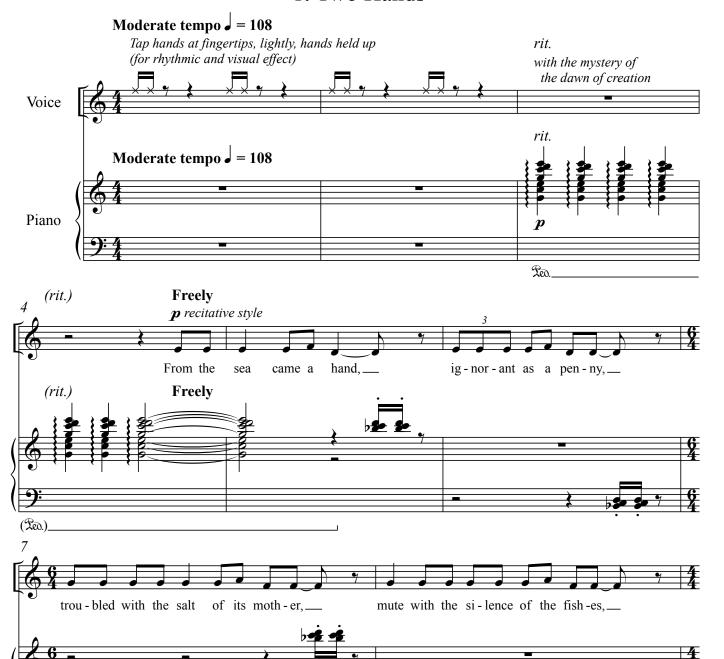
A Thousand Prayers

for High Voice and Piano

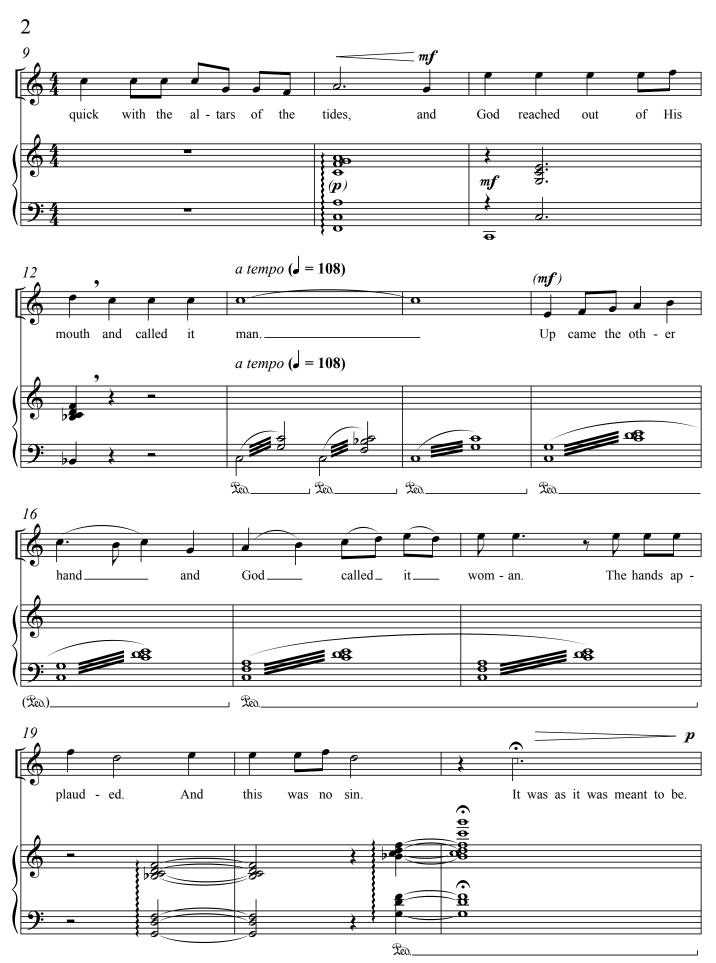
Anne Sexton (1928 – 1974)

1. Two Hands

Gwyneth Walker



Two Hands, Welcome Morning, What the Bird with the Human Head Knew, Snow, and Not So, Not So by Anne Sexton. Reprinted by permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc., © Copyright by Anne Sexton.



Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 1. Two Hands





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2. Welcome Morning







Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 2. Welcome Morning



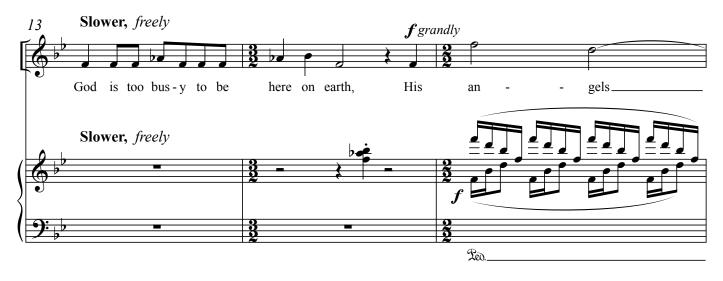
Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 2. Welcome Morning

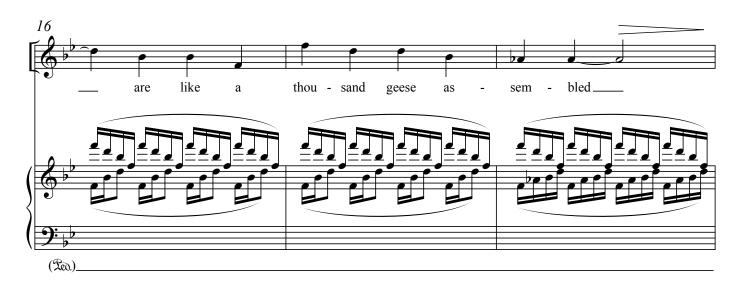


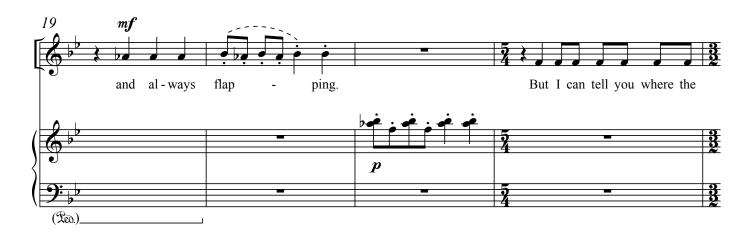
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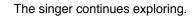
The singer explores the stage, moving in time with the 2/2 rhythm, looking for the mysterious bird.



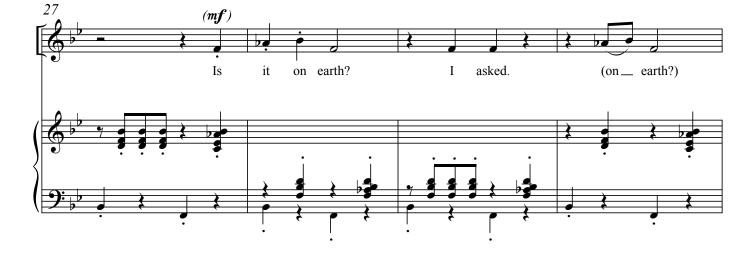


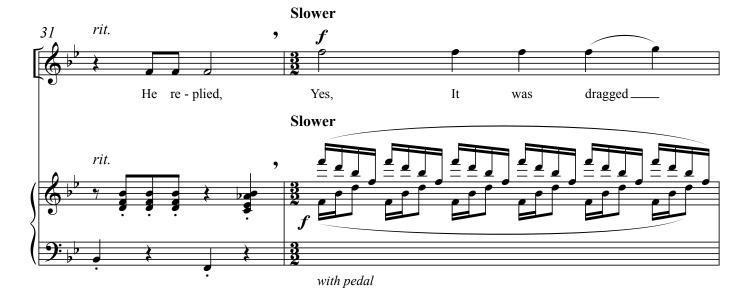








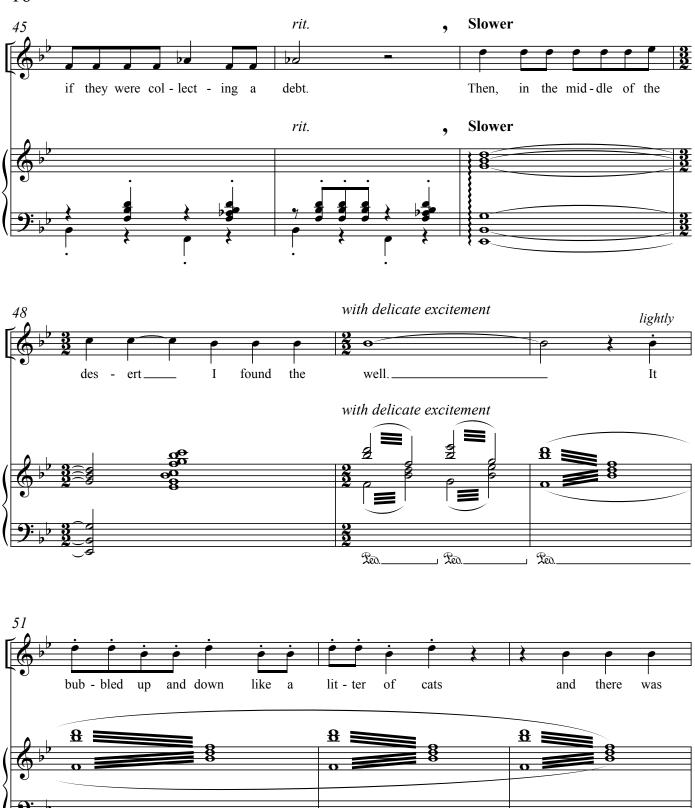


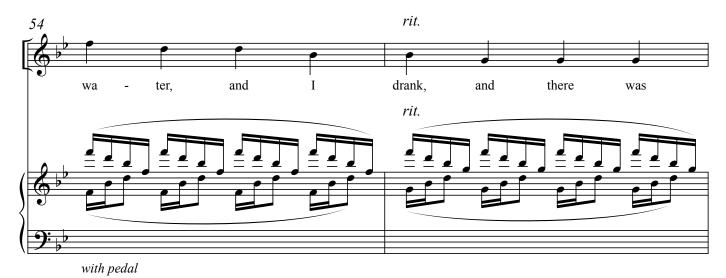


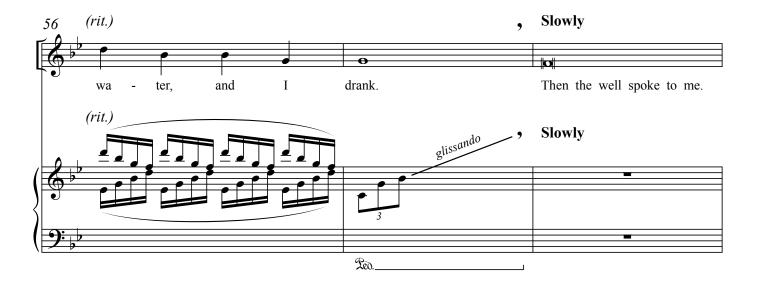


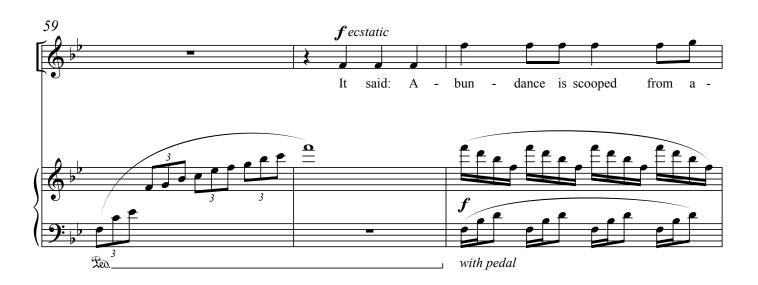
Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 3. What the Bird with the Human Head Knew

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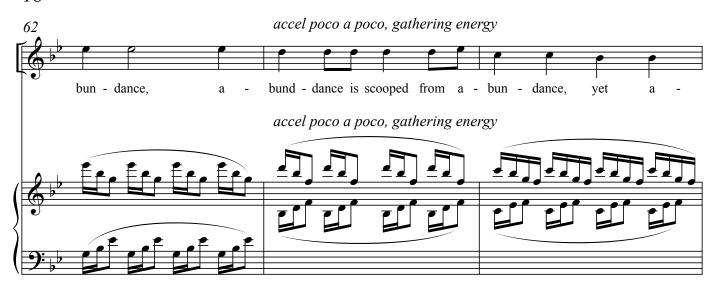


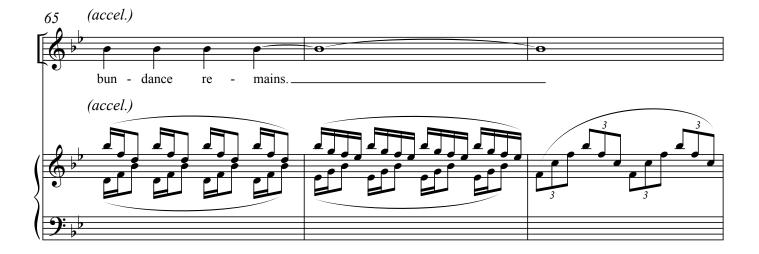




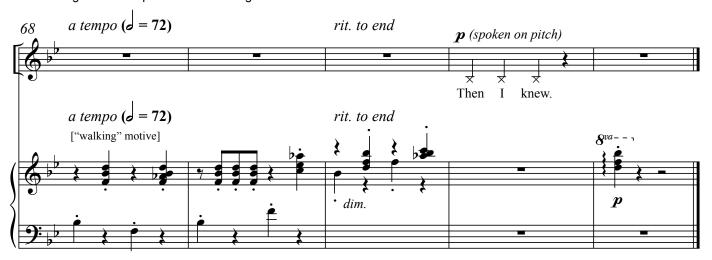


Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 3. What the Bird with the Human Head Knew



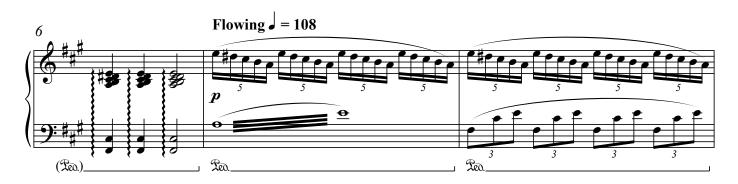


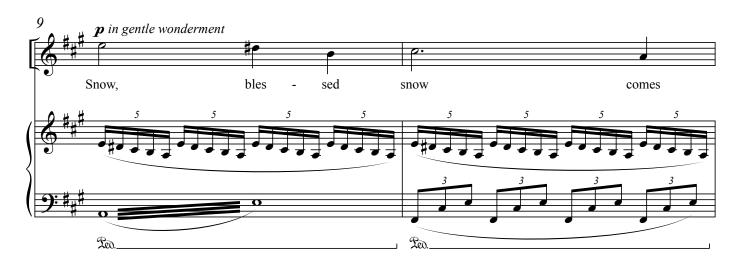


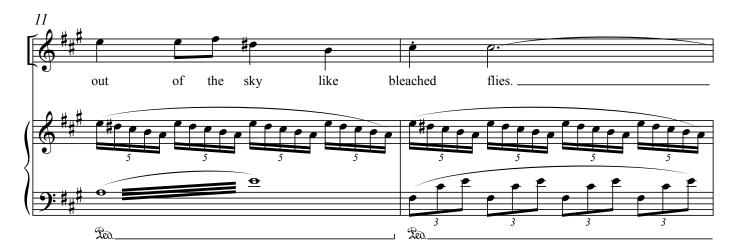


4. Snow









Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 4. Snow



Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 4. Snow











5. Look to Your Heart





Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 5. Look to Your Heart







Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 5. Look to Your Heart



Walker | A Thousand Prayers | 5. Look to Your Heart