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 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 houseAnd wind wades through my trees,The cedars fawn upon the storm with their huge paws.Silence is louder than a cycloneIn the rude door, my shelter.And there I eat my air aloneWith pure and solitary songs

While others sit in conference.Their windows grieve, and soon frownAnd glass begins to wrinkle with a multitude of waterTill I no longer see their speechAnd 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 voiceSnuffs all their flares in one gust.

And I go forth with no more wine and no more starsAnd no more buds and no more EdenAnd no more animals and no more sea:While God sings by Himself in acres of nightAnd 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!

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 Guyneth 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

Songs of Ecstasy

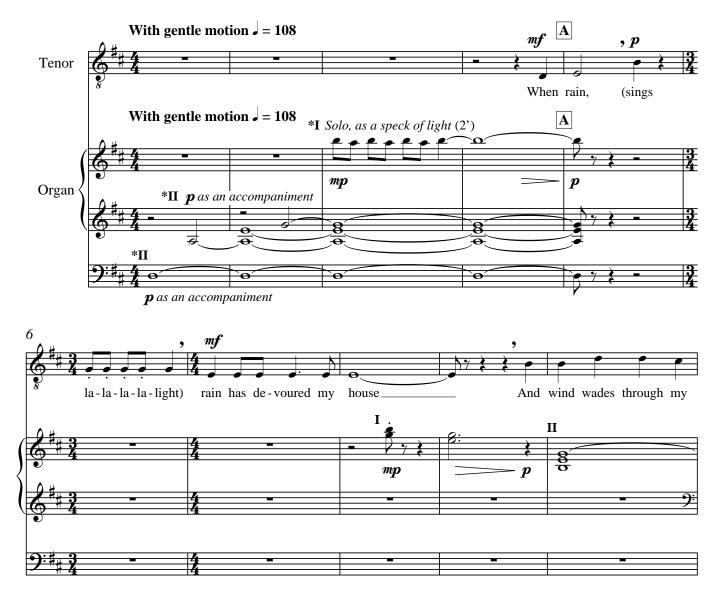
for Tenor and Organ

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..."



*I - Solo (2') II - as an accompaniment

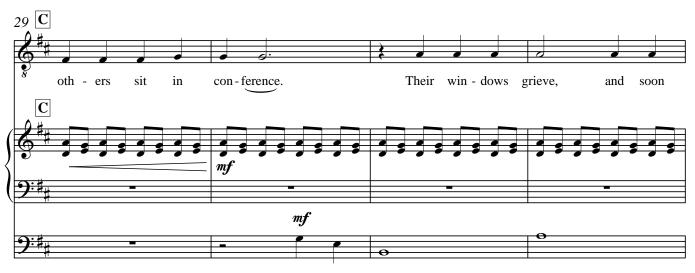
"Song (When rain)" By Thomas Merton, from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF THOMAS MERTON, copyright © 1944 by Our Lady of Gethsemani Monestary. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

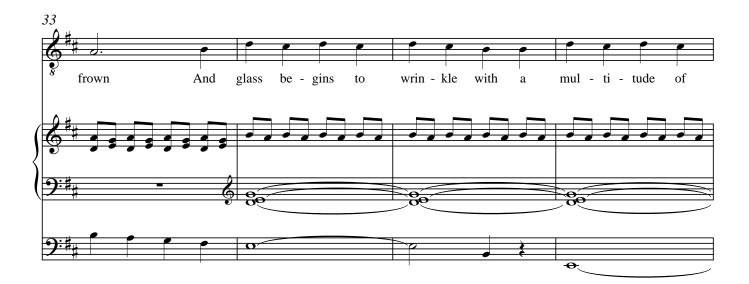
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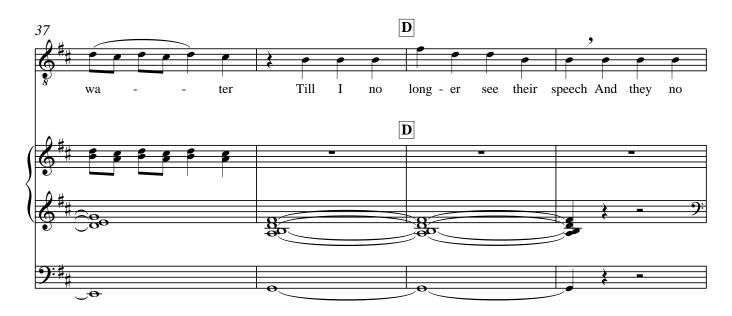


Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 1. Song

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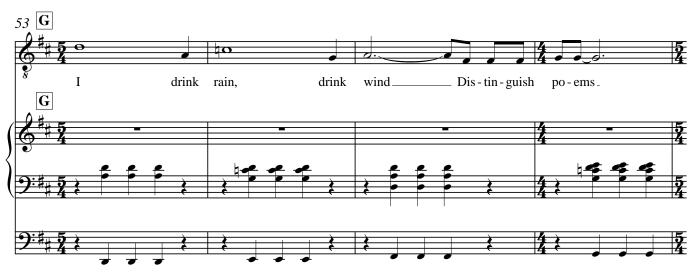


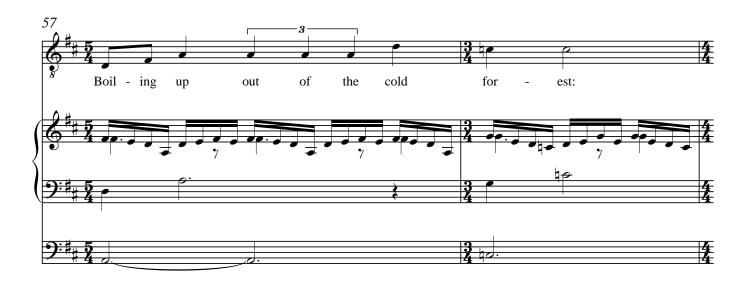
Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 1. Song

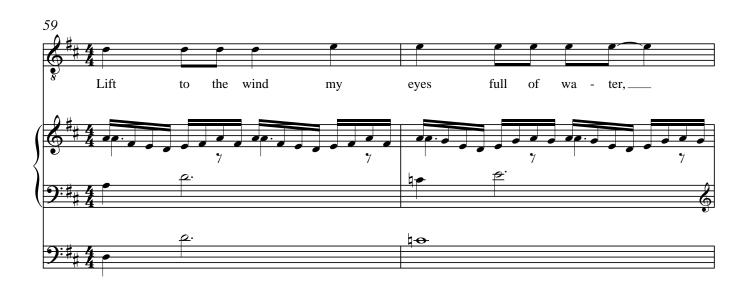


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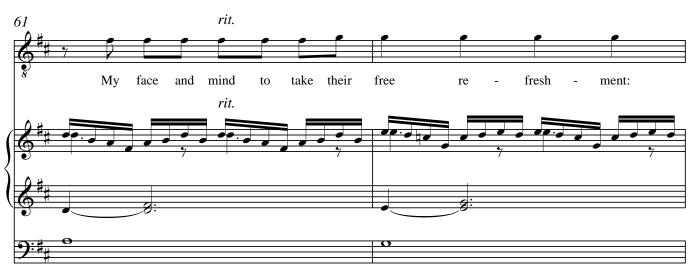
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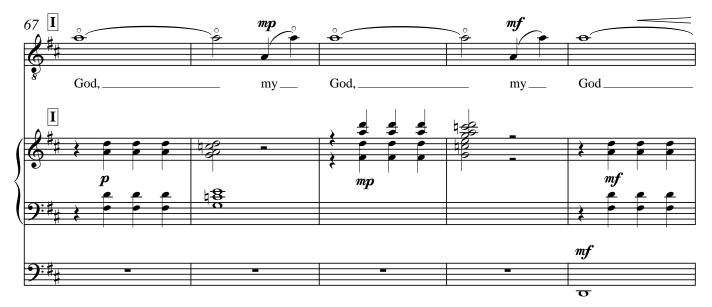












2. A Psalm: "The Spirit Sings"

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

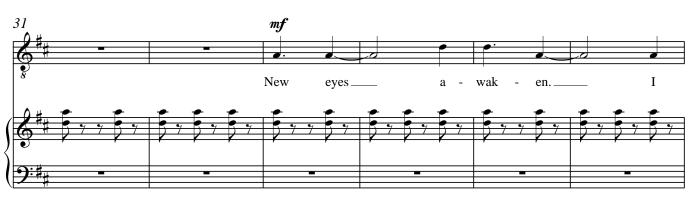


Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm

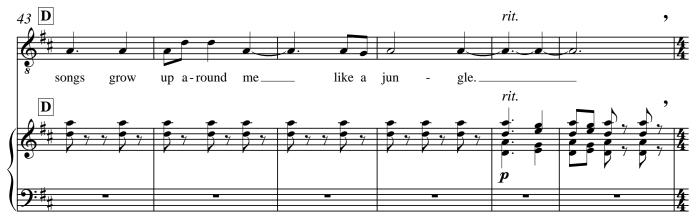


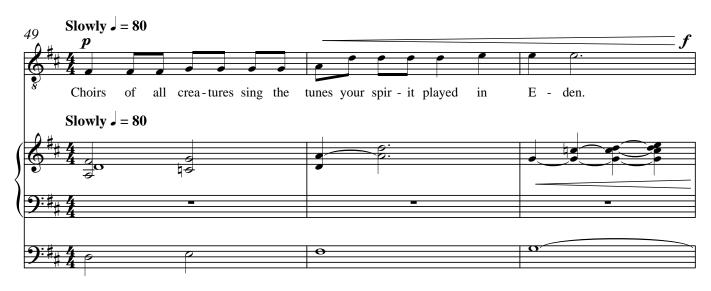
* Cue-sized notes at various moments in the score are ossia parts, to be performed as the singer chooses.

Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm





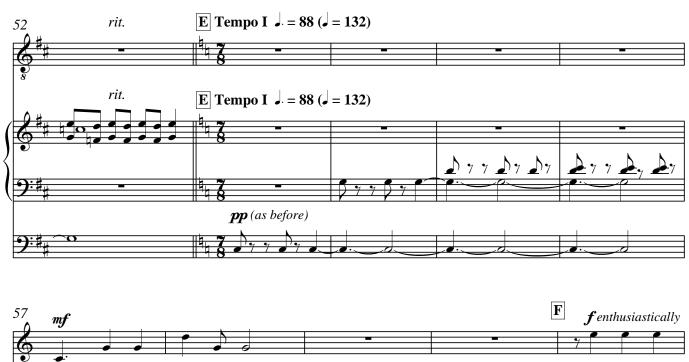




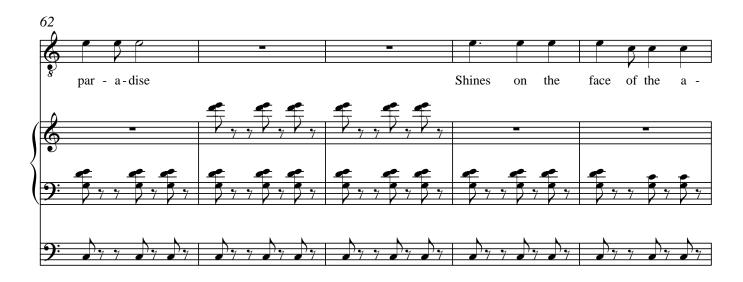
Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm

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







Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm



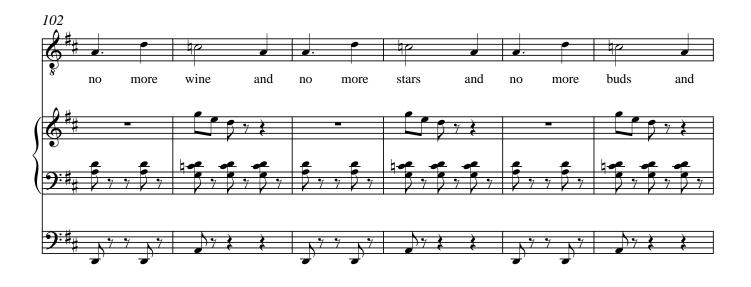
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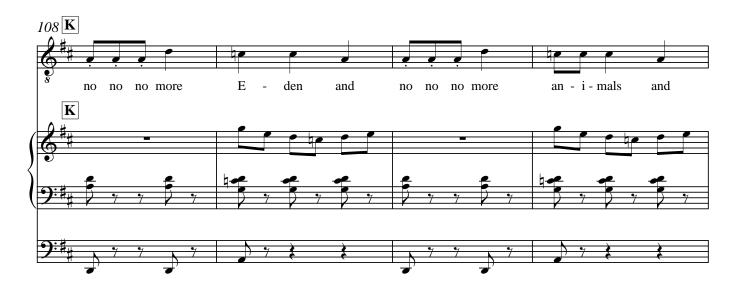
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Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 2. A Psalm







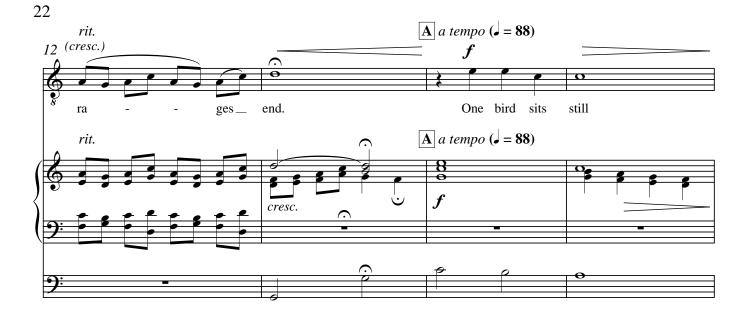


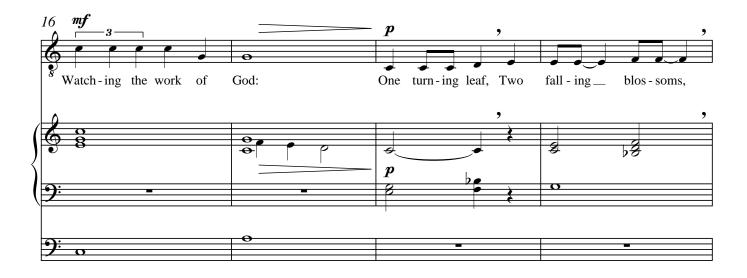
*Play whichever pitch the Tenor elects to sing.

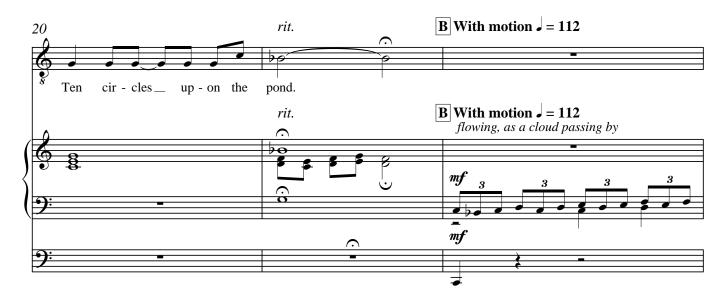
3. Stranger: "Thou Inward Stranger Whom I Have Never Seen"

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

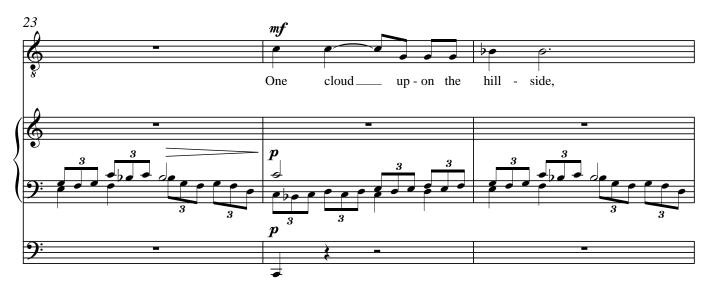


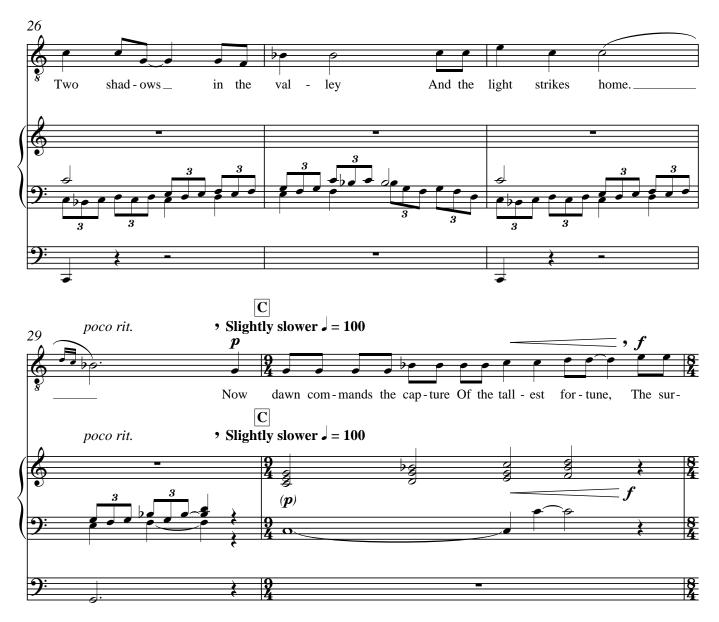




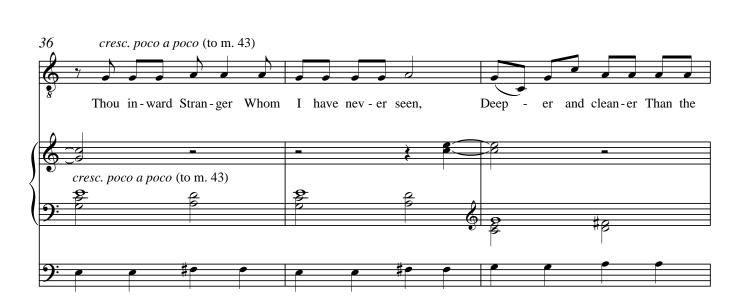


Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 3. Stranger









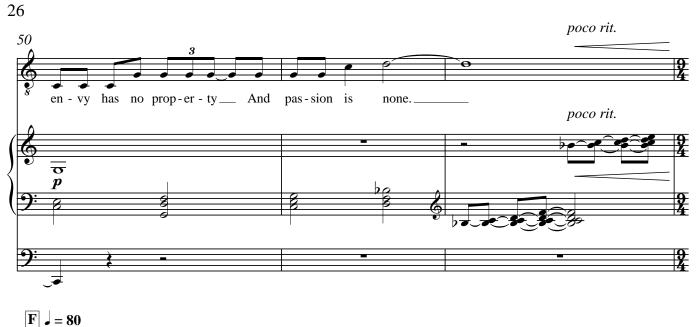
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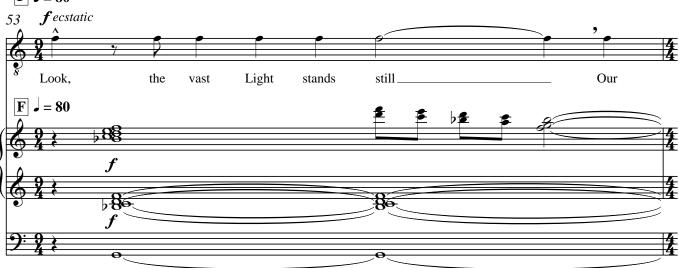
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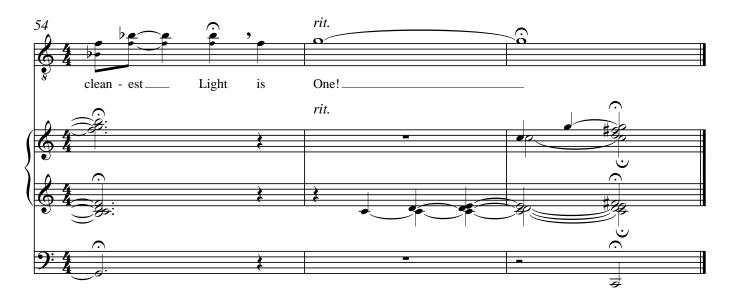
Walker | Songs of Ecstasy | 3. Stranger

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March 15, 2012 New Canaan, Connecticut 3'15" / Total: 11'00"