

## About *THE IMPATIENT EXPLORER*

*The Impatient Explorer* (1997) is a song-cycle for countertenor, theremin, clarinet, kalimba, banjo and trombone based on seven poems by Kenneth Patchen. It is the eighth in an ongoing series of compositions I've based on the work of 20th century English-language poets. Similar to the compositional process for each of the previous works, which in turn have taken their inspiration from poems by James R. Murphy, Richard Brautigan, E. E. Cummings, Margaret Atwood and William Butler Yeats, the musical processes in *The Impatient Explorer* attempt to derive exclusively from implications already present in Patchen's texts. Rhythms, melodic contours, structures and even instrumentation attempt to address concepts that are already implicit in the poems themselves. Singers, and accompanying instrumentalists as well, should approach these works with familiarity and appreciation for the poems and should mold their interpretations of musical lines directly from their own personal interpretations of the poetry, always making sure that the flow and meaning of the words are never obscured to listeners. The unlikely combination of countertenor, theremin, clarinet, kalimba, banjo and trombone in *The Impatient Explorer* is an attempt to sonically reflect the resolution of Patchen's many seeming contradictions. (If a kalimba is unavailable, a glockenspiel can be substituted.)

The poetry of the Ohio-born iconoclast Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) offers unique challenges to musicalization. At the same time, his poetry is primitive and experimental, radical and naïve, almost folksy and old-fashioned. But it is always direct. His phrases are extremely long in some instances and extremely short in others. Cadences are usually irregular. His poems are frequently accompanied by drawings and sometimes the elements of poetry and visual art are completely intertwined. Like the concrete poetry that his work foreshadows, some poems almost completely defy a satisfying aural interpretation, let alone a musical one! At the same time, there are other poems whose full beauty only comes across when read out loud.

The seven poems used in *The Impatient Explorer* reflect this range, and their musical settings attempt to reflect this range as well. The first poem, "The ImPatient Explorer," is a picture poem involving footsteps, which are conveyed by the singer walking on stage accompanied by an ambiguous, yet stagnant and almost monotonous, chord progression. "And with the Sorrows of This Joyousness," is an almost-Mother Goose-type poem featuring a list of improbable comparisons in alphabetical order. So I did the improbable: I used two twelve-tone rows against each other in a decisively non-serial manner – a relentless um-pah-pah waltz. Listeners get a break from this wandering chromaticism in the setting of the third poem, "Fall of The Evening Star," a beautiful lyrical poem, which remains on one chord throughout and develops through adding layers of additional instruments, each with a unique single-measure ostinato, rather than any other change. "(Bathed in SilenCe)," based on the poem "We Must Be Slow" whose opening words should be taken as a tempo indication, offers more lyricism but returns to chromaticism. The fifth and sixth poems, "Religion is tHat I Love You" and "Not Many Kingdoms LEft," combine ostinatos and chromaticism reflecting the lyrical yet prosy flow of those two poems. The final movement, "EterNity" sets the single line of language in one of Patchen's picture poems—"All at once is what eternity is"—against a full chromatic tone-cluster, a musical "all at once." The unusual capitalization in the titles of the seven movements are not in the original poems, but are added here to yield a mesostic spelling the name Patchen.