

About WALKING NAKED

Walking Naked (1996) is a five-movement song-cycle based on poems by William Butler Yeats. It was inspired by Joseph and Nancy Ornstein for whom Ireland, Yeats, and the last poem of this cycle have special significance. The final movement of this cycle was composed at their request and premiered at their wedding on May 5, 1996. During one of their trips to Ireland, Joe and Nancy visited the Yeats home as well as his gravesite. I imagine *Walking Naked* as Yeats attempting to speak to Joe and Nancy, overcoming petty obstacles like time, space, and death.

A central theme of *Walking Naked* is the wisdom of age. Although the poems that were chosen for this cycle were all written by Yeats early or midway in his poetic career, they have the authoritative voice of a very old man. The poems speak about casting off things: beauty ("all that's beautiful drifts away"), myths ("I made my song a coat ... out of old mythologies ... but the fools caught it ... let them take it"), the corporeal nature of his own beloved ("would beloved that you lay under the dock leaves in the ground"), comfort (which he calls "folly"), and finally, dreams ("I have set my dreams under your feet. . ."). Although many of these poems may at first appear hopeless, even morbid at times, I believe that they celebrate the overcoming of obstacles and, ultimately, transcendence - "there's more enterprise in walking naked" - hence the overall title of the cycle. The ability to see beyond what are—from an eternal point of view—momentary setbacks and to rejoice in where you are and where you'll be is true wisdom. This is something I have learned from Joe, who has been a patient and abiding friend through many a personal crisis. Wisdom is received knowledge, which Yeats himself acknowledges in the first words of the poem beginning the cycle: "I heard the old, old men say..."

Approaching the poetry of Yeats as a late 20th century American composer has posed a number of particular challenges. There is a very thin line between lapsing into anachronistic nostalgia and making sure to stay clear of contemporary a-historicisms which would disrespect the text. Yeats lived between two eras, the waning heroic age of Romanticism and the dawn of disillusioned Modernity. It was a time of great innovation in music. The late Romanticism of the Wagnerians gave way to the expressionistic chromatic wandering and eventual atonality of Schoenberg and his disciples. Popular songs and dance music began to be recorded and internationally disseminated, including the very first recordings of the traditional folk music of Yeats's native Ireland. At roughly the same time that Yeats was writing these poems, a young Irish-American composer named Henry Cowell began experimenting with tone clusters in addition to incorporating jigs and reels into music composed for the concert hall. After Yeats had written most of these poems, his father John Butler Yeats left Ireland for the United States never to return. Trying to establish a career for himself as a painter in New York City, the elder Yeats lived around the corner from the building I grew up in and where I was still living at the time I composed this music. All of this history has played a role in shaping music which I believe is true to the spirit of Yeats and at the same time fresh and relevant for our own time.

To my ears, the poetry of Yeats demands a sound world that is lush, lyrical and tonal, but never triadic. There is a heavy use of diatonic tone-clusters in *Walking Naked*, but they are never used as dissonances. Rather, whole scales function as seven-note chords, aurally reducing modulation into a progression of chords. Melodic patterns suggestive of traditional Irish melodies set against this harmonic backdrop sound unexpected and otherworldly. The use of an alto recorder and a mandola, which suggest an Irish caeli band, combined with an "international" yet unusual ensemble of eight cellos and a double-bass creates a timbre palette which is ethnically specific yet unfamiliar. The music is at the same time the most progressive and most traditional that I have ever written. This is in keeping with my attempt to conjure up a man who was simultaneously an avid Irish nationalist and folklorist, an outspoken pacifist, and an experimental mystic who believed in telepathy. He spoke to me through these poems; I can only hope that my amplifier maintains the clarity of his voice.

- Frank J. Oteri (May 17, 1996)