

To Melt into the Sun: The Mystery of Light

by

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## ABSTRACT

“The Mystery of Light” is the first movement of a yet to be completed larger work titled *...to melt into the sun* for chamber choir and percussion quartet. The text of the work is an excerpt from Kahlil Gibran’s masterpiece, *The Prophet*. This book tells the story of a prophet-like man, Almustafa, who, before embarking on the journey back to his native land, stops in the city of Orphalese, where the townspeople, having known him for many years, entreat him to share his wisdom before he departs. The seeress, Almitra, urges him, “speak to us and give us of your truth.” Almustafa proceeds to philosophize on a range of topics including love, laws, pain, friendship, children, time, beauty, and self-knowledge. Just before his farewell to the people of Orphalese, he speaks of death, saying that it is not something to be feared, but rather, embraced as a necessary and beautiful part of life.

This interconnectedness of the life and death process, of which Almustafa speaks, is the subject of “The Mystery of Light.” Almitra’s aforementioned request returns directly and indirectly throughout the movement as a reference to humanity’s undying desire to understand the great mysteries of our own mortal condition. The choir shifts throughout the movement between the three following perspectives: 1) that of people who live in fear, whose anxious whispers grow into shouts of horror as they are faced with the threat of death, 2) that of people who share Almitra’s inquisitiveness and are inspired with wonder by the secret of death and 3) that of the prophet, as he speaks words of comfort and wisdom to those who look, either in terror or wonder, upon the face of death. My hope with this music is to share the comforting words which Gibran has spoken through the character, Almustafa, so that, as they

have done for me, these words may provide comfort to those who will stand trembling in the presence of life's most inevitable consequence.

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Text from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*

Then Almitra spoke, saying, We would ask now of Death.

And he said:

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

## Instrument List

### Percussion I

Vibraphone  
Crotales (with cello bow)  
Suspended cymbal  
Tam tam (shared with perc. III)

### Percussion II

Vibraphone  
Suspended cymbal  
Tam tam (shared with perc. IV)  
Bass drum (shared with perc. IV)

### Percussion III

Marimba  
Suspended cymbal  
Sizzle cymbal  
Tam tam (shared with perc. I)  
Bass drum

### Percussion IV

Marimba  
Suspended cymbal  
Tam tam (shared with perc. II)  
Bass drum (shared with perc. II)

### Comprehensive list of percussion instruments

Marimba (five octaves) x 2  
Vibraphone x 2  
Crotales (two octaves) with cello bow  
Suspended cymbal x 4  
Sizzle cymbal  
Tam tam (large) x 2  
Bass drum x 2

## Instructions for the voices

12 singers:

3 sopranos (one soloist)

3 altos

3 tenors

3 basses

The soprano soloist should come from within the soprano section. The solo should be sung by the same individual throughout the entire piece. During moments when the soloist is singing with the choir, the soprano section will be reduced to two voices.

Throughout the piece there are sections where the choir is divided in such a way that the sopranos and altos divide into three parts (soprano, mezzo soprano, and alto) and/or the tenors and basses divide into three parts (tenor, baritone, bass). At the end of this movement there is a moment where each part (SATB) is divided into three. In a choir comprised of 12 voices, this requires each individual member to sing independently.

Though this piece was written with a chamber choir of 12 voices in mind, performance by an ensemble of singers larger than this is possible as long as the balance between voice parts is not compromised.

## PROGRAM NOTES

Written in 1923, Kahlil Gibran's book, *The Prophet*, tells the story of a wise man named Almustafa, who, after many years of living in the city of Orphalese, is about to return to his native land. Before leaving, however, the people of Orphalese, along with the seeress, Almitra, ask him to share with them his wisdom. The majority of the book consists of short, poetic sections in which Almustafa shares his philosophy about 26 different topics, which range from abstract concepts, such as love, to more practical subjects, such as buying and selling. Each section is named according to the topic being discussed (e.g. "On Love" and "On Buying and Selling"). The very last subject examined by Almustafa just before his farewell is "On Death."

This last excerpt from *The Prophet* has come into and out of my life at various points over the past decade. I first encountered the book in high school during a point in my life when I was becoming increasingly interested in philosophy and spirituality. Years later I was reminded of my appreciation for Gibran's text while taking a course called "Understandings of Love" during my time as a student at Carthage College. Among many other literary and philosophical texts, the class read and discussed "On Death" and "On Love" from Gibran's masterpiece. I found both of these excerpts to be particularly moving and I eventually read the book in its entirety, finding enrichment throughout. In the following years, I would revisit different moments in it as they became personally relevant.

The most recent, and most significant revisitation of Gibran's text for me was February 8th, 2019, when I learned of the death of my grandfather, Ewald Stefans. As I reflected that night on his death, the following line from *The Prophet* drifted to the surface of my



consciousness: “For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?” The title of this piece is derived from this line, the imagery of which I find both striking and visceral, while also profoundly beautiful as it expresses the sense of surrender one might experience in their final moments. It was after recalling and reflecting upon this line that I realized I had developed such a personal connection with this text and it is for this reason that I felt urged to express these words musically.

In crafting this work it was important to me that Gibran’s text not only be illustrated musically, but that these words would be communicated using the human voice. In addition to having the text sung by a choir, I wanted to include a representation of Almitra’s character through the use of the soprano soloist. The use of percussion provides a contrast to the human voice; the voice can be associated with life, due to its reliance on breath and its ability to produce notes with a longer sustain—notes which “live” longer—while percussion instruments might represent the opposite due to their production of notes with a short decay and the instruments’ lack of direct reliance on breath. This distinction between symbolic roles within the piece, however, is intentionally blurred at times through the use of percussion instruments with a longer decay (vibraphone with pedal, crotales, tam-tam, etc.) and voices which produce short spoken phrases, rather than long sung melodies—representing the blurring of life and death, which is one of the primary themes of the piece.

Some time after choosing this instrumentation, I realized another more personal connection between this decision to use percussion and the overarching theme of death. In my life there have been two significant instances, both relatively recent, when I have been reminded of the fact that death occurs randomly, and indiscriminately. Most recent was the death of a

percussionist, John Larsen, whom I had worked with and gotten to know while in attendance at Carthage College. In addition to being an incredibly kind person, John was an excellent marimba player. He died in July of 2019 at the age of 22. The other instance was in January of 2017 when an old friend of mine, Parker Matzinger, died suddenly, also at the age of 22. Though his primary focus in life was ecology, Parker was also a percussionist. The news of these deaths came as an incredible shock to me and though this piece is not explicitly about Parker or John specifically, their influence on me and my conception of death has been significant. As their respective memories were on my mind throughout the process of writing this piece, I think it is important to mention their names here.

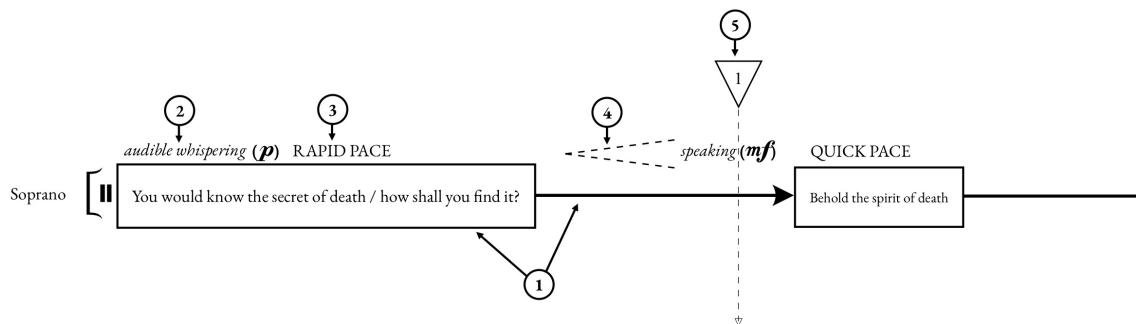
The first movement of *...to melt into the sun* is a setting of the first few lines of “On Death,” which deal with the idea that life and death are two aspects of one entity, and knowledge of death can come only from reflection on what it means to be alive. Some sections correspond more closely with death as an isolated concept and the negative attitudes often associated with it; others correspond with the concept of life and the positive attitudes associated with it, while still other sections represent the reconciliation between these two concepts and perspectives. This interconnectedness of the life and death processes is expressed musically through the use of tempo relations which articulate the form of the piece.

The opening section, which corresponds with negative attitudes associated with death, is marked with a tempo of 64 bpm, though each iteration of this section increases slightly in tempo, as I will explain later. The central section of the piece, beginning at m. 83, corresponds with the positive attitudes associated with life and is marked at 96 bpm. The relationship

between 64 bpm and 96 bpm is that of a 2:3 ratio. The formal sections which correspond with the reconciliation between these two attitudes are marked at 32 bpm. Within this tempo marking exists the potential for both perspectives. A duple division (ratio of 1:2) would result in 64 bpm and a triple division (ratio of 1:3) would result in 96 bpm. Altogether, these three tempos form the ratio 1:2:3. Within the context of the piece, each occurrence of 32 bpm involves the subdivision of the beat into three, demonstrating a preference for the attitudes which correspond with the 96 bpm marking.

A fourth tempo (72 bpm) is present throughout the piece and acts as something of an intermediary between 64 bpm and 96 bpm. It is used in the sections featuring the soprano soloist, who represents the character Almitra and her desire to understand death. This tempo is also related to 96 bpm (the tempo representing positive attitudes) by a ratio of 3:4, while it is related to 64 bpm (the tempo representing negative attitudes) more distantly, with a ratio of 9:4. This suggests that Almitra's inquisitive perspective regarding death contains more positive attitudes about life (and therefore, death, as they are one and the same) than negative ones. Furthermore, the tempo of 72 bpm is ultimately arrived at in the third iteration of the piece's opening section (m. 156). This shift in tempo represents the change in perspectives away from that of negativity and toward that of Almitra's positive curiosity regarding the topic of death. Moving away from feelings of dread, fear, and anxiety about death toward love, excitement, and appreciation for life, which are arrived at through an examination of death, is the entire goal of the piece, and, I believe, Gibran's message in "On Death."

## NOTATION INSTRUCTIONS



1. **Recited Text** - Text within this box is to be repeated continuously. This text should be recited in an asynchronous manner so that the members of each section are *not* chanting, but progressing through the text at their own pace. The phrases within this box may be recited as written, or fragmented, with words and sub-phrases recited out of order. This is to aid in the goal of avoiding synchronization between members of each section. The thick black line which extends out from the right of the box indicates that the repetition of the text is to be continued until the line ends with either an arrowhead or a flattened horizontal line. A line ending in an arrowhead indicates that the text should shift smoothly into the new box of text. If the line ends without the arrowhead, recitation of the text should cease, as the notation style has shifted back to conventional rhythmic notation.
2. **Timbre and Dynamics** - Any text written in *italics* in this position above either the recited text or the thick black line specifies the timbre and approximate volume at which the text should be recited. At times there will be a dynamic marking in parentheses (i.e. (*p*)) following the timbral instruction, though this is not always

present. This dynamic marking is simply to clarify the approximate volume level at which the text is to be recited at any given time.

3. **Speed** - Text written above the recited text in CAPITALS indicates the approximate speed at which the text should be recited. There are only four different paces indicated throughout the piece. Listed slowest to fastest, they are: SLOW, MODERATE, QUICK, and RAPID. These terms are relative and need not be treated rigidly as they are intended simply to be guidelines for the pace of the recited text. Similarly, the transition between one pace indication and another need not be strict, but should occur as a natural slowing or quickening.
4. **Dashed Hairpins** - Hairpins with dashed lines specify timbral/dynamic changes. As with speed indications, these should not be treated with rigidity. The point at which a timbral shift begins and ends can be flexible.
5. **Cues** - In order to coordinate between the ametric recitation of the choir and the concrete meter of the percussion, numbered cues are provided. These numbers, enclosed within inverted triangles, may be communicated in whatever way the conductor feels is most effective as long as the visual cues are not distracting in a way that interrupts the mood of the music. The dashed vertical lines which extend down from the point of the inverted triangle indicate the exact moment that these cues should be given. In all cases these cues coincide with the downbeat of a measure. Though these cues should be precise, the members of the choir are to use these cues as loose guidelines for whether they ought to shift text, timbre, or pace. For example, although in measure 10 the box of text in the tenor part reading, “cannot unveil the

mystery of light” lines up with the conductor’s cue in the score, does not mean that every tenor needs to immediately begin reciting that text. It simply means that the tenors should be shifting into this new segment of text at this approximate moment.

# ...to melt into the sun

## I. The Mystery of Light

Kahlil Gibran

Karl Stefans

Brooding,  $\text{♩} = 64$

Sop. Solo

Soprano *audible whispering (pp)* RAPID PACE  
You would know the secret of death / how shall you find it?

Alto *audible whispering (pp)* QUICK PACE  
You would know the secret of death / how shall you find it?

Tenor *audible whispering (pp)* MODERATE PACE  
You would know the secret of death / how shall you find it?

Bass *audible whispering (pp)* SLOW PACE  
You would know the secret of death / how shall you find it?

I **Brooding,  $\text{♩} = 64$**   
Cymbal *arco* *mf* *l.c.*  
Vibraphone *mf* *l.c.*  
Tom Tom *mf* *l.c.*  
Bass Drum *mf* *l.c.*

II *mf brighter ped. ad lib*  
Cymbal *arco* *pp* *l.c.*  
Vibraphone *mf* *l.c.*  
Tom Tom *mf* *l.c.*  
Bass Drum *mf* *l.c.*

III *mf* *l.c.*  
Cymbal *arco* *mf* *l.c.*  
Vibraphone *mf* *l.c.*  
Tom Tom *mf* *l.c.*  
Bass Drum *mf* *l.c.*

IV *pp* *l.c.*  
Cymbal *arco* *mf* *l.c.*  
Vibraphone *mf* *l.c.*  
Tom Tom *mf* *l.c.*  
Bass Drum *mf* *l.c.*

QUICK PACE  
The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind into the day...

MODERATE PACE  
The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind into the day...

QUICK PACE  
cannot unveil the mystery of light

MODERATE PACE  
cannot unveil the mystery of light





rit. **23** ♩ = 96

Solo Speak... to us... now... *pp* *mf* *acc.* *f*

S death! death! death! death!

A death! death! death! death!

T death! death! death! death!

B death! death! death! death!

rit. **26** Pensive, ♩ = 72

Cornets arco *pp* *mf* *acc.*

I *pp* *mf* *acc.*

II *pp* *mf* *acc.*

III *pp* *mf* *acc.*

IV *mp* *mf* *acc.*

Bas drum *sfz*

Marimbis *p* *mf* *acc.*

Marimbis *p* *mf* *acc.*

Marimbis *mp* *mf* *acc.*

Snare cymbal *pp* *f*

Choke *f*

*a tempo*  
*mp* Speak to us now *mf* *accl.* death. *ritardando* *f* *molto rit.*

*a tempo*  
*mp* bright *accl.* death. *ritardando* *mf* *molto rit.*

*a tempo*  
*mp* *accl.* *ritardando* *f* *molto rit.*

*a tempo*  
*mp* *accl.* *ritardando* *f* *molto rit.*

*a tempo*  
*mp* *accl.* *ritardando* *f* *molto rit.*

42 Meditative,  $\text{♩} = 32 (\text{♩} = 96)$

S. + A. *pp* *audible whispering* QUICK PACE *mp*

T. + B. *mp*

you would know, you would know, you would know, you would know,

*mf* You would know, the you would know, the

cannot unveil the mystery of light *mf* *but*

§ - eret of death *mp*

42 Meditative,  $\text{♩} = 32 (\text{♩} = 96)$

I *mf* *sharp* *pitch bend* *mf* *norm* *foot*

II *p* *mf* *l.r.*

III *pp* *dark* *mf* *p* *n* *mf* *mf* *p* *mf* *f*

IV *pp* *dark* *mp* *n* *mp* *p* *mf* *f*

III *mf* *p* *n* *mf* *mf* *p* *mf* *f*

IV *mp* *n* *mp* *p* *mf* *f*

Vib. Bass drum

*mf*  
 S. + A. *mp*  
 how — shall you find. — — — — —  
*p*  
 how shall you find the se - cret of death. — — — — —  
 but you would know, — — — — —  
 you would know, — — — — —  
*mp*  
 death. — — — — —  
 death. — — — — —

T. + B. *mp*  
 You would know, — — — — —  
*p*  
 You would know, — — — — —  
 you would know, — — — — —  
 se - cret of death. — — — — —  
 se - cret of death. — — — — —

II *f*  
 [Snare drum]

III *p*  
 [Tom tom]

IV *p*  
 [Bass drum]



**66** Pensive,  $\text{♩} = 72$

Solo *mp* The ow - I whose night - bound eyes - can - not - un - veil - the

S. + A. *pp* blind - un - to the day - *pp* ah - ah - ah - ah -

T. + B. *pp* ah - ah - ah - ah -

I *mp* *arco* *Cresc.* *pp* *mf* *Lx.* *pp* *mf* *Lx.*

II *mf* *pitch bend* *mf* *mf* *Lx.*

III *mf* *mf* *Lx.*

IV *mp* *sfz* *mp* *p*



95

I **Cresc.** **Vib.** *mf*  
*p longde* *lc.*  
 II *mf*  
 III *f*  
 IV *f*  
*mp pointed and sustained.*  
*lc.*



103

S. & A. *mf* If you would in . . . deed be . . .  
 I **Cresc.** **Vib.** *mp*  
 II *mp longde* *lc.*  
 III *mf*  
 IV *mf*



S. + A. *f*

hold, if you would in deed be hold the

*mp* *mf* *f* *mp*

Vib. *L.c.* *L.c.*

*mf*



S. + A. *mf* *mp*

spi . . . . . of death, if you would in deed be .

*mf* *mp* *p* *mp* *p* *mf*

Vib. *L.c.* *L.c.* *L.c.*

119

Musical score for vocal solo and orchestra, measures 119-124. The score is written for Soprano and Alto (S. + A.), Tenor (T), Bass (B), Violins I (Vln. I), Violins II (Vln. II), Violas (Vla.), Cellos (Cello), and Double Basses (Cb.).

**Measures 119-124:**

- Measures 119-120:** Vocal solo. Lyrics: "o . . . pen . . . heart, heart, your heart, your heart." Dynamics: *f* (first measure), *mf* (second measure).
- Measures 121-122:** Vocal solo. Lyrics: "o . . . pen . . . heart, heart, your heart, your heart." Dynamics: *f* (first measure), *mf* (second measure).
- Measures 123-124:** Full orchestra. Dynamics: *mp* (first measure), *p* (second measure).

**Instrumentation and Performance Markings:**

- Violins I (Vln. I):** *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 121-122), *p* (measures 123-124).
- Violins II (Vln. II):** *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 121-122), *p* (measures 123-124).
- Violas (Vla.):** *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 121-122), *p* (measures 123-124).
- Cellos (Cello):** *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 121-122), *p* (measures 123-124).
- Double Basses (Cb.):** *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 121-122), *p* (measures 123-124).

**Other Markings:** *f* (measures 119-120), *mf* (measures 119-120), *mp* (measures 119-120), *p* (measures 123-124), *mf* (measures 123-124), *mf* (measures 123-124), *mf* (measures 123-124).

123 S. + A. *f* wide heart *f* wide heart *f* wide heart

T *mf* your heart *f* wide heart *f* wide heart

B your heart *f* wide heart

129 *f* *mf* *mf* *f*

I *mf* *mf* *mf* *f*

II *p* *mf* *mf* *f*

III *f*

IV

133  $\text{♩} = 64$ , Ecstatic

133  $\text{♩} = 64$ , Ecstatic

14

**145** Pensive, *p* = 72

Solo

S. + A. *mf* *p* *mf*

T. + B. *mp* *p* *mp* *mf*

III *pp*

IV *pp*

Solo cymbal

Hi-hat

Bass drum

to us now *mf*

Speak to us *p*

nah - oo *p*

death... *mp*

of

ah *mp*

oo of death *mf*

now *mf*

to us *mf*

Speak to us *mf*

nah - oo *mf*

ah *mf*

to us *mf*

Speak to us *mf*

nah - oo *mf*

oo of death *mf*





71

S. + A. *mf* find. — you would know, but shall you find the se . . . cret of death. — in . . . less — you seek it in the

T. + B. *mf* you would know, you would know, the se . . . cret of death. — in the

III *Marimba* *p* *staccato*

IV *mf*



The musical score is divided into four systems (I-IV). The vocal parts are S. + A. (Soprano and Alto) and T. + B. (Tenor and Bass). The piano accompaniment is marked with various dynamics and articulations.

**System I:** S. + A. and T. + B. enter with lyrics: heart, heart, of life? heart. *mp*. The piano accompaniment is marked *mp* and *arco*. A rehearsal mark **180** is present.

**System II:** S. + A. and T. + B. sing: You would know life. *f*. The piano accompaniment features a *mf* dynamic and includes the instruction *arco*. A rehearsal mark **180** is present.

**System III:** S. + A. and T. + B. sing: But how shall you know the *mp*. The piano accompaniment is marked *mp* and *f*. Dynamics range from *mp* to *f*. The instruction *arco* is also present.

**System IV:** S. + A. and T. + B. sing: You would know life. *f*. The piano accompaniment is marked *f* and *light*. Dynamics range from *f* to *mp*. The instruction *arco* is present.

185

S. + A. *mf* se - cret of death, \_\_\_\_\_ of death, \_\_\_\_\_ For life, \_\_\_\_\_ and death, \_\_\_\_\_ you would know, the se - cret of

T. + B. *mf* se - cret of death, \_\_\_\_\_ of death, \_\_\_\_\_ For \_\_\_\_\_ you would know, se - cret of

185

I *pp* *f* *rit.*

III *f*

IV *mf*

*ff emphatic*  
S. + A. life and death are one, just as the

*ff emphatic*  
T. + B. life and death are one, just as the

*mf ped. ad lib*  
I. *Vib.*

*mf ped. ad lib*  
II. *Vib.*

*ff rimbombant*  
III. *8va*

*ff rimbombant*  
IV.

*non dim.*  
*non dim.*

*f*  
*f*  
*f*  
*f*

*p*  
*p*  
*f*  
*f*

**193** ♯ =  $\sigma$  ( $\sigma = 64$ ), *Ecstatic*  
 S. *ff* ri - . ver, the ri - . ver, the  
 A. *ff* just as the ri - . ver, the  
 T. *mf* son, just as the ri - . ver, the  
 B. *mf* just as the ri - . ver, the  
 just as the ri - . . .  
 just as the ri - . . .  
**193**  $\flat$  =  $\sigma$  ( $\sigma = 64$ ), *Ecstatic*  
 (8<sup>mov.</sup>)  
 III. *ff* light  
 IV. *ff* very

