

Boston Saengerfest Men's Chorus
Choral Concordance and Our New England Heritage

To celebrate our first quarter century and to inaugurate our next 25 years, the Boston Saengerfest Men's Chorus commissioned New England's Lewis Spratlan to compose a salute to the chorus and to the American culture in which so much of our music has its roots. What better source, then, could there be than the intellectual cornucopia that gave us such 19th century figures as Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, and others.

Spratlan found two works that capture New England's essential values, combining them under the title *New England Concordance*: Louisa May Alcott's elegy, "Thoreau's Flute," and Samuel Stennett's hymn, "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." (Spratlan's title reminds us also of Thoreau's fondness for puns.)

For both Alcott/Thoreau and Stennett, Heaven and eternity exist in Nature's manifestations. Alcott gives us bluebirds, willow blossoms, "swallow and aster, lake and pine"—an abundance of fruitful creations suggesting an almost Eden-like existence achieved through Thoreau's essence. Stennett cites green fields, rivers, fruits and fruit trees, brooks filled with "milk and honey," and more. Indeed, much American literature embodies this vision of an "American Adam" who, having left contentious Europe ("Jordan's stormy banks"), has prospered in this continent's innocent venue distinguished by Nature's bounty and an ever-westward road to salvation.

Like all works of art, Alcott's "Thoreau's Flute" came to be in the culture of its times. In 1862, during the early years of the Civil War, Thoreau died at age 40. Alcott had already served in Washington as an Army nurse, a harsh experience for a 30-year-old New England Abolitionist spinster. Stricken with typhus, she returned to Concord in 1863, deeply affected both by wartime nursing horrors and the illness that almost claimed her life. All this trauma lies beneath the seemingly idyllic innocence portrayed in "Thoreau's Flute," much as the barbarous reality of WWII underpins Thomson's 1943 Testament of Freedom.

Thoreau may be better known to us than Alcott because of two works: *Civil Disobedience* (1849) and *Walden* (1854)—both carried Biblical authority among the university students I was teaching in the 1960's and '70's. His "discovery" of consummate order embodied in Nature, of its inherently complex simplicity, invested the natural world with meaning that the social world would be better off heeding. It is that transcendent power that Alcott reveres and celebrates.

Alcott's text is simply structured. The first stanza quotes what "we"—those mourning the recent death of Henry David Thoreau—said, contemplating their townsman's wooden flute that he characteristically played as he walked through the still-countrified woods and fields of Concord. The final three stanzas are spoken by the flute itself, defining a kind of immortality conferred because of his capacity to demonstrate Nature's transcendence of man's temporal world. "Seek not for him," the

speaker concludes; "he is with thee."

Naming Thoreau "Our Pan" and calling his flute "his pipe" evokes Pan, the Greek god of the wild, who played a "Pan-pipe," reeds of various lengths bound together across whose open ends one blows. In classical and neoclassic pastoral literature, from Theocritus to Virgil to the 19th century and beyond, the Pan figure is linked to the poet/artist, whose simple rural tunes—poems—instructed and reformed the corrupted urbanites on whose ears they fell.

So Alcott points to a hand-made wood flute (still on display in Concord) also played by blowing across a hole cut into the basic tubular shape as an emblem of the classical pan-pipe, awarding "our Pan" the power accrued over centuries of tradition. That flute addressed in stanza one replies with comforting, grief-assuaging insights.

Breathing and speaking images ("sighing" in line 1, then "mute," "airy voice," "chants a requiem," and "harmonious breath") establish the life of the dead Pan figure among all these living elements of the Spring season of new life. The flute's voice comforts the mourners: "For such as he there is no death," he declares, because a higher power so decreed. Thoreau's vision "made one small spot [Concord, perhaps, or Walden Pond] a continent [microcosm contains macrocosm] / And turned to poetry life's prose" [echoing the ancient alchemical aspiration to turn lead into gold, the mundane into the special].

The flute's encomium asserts Thoreau's immortality,

revealed in Nature and merited by the writer's wandering ("haunting"), flute at his lips and village children at his heels, through "the hills, the stream, the wild" around Concord, teaching about the natural world surrounding them. Thoreau's "soul"—the essence of his song—was uncomplaining, pouring forth "no poor lament / But wood-notes ever sweet and strong." In perceiving Nature's blessings, therefore, "he still will be / a potent presence, though unseen, / Steadfast, sagacious, and serene." Alcott, like her elegy's subject, plays with both meanings "wood notes": tunes from the woodlands and from the wooden flute itself.

To the Alcott/Thoreau text Spratlan has linked a simple late 18th century English hymn, Samuel Stennett's "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," likely familiar to our area's mid-19th century churchgoers. The faithful who stand today in this fallen world (the Jordan River's "stormy banks") cast their "wishful eye[s] / To Canaan's fair and happy land," a heaven where fruit trees are immortal, darkness is banished, and Jesus is in charge. Its plain music moves forward with certainty, concluding with darkness ultimately being "banished away." Again, music from a time of innocence.

Awash in cynicism in our own age, comprehending the optimistic innocence of this Edenic thrust is difficult. Spratlan's music makes it less difficult, and that's a blessing.

—Linus Travers

Thoreau's Flute
Louisa May Alcott

We sighing said, "Our Pan is dead;
His pipe hangs mute beside the river
Around it wistful sunbeams quiver,
But Music's airy voice is fled.
Spring mourns as for untimely frost;
The bluebird chants a requiem;
The willow-blossom waits for him;
The Genius of the wood is lost."

Then from the flute, untouched by hands,
There came a low, harmonious breath:
"For such as he there is no death;
His life the eternal life commands;
Above man's aims his nature rose.
The wisdom of a just content
Made one small spot a continent
And turned to poetry life's prose.

"Haunting the hills, the stream, the wild,
Swallow and aster, lake and pine,
To him grew human or divine,
Fit mates for this large-hearted child.
Such homage Nature ne'er forgets,
And yearly on the coverlid
'Neath which her darling lieth hid
Will write his name in violets.

"To him no vain regrets belong
Whose soul, that finer instrument,
Gave to the world no poor lament,
But wood-notes ever sweet and strong.
O lonely friend! he still will be

A potent presence, though unseen,
Steadfast, sagacious, and serene;
Seek not for him -- he is with thee."

"On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand"
Samuel Stennett

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

O the transporting rapt'rous scene
That rises in my sight!
Sweet fields arrayed in living green,
And rivers of delight.

There gen'rous fruits that never fail
On trees immortal grow;
There rocks and hills and brooks and vales
With milk and honey flow.

All o'er these wide extended plains
Shines one eternal day!
There God the Son forever reigns
And scatters night away.