

Cascadian Chorale

Welcome Home (2015)

Extended Notes for the Recording
by **Gary D. Cannon**

[1]	Modern Musick (1781)	William Billings (1746–1800)	[2:55]
[2]	David’s Lamentation (1778)	William Billings	[1:42]
[3]	Euroclydon (1781)	William Billings	[3:53]
	Frostiana (1959)	Randall Thompson (1899–1984)	[32:59]
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† World premiere recordings

Modern Musick, first published in *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (1781)
by **William Billings** (1746–1800)

Art music was not a focus in colonial North America. Unlike the Spanish colonies to the south, where cathedrals developed strong traditions of choral music that incorporated native elements, the English colonies of the Atlantic coast devoted more attention to economic development than to culture. Indeed, the first composer of note from the English colonies did not emerge until the Revolutionary period. And this individual was far from the typical composer.

William Billings was a professional tanner, blind in one eye and short in one leg, with a withered arm and “an uncommon negligence of person.” Notwithstanding physical deformities and hygienic deficiencies, he successfully taught “singing schools,” group-oriented music lessons aimed at amateur church singers, around the greater Boston area. His 1770 volume, *The New England Psalm-Singer*, was the first publication ever devoted wholly to an American composer. By the time of the American Revolution, he had befriended such rebels as Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, supporting the cause with hymns such as *Chester* (“Let tyrants shake their iron rod / And Slav’ry clank her galling chains, / We fear them not, we trust in God, / New England’s God for ever reigns.”). By the time of his crowning achievement, the 1781 collection *The Psalm-Singer’s Amusement*, Billings had achieved substantial financial success. Unfortunately, copyright laws were not enacted until 1790, by which time his best works had been freely reprinted throughout the colonies. He accepted civic posts such as sealer of leather (inspecting goods), scavenger (sweeping streets), and hogreeve (tracking down loose hogs and returning them to their owners), but upon his death in 1800, this widower with six young children died with few assets other than his house. His music fell out of fashion by the early nineteenth century except in Southern and Appalachian hymnals known as “shape-note” books.

Billings’s music, like the man himself, is rather rough-and-tumble. While mostly avoiding dissonance, the harmony usually doesn’t move akin to chordal progressions of his day. The voice-leading is often static. *Modern Musick* certainly suffers from these—as today’s analysts might call them—deficiencies, but it achieves an expressive purpose that overrides any quibbling about compositional technique. Billings’s witty text informs the listener of the musical devices he includes, such as establishing first the key of E major, then the more “pensive” E minor, and moving from “Common” (duple) to “Treble” (triple) meter. Near the beginning, the four parts enter in turns (in a style known as “fuguing,” but little related to the form beloved of Bach) with different, simultaneous texts. Billings even hints at his Revolutionary ideals by mentioning that musicians—not unlike Americans—are able to “write their own laws.” The declaration that singers “are sanguine and clap at the bars” was probably, at least in Billings’s personal case, quite the understatement.

David's Lamentation, published in *The Singing Master's Assistant*, 1778
by **William Billings** (1746–1800)

Nearly all of Billings's 340 surviving works are four-part sacred music, often setting his own texts adapted from scriptural or poetic sources. The tune, as is typical of late-eighteenth-century choral music, is found in the tenors, though the basses are often also given prominence: Billings even recommended that half of a choir's membership should be basses. His counterpoint is often rough—typically, he composed the tenors' tune first, then a supportive bass line, next a consonant soprano line, and finally an alto line that merely filled in the harmony—and the resulting harmony often features open sonorities of octaves or fifths. (Intriguingly, 150 years later Aaron Copland would embrace similar harmonies when attempting to craft a conspicuously “American” sound.) The raucous, forthright manner of his compositions suits the famed “When David heard” text admirably.

Euroclydon: An Anthem for Mariners, published in *The Psalm-Singer's Amusement* (1781)
by **William Billings** (1746–1800)

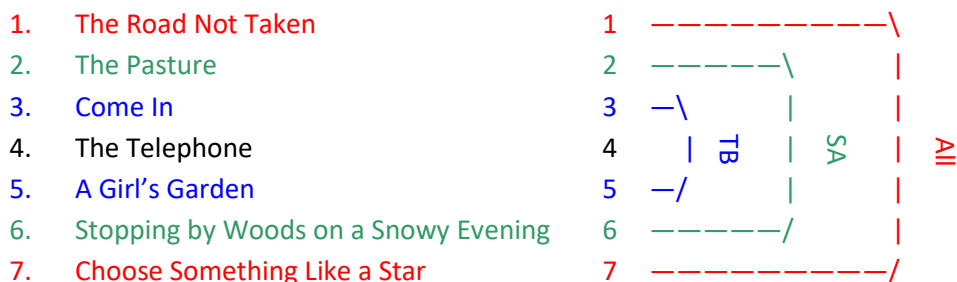
Euroclydon is the term for the east or northeast wind, especially the storm that shipwrecked St. Paul on Malta in 60CE. The text to which William Billings assigned that title is from Psalm 107, beginning “They that go down to the sea in ships.” This anthem depicts aurally the blowing of the “stormy winds” and the “lifting up [of] the waves.” As the waves descend “down into the deep,” the men's voices outline a descending arpeggio. As the sailors “reel and stagger to and fro like a drunken man,” the listener senses that Billings knew this sensation all too well. After the storm has calmed, Billings strays from the psalm text, “and all huzza” in a rousing finale.

Frostiana: Seven Country Songs (1959)
by **Randall Thompson** (1899–1984)

Randall Thompson is often hailed as the dean of American choral music. Early in his career, Thompson focused on instrumental works, including three finely crafted symphonies, but by the 1940s he turned predominantly to the choir. Thompson's many illustrious positions included the directorship of Philadelphia's Curtis Institute and a professorship at Harvard. His many choral compositions form the core of the American repertory, ranging from the idyllic *The Peaceable Kingdom* to the boisterously patriotic *The Testament of Freedom*. His brief *Alleluia* remains perhaps the most frequently performed piece of American choral music. Not bad for a chap who, as an undergraduate, had failed in his first audition to join the Harvard Glee Club: he later quipped, “My life has been an attempt to strike back.” Thompson's compositional style is very meticulous—often almost every note on the page has an articulation or related marking—and yet the overall effect is of a spontaneous and sincere reaction to the text.

Frostiana is one of Thompson’s most beloved works. Delightful and urbane, it is a collection of “Seven Country Songs” on texts by the great American poet Robert Frost. The cycle was composed in the summer of 1959 to fulfill a commission for the bicentennial of the incorporation of Amherst, Massachusetts. Thompson himself conducted the premiere, sung by a volunteer ensemble drawn from throughout the township, not unlike the Cascadian Chorale. Both Thompson and Frost were adopted New Englanders, and Frost was suitably impressed by the work to direct his estate not to allow other composers to set his poems to music, a ban which continues, more or less, today. In 1965, Thompson orchestrated the work, and even later made an arrangement for band. This recording contains the original version, with a demanding piano accompaniment.

Thompson was confronted with several musical challenges in this work, chief among them a logistical complication: the sopranos and altos were to rehearse separately from the tenors and basses. Thompson opted for an ingenious solution. Only in the first and last of the seven songs does the full ensemble behave as one. Between them, there are two pieces for men (tenors and basses) only, two pieces for women (sopranos and altos) only, and a central movement in which the two groups both participate, but function as separate entities. The order was determined by a technique found in several Bach cantatas, in which the outer movements complement each other, as do the second and penultimate movements in a mirror-like fashion, and so forth.



Another challenge in composing *Frostiana* was the technical simplicity of the text. Frost is essentially a conservative poet, handling meter, rhyme, and stanza in historically traditional manners. Thompson finds ways to create diversity within the music, partly by calling on an ancient technique known as text-painting. All seven songs are littered with moments in which the music re-creates in sound the meaning of a specific word or phrase. This can be a very simple technique—such as giving the choir high notes for words like “high,” “hill,” or “heaven”—but Thompson’s text-painting is far more subtle. For example, he will at times depict the text in only one of the four voices, or the text is reflected more in the piano than the choir. A few examples are given below, but rest assured that the curious listener may find many more.

Frostiana begins with a text memorized by so many of us as schoolchildren, *The Road Not Taken*. The poem is in four stanzas. Thompson sets the stage by having the entire choir sing in unison for the first two: a preemptive hint that a traveler can only follow one road. In the third verse, as Frost proclaims “I kept the first for another day,” Thompson lets the tenors depict that “other road” as they briefly split

from the rest of the choir. The tenors have another special moment of text-painting on the word “sigh” in the fourth stanza; here Thompson adopts another method loved of Bach, that of a falling half-step to depict in music a sigh-like vocalization. Much has been written about Frost’s ambiguity as to whether “the difference” was a positive or negative one, or whether it even matters. Thompson takes an unusual approach by depicting both possibilities: after the last line of text is sung, the piano embarks on a playful statement of the main melody, concluding with a more somber setting in the choir. The piano has the last say, however, as the final chords are simply open fifths: there is no third to indicate whether the music should be considered in (traditionally happy) D major or (traditionally sad) D minor. Frost and Thompson both allow the listener to draw his own conclusions.

The tempo indication in *The Pasture* reveals just how literal Thompson intends the setting to be: “Lento pastorale” (“Slow and pastoral”). The piano ambles along in the traditionally pastoral 6/8 time, but when the tenors and basses enter, the meter shifts to 4/4, more suitable to the scansion of the text. It is particularly appropriate that this poem be set for men’s voices alone: it could easily be considered from the point of view of the farm-boy inviting a neighbor girl on a casual walk as he goes about his chores. One delightful moment is the depiction of the cow with her young calf, as the mother “totters when she licks it with her tongue:” the rhythm suddenly moves faster to represent the tottering. This song also includes one of Thompson’s simplest but most beautiful compositional moments: the delicate downward scales and suspensions for the final statement of “I sha’n’t be gone long.”

The third movement, *Come In*, is set for women’s voices with a crucial role for the piano. The text is from the point of view of an individual who, while walking at dusk outside the forest, hears from within the singing of a thrush, a variety of wood-bird that includes nightingales. Thompson gives a birdsong-like motive to the piano: two pairs of ascending fifths followed by a series of accelerating repeated notes. The otherwise spare and empty texture of the piano emphasizes the loneliness of the woods. Thompson also evokes the darkness of night by calling on the altos to sing frequently at the very bottom of their range. In the third stanza, Frost indicates that the setting sun “still lived for one song more,” appropriately marked by the altos’ octave leap followed by a steady descent. The music ends with the piano/thrush issuing a final invitation.

For the middle movement of *Frostiana*, Thompson chose a text that is a conversation between a man and a woman who use a trestle-flower as a telephone-like communication device. You may perhaps picture a fair maiden in a second-story room, speaking into a flower which is connected, like two cans and a string, to a flower at the ground, where listens her beloved. The men energetically re-tell the experience, but the women are coy. Meanwhile, the piano winds up and down the keyboard as the flower’s vine would wind up and down the side of the house.

A Girl’s Garden is the longest poem used in *Frostiana*, and in order to render it intelligible to the listener, Thompson directs all the women to sing it in unison, as a single vocal line. The poem tells the story of a village know-it-all who as a young girl intended to plant a garden, but instead dumped seeds and fertilizer on an empty plot of land and merely “begged the seed.” The melody is simple, almost folk-like, but the music moves quickly and the singers must have their wits about them. Also, how often does one get to sing words like “wheelbarrow” and “dung”? That same stanza includes two moments of remarkably subtle text-painting, as “she always ran away and left / her not-nice load:” the word “left” is

held for a long time, as “not-nice” is given a suitably delicate setting. At the very end, the women finally split into three-part harmony to depict the lazy girl who now self-righteously instructs others: “It’s as when I was a farmer.”

The poetic scene of *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a simple one: a man with his horse, travelling on a long journey, pauses briefly near a forest to watch the snow fall. The poem is a miniature masterpiece, with a sophisticated but simple rhyme scheme, and Thompson responds in kind. The music alternates between a pianistic depiction of slow and delicate snowfall in 4/4 time and the men’s reflections in a lilting 6/8. The final line is punctuated by silences which underscore the rider’s sleepiness.

The final movement of *Frostiana* has a tripartite structure in which the opening and closing sections place the sopranos on a repeated D, hanging above the choir as a star hangs in the skies. At the very end, as we are gently encouraged to “be staid,” the choir finally rests on a long-held D. In the dramatic middle section, Thompson aptly depicts both the frustration inherent in the eternal quest for knowledge and the calm required to resolve the quest satisfactorily. As is often the case in Frost’s poetry, the meaning of this text is intentionally obscure. The star can be interpreted religiously as symbolic of a deity, or scientifically as representative of all knowledge. Or perhaps both interpretations are valid, and a myriad beyond. Thompson’s genius lies in that his music, like Frost’s text, once again lets the listener decide.

A Red, Red Rose (2012)

by **Jeremy Kings** (born 1987)

Jeremy Kings’s father was a Lutheran pastor, and his mother was the church organist. From her, young Jeremy received his first training in music, though he was rather more interested in technology, especially computer gaming. Attending high school in La Grange, a suburb of Chicago, he joined the choir and fell in love with the world of choral music. In his senior year, he had the rare opportunity to take a class in music theory and—even more rare—to hear his works performed. He kept singing and composing while a computer science major at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. In 2010 he relocated to the Seattle area to study computer game programming at the DigiPen Institute of Technology. Information about his activities both musical and technological—plus his fascinating blog which deals with topics such as the process of composing music for computer games—is available at his website, jeremykings.com.

Kings set to music Robert Burns’s famous ballad *Oh my Luve’s like a red, red rose*, which he had previously sung in a choral setting by Indianapolis composer James Mulholland. Kings’s practical experience composing for computer games has served him well in developing a deep understanding of counterpoint, harmony, structure, and subtle variety. After a brief introduction, the principal tune, with its soaring initial octave leap, is first heard in the sopranos. Love’s “melodie” is reflected in a sumptuous seven-part chord. The work is in AABA form, with each “A” section invoking the main theme in a

different guise. At the end, the men's voices virtually run the final stretch of the poet's "ten thousand mile."

A Lantern Voice (2014)

by **Giselle Wyers** (born 1969)

Giselle Wyers is Associate Professor and Chair of Choral Studies and Voice at the University of Washington, where she conducts the University Chorale and teaches courses in choral conducting and voice. She has conducted semi-professional ensembles and honor choirs across the United States and in Europe. Wyers's dedication to exposing audiences to the music of contemporary American composers is apparent in her work with Solaris Vocal Ensemble, a twelve-voice solo ensemble of professional singers. Since her very first composition, *Ave Maria*, won the Cambridge Madrigal Singers International Choral Composition in 2003, she has been constantly in demand, having received commissions from the Chamber Choir of Europe, A Capella Koor Cantabile of the Netherlands, and several American choirs including Seattle's own Choral Arts.

To fulfill a commission from Cascadian Chorale in late 2013, Wyers selected two poems by Stephen Crane—*Voices* and *There was crimson clash of war*—from which to fashion her new work, titled *A Lantern Voice*. The music is darker in mood than most of Wyers's output, befitting her chosen subject of children forced into servitude as soldiers. In this context, "each small gleam" represents a child soldier caught up in the "crimson clash of war." The imagery of these two poems interweaves brilliantly. After the "babes ran, wondering," Wyers emphasizes these links by bringing back the music for "Each small gleam"—the running children are the small gleams, later dubbed "little holy fathers." As this music decries the injustice of war, there are harmonic and rhythmic dissonances aplenty, but also a deep sense of hope that colors the tragedy.

Love Letters (2005)

by **Bern Herbolzheimer** (born 1948)

The Tatar people's historical home was the broad steppes of Russia, especially the region about five hundred miles south and east of Moscow, along the Volga River. For his unaccompanied choral cycle *Love Letters*, Bern Herbolzheimer has chosen four traditional Tatar love-songs in the four-line poetic form of a ruba'i (the plural is "rubaiyat"). The poems are united by the mention of colors, but are varied in mood. Composed in April 2005, *Love Letters* is a perfect example of Herbolzheimer's luscious lyricism and consummate craftsmanship.

Born in Montana, Herbolsheimer has long made his home in Seattle. He has taught at the University of Washington and Cornish College of the Arts and is among the most accomplished composers in the Northwest. His operas have been performed internationally; his symphonic music, across the country. His output is well known to Seattle choral audiences, as his works are often performed by the Cascadian Chorale (where he served as Composer-in-Residence for many years), Opus 7, and the choirs of St. James Cathedral. Herbolsheimer is a remarkably prolific composer for whom the choral sound-world has special resonance.

Agnus Dei, from *Missa Brevis* (2010)

Christopher Lee Fraley (born 1967)

Raised near Philadelphia, Chris Fraley grew up writing “hundreds of songs” for the band in which he played guitar. He went on to study computer engineering and music composition at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. He joined the fledgling staff of Microsoft in 1989, working as a software code developer. He found many fellow musicians at the company, former professionals and even ongoing freelancers, and thus never neglected his love for music. After nine years as a self-professed “code monkey,” Fraley left Microsoft to start a new technology firm with his brother in Pittsburgh. He eventually returned to Seattle, continuing his studies with composer Peter Wolf. Until about five years ago, he focused his musical efforts on orchestral and chamber music, but has recently embraced the choral milieu with vigor.

Fraley imbues his compositions with formal structure, motivic unity, and harmonic consistency. In the case of his *Missa Brevis*, the unifying idea is an inspiration in the early Mass settings of the Renaissance. Each movement handles its early-music influence in a different way. The concluding Agnus Dei is a gem of musical concision. In the liturgy this text is recited three times. Fraley’s movement is in AAB form, meaning that he repeats the first “Agnus Dei” music for the text’s second statement. Unusually, this repeat is a step lower. The third section begins another step lower, but is more dissonant and impassioned in the plea for mercy. Fraley’s true masterstroke is the final statement of “Dona nobis pacem” (“Grant us peace”), as the music settles into F major in a calm, indeed peaceful, manner worthy of Schubert at his best... though not without a few twenty-first-century twists.

Landscape (2001)

by **Eric Lane Barnes** (born 1960)

Comedy and music form the backbones of Eric Lane Barnes’s creative life, as Assistant Artistic Director of the Seattle Men’s Chorus, founder of the vocal comedy troupe Captain Smarty Pants, and composer of children’s theater works performed throughout the country. In an e-mail to the present author, Barnes recounted a conversation with Timothy Seelig, conductor of Dallas’s famed Turtle Creek Chorale:

“He suggested I write a piece based on *Kumbaya*, doing it in different styles. I liked the idea, but thought that *Kumbaya* was too simplistic melodically and harmonically to do much with. He suggested the idea to me right before we went into a seminar at a GALA [Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses] Leadership conference. We sat in the back of the room while the speaker was talking, trading notes back and forth about the piece. I suggested using *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, and we were off and running. We plotted the whole piece out together that way, passing notes back and forth, giggling and trying to at least appear as if we were paying attention to the speaker.”

Quite an appropriate beginning for such a wonderfully silly composition. In seven movements, *Lambscapes* re-interprets the popular nursery rhyme in various historical guises: Gregorian chant, Handelian oratorio chorus, Schubert art-song, Verdi opera aria, grand gesture of Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, even evoking American popular music with a cowboy song and final gospel. But listen carefully: this little lamb has a big adventure.

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