

Songs of America

*For Soprano or Tenor (8vb), Violin and Orchestra or Piano
(optional addition of a Field Drum for II, and second Piano for V)*

Music by J. Todd Frazier

I.

“We Hold These Truths”

Text by Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

From The American Declaration of Independence from England

II.

“Summer in the South: A Prayer”

Poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

III.

“Head and Heart”

IV.

“A Dying Soldier’s Last Request”

Poem by William Munnerlyn (1842-1864)

From a Letter to his Sister

V.

“Wild Horses”

Original Words and Music by Jean Ritchie (b. 1922)

Interpretation and Arrangement by J. Todd Frazier

Program Notes:

Songs of America invites audiences to reflect on the dream of America, the thirst and struggle for freedom, of how far we have come, on those that have suffered for the cause, the internal and external struggles of today, and the hopes and challenges of the future. Thomas Jefferson, with graphic imagery, describes the price of freedom; *“The Tree of Liberty must be nourished from time to time with the blood of Patriots and Tyrants, it is its natural manure.”*

“We Hold These Truths” sets the first lines of the Declaration of Independence, recalling the vision of, and challenge to, America and Americans, through the words of the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson.

The set continues with the combined setting of **“Summer in the South”** and **“A Prayer”** by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The son of slaves, Dunbar wrote at the end of the 1800s, more than 100 years after the adoption of the Declaration. He writes of his love of nature and of life idealized, juxtaposed with the worldly challenges of living as a black man in a time where inequity continued.

Next we have **“Head and Heart”**, an instrumental response, aside from the coda, to the personal turmoil of Thomas Jefferson, produced by the extraordinary outward accomplishment of the Declaration, balanced by the inward tragedy of his wife’s (Martha) untimely death. It also represents the human condition where the ideals of the Head are constantly challenged by the passions of the Heart.

Following is *William Munnerlyn’s beautiful letter to his sister written 88 years after the Declaration, **“A Dying Soldier’s Last Request”**. Similar to Dunbar, his letter not only evokes nature and love of life, but also commitment and loyalty to family and country. William wrote the letter at age 22, just before being shot dead fighting in the war of the states. It reminds us of an age of literary thoughtfulness and sophistication rarely seen today in youth and is additionally poignant and thought provoking after Dunbar’s poems, as Munnerlyn was a Confederate soldier.

The set concludes with an interpretation and arrangement of the Appalachian folk song by Jean Ritchie (b. 1922), **“Wild Horses”**, originally for lap dulcimer and voice. This work provides wonderful contrast to the previous songs and music, not only in tempo and style, but also in its representation of freedom as an unbridled thirst in nature with verses like; *“Out of the way, you'll get run over; Wild things never will bear the rein! Fly the fences, smash the clover. Out of the way they're (Wild Horses) gone again!”*

* a relative of the composer and nephew to Margaret Munnerlyn Mitchel, author of *“Gone with the Wind.”*