Troy D. Robertson

Height in Heaven

Note from the composer:

When presented with a work that is strange or challenging, one often wonders, why this? I hope the following scraps of history will serve to elucidate my passion for these texts and something of the forces behind the genesis of this piece of music.

It may help the audience to include some simple staging, such as setting Swedenborg apart, perhaps at a lecturn. The choir could start to one side and then, as they crescendo, gradually envelope Swedenborg, both musically and physically, so that he becomes lost in the ensemble before finishing his lecture.

Telling the story by inhabiting these characters is essential to the music's success.

I hope you enjoy the performance of the piece but, more than that, I hope you are lost in thought about these four people, their time, place, and circumstances, and the people around them, just as I was.

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Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was born into a deeply religious world. She spent a year in training at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Several of her poems concern religious matters. This poem, "Their height in heaven comforts not," wrestles with thoughts of heaven, but its title sounds strangely allusory. What does this strange phrase signifiy? It is easy to imagine what Dickinson might have meant, but one may only speculate.

Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) was, for much of his life, a man of science. Until late in mid-life his scientific interests and expertise included subjects as disparate as anatomy and metallurgy, and his contributions to science include the earliest known conception of the neuron. Swedenborg was obsessed with explaining the connection bewteen the material body and the soul. Having experienced dreams and visions for more than a decade, Swedenborg devoted himself entirely to religion at the age of 53. His religious works, concerned with his own revelations and his very peculiar form of exegesis, eventually dissimenated throughout the world and were studied by many, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James, Walt Whitman, and Abraham Lincoln.

One of his works, *Concerning Heaven and Hell*, originally published in Latin in 1758, became very popular in its English translation, which was published in 1825, such that even today it is championed by the Swedenborg Foundation of Westchester, Pennsylvania. The translation (emphasis mine) contains a peculiar and seldom used phrase. In this passage Swedenborg attempts to explain the Bible's references to measurements:

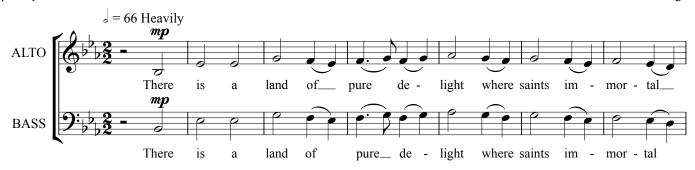
"Such is the meaning of these three dimensions, because length in heaven is from east to west, and those that dwell there are in good of love; while breadth in heaven is from south to north, and those that dwell there are in truth from good; while **height in heaven** applies to both of these in respect to degrees."

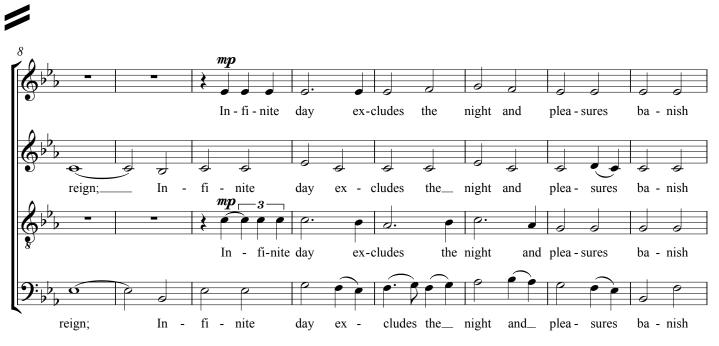
The people around Emily Dickinson in 19th century Amherst, Massachusetts, were no doubt very devout and thought often of heaven and hell. One of their forebears, William Billings (1746-1800), set a meditation on heaven by Isaac Watts (1674-1748) to music. Billings called the tune JORDAN.

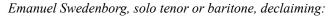
Height in Heaven

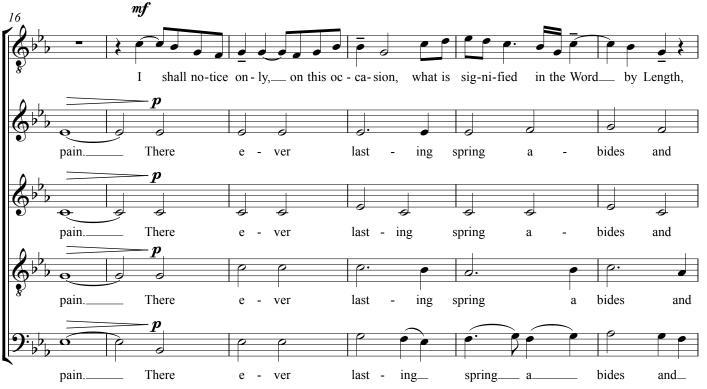
Emily Dickinson as well as texts from Emanuel Swedenborg and Isaac Waats adapted by R.G.

Troy D. Robertson with quotations of JORDAN by William Billings

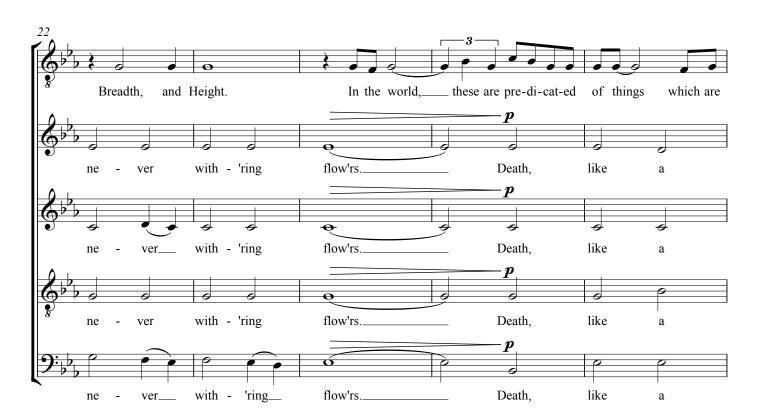


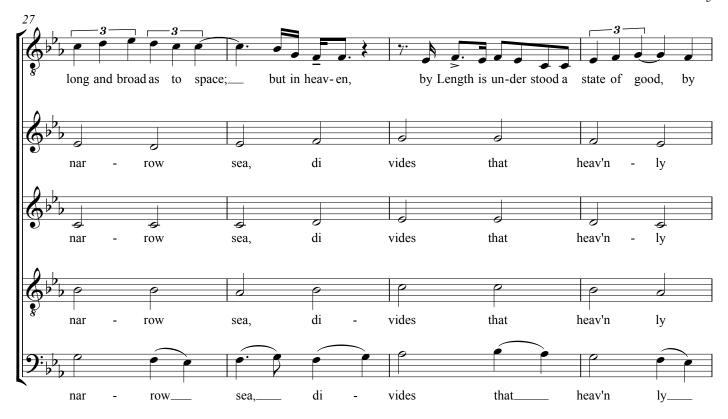




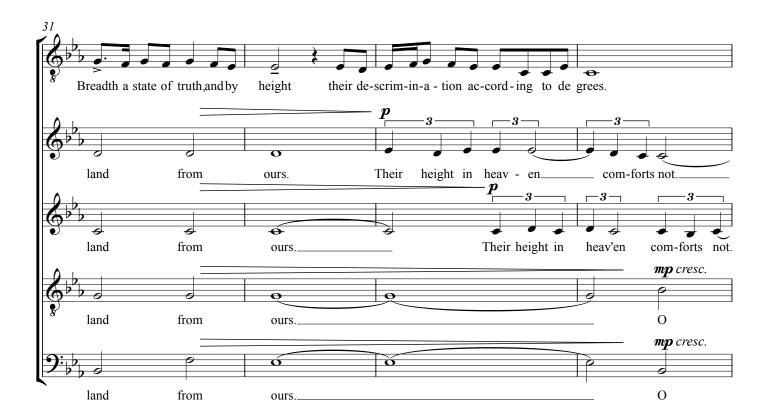


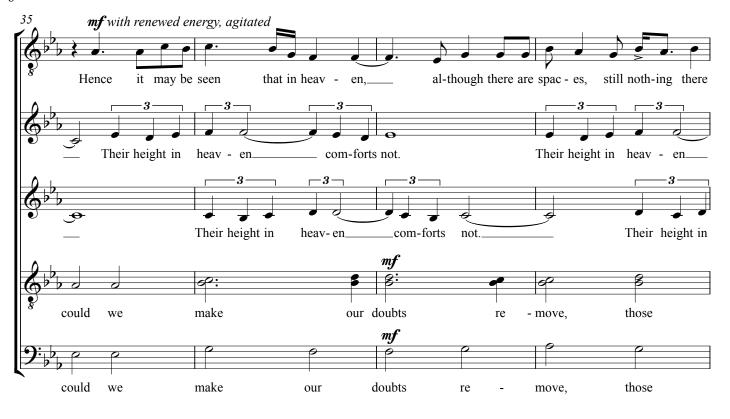




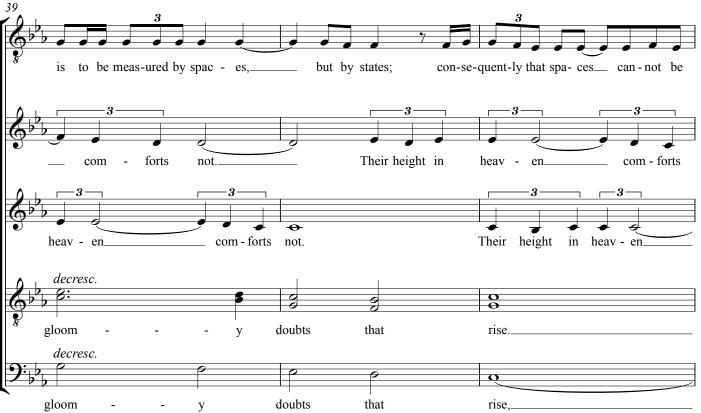


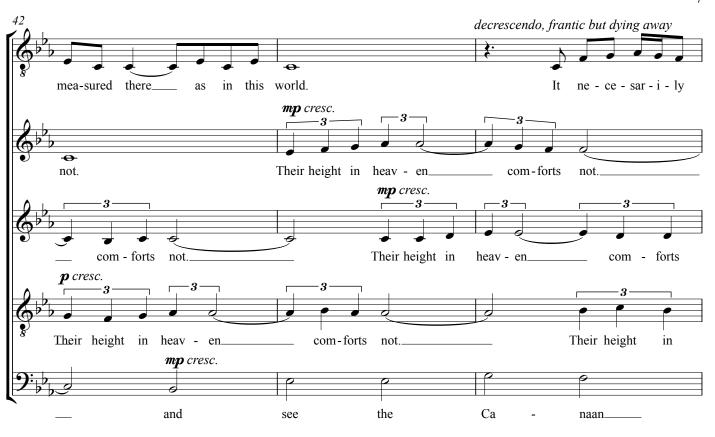














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