

My Outstretched Hand

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: June 9, 2016, Rose Theaer at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Commissioned by The Knights for the 2016 NY Phil Biennial
Duration: 13'
Instrumentation: Chamber Orchestra (1*1*1*1; 1110; perc; pno; strings), Youth Chorus (SSAA), Girls Chorus (SSAA)

My Outstretched Hand expands around excerpts from an arresting autobiography written by Mary MacLane, an extremely precocious 19-year-old girl living in Montana in 1902. With the ecstatic vision of William Blake, the roiling passion of Lawrence Durrell, and the earnest confessional tone of Anne Frank, MacLane was a child genius whose words deserve not to be forgotten. Totally isolated from any literary community, in the copper-mining town of Butte, MacLane churned out writing that is bold, audacious, colorful, often funny and sometimes yearningly sad.

One of the things I love about her writing is that she embraces the power of her own emotional life so seriously-mindedly. Spending time with the young singers on this program has given me a renewed appreciation for the special combination of artistic rigor and emotional intensity – unique to this age – that they channel through their singing. When I first met Knights conductor Eric Jacobsen he, too, was just 19 years old, and the group that he and his brother Colin have built together exemplifies exactly this brilliant balance between artistic rigor and youthful energy.

In my work with young women in the last few years, I have seen how the power that comes from their roiling internal lives can be channeled rather than dismissed. *My Outstretched Hand* invites us as listeners to take the strong surges of adolescent emotion seriously as unique and important expressions of our shared human experience. In the piece I employ the two groups of young voices – the San Francisco Girls Chorus and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, each with their own unique sound and energy – in dialogue with each other and within the rich tapestry of The Knights' vibrant sound. In one extended section the two groups play the roles of MacLane and her Soul, in a heart-stoppingly tender Socratic dialogue.

– Lisa Bielawa

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Text

My Outstretched Hand

Texts by Mary MacLane

Butte, Montana, 1901

19 years old

I of womankind and of nineteen years, will now begin to set down as full and frank a Portrayal as I am able of myself, Mary MacLane, for whom the world contains not a parallel.

I am convinced of this, for I am odd.

I am distinctly original innately and in development.

I have in me a quite unusual intensity of life.

I can feel.

I have a marvelous capacity for misery and for happiness.

I am broad-minded.

I am a genius.

I am a philosopher of my own peripatetic school.

...this young body glows with life.

My red blood flows swiftly and joyously – in the midst of the brightness of October.

My sound, sensitive liver rests gently with its thin yellow bile in sweet content.

My calm, beautiful stomach silently sings, as I walk, a song of peace.

My lungs, saturated with mountain ozone and the perfume of the pines, expand in continuous ecstasy.

My heart beats like the music of Schumann, in easy, graceful rhythm with an undertone of power.

...

The world is made up mostly of nothing. You may be convinced of this when a bitter wind has swept away your delusions.

What is the wind?

Nothing.

What is the sky?

Nothing.

What do we know?

Nothing.

What is fame?

Nothing.

What is my heart?

Nothing.

What is my soul?

Nothing.

What are we?

We are nothing.

...

Today we eat our good dinners with forks.

A thousand years ago they had no forks.

Yet, though we have forks, we are not happy. We scream and kick and struggle and weep just as they did a thousand years ago – when they had no forks.

...

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My soul said to me: "I am sick."

I answered: "And I am sick."

"We may be well," said my soul. "Why are we not well?"

"How may we be well?" I asked.

"We may throw away all our vanity and false pride," said my soul. "We may take on a new life. We may learn to wait and to possess ourselves in patience. We may labor and overcome."

"We can do none of these things," I cried. "Have I not tried all of them some time in my short life? And have I not waited and wanted until you have become faint with pain? Have I not looked and longed? Dear soul, why do you not resign yourself? Why can you not stay quiet and trouble yourself and me no more? Why are you always straining and reaching? There isn't anything for you. You are wearing yourself out."

My soul made answer: "I may strain and reach until only one worn nerve of me is left. And that one nerve may be scourged with whips and burned with fire. But I will keep one atom of faith. I may go bad, but I will keep one atom of faith in Love and in the Truth that is Love. You are a genius, but I am no genius. The years – a million of years – may do their utmost to destroy the single nerve. They may lash and beat it. I will keep my one atom of faith."

...

Now, as I write, I hear twenty voices chanting in a sad minor key – twenty voices that fill my brain with sounds to the bursting point...

...

And shall my bitter little story fall easily and comfortably upon undisturbed ears, and linger for an hour, and be forgotten?

Will the wise wide world itself give me in my outstretched hand a stone?

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