

A NATIVE HILL  
GAVIN BRYARS



navona

THE CROSSING  
DONALD NALLY



## A NATIVE HILL

Music by Gavin Bryars (b. 1943)

Words by Wendell Berry (b. 1934)

*Composed as a gift for The Crossing; dedicated to Cassia Bryars-Rockey; In memoriam Julian Rockey.*

*First performance of movements i-v:*

14 December 2018

*The Crossing*

Donald Nally, conductor

Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse Square

Philadelphia PA

*First complete performance*

13 October 2019

*The Crossing*

Donald Nally, conductor

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

Philadelphia PA

### A note from the composer

Following the success of our previous collaboration, I composed a substantial new a cappella work for *The Crossing* as a gift to the choir. It draws on our close working relationship and the personal friendships that have developed between us as well as my intimate knowledge of the singers' individual characteristics, and there are solo parts written specifically for particular voices.

The piece is in twelve sections, setting extracts from the American writer Wendell Berry's 1968 essay "A Native Hill." Although at first appearance pastoral, Berry's descriptions of the minutiae of his rural existence have a profound metaphysical and even political force. He has been called, a little simplistically perhaps, a modern-day Thoreau, although here his visionary prose has something of the mysticism of the text for my previous work with *The Crossing* when I set Thomas Traherne.

Quite coincidentally, I finished the piece on August 29th, the day my granddaughter Cassia was born, and I had worked on it, on and off, for nine months - the whole period of my daughter Orlanda's pregnancy; and Cassia's father, Orlanda's partner Julian, had died suddenly half way through.

Completing the work in Canada throughout the summer was an intense experience: I had Orlanda's situation always in mind ever since I left England in mid-June. In addition, I worked on the piece with a care and scrutiny beyond anything I have done before. Generally I compose very quickly, though usually after a period of reflection and study, often around questions of text while being mindful of the need to deliver. But here I did not set myself a specific deadline, and the result of this was that the energy I would normally have put into the speed of writing was diverted into detail and concentration.

This had already shown itself in the fourth section, *The Pool*, where the tenor solo voice is accompanied by complex textures involving extreme, though very quiet, harmonic colouring by groups of solo voices. My knowledge of the choir's ability to rise to these challenges also encouraged me to experiment with background humming and whistling by pairs of solo voices in the tenth section, *Animals and Birds*. And I decided to open the last part, *At Peace*, with all 24 voices having completely independent and unconnected notes to make a chromatic cluster out of which cleaner harmonies could come into focus and melodic movement could be revealed. This dense covering reappears to a greater and lesser extent throughout the movement, with its eventual evaporation allowing the sense of being at peace to emerge. But, at the same time, there are also many moments of simple, church-like music. And this combination of the apparently traditional and deceptive complex comes about through a close reading of the text and reflects a deep respect for Wendell Berry's beautiful prose.

– Gavin Bryars, September 14th 2019, Biarritz, France

## Texts

### i. The Sense of the Past

But the sense of the past also gives a deep richness and resonance to nearly everything I see here. It is partly the sense that what I now see, other men that I have known once saw, and partly that this knowledge provides an imaginative access to what I do not know. I think of the country as a kind of palimpsest scrawled over with the comings and goings of people, the erasure of time already in process even as the marks of passage are put down. There are the ritual marks of neighbourhood - roads, paths between houses. There are the domestic paths from house to barns and outbuildings and gardens, farm roads through the pasture gates. There are the wanderings of hunters and searchers after lost stock, and the speculative or meditative or inquisitive 'walking around' of farmers on wet days and Sundays. There is the spiralling geometry of the round of implements in fields and the passing and returning, scratches of plows across croplands. Often these have filled an interval, an opening, between the retreat of the forest from the virgin ground and the forest's return to ground that has been worn out and given up. In the woods here one often finds cairns of stones picked up out of the furrows, gullies left by bad farming, forgotten roads, stone chimneys of houses long rotted away or burned.

### ii. The Path

The dog runs ahead, prancing and looking back, knowing the way we are about to go. This is a walk well established with us - a route in our minds as well as on the ground. No matter how wanderingly one begins, the tendency is always toward habit. By the third or fourth trip, without realizing it, one is following a fixed path, going the way one went before. After that, one may still wander, but only by deliberation, and when there is no need to hurry, or when the mind wanders rather than the feet, one returns to the old route. Familiarity has begun. One has made a relationship with the landscape, and the form and the symbol and the enactment of the relationship is the path. These paths of mine are seldom worn on the ground. They are habits of mind, directions and turns. They are as personal as old shoes. My feet are comfortable in them.

### iii. Sea Level

Underlying this country, nine hundred feet below the highest ridgetops, more than four hundred feet below the surface of the river, is sea level. We seldom think of it here; we are a long way from the coast, and the sea is alien to us. And yet the attraction of sea level dwells in this country as an ideal dwells in a man's mind. All our rains go in search of it and, departing, they have carved the land in a shape that is fluent and falling. The streams branch like vines, and between the branches the land rises steeply and then rounds and gentles into the long narrowing fingers of ridgeland. Near the heads of the streams even the steepest land was not too long ago farmed and kept cleared. But now it has been given up and the woods is returning. The wild is flowing back like a tide. The arable ridgetops reach out above the gathered trees like headlands into the sea, bearing their human burdens of fences and houses and barns, crops and roads.

### iv. The Pool

Not far from the beginning of the woods, and set deep in the earth in the bottom of the hollow, is a rock-walled pool not a lot bigger than a bathtub. The wall is still nearly as straight and tight as when it was built. It makes a neatly turned narrow horseshoe, the open end downstream. This is a historical ruin, dug here either to catch and hold the water of the little branch, or to collect the water of a spring whose vein broke to the surface here - it is probably no longer possible to know which. The pool is filled with earth now, and grass grows in it. And the branch bends around it, cut down to the bare rock, a torrent after heavy rain, other times bone dry...

### v. The Road

Like the pasture gates, the streams are great collectors of comings and goings. The streams go down, and paths always go down beside streams. For a while I walk along an old wagon road that is buried in leaves - a fragment, beginningless and endless as the middle of a sentence on some scrap of papyrus. There is a cedar whose branches reach over this road, and under the branches I find the leavings of two kills of some bird of prey. The most recent is a pile of blue jay feathers. The other has been rained on and is not identifiable. How little we know. How little of this was intended or expected by any man. The road that has become the grave of men's passages has led to the woods.

And I say to myself: Here is your road  
without beginning or end, appearing  
out of the earth and ending in it, bearing  
no load but the hawk's kill, and the leaves  
building earth on it, something more  
to be borne. Tracks fill with earth  
and return to absence. The road was worn  
by men bearing earth along it. They have come  
to endlessness. In their passing  
they could not stay in, trees have risen  
and stand still. It is leading to the dark,  
to mornings where you are not. Here  
is your road, beginningless and endless as God.

#### **vi. The Music of Streams**

Perhaps it is to prepare to hear someday the music of the spheres that I am always turning my ears to the music of streams. There is indeed a music in streams, but it is not for the hurried. It has to be loitered by and imagined. Or imagined toward, for it is hardly for men at all. Nature has a patient ear. To her the slowest funeral march sounds like a jig. She is satisfied to have the notes drawn out to the lengths of days or weeks or months. Small variations are acceptable to her, modulations as leisurely as the opening of a flower.

The stream is full of stops and gates. Here it has piled up rocks in its path, and pours over them into a tiny pool it has scooped at the foot of its fall. Here it has been dammed by a mat of leaves caught behind a fallen limb. Here it must force a narrow passage, here a wider one. Tomorrow the flow may increase or slacken, and the tone will shift. In an hour or a week that rock may give way, and the composition will advance by another note. The ear must imagine an impossible patience in order to grasp even the unimagineableness of such music.

But the creation is musical, and this is a part of its music, as birdsong is, or the words of poets. The music of the streams is the music of the shaping of the earth, by which the rocks are pushed and shifted downwards toward the level of the sea.

#### **vii. Questions**

A man, while pursuing Heaven with the sublime appetite he thought of as his soul, could turn his heart against his neighbors and his hands against the world... Though Heaven is certainly more important than the earth if all they say about it is true, it is still morally incidental to it and dependent on it, and I can only imagine it and desire it in terms of what I know of the earth. And so my questions do not aspire beyond the earth. They aspire toward it and into it. Perhaps they aspire through it. They are religious because they are asked at the limit of what I know; they acknowledge mystery and honor its presence in the creation; they are spoken in reverence for the order and grace that I see, and that I trust beyond my power to see.

#### **viii. Topsoil**

The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or tunnel by which its past enters its future.

#### **ix. The Hill**

The hill, like Valéry's sycamore, is a voyager standing still. Never moving a step, it travels through years, seasons, weathers, days and nights. These are the measures of its time, and they alter it, marking their passage on it as on a man's face. The hill has never observed a Christmas or an Easter or a Fourth of July. It has nothing to do with a dial or a calendar. Time is told in it mutely and immediately, with perfect accuracy, as it is told by the heart of its body. Its time is the birth and the flourishing and the death of the many lives that are its life.

#### **x. Animals and Birds**

There is in the lives of the animals and birds a great peacefulness. It is not all fear and flight, pursuit and killing. That is part of it, certainly; and there is cold and hunger; there is the likelihood that death, when it comes, will be violent. But there is peace, too, and I think that the intervals of peace



are frequent and prolonged. These are the times when the creature rests, communes with himself or with his kind, takes pleasure in being alive.

#### xi. Shadow

Every man is followed by a shadow which is his death - dark, featureless, and mute. And for every man there is a place where his shadow is clarified and is made his reflection, where his face is mirrored in the ground. He sees his source and his destiny, and they are acceptable to him. He becomes the follower of what pursued him. What hounded his track becomes his companion.

That is the myth of my search and my return.

#### xii. At Peace

I have been walking in the woods, and have lain down on the ground to rest... And now a leaf, spiralling down in wild flight, lands on my shirt... At first I am bemused and mystified by the coincidence - that the leaf should have been so hung, weighted and shaped, so ready to fall, so nudged loose and slanted by the breeze, as to fall where I, by the same delicacy of circumstance, happen to be lying...

And suddenly I apprehend in it the dark proposal of the ground. Under the fallen leaf my breastbone burns with imminent decay. Other leaves fall. My body begins its long shudder into humus. I feel my substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed interreaching of the treetops, the leaves falling - and then that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace.

When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world.

—from the essay *A Native Hill* (1968). © 2002 by Wendell Berry, from *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*. Reprinted by permission of Counterpoint Press.



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**GAVIN BRYARS** (b. 1943) studied philosophy but became a jazz bassist and pioneer of free improvisation with Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley. Early iconic pieces *The Sinking of the Titanic* and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* achieved great popular success. Works include five operas, a large body of chamber music, several concertos and much vocal music including 6 books of madrigals - performers include The Hilliard Ensemble, Trio Mediaeval, Red Byrd, Latvian Radio Choir, Estonian National Male Choir, Iarla O'Lionaird, Singer Pur, and The Crossing, whose recording of *The Fifth Century* was awarded a Grammy. He has collaborated widely with visual artists (Juan Muñoz, Bruce McLean), choreographers (William Forsythe, Merce Cunningham, Edouard Lock, David Dawson, Carolyn Carlson), theatre directors (Robert Wilson, Atom Egoyan), as well as writing music for the films of his wife Anna Tchernakova. He has also worked with non-classical performers such as Charlie Haden, Bill Frisell, Tom Waits, Natalie Merchant, Gavin Friday, Father John Misty, Bertrand Belin, and Mocke. Since 1986 he has performed internationally and recorded with the Gavin Bryars Ensemble, his preferred performers. A French book on his work, *Gavin Bryars, en paroles et musique*, appeared in 2020 and a second book is due for publication in England in April 2021. He lives in a Leicestershire village and on Vancouver Island. He is a Transcendent Satrap and a Regent of the Collège de 'Pataphysique and has made many recordings - for ECM, Point, Philips, Naxos, Decca, and his own label GB Records. [gavinbryars.com](http://gavinbryars.com)



PHOTO: BECKY OEHLERS

**DONALD NALLY** conducts The Crossing, the internationally acclaimed, Grammy-award-winning professional choir that commissions, premieres, and records only new music. He holds the John W. Beattie Chair of Music at Northwestern University where he is director of choral organizations. Nally has served as chorus master at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Welsh National Opera, Opera Philadelphia, and for many seasons at the Spoleto Festival in Italy. Nally has commissioned over 130 works and, with The Crossing, has produced 24 recordings, winning two Grammy Awards. He was the American Composers Forum 2017 Champion of New Music and received the 2017 Michael Korn Founders Award from Chorus America; his ensembles have twice received the Margaret Hillis Award for Excellence in Choral Music. Nally has worked closely with the artists Allora & Calzadilla and composer David Lang on projects in London, Osaka, Cleveland, Edmonton, Houston, and Philadelphia. In recent seasons has been a visiting resident artist at the Park Avenue Armory, music director for the world premiere of Lang's The Mile-Long Opera – directing 1000 voices on the High Line in Manhattan – as well as chorus master for the New York Philharmonic for world premieres by Lang and Julia Wolfe.

#### **WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR:**

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