

THE ARC IN THE SKY
KILE SMITH



navona

THE CROSSING
DONALD NALLY

THE ARC IN THE SKY

The Arc in the Sky, on texts of Robert Lax (1915–2000), is a 65-minute pilgrimage for unaccompanied choir. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Thomas Merton provides the best introduction to Lax I know. Lax, his friend at Columbia University, had a “natural, instinctive spirituality, a kind of inborn direction to the living God,” and was “a potential prophet,” Merton wrote, a Moses to whom words came with difficulty:

A mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say about them, and resigned himself to being inarticulate. In his hesitations, though without embarrassment or nervousness at all, he would often curl his long legs all around a chair, in seven different ways, while he was trying to find a word with which to begin. He talked best sitting on the floor.

They went to jazz clubs together. They wrestled with philosophy, religion, and writing. One night, with Merton trying to explain that he wanted to be a good Catholic, Lax was having none of it.

“What you should say”—he told me—“what you should say is that you want to be a saint.”

A saint!... “How do you expect me to become a saint?”

“By wanting to,” said Lax, simply.... “All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one.... All you have to do is desire it.”

That conversation led Merton, eventually, to a Trappist monastery. Lax himself converted from Judaism to Catholicism. He wrote for *The New Yorker*, for *Time*, for *Hollywood*, and wrote poetry and *The Circus of the Sun*, a bright gem of a book about acrobats. He moved from New York City to his home in Western New York and back, to Marseilles, and to the Greek islands of Kalymnos and Patmos, the island to where it is said the apostle John had been exiled and where he had written *The Revelation*.

Lax wrote some of the first minimalist poetry: one word, one syllable, or even one letter to a line. “All of this was to please myself,” he wrote. “I certainly wasn’t trying to invent a new form and startle anyone with it. I don’t like startling people.” Jack Kerouac called him “one of the great original voices of our times ... a Pilgrim in search of beautiful innocence.”

He observed sponge divers, the sea, and the sky, and wrote poems of stunning simplicity about them. James Uebbing, in an alumni appreciation for Columbia, wrote, “Lax is essentially simple and devoid of secrets.”

To Lax, jazz was a metaphor of life, a communal improvisation with others and with God. I open the work with why did they all shout, capturing, I hoped, the ecstasy of performers and listeners being carried along together. Some features echo jazz: close and parallel harmonies, a kind of syncopation through changing meters and twos-against-threes, a walking bass.

Jazz harmonies abound in there are not many songs. There’s an abandonment to the idiom (or one corner of it that’s dear to me), reflecting a giving of oneself over to the “one song.” If I was to use jazz, I decided, I would go all the way in and see what happened.

Lax is conversational and humorous in *Cherubim & Palm Trees*, speaking to his friend Jack Kerouac. A solo quartet separates itself from the choir; this movement and the first section crescendo to “the courts of the house of God.”

I want to write a book of praise recalibrates attention from the panoramic temple to the little and common things. I use a recognizably “religious” syntax for the men, a chant.

Women then sing *The light of the afternoon is on the houses*, common images prompting illumination. I am always text-painting, trying to elicit emotions, and here, “the laughing speech” colors everything. Parallel harmonies are again voiced closely in this swaying waltz.

Remembrance and non-remembrance coexist in *Psalm*, with a tonality switching between G-sharp minor and B-flat mixolydian (five sharps and three flats), and with see-sawing pitches such as Ds and D-flats, Es and E-sharps. They’re blues thirds, really—alternated, overlapped, or crushed together—simultaneously proclaiming and questioning.

Jerusalem is an almost unbearably moving poem. Descending and ascending, ruin and beauty, and solitude in the midst of the city are dichotomies Lax holds comfortably at the same time. More and more flats are introduced into the nonchalant E-flat major, presaging the triumphant but lamenting G-flat major chorus: “for lovely, ruined Jerusalem / lovely sad Jerusalem / lies furled / under cities of light.”

I would stand and watch them is all observation and innocence. Canons reflect the unstudied sound I wanted. Each phrase is a new canon, nearly always at the octave, but with altered entrances and number of repetitions. By highlighting the last two words, “we mend,” the meaning changes from transitive to intransitive verb. Not only the nets are mended, but we ourselves.



The Arc ends the work by hearkening back to the emotion of the opening. Broad brush-strokes of simple chords are laid onto a canvas we see not only as a whole but also as a slow succession of details. We see arc, sky, and sea separately and together.

The chorus forms two choirs. Blocks of chords alternate, complement, and strike sparks off each other. (Two choirs also allow the singers to breathe during these long corridors of sound.) Dynamics, ranges, and harmonies adjust around these simple words, creating an emotional drama. The pilgrimage closes in ecstasy, seeing in an instant yet slowly pondering the immensity of the vision.

My thanks to Marcia Kelly, Lax's niece, to Paul Spaeth, director of the library and the Robert Lax archives at St. Bonaventure University, for permission to use these texts, and to Michael McGregor, author of *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*. Their time, openness, and conversations held great insight into Lax for me. I am indebted to *The Crossing* and to Donald Nally. As always, their faith in me by asking for another work opens my heart in gratitude. I am humbled by their trust, and astonished by the magnitude of their talent and artistry.

— Kile Smith, 19 May 2018



Becky Oehlers Photography



Kevin Vondrak Photography



I. JAZZ

1. why did they all shout

why did they
all shout:
louis
is de
lawd?

because
there was something
prophetic
about his trumpeting:

to be that right
is to be at one
with the source
of all good
things

hit it!
higher
and higher
and higher:

to be that high
is to be at one
with the source
of all true
blessings

that is why they shouted
when louis hit the
high notes:
they thought
the roof
would open
and the angels
would burst in

2. there are not many songs

there are not many songs
there is only one song

the animals lope to it
the fish swim to it
the sun circles to it
the stars rise
the snow falls
the grass grows

there is no end to the song and no beginning
the singer may die
but the song is forever

truth is the name of the song
and the song is truth.

3. Cherubim & Palm-Trees *for Jean-Louis Kerouac*

what I want to say
to (jean-louis) is:
if yr really
a jazz writer,
then stop
thinking about
literature
and think
about music.

music can speak,
and words played
like music can speak;
but words played like
music are not the same
as words just played
like words.

words played
like music
have meaning
there is only one song
as words,
like words
and music,
but not the same
meaning
and not
the same value
as words
just used
like words.

words played like
music
are poetic words;
words played like
music
are themselves
a kind of
music.

they are fetched
words,
fetched from deep
like rocks
and fish,
not hunted down
like quarry.

they are words
to cry,
are lyric words,
words which
hold a feeling.

any word
any word at all
can sing,
but some are strange,

as dinosaurs
are funny
when they
fly.

what we are talking
about is the kingdom
of heaven:
a jam-session
civilization,
a civilization
of jazz.

a culture
of new
and spontaneous
music;
spontaneous
order of
play.

a civilization
in which each man's
songs
and each man's
dances
are new
spontaneous
his own
individual
(not to be
copied)
yet filled
with grace
and decorum.

a jam-session
of the
just

where each
is filled

with wonder
for the
other.

where all
delight
in the all
and the
Maker
of all.

how will this begin,
it will begin
by prayerfully
beginning;
and by a prayerful
beginning,
it is even now
begun.

the instruments
are tuned,
the first notes
sounded,
even now
the music
has begun,

how many players
does it take for a session?
one, two or ten
as many as can play;
one, two or ten
and all will have
their licks.

the tune,
the tune
is always
the same;
the music
is always

different
and new.

jazz
doesn't do
any work
at all,
no work
at all,
just sing.

jazz
doesn't hoe
any fields
or plant
any crop.

jazz lies back
to sing its song;
jazz leans forward
to hear the tune;
jazz doesn't walk
it dances.

jazz is made
of sound and flame;
jazz is made of vision
and song.

jazz rejoices
in the judgments
of the Lord
and waits for His
epiphanies

jazz is for
the outer temple,
for the courts
of the house
of God.



II. PRAISE

4. I want to write a book of praise

I want to write a book of praise, but not use the religious words. That is because they should not be used lightly, and all the words I will be using for a while must be used lightly, set down tentatively.

The holy words hold terror for some, are not respected by others. I will try to talk in little words that people respect and do not fear. They respect them like hammers, they fear them no more than they fear doors or windows.

5. The light of the afternoon is on the houses

The light of the afternoon is on the houses
the white houses
wedged in the hill
set in the hillside like slabs of stone
like flats of canvas
like stiff paper.
Only the palm leaves toss and rattle.
Only the palm leaves nod & whisper
in the cool breeze of the afternoon,
And the movement of the palms is like a dance
is like nothing but a
dance
& the laughing speech
of high born ladies.
The palms are feminine.
They are as beautiful as ancient dancers caught upon a vase.
And they sing the song of the afternoon
of the beauty of the sunlight and the wind.

6. Psalm

It is you yourself
who urges me
to find you.

I believed you
when you spoke.
I believed myself
when I answered.

I can't remember
exactly what you
said
I can't remember
what I said either
exactly

But I remember
that there was a moment of trust—a long,
full moment of trust that passed, that existed
between us.

If that is true, I have found you:
you are within me,
urging me to look.

I have long desired to find some one to love.
One who would have certain qualities & not
others.
But who could have
awakened
that dream in me
if not you?

III. ARC

7. Jerusalem

reading of lovely Jerusalem,
lovely, ruined Jerusalem.

we are brought to the port
where the boats in line are
and the high tower on the hill
and the prows starting again
into the mist.

for we must seek
by going down,
down into the city
for our song.
deep into the city
for our peace.
for it is there
that peace lies
folded
like a pool.

there we shall seek:
it is from there
she'll flower.
for lovely, ruined Jerusalem
lovely sad Jerusalem
lies furled
under cities of light.

for we are only
going down,
only descending
by this song
to where the cities
gleam in the darkness,
or curled like roots
sit waiting
at the undiscovered
pool.

what pressure
thrusts us up
as we descend?

pressure
of the city's singing

pressure of
the song
she hath withheld.

hath long withheld.

for none
would hear
her.

8. I would stand and watch them
I would stand and watch them
as they sat at their work.

<<what are you doing?>> i'd say.

<<we're mending our nets,>> they'd say.

<<mending?>>

<<yes. mending our nets.>>

<<why must you mend them?>>

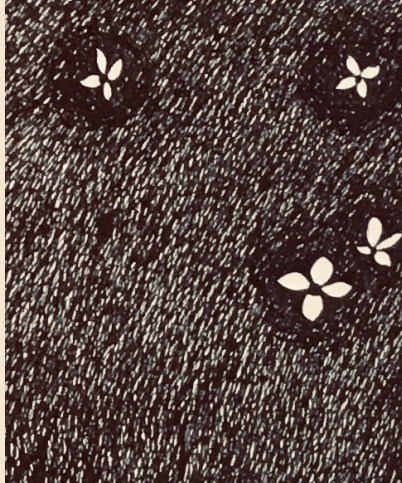
<<they're torn. they've been broken into.
the night-fish have leapt through them
in the sea. every night they break them;
and every day, we mend.>>

9. The Arc
 the
 arc
 in
 the
 sky
 the
 arc
 in
 the
 sky
 of
 the
 sea
 the
 arc
 of
 the
 sea

the
 arc
 of
 the
 sea
 in
 the
 sky

Robert Lax (1915-2000)

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Composer **KILE SMITH** has gained national and international acclaim, with commissions from Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, Piffaro, Helena Symphony, Lyric Fest, The Crossing, Westminster Choir College, Newburyport Chamber Music Festival, the Pennsylvania Girlchoir, Choral Arts Philadelphia, Gaudete Brass, The Arcadian Trio, Red Shift, Khorikos, and Cincinnati's Vocal Arts Ensemble, whose recording of their commission *Canticle* was released in 2018. His music has also been performed by, among many others, *Conspire*, *Seraphic Fire*, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the Grand Rapids Symphony, the Delaware Symphony, *Orchestra 2001*, *Network for New Music*, and *Gaudete Brass*.

Kile's music has been called "eerily beautiful" by Boston Classical Review, "like no other music" by the Miami Herald, and "ecstatically beautiful" by The Philadelphia Inquirer. He has been composer in residence for Lyric Fest, the Helena Symphony, the Jupiter Symphony, and the Church of the Holy Trinity on Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia. Kile has received grants from the Philadelphia Music Project, Meet The Composer, the Argosy Foundation, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the Independence Foundation, which is supporting the composition of his first opera, *The Book of Job*. Kile is a regular contributor to the arts and culture magazine *Broad Street Review*; he has hosted Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection since 2002.

The Arc in the Sky marks Kile's sixth commission from The Crossing, who have recorded his *Where Flames a Word* and *Vespers*.

We are grateful for - our artists, composers, audience, friends, and supporters; the staff and congregation at our home, The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill; those who open their homes to our artists: Rev. Cindy Jarvis, David and Rebecca Thornburgh, Jeff and Liz Podraza, Colin Dill, Rebecca Siler, Corbin Abernathy and Andrew Beck, Steven Hyder and Donald Nally, James Reese.

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DONALD NALLY conducts The Crossing, the internationally acclaimed, professional choir commissioning, premiering, and recording only new music. He holds the John W. Beattie Chair of Music at Northwestern University where he is professor and director of choral organizations. Donald 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. With The Crossing, Donald has commissioned nearly eighty works and produced fifteen recordings, with three Grammy nominations; he has won two Grammys for Best Choral Performance (2018, 2019). He was the American Composers Forum 2017 Champion of New Music and received the 2017 Michael Korn Founders Award from Chorus America. He is the only conductor to have two ensembles receive the Margaret Hillis Award for Excellence in Choral Music. In addition to his work with The Crossing, Donald has recently been visiting resident artist at the Park Avenue Armory, music director of David Lang's 1000-voice Mile Long Opera on the High Line in Manhattan, and chorus master for the New York Philharmonic's world premieres of works Julia Wolfe and David Lang. He has worked closely with Lang and Allora & Calzadilla on projects in Osaka, London, Edmonton, Cleveland, and Philadelphia.



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I. JAZZ

- 1 why did they all shout 0:00
- 2 there are not many songs 0:00
- 3 Cherubim & Palm-Trees 0:00

II. PRAISE

- 4 I want to write a book of praise 0:00
- 5 The light of the afternoon is on
the houses 0:00
- 6 Psalm 0:00

III. ARC

- 7 Jerusalem 0:00
- 8 I would stand and watch them 0:00
- 9 The Arc 0:00

