

**From Balsam
Bells and Leaves**

for String Quartet and Harp

Jon Jeffrey Grier

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for String Quartet and Harp (2014)
on writings of John Muir

Program Notes

John Muir (1838-1914) was America's first true conservationist, ecologist, and founder of the Sierra Club. This music was composed under the influence of words from his writings that I found particularly potent:

We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men.

A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fiber thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves.

Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed — chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones.

The most of the thematic material is adapted from folk sources. As Muir was a Scot and spoke with a Scottish accent all his life, I chose the traditional Scottish tune *Flowers of the Forest*:



The melody dates from the early 17th century. Though a number of lyrics exist, they are generally in a tone of mourning; the song is often employed today as a lament for those fallen in war. I think of it here as a lament for the Native Americans and the magnificent trees felled by the advances of arrogant European settlers. Though Muir did not think well of Native Americans at first, his respect grew with experience. He grew to admire the way in which their lifestyle had such a low impact on their environment — something, he argued, to be emulated. From these first Americans I have borrowed a pine nut blessing song of the Paiute tribe, *Tubva buinzi*. The Paiute are indigenous to the area of Muir's beloved Yosemite:



These tunes overlap in their pentatonic basis, and thus it is not always obvious which is being quoted. It is *Flowers of the Forest* – suitably – that is heard last.

Harmonies and other incidental melodic motives are generated from a variety of scales, including major, pentatonic, and (especially) synthetic scales. The form is loosely a sonata: (Exposition) 1st theme group, bars 1- 44; bridge, bars 45-61; 2nd theme group, bars 62-82; closing group, bars 83-98; Development, bars 99-172; (Recapitulation) 1st theme group, bars 173-182; bridge, 183-192; 2nd theme group, 193-208; closing group, bars 209-217; Coda, bars 218-247.

Interpretive Suggestions

Keep the tempo steady and the rhythm motoric throughout, bars 79-81 and 224 to the end excepted. Make *sul ponticelli* as thin and raspy as possible. Perform string *glissandi* as they look: if the line extends all the way from note head to the next, begin the *glissando* immediately after the first pitch is sounded. If the line begins part way through the note, start it there. It is understood that the harpist will re-take on longer *glissandi* as necessary. The grim climax at rehearsal Q. will not succeed if anyone holds back – make this as big and violent as possible. The harp harmonics at the end are at actual pitch.

About the Composer

Jon Jeffrey Grier holds a B.A. from Kalamazoo College, where he studied composition with Lawrence Rackley, an M.M. in Composition from Western Michigan University, studying with Ramon Zupko, and an M.M. in Theory and a D.M.A. in Composition from the University of South Carolina, where he studied with Jerry Curry, Dick Goodwin and Sam Douglas. Jon has taught Advanced Placement Music Theory and Music History at the Greenville Fine Arts Center, a magnet school of the arts in Greenville, SC, since 1988. He composes frequently for student and faculty ensembles at the FAC, usually when he really should be grading papers. Jon has also been a writer/keyboardist with various jazz-fusion ensembles since 1984. He lives in Greenville with wife Marion and manic mongrels Roxanne and Gracie Jean.