LIFE ABOVE THE PERMAFROST

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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

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*Life Above the Permafrost* is a composition for soprano vocalist, flute, B-flat clarinet, violin, cello, piano and percussion. This single-movement work is based on the poem “Life Above the Permafrost” by Alice Fulton and is approximately eleven minutes in length. “Life Above the Permafrost” is a romantic poem in which the presumably female speaker juxtaposes visions of nature and changing seasons with that of herself and her lover in bed.¹ The poem’s vivid imagery evokes a variety of moods through a number of textual themes. These themes, including the recurring elements of seasons, birds, trees, beds and color, provided ample material for text painting and motivic development throughout the work. The poem also established the framework for the structure of *Life Above the Permafrost*, which is comprised of five main sections matching the stanzas of the poem as well as an introduction and short interludes between sections. Melodic and harmonic pitch material was derived from a primary pitch-class set (6-Z19 [013478]) and its complement (6-Z44 [012569]), which furnish the basic intervallic content for the majority of the work. 6-Z19 can most strongly be heard as the result of one of a variety of transpositional combinations of subsets, many of which are rather consonant in nature. In contrast, its complement, 6-Z44, contains more dense intervallic content. Five of the six pitch-classes in this set are contained within a range of interval-class 6, providing more dissonant possibilities. The vocal melody was composed first, employing pitches drawn from these primary sets. The ensemble’s music was then constructed around the vocal framework using derivative material from the vocal line and new material from manipulations of the aforementioned sets. Inspired by the vibrant imagery of the text, the wide timbral palette of the ensemble is utilized in colorful ways, drawing inspiration from works by the likes of Joseph Schwantner and Steven Stucky, among others.

INSTRUMENTATION

Soprano  
Flute  
Clarinet in Bb  
Violin  
Cello  
Piano  
Percussion  
  Bass Drum  
  Tam Tam/Water Gong  
  Vibraphone  
    Soft Yarn Mallets  
    Medium Yarn Mallets  
    Bow  
  Glockenspiel  
    Hard Plastic Mallets  
    Soft Rubber Mallets  
  Medium or Large Suspended Cymbal  
  Sizzle Cymbal  
  Woodblock  
  Drumsticks

PERCUSSION KEY

Bass Drum  Sus. Cymbal  Sizzle Cymbal  Tam-Tam  Woodblock

SPECIAL NOTATION

Water Gong: Headless notes with a roll indicate that the water gong should be rolled while submerged. An upward gliss indicates the gong should be slowly raised out of the water. A note with a head indicates the gong is no longer submerged.

Violin and Piano: This gesture should be played as quickly as possible while keeping the notes clear. The performer should continue to improvise a pattern similar to the one indicated inside the box for the full length indicated by the line.
PROGRAM NOTES

Life Above the Permafrost is based on a poem of the same name by Alice Fulton. This work portrays the relationship between the speaker and her lover through the extended metaphor of changing seasons. Through vivid images of snowy landscapes, migratory birds, and “the rum drinks of summer,” the speaker guides us through the journey of her passion for the one she loves. This sensual path ends in a moment of reflection and realization in which the past gives way to future and the speaker plainly describes her feelings. In setting this poem, the music aims to paint the imagery of the text and enhance the tone of the speaker or, in this case, the singer, relaying through sound the images of tossing trees and flapping wings, the sensation of waking after a long sleep and the feeling of solitude in a moment of quiet introspection.

Life Above the Permafrost

All winter the trees tossed in their coma.
Beneath them fields unrolled
like a pallet. Snow came,
the universal donor, the connective
in all the ready metaphors:
sky coarse as hotel linen,
bedsheets the half-white of rice paper. That kinship.

Prone as the land,
I wanted each day to start
the way the body starts in sleep: a reflex
of sun, mimosa explosions. Not
the window's slow tap of the sky,
light rising like sap
in maples, and even the maples
warted with sparrows
too frigid to fly South.
Those trees needed wild flamingos, at least,
to break their drowse.

In bed, my nails raked
the chenille spread, its whitework
like a mulch of snow. Snug as a corm
in its coldframe, the heart
shied from my five-fingered tongs.

Now there are parasol garnishes
on the rum drinks of summer, Adirondack
chairs with wind in the slats. Your arms band
me like a migratory bird. I think,
this must be life
above the permafrost. The raised candle-
wicking of the quilt
cornrows our skin. Our fingers braid
like aerial roots.

You make me want
to stop tending relics in my head,
that well-stocked potter's field:
just listen to the insects'
adenoidal plainsong all day long,
enamored of the keynote, the tonic.

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2 Lyrics from DANCE SCRIPT WITH ELECTRIC BALLERINA. Copyright 1983 by Alice Fulton. Used with permission of the poet and the University of Illinois Press.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people who were essential in making this composition possible. First, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Alice Fulton and her publisher, University of Illinois Press, in graciously allowing me to set her work for this thesis. I would also like to my composition professors at Bowling Green State University, Dr. Burton Beerman, Dr. Mikel Kuehn and especially Dr. Elainie Lillios, who has provided me with invaluable advice and guidance throughout this year-long process. Next, I must acknowledge the support of all my friends and fellow graduate students who have been my colleagues and confidants while navigating the processes of continuing education in music. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Monte and Leslie Pitman, for the support they have provided in my pursuit of a career in music that made this work possible.
Transposed Score

Life Above the Permafrost

Text by Alice Fulton

for soprano and chamber ensemble

Dennis Pitman

Floating \( \frac{\dot{b}}{q} = 64 \)

Soprano

Flute

pppp \( \times \) mp \( \times \) n

pppp \( \times \) mp \( \times \) n

pppp \( \times \) mp \( \times \) n

ppp

Clarinet in Bb

Violin

Cello

Piano

Percussion

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S: mp → f → mf → mf → mp → mf. "Be beneath them fields un rolled like a pallet"

Fl.

B-Cl. mp → mf → mp → mf → mp. "Snow came through the universal donor the connective in all the ready metaphors"

Vln. pp → mf → mp → mf → mp. "Snow came through the universal donor the connective in all the ready metaphors"

Vlc.

Pno. pp

Perc. 2so
of rice paper that kin - ships

accel.

sky coarse as hotel lin - en bed - sheets the half - white
Waking Up

\( \text{\textcopyright 90} \)

S

Fl.

B. Cl.

Vln.

Vlc.

Pno.

Perc.

S

Fl.

B. Cl.

Vln.

Vlc.

Pno.

Perc.

Flute

Bassoon

Violin

Viola

Piano

Percussion

\textit{Prone} as the land I wanted each day to start the

\textit{way the body starts in sleep} a reflex of sun

\textit{mimosa explosions} Not the

\textit{Glock} soft rubber mallets

\textit{Sus. Cym.} scrape

\textit{Bass Drum} \textit{pp} with fingers
88

W. S. Fl.

t

B. Cl.

p

Vln.

p

Vlc.


Pno.

J


Perc.

Water Gong

93

accel.

S.

W. S. Fl.

W. B. Cl.

W. Vln.

W. Vlc.

W. Pno.

W. Perc.
S

S

Fl.

B.Cl.

Vln.

Vlc.

Pno.

Perc.

Woodblock drumsticks

P

E Building Chaos \( \mathfrak{q} = 110 \)

S

fl.

S

at least, to break their drowse.
Calmly \( \dot{\text{\textit{F}}} \)  \( \text{\textit{q}} = 90 \)

In bed, my nails raked

the chill spread

its white-work like a mulch of snow.

Snug as a
in its cold frame, the heart shied from my five-fingered tongs.
With Steady Motion \( \dot{\text{r}} = 100 \)

Now there are par-\`a-sol-gar-nish-es on the rum

drinks of sum-mer Ad-i-ron-dack chairs with wind in the slats your arms band me like
of the quilt corn rows our skin. Our fingers braid like aerial roots.
tending relics in my head that well-stocked potter's field:

just listen to the insects’ ad e noi dal Plain song

inside piano with fingernails or plectrum
Fl.

Vln.

Vlc.

Pno.

Perc.

**Duration: 10'35"**