

STILL WE RISE: CHANGING HERSTORY

A MUSICAL CELEBRATION OF WOMEN WHO HAVE CHANGED HISTORY

Program Notes

“Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.”

We stand on the shoulders of the courageous women who came before us. While we have made much progress, there is still work to be done. Women and men are waking and rising to the call for conscious engagement around widespread imbalances.

We rise
We rise
We rise.

Ensemble Lyrae’s program “Still WE Rise: Changing HERstory,” is rising from the ashes of March 2020 and is finally coming to life! This concert explores the theme of women throughout history who have persisted in the face of obstacles. It celebrates those who have spoken up, risen up, fought for what is right, and paved the way for others by changing the course of history. Works include the stories and/or words of women such as Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman, Malala Yousafzai, Abigail Adams, Louisa May Alcott, and Anne Frank, among many others. The program also includes a set of suffragette songs, never taking for granted our fundamental right to vote.

Social reformer and women’s rights activist, Susan B. Anthony was a pivotal figure in the fight for women’s suffrage. In 1872, Anthony was arrested in her hometown, Rochester, NY, for voting when the law only permitted men to vote. Anthony and her long-time friend and colleague, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, presented an amendment giving women the right to vote. Introduced by Sen. Aaron A. Sargent (R-CA), it later became known colloquially as the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment.” It was eventually ratified as the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920. Taken from Anthony’s own speeches and writings, the text of Jake Runestad’s *Rise Up* invokes the spirit of the American suffrage movement, asking individuals to “deepen their sympathy then convert it to action.”

Composer Andrea Ramsey has devoted several of her compositions to the theme of women’s empowerment. Scored for women’s voices and percussion, *truth* was written merely two months after her mother’s death. Up against a deadline, she composed the entire piece in just four days, allowing it to be a cathartic experience as she processed her grief. Ramsey states in an interview, “I returned to themes I knew would resonate with women, and themes that for me personally were near to my relationship with my mother — who always told me I was beautiful and that she loved me ... I do believe strongly in empowering young women to believe in themselves and get outside their comfort zones where the growth is.”

Emma Lazarus’s 1883 sonnet, *The New Colossus*, represents the United States as a woman, the “Mother of Exiles,” who welcomes immigrants and cares for the homeless. The poem’s sestet connects the idea of a nation to womanhood, and Lazarus describes the Statue of Liberty as a “mighty woman” who embodies “maternal strength.” The poem’s themes include the promise of freedom, patriarchal values versus maternal virtues, and America’s vision of breaking from European tradition.

Born into slavery, Harriet Tubman escaped in 1849 and later became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, guiding hundreds of other slaves to freedom in the north. Through this effort, she became known as the “Moses of her people.” In *Harriet Tubman*, written

by Walter Robinson and arranged by Kathleen McGuire, vocal percussion and call-and-response singing create an immersive texture of sounds, emulating a figurative train and its journey on the Underground Railroad.

Anne Frank had the inspiring ability to look beyond her terrible situation and find joy in the simplest places. Linda Haugen's sensitive interpretation and swelling phrases of *Sunshine and a Cloudless Sky* provide another dimension to the words of Anne Frank's moving diary.

"I'd been following the story of Malala Yousafzai for some time when I heard her address to the UN general assembly in Fall of 2013. I decided at that moment to compose an ode to her for Aurora Chorus' inaugural International Women's Day concert, entitled: *The Rising of the Women Is the Rising of Us All*. Inspired by her courage and mission, I've created a work that is strong, direct and with a powerful feminine fluidity— like Malala herself. A 'rap' on a quote from her UN speech occurs in the middle of the piece and lends *Malala* a contemporary feel." —Joan Szymko

In the early decades of the 20th century, women needed some sensational rebranding. Their roles were limited to home-keeping, child-bearing, and child-rearing. "*She's Good Enough to Be Your Baby's Mother and She's Good Enough to Vote with You*" is a song written by Alfred Bryan and Herman Paley and published in 1916. This song took the suffrage movement out of the rally halls and into the popular domain. The song's lyrics are an appeal to the male idea of a woman's worth, as if women had no other merit than what men might deign to assign them as well as counter-argue anti-suffragettes who believed women couldn't vote respectfully because of their limited capacity for reason. This is a fun little ditty that packs a punch!

All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Song, originally known as "Victory Song," is the official theme song of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League Association. Founded by Philip K. Wrigley, this professional women's baseball league was active from 1943-1954. With minor league teams dwindling as young men were drafted into the war effort, the women's league filled the void. Co-written by players Pepper Paire and Nalda Bird, the song rose to fame after its appearance in the 1992 film *A League of Their Own*.

Penned by Jack Norworth in 1908, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* asks us to reconsider that perhaps it was truly meant as a feminist anthem. In fact, Norworth admitted he was writing about a woman – and had never been to a professional baseball game! Meant as a parlor song, it was first performed in vaudeville shows and during intermissions at movie houses, not making its ballpark debut until 1934.

The March of the Women was first performed on January 21, 1911, by the Suffrage Choir, at a ceremony held on Pall Mall, London, to celebrate a release of activists who had been violently imprisoned on "Black Friday." Emmeline Pankhurst introduced the song as the WSPU's official anthem, replacing "The Women's Marseillaise."

American author, lecturer, and social reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman preferred to be called a humanist rather than feminist. As an author, she invoked the need for gender equality and redefining domestic and social responsibilities. In 1898, she published her most famous manifesto, *Women and Economics*, calling for the economic independence of women. Drawing from texts in Gilman's *Suffrage Songs & Verses (1911)*, composer Andrea Ramsey's *The Woman to This Hour* "alternates between haunting legato and fiery strength," as she sets the text, "She walketh veiled and sleeping, for she knoweth not her power."

Separated for much of their marriage, Abigail and John Adams infamously corresponded through letters during those years apart. While John was away at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Abigail wrote him a letter, dated March 31, 1776, imploring him and his fellow congressmen to **Remember the Ladies** as they drew up the founding documents that would establish the new government. She declares, "Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands ... If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation." In this musical setting by Carol Barnett, you can hear the loving nature of her letters, laced with the edge of insistence to heed her advice.

Although taken as a tongue-in-cheek in modern times, the text of *God's Bottles* by Randall Thompson was originally meant with great seriousness. Published in a leaflet by the National Women's Christian Temperance Union (NWCTU), the words were meant to

discourage the use of alcohol, proclaiming that, “Some men take the juice of apples and grapes and make drinks that will harm our bodies!” One of the largest and most influential women’s groups of the 19th century, the NWCTU also used its social platform to fight for women’s suffrage, labor laws, and prison reform.

Here is a Place was commissioned by OPERA America for “The OPERA America Songbook” to commemorate the 2012 opening of the National Opera Center in New York City.

In *To Madame Curie*, composer Misty Dupuis sets the text of Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelsen, a daughter of a former slave and a prominent African American poet of the Harlem Renaissance. In her poetry, Dunbar-Nelsen reveres Polish-born physicist and chemist Marie Curie. The first woman to win a Nobel prize, Curie is renowned for her scientific achievements and the development of radioactivity theory.

Primarily known as the author of *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott offers a window into her mind as a young girl through the poem *My Kingdom*. Written in 1846, the text speaks of the thirteen-year-old’s personal search for grace and identity while revealing her strength of character and sense of spirituality. Initially fearing selfishness, she asks how she “can . . . rule myself” when “passion tempts and troubles me.” Then by seeking divine intervention, she asks for guidance in finding selflessness: “Dear Father, help me with the love that casteth out my fear.” Alcott gains the courage to seek not a worldly “crown” but a state of inner peace that occurs when her focus is on a greater spiritual dimension, resulting in her “happy kingdom” within. Raised by transcendentalist parents in Concord, Massachusetts, Alcott had strong ties to her location and the well-known intellectuals of the time, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

We hear the innocence of the adolescent poet in the simple repeated piano figure of Brian John’s composition. The voices emerge in soft dynamic levels as the text describes Alcott’s struggle for identity but gain confidence and volume as her spiritual fortitude develops. The build-up of the vocal and piano lines illustrate the author’s realization that she is incapable of knowing how to best live a life of faith. Her innocent request for divine help is heard amid a faster-moving musical line as she begins to understand and take command of her own spiritual kingdom and encourages us to do the same.

Alla René Bozarth was the first woman ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal diocese of Oregon in 1971. Her ordination to the priesthood with eleven other women in 1974 created a huge stir within the denomination and attracted international attention. She wrote the poem, *Call* on the eve of her historic ordination. Her poem, inspired by the poem “Mountain Moving Day,” (1911), by Japanese Feminist Poet Yosano Akiko, is as relevant today as when it was first penned. The roar of voices continues. Women and men are waking and rising to the call for conscious engagement around widespread gender imbalance in matters of education, economics and politics and spiritual leadership. —Joan Szymko

