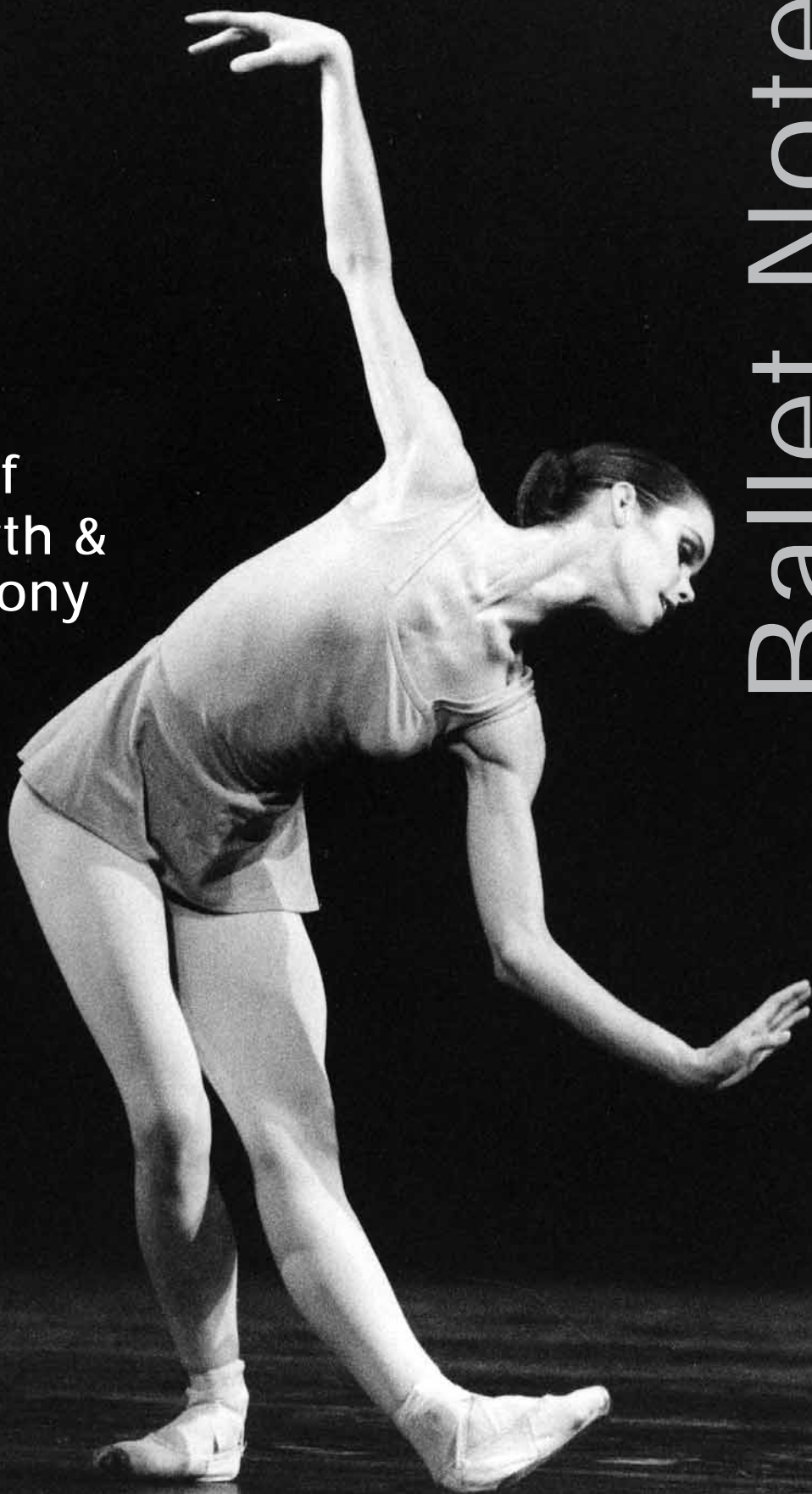


THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

Song of
the Earth &
Symphony
in C

November 2006



Ballet Notes



Song of the Earth

Choreography: Kenneth MacMillan

Staged by: Grant Coyle and Donald Macleary

Music: Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*

Set and Costume Design: Nicholas Georgiadis

Lighting Design: John B. Read

Chinese poems freely translated into German by Hans Bethge

Symphony in C

Choreography: George Balanchine © School of American Ballet

Staged by: Lindsay Fischer, Susan Hendl, Sara Leland,

Mandy-Jayne Richardson, Joysanne Sidimus

Music: Georges Bizet, *Symphony in C Major*

Costume Design: Karinska

Lighting Design: Ronald Bates

Symphony in C is a gift from

THE VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE,

THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA

Cover: Jennifer Fournier in
Song of the Earth, 1991.

Top Left: Jennifer Fournier
with Artists of the Ballet in
Song of the Earth, 1991.

Bottom Left: Artists of the
Ballet in *Symphony in C*, 1989.

Balanchine's Symphony in C and MacMillan's Song of the Earth

"How can I describe the power of some moments of performance? Sometimes through dancing you experience the deep pleasure of simply being alive, of moving, of breathing. Dancing is so intensely physical, so ecstatic, so personal."

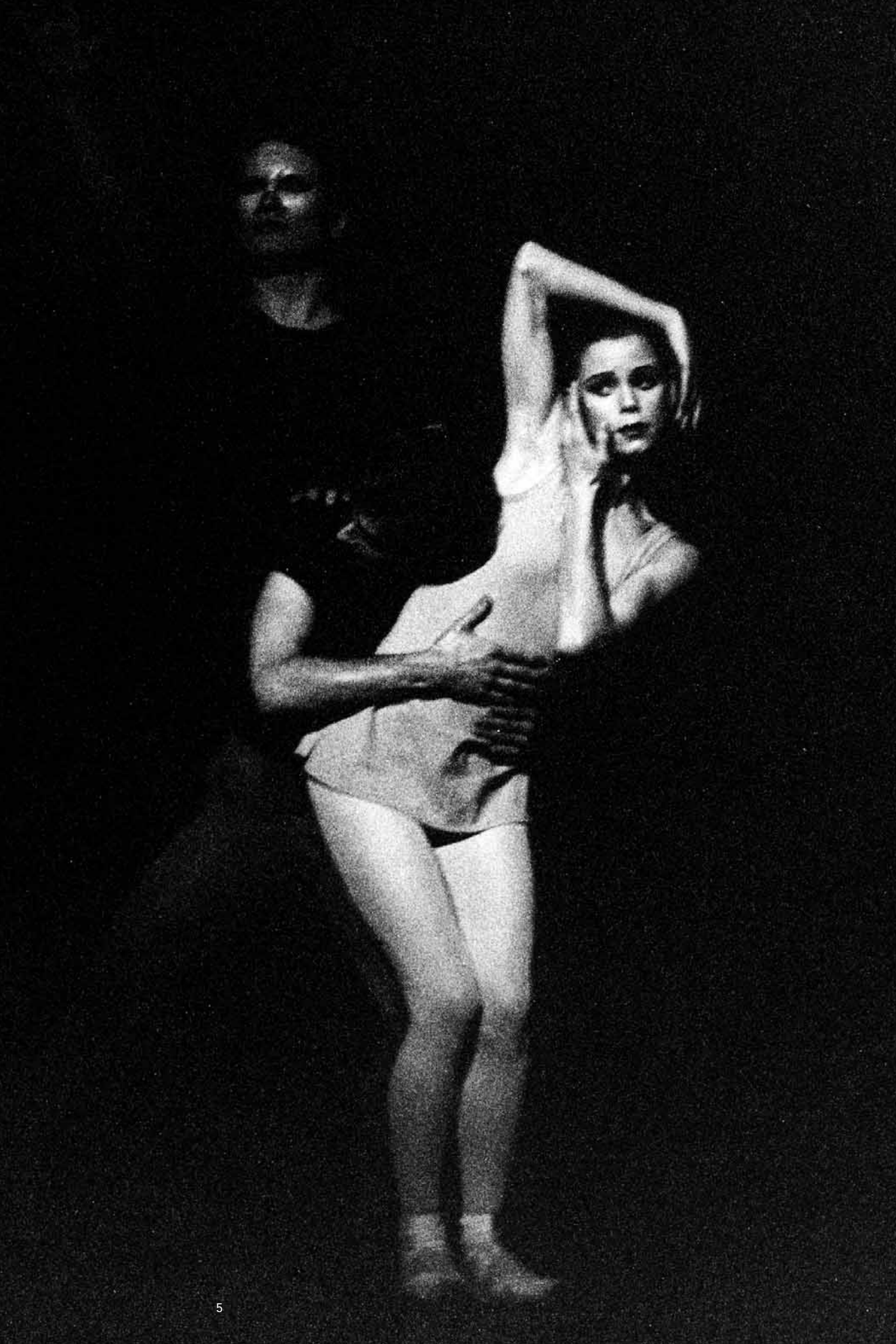
Karen Kain, *Movement Never Lies*

As a dancer, Karen Kain put an indelible stamp on the two ballets featured in this, the first mixed program of The National Ballet of Canada's first season in the Four Seasons Centre. Always an exquisite dancer of George Balanchine's works, Kain brought a special depth and mystery to the second movement of Bizet's *Symphony in C* with its hauntingly languorous oboe melody. And, although she danced it only a few times in 1991, she became one of the greatest interpreters of the Woman in Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Song of the Earth*, a role that was particularly dear to her for reasons her comment just quoted illustrates.

It would be difficult to find two plotless masterworks rooted in classical technique that are more strikingly different than these two ballets. *Symphony in C*, created for the Paris Opéra Ballet in 1947 under the title *Le palais de cristal*, is brilliantly constructed, elegant and virtuosic, all flash and dazzle. It drew heavily on the vast financial and artistic resources of that acclaimed company at a time when, in New York, Balanchine had few dancers, high school auditoria for stages, and a minuscule costume budget. Like most of Balanchine's works, it follows the music closely and perceptively—in this case, the long-lost score of the seventeen-year-old Bizet's unpublished first symphony, rediscovered only in 1935—allowing us, as Balanchine always wished, to *"see the music, hear the dancing."*

That goal would be easier to achieve when Balanchine brought the work to New York the next year, stripping it of its fancy title, its elaborate costumes (one colour to each movement, rather like *Jewels*), its lavish scenery with galleries, balconies, a staircase, and ornaments galore, and its huge initial cast. As always,

Right: Jennifer Fournier with Artists of the Ballet in *Song of the Earth*, 1991.





Left: Karen Kain and
Rex Harrington in
Symphony in C, 1984.

Balanchine's impulse was to simplify and clarify his works over the years. One of the most startling facts about this ballet is that it took only two weeks to choreograph, matching the mere two weeks Bizet devoted to his musical composition.

Brought into the repertoire of The National Ballet of Canada by Erik Bruhn in 1984 as part of a Balanchine Evening, *Symphony in C* contains the traditional four movements of a classical symphony and embodies Balanchine's assertion that "*Ballet is Woman.*"

Structurally, each movement has a principal couple with the woman dominant, two secondary couples, and six to eight female corps, depending on the size of the company (the full Paris cast numbered 52 dancers). Each movement plays inventively with geometrical shapes—squares, diagonals, sculptural groupings—that illustrate the variety of effects possible using a very active and technically adept corps de ballet.

Three movements of Bizet's symphony (1, 3, and 4) are marked *Allegro Vivo* or *Allegro Vivace* in the score—buoyant, crisp, lively. The first presents a commandingly regal ballerina (Maria Tallchief, Balanchine's then-wife, in the New York premiere). In marked contrast to the other movements, the second movement—*Adagio*—is the longest, most admired in its music and dance alike. Subtly Spanish in flavour, graced by a hypnotic oboe melody that only Bizet could have written, the section is sensuous, exotic, seductive, as the ballerina bourrées effortlessly and skims the floor in low serene lifts. Towards the end, she displays her trust, and her partner's reliability, when three times she faints backwards, only to be caught securely at the last minute.

The ebullient third movement is Scottish in flavour (hear the orchestral imitation of bagpipe). It demands a principal couple capable of huge side-by-side jumps and possessing remarkable stamina.

The spectacular perpetual-motion final movement begins with its own soloists and corps but each time it appears to reach a climax, dancers from an earlier section crest onto the stage, wave after wave, until finally over fifty dancers are leaping in unison in one of the most flamboyant finales in all ballet. No wonder the finicky French audience gave it a standing ovation, or that its New York premiere was so successful that the

Ballet Society, as Balanchine's company was then named, had to change from a private subscription-only enterprise and sell tickets to a general public demanding to see the piece everyone was talking about.

If *Symphony in C* is pure dance, a ballet about ballet, Sir Kenneth MacMillan's 1965 masterpiece, *Song of the Earth*, is in contrast an emotional farewell to youth, beauty, love, and life, all as precious and ephemeral as dance itself.

The ballet was inspired primarily by the music and text of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) composed the music in 1907-1908, a time of great personal tragedy for him—he had been fired from his musical post in Vienna, his daughter Maria had died, and he himself had been diagnosed with terminal heart disease. He had found some consolation in a collection of poetry from the Tang dynasty (8th century) that had made its way circuitously from Chinese to French to German, and he drew on this resource to create something richly original: a new form, the song-symphony, combining the two genres—the art song and the symphony—to which he had devoted so much of his musical life.

The texts were extremely important to Mahler. He selected seven poems from Hans Bethge's collection, *The Chinese Flute*, and made changes, some subtle and some major, to provide the appropriate groundwork for his composition. In the Sixth Song, for instance, he combined poems by different authors and wrote a completely new text for the closing stanza, lending a hint of optimism, a vision of renewal and rebirth, and a sense of eternity ("ewig," the repeated closing word) as consolation for the fleeting nature of human life.

MacMillan's ballet too emerged from a troubled time. He had proposed the Mahler score to London's rather conservative Royal Opera House board and had been rejected on grounds that *Song of the Earth* was inappropriate for ballet. He had also been forced to cast the premiere of his *Romeo and Juliet* with Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev instead of the ballet's co-creators, Christopher Gable and Canadian Lynn Seymour. A choreographer obsessed in many works with the plight of the outsider, MacMillan himself became an outsider, going to Germany to create *Song of the Earth* for his friend John Cranko's Stuttgart Ballet, with the renowned

dramatic ballerina Marcia Haydée in the leading role. A great success in Europe, *Song* was, ironically, performed by the Royal Ballet the year after its Stuttgart premiere.

The ballet consists of six movements, the last—"Der Abschied," the farewell—as long as all the others combined. Although the work is non-narrative, it's easy to read a universal story into it. Mahler's work uses the poems as philosophical meditations, but MacMillan has linked the songs by the figure of the Messenger of Death, masked and dressed in black, who stalks and seizes one of a group of young men and women in each song. A Man and a Woman also link the sections, and it seems that the Man dies, the Woman is left grieving, and finally both are led by the Messenger to the prospect of eternity, or at least to peace and an end to mourning. An acknowledged master of passionate pas de deux and trios, MacMillan began the composition of the ballet at its end, with a moving farewell for the Man and the Woman and then a trio with the Messenger, full of eloquent if often distorted sculptural poses.

MacMillan's style, rooted in classical ballet, reflects the influence of modern dance in its twisted positions, deep pliés in second position, and contracted torsos. He also intentionally included qualities of Asian dance forms—small quick steps, sideways bending positions, unusual port de bras, kneeling and crouching positions. The linearity and verticality of classical ballet appear side by side with flexed feet, wrists, and knees. The symmetry so evident in classical works veers sharply to the asymmetrical, as dancers are deployed in contrasting groups.

Like Mahler, MacMillan pays close, though not literal, heed to the poetry. The First Song, "The Drinking Song of Earth's Misery," alludes to an ape howling over a grave, an image reflected in the movement of the Messenger loping sideways across the stage. At the end, the Messenger is dropped suddenly from a high lift to a low hold, like a man being lowered into his coffin—"Dark is life, so is death." The Second Song, "The Lonely One in Autumn," imitates in both music and movement the uneasy rustling of leaves as the Woman eddies around like a small autumnal whirlwind while the Messenger stalks her. The Third Song, "Of Youth," tells of a porcelain pavilion in a lake that mirrors the playful occupants upside down, and the leading

woman is inverted time and again, culminating in a series of supported cartwheels. The Fourth Song, "Of Beauty," borrows from the text images of girls picking lotus blossoms and men charging in on horseback. The Fifth Song, "The Drunkard in Spring," shows another of MacMillan's special talents: choreography for drunkards.

The Sixth Song, "The Farewell," is the climax, perhaps even the catharsis, of the ballet. Over half an hour in length, it calls on tremendous physical and emotional stamina from the Woman, who passes through the many stages of grief as she moves from anger at her lover's abandonment through death to the exhaustion of mourning and finally to resignation as time becomes eternity. In the process of composition, Mahler became worried that, on hearing the work, "*people would go home and shoot themselves.*" The last stanza of the Sixth Song, Mahler's own contribution, is a remedy for such despair. The last word, literally, is "*eternal.*"

To bring this ballet note full circle, I quote what were almost the last words in Karen Kain's autobiography:

"When I dance in MacMillan's Song of the Earth, I'm in touch with universal truths that I would never have the courage to put into words: to the very core of my being I feel the joy of life, the sorrow of death, the desperate rage of struggling against the laws of nature, and the peace that finally comes from accepting those laws. At moments like these, dancing remains what it was in prehistory: a religious experience in the most profound sense."

— Penelope Reed Doob



Song of the Earth

The following are English translations by William Mann of the German songs used in Gustav Mahler's *The Song of the Earth*. These, in turn, are translations from the Chinese:

First Song

The Drinking Song of Earth's Misery
by Li-Tai-Po

The wine beckons already in the golden goblet,
But do not drink yet; first I will sing you a song.
The song of grief shall resound your souls like laughter,
When grief approaches, the gardens of the soul lie
deserted,
Joy and song fade away and die,
Life is dark, so is death.

Landlord of this house
Your cellar conceals its fill of golden wine.
Here I call this lute my own.
To strike the lute and empty the glasses,
Those are the things that go together.
A full cup of wine at the right time
Is worth more than all the riches of this earth.
Life is dark, so is death.

The firmament is blue for ever and the earth
Will long stand fast and blossom forth in spring.
But you, man, how long do you then live?
Not for 100 years may you amuse yourself
With all the rotten trash on this earth.

Look down there. In the moonlight on the graves
A wild ghostly form is crouching.
It's an ape. Listen how its howls
Grate on the sweet scent of life.
Now take the wine. Now it is time, companions.
Empty your golden glasses to the dregs.
Life is dark, so is death.

Second Song

The Lonely One in Autumn
by Chang-Tsi

Autumn mists hover blue above the lake;
All the grass stands covered with hoarfrost;
You would think an artist had got jade-dust
And scattered it over the fragile blossoms.

The sweet scent of the flowers is vanished;
A cold wind bows down their stems.
Soon will the faded golden leaves
Of the lotus bird drift on the water.

My heart is tired. My little lamp
Snuffed out with a crackle; it makes me think of sleep.
I come to you, dear resting-place.
Yes, give me rest, I need to be revived.

I weep much in my solitude.
The autumn in my heart has lasted too long.
Sun of love, will you never shine again,
And gently dry my bitter tears?

Third Song

Of Youth
by Li-Tai-Po

In the middle of the little pond
Stands a pavilion of green
and white porcelain.

Like the back of a tiger
The bridge of jade arches
Across to the pavilion

In the house friends are sitting
Beautifully dressed, drinking, chattering;
Some are writing down verses.

Their silken sleeves glide
Back, their silken caps
Perch cheerfully on the backs of their hands.

On the little pond's still
Surface everything is seen
Curiously mirrored.

They are all standing on their heads
In the pavilion of green
And white porcelain;

The bridge stands like a half-moon,
Its arch upside-down. Friends,
Beautifully dressed, are drinking, chattering.

Fourth Song

Of Beauty
by Li-Tai-Po

Young girls are picking flowers
Picking lotus buds on the riverbank.
They sit among bushes and leaves,
Collect blossoms in their laps and call
Saucily to one another.

Golden sunlight plays on their forms,
Reflects them in the clear water.

Sunlight reflects their slender limbs,
Their sweet eyes.
And with a caress the breeze lifts
The fabric of their sleeves,
Carries the enchantment
Of their fragrance through the air.

O look, what handsome boys are pounding by
There on the riverbank on their sturdy horses?
Shining afar like sunbeams
Between the branches of green willows
One of their horses neighs happily
And bucks and rushes onward,
Over flowers, grass, its hooves reel on,
In their tempest they trample down the fallen blossoms.
Hye. How their manes wave in the tumult,

Their nostrils steam with heat.
Golden sunlight plays on their forms,
Reflects them in the clear water.

And the fairest of the maidens send
Long glances of yearning after him.
Her proud beauty is only assumed.
In the blaze of her big eyes,
In the dark of their heated gaze,
Hovers still crying the excitement of her heart.

Fifth Song

The Drunkard in Spring
by Li-Tai-Po

If life is only a dream,
Then why our pains and groans?
I'll drink until I no longer can,
The whole, lovely day through.

And when I can no longer drink,
Because gullet and spirit are full,
Then I'll roll to my door
And have a marvellous sleep.

What do I hear on waking? Listen.
A bird sings in the tree.
I ask him if it's springtime yet.
It seems just like a dream.

The bird twitters yes. The spring
Is here, it came overnight.
Deep in my watching I listen,
The bird sings and laughs.

I fill my cup again and empty it to the dregs,
And sing till the moon shines
In the black firmament.

And when I can no longer sing,
I'll go back to sleep again.
What does the spring matter to me?
Let me be drunk.

Sixth Song

The Farewell
by Mong-Kao-Jen and Wang-Sei

The sun is setting behind the mountains,
Evening climbs down into all the dales
With its shadows that are full of coolness.
O look. Like a silver boat it hovers,
The moon upon the blue lake of heaven,
I sense the breath of a fine wind
Behind the dark fir trees.
Full of fair sound the brook sings through the darkness.
The flowers turn pale in the twilight.
All longing wants to dream now,
Men go home weary,
To find forgotten happiness in sleep
And learn to be young again.
The birds squat silent on their branches.
The world is going to sleep.

The air is cool in the shadow of my fir trees.
I stand here and wait for my friend.
I wait for him and our last farewell.
By your side, friend, I long
To enjoy the beauty of this evening.
Where are you? Long are you leaving me alone.
I walk up and down with my lute
On paths padded with soft grass.
O beauty. O world forever drunk on love and life.

He climbed from the horse and offered him the drink
Of farewell. He asked him wither
He was going and also why it had to be.
He spoke and his voice was veiled:
"My friend, I tell you,
In this world luck was not kind to me.
Where I am going? I'll go, I'll wander into the mountains.
I'm seeking rest for my lonely heart.
I'm walking towards home, my abode.
I shall never rove far away.
My heart is quiet and bides its time.

Everywhere the dear earth
Blossoms in the spring and grows green
Again. Everywhere and forever
The distance looks bright and blue
Forever...Forever."



Above: Sabina Allemann
in *Symphony in C*, 1984.

Photographs: Bruce Monk,
Andrew Oxenham, David Street,
and Cylla von Tiedemann.

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