

## Journey to Refuge – Finding Home

*“All you need to know is that when you go through that kind of experience, there are often two extremes: Either you lose hope completely and you shatter and break into pieces, or you become so resilient that no one can break you anymore.”*

*--Malala Yousafzai, We Are Displaced*

The history of humankind is filled with the stories of those who were forced to flee their homes because of persecution, war, or violence. The journeys to refuge are difficult and dangerous, and the act of migration is only one part of the hardship: once relief is found, those who have been displaced must still come to terms with loss. As Malala Yousafzai writes in *We Are Displaced*: “Many people think refugees should feel only two things: gratitude towards the countries that granted them asylum and relief to be safe...but they are escaping their countries, their beloved homes. That seems to get lost in the conversation about refugees and internally displaced people. So much focus is on where they are now – not what they have lost as a result.”

As of 2019, an estimated 70.8 million people have been displaced from their homes; among them are 30 million refugees (according to UN classification), over half of whom are under the age of 18. The music on this concert is performed as remembrance, a memorial, a testament, and a call to action.

### **Journey to Refuge**

*“Refugees didn’t just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand memories until they’d put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day.”*

*--Nadia Hashimi, When the Moon is Low*

Recalling the deliverance of Israel from Egypt through the Red Sea, composer Zebulon M. Highben takes triumphant text from Exodus 15:21 for “And Miriam Sang” (“Shiru L’Adonai”) to compose a musical imagination of what this moment of celebratory song might have sounded like. The text is performed in Hebrew, and the melodies are inflected with the character of Hasidic and Middle-Eastern music.

“Vivre, Aimer, Partager” (Live, Love, Share) by Laura Hawley was composed for a French-language children’s choir festival, and the piece happened to premiere at the same time that Syrian refugees were arriving in Canada in 2015. A video of the performance went viral after it was posted to YouTube by one of the parents of the choristers with the title “Welcome to Canada Syrian Refugees.” In this piece, Hawley pairs an Arabic song, “Tala’ al-Badru Alayna”, a deeply familiar song in the Islamic world that is a song of joy, gratitude, and community, with a French poem “Vivre, c’est aimer”, framing the piece with an introduction and conclusion inspired by the call-to-prayer.

“From Behind the Caravan: Songs of Hâfez” is based on the lyric poems of 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Khwâja Hâfez-e Shirazi. Composer Abbie Betinis sets the four Farsi-language poems in this piece

to depict the concept of longing through many different lenses: a longing for Truth, for Reason, and for Love. Inspired by both Persian music and the familiar sounds of Greek music heard in childhood while spending time with beloved family, Betinis writes vocal lines that are evocative of determined, constant movement.

In “The Peace of Wild Things”, composer Sean Ivory sets a meditative poem by Wendell Berry that reflects upon the act of seeking peace and finding refuge from the fear of transience in beauty of nature. Cello and piano offer sparse counterpoint to the worrying voices, gradually growing in intensity to peak with a twinkling of stars, offering the hope that we can find a moment’s worth of grace and freedom in the presence of wild things.

Ysaye M. Barnwell’s “Would You Harbor Me?” asks us, in frank, straightforward language, to be on the right side of history. When faced with the reality, would you harbor someone in need, a Harriet Tubman or a Sojourner Truth?

Composer Moira Smiley wrote “Refugee” after she volunteered at the Calais Jungle refugee camp in France in 2016. The piece musically depicts the deep connections between human beings all over the world: rhythmic melodies alternate between different voice sections in the ensemble, parts interlock and trade and come together in unison, exchanging musical ideas and experiences.

### **Finding Home**

*“Home is where you feel more welcome, more secure, have more rights, where you are loved. This place can be any place even away from what you would normally call home.”*  
--Bangambiki Habyarimana, *Book of Wisdom*

We start the second half with two pieces by Joan Szymko, “Always Coming Home” and “Nada te turbe.” The first sets text from Ursula Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* as a lyrical journey, initially hesitant but growing into an openness to the potential of travel to bring positive things both old and new for your senses to experience while ever keeping a mindfulness of home.

The peaceful, comforting words of “Nada te turbe” come from 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish nun Teresa of Ávila, a mystic of the Catholic Church: “Let nothing disturb you, nothing frighten you...All things are passing. God never changes.” In keeping with the sounds of Teresa of Ávila’s time, the piece opens with the cello mimicking the sound of a period guitar, and the alto melody is akin to liturgical chant. The middle of the piece gives way to a mystic’s ecstatic outburst, returning to the chant-like melody at its conclusion.

A new commission for VOX, Andrea Clearfield’s “Home in Me” ruminates upon the theme of finding home, and Clearfield and poet Sienna Craig contemplate this through the experience of the body, and how we resonate with our surroundings in seeking where we belong. Some singers will perform the piece with small stones in hand that they were charged to gather from a place that feels like home, playing them as percussion instruments.

For “The Road Home”, Stephen Paulus adapted the hymn tune “Prospect”, which was published in the shape-note tunebook *Southern Harmony* in 1835, with a text by Michael Dennis Browne. The hymnody is full of nostalgia and longing, full of aching suspensions in the inner voices that briefly delay resolutions to stable harmonies, suggestive of the delays to the return home.

We end with a VOX commission from 2014, “We Are Home” by Jenni Brandon. Members of VOX participated in the creation of this piece by offering descriptions of what VOX meant to them. As an expression of a community made up of many different voices, the piece has a recurring musical motif: the energetic repetition of “we are” that builds in texture, layering voices from lowest to highest, only ever ending when voices are at their zenith of strength: in unity.

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