Grow Old Along With Me

A Setting of Excerpts from Two Poems by Robert Browning

For Unaccompanied Mixed Chorus (SATB)

By Mark Zuckerman
1998

Duration: ca. 3'30"

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About the Music

I wrote **Grow Old Along With Me** in honor of my wife, Judith, to be sung at our wedding.

This piece is actually a joint effort, since we both selected the text. It was Judith's idea to use Robert Browning, and she chose as our theme the famous first lines from Browning's poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra:* "Grow old along with me/The best is yet to be." These words have been set by a number of composers (John Lennon is perhaps the best known). We then read through several volumes of Browning's work until we discovered *Any Wife to Any Husband*, the second stanza of which we felt captured exactly how we felt about each other.

Grow Old Along with Me was presented as a choral consecration joining the two parts of the Jewish wedding ceremony: *Kiddushin*, the engagement ceremony, and *Nissuin*, the marriage ceremony. Judith and I were facing each other, holding hands, while it was sung.

Ours was a very musical wedding. We walked down the aisle to the choral setting of Psalm LXVII by the 17th century composer, Salamon Rossi. I wrote the rest of the choral music: a Hebrew setting of a verse from *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) was the prelude, and the postlude was an arrangement (in Yiddish) of *Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn*. (I also wrote the song played at our party during our first dance as husband and wife: truly *our* song.)

About the Text

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be!
I have but to be by thee, and thy hand
Will never let mine go, nor heart withstand
The beating of my heart to reach its place.
When shall I look for thee and feel thee gone?
When cry for the old comfort and find none?
Never, I know! Thy soul is in thy face.
Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be!

The two lines from *Rabbi Ben Ezra* serve as a frame, beginning and concluding the piece, and surrounding the excerpt from *Any Wife to Any Husband*. Each time they occur, the two lines are set as antecedent/consequent phrases, as their poetic structure suggests.

The framing lines from *Rabbi Ben Ezra* highlight the intensity expressed by the stanza from *Any Wife to Any Husband*. The essence of this passion is distilled into the word "never," which occurs twice. The two "never"'s surround two other significant words that are repeated: first "heart," used once for each lover; and "when," which starts two rhetorical questions answered by the second "never." These are the key elements in the text that motivate the music.

About the Musical Materials

Grow Old Along With Me uses a pitch collection Vincent Persichetti called the "symmetrical scale" (e.g., C-D-Eb-F-F#-G#-A-B).

This scale sounds a lot like the familiar minor scale – you can build it by taking the first four notes of the minor scale and then transposing them by a tritone. In **Grow Old Along With Me**, different properties of the symmetrical scale come into play at different times.

In each of the *Rabbi Ben Ezra* sections – the first and last sections – the harmony consists of a four-note chord with a symmetrical interval structure not containing a tritone. Although the chord in the first section is different from the one in the last section, the two chords share the property that a transposition contains the other four notes in the collection. This complementary relation articulates the antecedent/consequent phrasing.

The emotional intensity in the stanza from *Any Wife to Any Husband* (the middle section) is also manifest in the harmony. This time, the four-note chords are asymmetrical, each containing a tritone and the homonym (that is, a chord that sounds like, but doesn't have the function) of a triad in tonal music. Unlike the framing sections, the harmonic progression in the middle section uses tones in common among the different transformations of the four-note chords, slowing the harmonic rhythm and making the most of subtle melodic differences. The triad homonyms emerge prominently at the cadences.

This last feature is echoed in the last section, where the four-note chord also contains an embedded triad homonym, which emerges in the last cadence.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the *Goldene Keyt* Singers (Mary Ellen Callahan, Hsi-Ling Chang, Peter Eldridge, and Archie Worley), who graced our wedding with a heartfelt performance.

To my wife Judith, my partner in this piece as well as in life, and the inspiration behind this and other pieces of my music, my undying love and gratitude.

About Mark Zuckerman

Mark Zuckerman received a 2004 Artist Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. He holds a PhD in composition from Princeton University, and is a student of Milton Babbitt, David Epstein, J. K. Randall, and Elie Yarden. He has taught composition, tonal and atonal theory, orchestration, and computer music at Princeton and Columbia Universities, and published numerous scholarly articles and a book on listening to jazz, drawn from a popular jazz survey course he taught at Princeton and Columbia.

He founded *Di Goldene Keyt*, The Yiddish Chorale, and has written a bunch of choral music in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, including some twenty arrangements for a cappella mixed chorus of Yiddish songs.

His choral music has been performed by such notable conductors as Judith Clurman, Zalmen Mlotek, Elayne Robinson Grossman, and Ben Schaechter ; and is published by Carl Fischer. His choral music has been featured by such groups as The Rottenberg Chorale; The New Yiddish Chorale; The Golden Jubilee Singers; The Workmen's Circle Chorus; The Jewish Folk Chorus of San Francisco; The Toronto Jewish Folk Choir*; Di Goldene Keyt,* The Yiddish Chorale; *Kol Dodi*; and The Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus at such venues as the 92nd Street Y, Symphony Space, Town Hall, Merkin Hall, The Miller Theatre at Columbia University, The North American Jewish Choral Festival, and The Toronto Ashkenaz Festival.

Grow Old Along With Me

for unaccompanied SATB

Duration: ca. 3'30"

Text: Robert Browning (from the poems Rabbi Ben Ezra and Any Wife to Any Husband)   **Music: Mark Zuckerman**

Simply and Easily (♩ = 80)

S: Grow old a - long with me! The best is yet to

A: Grow old a - long with me! The best is yet to

T: Grow old a - long with me! with

B: Grow old a - long with me! with

[5]

S: be! with me!

A: be! with me!

T: me! Grow old a - long with me!

B: me! Grow old a - long with me! Grow old a - long with

[9]

S: The best The best The best is yet to be!

A: The best The best The best The best is yet to be!

T: The best The best is yet to be!

B: me! The best The best The best The best is yet to be!

Lyrics under the music:

(27)
When shall I look for thee and feel thee gone? When cry for the old

(31)
com - fort and find none? Ne - - - - - - - ver,

(37)
Ne - ver, I know! Thy soul is in thy