

The ALCM Raabe Prize for Excellence in Sacred Composition is awarded every two years for a single musical work, published or unpublished and written within the last five years, but that work should reflect a larger history of excellence on the part of the composer who need not be Lutheran. While any sacred piece may be submitted, works that include the voice or voices are preferred over those for instruments alone. The \$2000 monetary award is shared equally by the winner and a musical or ecclesiastical organization chosen by the composer.

Dr. William and Nancy Raabe of Columbus, Ohio, established this prize to recognize and encourage significant accomplishments in composition contributing to the body of sacred music for the church in the Lutheran heritage.



David Cherwien writes: "The Souls of the Righteous" was a commission from the Choral Arts Ensemble of Rochester, Minnesota and their director, Michael Culloton. They were doing a program of settings of texts by "Famous Poets". Since my choir, the National Lutheran Choir does an annual All Saints program we set out to find a text that could fit both so that I could satisfy two needs in one. Living with a poet has a huge advantage as a composer - not only does Susan know poetry, if we can't find what we're looking for - she can write it. However, she found this Robert Richardson poem in an anthology in which the poem was identified as the epitaph placed on Mark Twain's daughter's tomb. Its text was so simple and moving it had to be the one for the composition:

*Warm summer sun,
Shine kindly here.
Warm southern wind,
Blow softly here.
Green sod above,
lie light.
Good night, dear heart.
Good night.*

I immediately imagined a father standing over the grave of his daughter, in a prairie, with tall grass gently blowing in the breeze with these every so tender sentiments for the Earth to care for his daughter. I also thought of the promise we have as Christians: "The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster. But they are at peace."

These two texts combined with the image gave me the piece. The form is simple; the four part choir (divisi) after a gentle rising of the sun, sings flowing breezes, loving and tender. A second choir is like angels offering the Christian promise to the grieving father as if from above. The piece seems to transform itself, moving through several keys, some of leaning towards the fear of disaster, but returns to

the place from where it began - we have peace in Christ always in life and in death.

It does take a good number of forces as the main choir is in 8 parts, the second choir as many as four parts (we do it with 6 singers) but the flowing lines seem to go where singers expect and provides a very picturesque musical depiction of the texts with very rich, lush yet gentle harmonies.

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Recorded by the *National Lutheran Choir*, on their CD *Eternity* - www.nlca.com