

2018 Winner:

MARY BETH BENNETT

Deep River to Premiere at the
National Convention in Kansas City



Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge

MARY BETH BENNETT has been awarded the 2018 AGO/ECS Publishing Award in Choral Composition for her commissioned piece *Deep River*. The 2018 award called for proposals for the commission of a work for SATB choir and organ with congregational participation, utilizing the text of the American spiritual “Deep River.” Ms. Bennett’s composition, which has garnered a \$2,000 award and publication by ECS Publishing, will be premiered at the AGO National Convention in Kansas City. The biennial competition seeks outstanding compositions for SATB chorus and organ in which the organ plays a distinctive and significant role. Specific requirements vary each year.

Mary Beth Bennett is a nationally recognized performer, composer, and improviser living in Richmond, Va., where she serves on the adjunct music faculty of the University of Richmond. She is also the organist at Second Baptist Church, Richmond. Her

compositions are published by Augsburg-Fortress, Concordia, GIA, Broadman, World Library, National, Hope, and Oxford University Press.

Being part of the AGO’s New Music Committee is often a journey into worlds of inspired minds by means of newly hatched music. In Mary Beth Bennett’s case, my journey toward her music is a bit late. She has been heard on *Pipedreams* eight times, she’s been a commissioned composer for both AGO regional and national conventions and for the Association of Anglican Musicians. Organist Alison Luedecke recently premiered her *Outburst of Spring Triumphant* in Paris at Notre Dame Cathedral (Alan Morrison played the U.S. premiere). I’ve been living under a rock, but no more.

Mary Beth Bennett generously sent me a number of her scores in preparation for this article, and what I found over several afternoons was a parade of music that leapt off the page. There was organ music for the



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simplest church service all the way to recital closers; there was organ music with instruments and choral music within the reach of many choirs. Centuries of French organ music are what motivate her to communicate her own musical vision and the results are remarkable. Each piece I read was a tour of a particular hymn tune or musical gesture, or both.

Mary Beth Bennett is a composer with commitment. Her music explores musical, theological, and emotional ideas from start to finish. I especially like the optional addition of the congregation at the end of *Deep River*. The congregation follows the tenors and basses singing the tune with three-part women's voices overhead so that everyone in the building is singing by the end of the piece.

Deep River will have its premiere performance July 4, 2018, at the AGO National Convention in Kansas City. The AGO Committee on New Music invites you to attend!

LOUISE MUNDINGER, *Director*
Committee on New Music

Mary Beth Bennett on Her Composition *Deep River*

The Great Dismal Swamp stretches from North Carolina to Central Virginia. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it encompassed an estimated one million acres, thick with vegetation, mosquitos, and snakes. It was an inhospitable but effective place to hide for escaped slaves fleeing captivity in the South.

In the introduction, I tried to create a vision of the mist rising slowly from the swamp water with dim sunlight filtering through the trees. The left hand portrays the dark, lazy water while the right hand, loosely built on the spiritual melody, wanders above, foreshadowing the choral entrance. The choir is first used as tonal color outlining the altered first phrase. The tenors and basses arrive at "campground" through an expanded meter and contrary motion. Measure 38 ushers in a new section. Here, a two-measure repeating harmonic figure signifies the determined steps of the refugee slaves as they fought their way through the swamp. The tenors and basses comment with resignation in m. 42. The altos begin a sighing motive (inverted from the traditional high to low contour) at m. 46 that is echoed in the sopranos at

m. 52. Following the slowly built crescendo, the questioning phrases "Oh, don't you want to go?" become shorter and more urgent. The choral climax at m. 60 broadens into 4/4 as we hear, "go to that gospel feast, that promised land." As the voices trail off, the organ emerges as a solo, dancing and swaying with joy at the thought of the Promised Land. Following a decrescendo, the choir enters again at "where all is peace." A simple A-flat major triad on "peace" ushers in an anticipatory fragment of phrase one in the organ, followed by the entrance of the congregation singing the traditional spiritual melody, unaltered for the first time. Three-part women's voices hover above in a harmonic descant "commentary." Returning to the opening mysterious style, the congregation sings, "I want to cross over into campground." Finally, as we hear the solo clarinet slowly descending into the harmonic background, we envision the footprints of the slaves disappearing back into the dark water.

Performance Tips

The piece can easily be performed by choir and organ alone, if desired. Although it will work on any type of organ, I had a symphonic-type instrument in mind, along with a mysterious atmosphere.

- Meter shifts should emphasize the big beats (quarters and dotted quarters) rather than individual eighths;
- Phrase mm. 38–54 in two-measure sections;
- Build slowly from m. 38 to the climax at m. 60;
- The right hand may be soloed out from m. 64 through m. 67, if desired;
- Right hand at m. 71 should be just loud enough to cue the congregation to come in, but without overpowering the left hand, which stays on the Swell;
- In m. 80, thumb down the right-hand D-flat to the Great and hold it as the rest moves to Swell;
- At m. 81, the left-hand solo, while listed as a clarinet stop, must be able to just be heard above the choir and congregation; another reed may need to be substituted;
- Add a soft 32' in m. 82 for "shimmer" without breaking the pedal line.

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