

*Leaves of Grass – Ode to America*

Thomas Lloyd

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free  
'tis the gift to come down where you ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right  
it will be in the valley of love and delight.*

*Simple Gifts* (Shaker Folk Song)

As a strong bird on pinions free,  
Joyous, the amplest spaces heavenward cleaving,  
Such be the thought I'd think to-day of thee, America,  
Such be the recitative I'd bring to-day for thee.

Walt Whitman (1872) – from “As a strong bird on pinions free” (*Leaves of Grass*)

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A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with  
full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is,  
any more than he.  
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition,  
out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer, designedly dropt,

*He shall feed his flock like a shepherd,  
and carry the young lambs in his bosom.*

R. Nathaniel Dett – from *Listen to the Lambs*

Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that  
we may see and remark, and say, *Whose?*  
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic;  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white;  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Walt Whitman (1855) – from “Song of Myself” (*Leaves of Grass*)

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*O beautiful for pilgrim's feet  
Whose stern, impassioned stress,  
A thoroughfare for freedom beat  
Across the wilderness!  
America! America!  
God mend thine ev'ry flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control,  
Thy liberty in law.*

Katherine Lee Bates/Samuel A. Ward – from *America the Beautiful*

...a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.  
...[can] any nation so conceived and so dedicated...long endure[?]

Abraham Lincoln (1863) - from *Gettysburg Address*

**Duration – approx. 9 minutes**

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*Thomas Lloyd*

*composed for the July 2004 tour of the Bucks County Choral Society  
to Tallinn, Estonia, and St. Petersburg, Russia*

For the July 2004 tour of the Bucks County Choral Society to Estonia and Russia, coming at a time when US foreign policy was the center of world-wide controversy and concern, I wanted to bring music that would convey to a foreign audience something of the contemporary American spirit, with a combination of both the confident exuberance and the spiritual humility that can both be found in the American tradition. I was surprised by how easily the poetic incantations of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address could be adapted, at a somewhat slower tempo, to the same melody inspired by the over-the-top lyricism of Whitman's "As a strong bird on pinions free." Three traditional melodies are quoted for the rich national associations they evoke and the context they provide for the final question that Lincoln's words prophetically pose again for our time. – TL