



Four Frost Songs

*Settings of poems
by Robert Frost*

Ephrem Feeley

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Notes

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was born in San Francisco. Following the death of his father, Frost moved to his grandfather's home in Massachusetts with his mother. He started to write poetry, and at twenty-three, entered Harvard, but left two years later without completing his degree. For eleven years, Frost worked as a farmer, but when the farm failed, moved to England. There he met poets such as Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas. He continued to write, and by 1915 had published two collections of poetry. He returned, famous, to the United States, where he took a series of lectureships, finally becoming Professor of Poetry at Harvard.

Much of Frost's poetry is inspired by the New England countryside, the forests, snow and farming communities. Still widely read today, his poetry has a simplicity of language and ideas that many find accessible and appealing.

These four songs were written in Summer 2005, and include settings of two of Frost's best-known poems: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* and *The Road Not Taken*; along with two less well-known poems: *Spring Pools* and *The Aim was Song*. They are scored for medium to high voice and piano.

I began to approach *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* sometime back to 1998, but put sketches for this piece aside, and later turning them into a setting of the Benedictus hymn for Morning Prayer. Eventually I returned to the original sketches and completed the Frost poem setting. The opening idea, heard in the introduction and the first verse, is heard later in the final verse. The middle two verses are melodically different, with the accompaniment in the third verse capturing the shaking of the horse's bells. The open chord at the end has a hint of ambiguity - reflecting the desire of the poet to remain in the woods, setting him in conflict with his "promises to keep". This piece also exists in a version for two- and three-part choir.

The song *The Road Not Taken* is in simple ternary AABA form. The four-bar interlude, as well as giving the singer an occasion to breathe, gives the listener the chance to reflect on the text sung. There is a change of tone in the third verse, as the poet seems to be slightly annoyed at the not being able to choose the first road. Bars 49-52 mirror his sadness at the realisation that he will probably never travel the path he did not choose. It is important in bar 52 that the singer finishes their note just before the fermata on the note F# in the accompaniment, and that the pedal is lifted just prior to this note too. In all pieces, the pedal should be used sensitively throughout.

Spring Pools is a quiet reflection on the beauty at the end of winter. In his writings, Frost hinted that his poetry should stand alone, without being set to music. In this song, I have allowed the words to speak for themselves by keeping the setting extremely simple, using mainly crotchets in the vocal line, and having the music sung in a style similar to chant, taking the rhythm from the words. The sparse accompaniment should be *colla voce* at all times. It would be best if accompanists tried to bring out the internal A-B-A-G# figure in the right-hand chords.

The final song in the cycle, *The Aim was Song*, starts with an introduction that is heard again after each verse. These six bars have no regular metre, changing time signature each measure before finally settling on 6/8 for the sung text. The changing time signatures of the introduction and interludes represent the changing and fickle nature of the wind, while the more regular metre found in the verse represents the order that humankind tries to impose on nature - one of the themes of this poem. The song has much movement and energy, but should be sung lightly to allow the words to be heard clearly, with the exception of the fourth verse, which is more declamatory in style.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Words: Robert Frost

Music: Ephrem Feeley

Peacefully, with sensitivity ($\text{♩} = 74$)

Piano

p

8va

con ped.

6

Whose woods these are I think I

6

Pno.

8va

mp

11

know. His house is in the vil-lage though; he will not see me stop-ping here to

11

Pno.

16

watch his woods fill up with snow. My lit - tle horse must think it

Pno.

20

queer to stop with-out a farm-house near be - tween the woods and fro - zen lake, the

poco cresc.

Pno.

24

dark - est eve-ning of the year. He

Pno.

28

gives his har - ness bells a shake to ask if there is some mis -

Pno. *leggiero*

31

take. The on - ly o - ther sound's the sweep of

Pno.

34

ea - sy wind and dow - ny flake.

Pno. *rall.* *p a tempo* *rit.*

38

Pno.

8va

8va

42

Pno.

The woods are love - ly, dark and

rit. al fine

46

Pno.

deep, but I have pro - mi - ses to keep, and miles to go be - fore I

The Road Not Taken

to Fr Joseph McEvoy,
on the occasion of the 25th anniversary
of his ordination to the priesthood

Words: Robert Frost

Music: Ephrem Feeley

Moderately (♩ = 112)

Piano

mf *mp* *poco rit.*

The piano introduction consists of two systems of music. The first system has a vocal line with whole rests and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Dynamics include *mf*, *mp*, and *poco rit.* The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 2/4.

7

Two roads di-verged in a yel-low wood, and sor-ry I could not tra-vel both _____

Pno. *mf a tempo*

This system contains the first line of lyrics. The vocal line starts at measure 7 and continues to measure 11. The piano accompaniment is marked *mf a tempo*. The key signature remains Bb and the time signature is 2/4.

12

_____ and be one tra-vel-ler, long I stood _____ and looked down one as

Pno.

This system contains the second line of lyrics. The vocal line starts at measure 12 and continues to measure 16. The piano accompaniment continues with the same *mf a tempo* marking. The key signature remains Bb and the time signature is 2/4.

17

far as I could to where it bent in the un-der-growth.

Pno.

22

Then took the o - ther, as just as fair, and

Pno.

27

ha - ving per-haps the bet-ter claim, be - cause it was gras - sy and

Pno.

31

wan-ted wear; _____ though as for that the pas-sing there _____ had real - ly

Pno.

36

worn them a - bout the same.

Pno.

mp

41

And both in mor - ning e - qual-ly lay in leaves no step had trod - den black.

Pno.

mf slightly broader

Spring Pools

Words: Robert Frost

Music: Ephrem Feeley

Mysteriously, chant-like (♩ = 88)

Piano

These pools that, though in fo-rests, still re-flect the

colla voce
mp sempre

con ped.
una corda

6

to-tal sky al-most with-out de-lect, and like the flowers be-side them,

6

Pno.

11

chill and shi-ver, will like the flowers be-side them soon be gone, and yet not

11

Pno.

16

out by a - ny brook or ri - ver, but up by roots to bring dark fo - liage on.

Pno.

tre corde

21

The trees that have it in their pent - up buds to dar - ken na - ture

Pno.

27

and be sum - mer woods: Let them think twice be - fore they use their powers to

Pno.

The Aim Was Song

Words: Robert Frost

Music: Ephrem Feeley

With movement (♩. = 70)

Piano

mf

The piano introduction consists of five measures. The right hand plays a series of chords, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The dynamic is marked *mf*.

6 *leggiero*

Be - fore man came to blow it right, the wind once blew it - self un-taught, and

Pno.

The piano accompaniment for the first line of lyrics (measures 6-10) features a light, flowing texture. The right hand has a melodic line with eighth notes, and the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The dynamic is *leggiero*.

11

did its loud-est day and night in a-ny rough place where it caught.

Pno.

cresc. *mf*

The piano accompaniment for the second line of lyrics (measures 11-15) continues the texture from the previous section. It includes a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking and a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic marking. The right hand has a melodic line with eighth notes, and the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes.

16

Man came to tell it

Pno.

21

what was wrong: it had - n't found the place to blow; it blew too hard, the

Pno. *cresc.*

25

aim was song. And lis-ten, lis-ten, how it ought to

Pno.

29

go!

Pno.

mf

34

He took a lit - tle in his mouth, and held it long e - nough for

Pno.

39

north to be con - ver - ted in - to south, and then by mea - sure blew it forth. By

Pno.

cresc. *poco rit.* *a tempo*