

A Prayer

O Lord, the hard-won miles
Have worn my stumbling feet:
Oh, soothe me with thy smiles,
And make my life complete.

The thorns were thick and keen
Where'er I trembling trod;
The way was long between
My wounded feet and God.

Where healing waters flow
Do thou my footsteps lead.
My heart is aching so;
Thy gracious balm I need.

Paul Laurence Dunbar
(1872–1906)

Much of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry is poignant and succinct, born out of first-hand experience of adversity. Many of his poems describe human emotion, and the lyrics often use contrasting language of hope and sadness. This setting of his three-verse poem, *A Prayer*, is like a reflective evening hymn in its use of a consistent, rhythmically simple melody, which has variations on the the second and third verses. The style of writing requires a range of choral vocal colours – ranging from pure, straight tones to intentionally strong vibrato; from the sounds reminiscent of the middle-age organum style to passages requiring a contemporary vocal approach.

The opening introductory phrase sets the mood for prayer, with a quasi-monastic humming phrase built on parallel chords. The sense of weariness, and intense yearning for relief, is painted by the melancholic chromatically falling melodic line and harmonies, which contrast with the more comforting spacious harmonies. The sombre second verse is followed by a moment of hope in the third, where the setting takes a new direction, momentarily departing from the original key. The rippling effect of healing waters is reflected in the rising and falling bass and alto lines. The emotional intensity and the free, improvised character of Spirituals, Gospel, and Blues conveys the depth of pain in the second part of the third verse on the word 'aching', before returning to the solemn plea. The closing Amen carries the bitter-sweet mood of the setting.

Ken Burton,
February 2021

Duration: c. 3 minutes

*Premiered in the inaugural performance of The Jason Max Ferdinand Singers as
part of VOCESS's LIVE from London Spring festival, 2021*

To Dr Jason Max Ferdinand & The Jason Max Ferdinand Singers

A Prayer

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)

Ken Burton (b.1970)

Earnestly ♩ = 72

Soprano

Alto *p espress.*
Ooh Ooh O

Tenor *p espress.*
Ooh Ooh O

Bass *p espress.*
Ooh Ooh O

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