

# "Art That Hides Art": The Craft of Randall Thompson, Robert Frost, and *Frostiana*

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Since its first performance in 1959, Randall Thompson's *Frostiana* has been a popular part of the American choral repertory. It can be reasonably assumed that most choral conductors in the United States are at least familiar with the piece. Many have performed it, or portions thereof, either as a choir member or conductor. The recent publications of a documented catalogue of Thompson's music and a single score containing all of *Frostiana*'s movements demonstrate a continued interest in Thompson's music and *Frostiana* in particular.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its popularity and rapid acceptance, or perhaps *because* of its popularity and rapid acceptance, *Frostiana* is deemed by some to be populist and is not necessarily considered a sophisticated work of art.<sup>2</sup> The poetry of

Robert Frost, whose poems serve as the text of *Frostiana*, suffers a similar fate. It is easy to mistake the folksy, aesthetically accessible nature of Thompson and Frost's works for a lack of sophistication. Upon further examination, however, one finds that these works are anything but unrefined. Through craftsmanship and technical command, Frost and Thompson build layers of meaning beneath a deceptively simple surface. Theirs is an "art that hides art."

The following discussion will offer reasons why Thompson and Frost are dismissed as provincial or unsophisticated and then will propose a reappraisal of their crafts. After a short history of the composition of *Frostiana*, an examination

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl B. Schmidt and Elizabeth K. Schmidt, *The Music of Randall Thompson (1899–1984): A Documented Catalogue* (Fenton, MO: E. C. Schirmer, 2014) and Randall Thompson, *Frostiana* (1959; repr., Boston: E. C. Schirmer, 2015). Zachary J. Vreeman has also recently made significant contributions to the scholarship on Thompson, specifically his Requiem setting. His dissertation provides a much-needed examination of this work. See Vreeman, "Randall Thompson's *Requiem*: A text setting analysis and recommendations for performance" (DMA diss., University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2011). He also recently published an article titled "Randall Thompson's Requiem: A Forgotten American Masterpiece" in *The Choral Scholar* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Frostiana* is not listed in *An Annotated Inventory of Distinctive Choral Literature for Performance at the High School Level* (Margaret B. Hawkins, American Choral Directors Association Monograph No. 2, 1976), *Twentieth Century Choral Music: An Annotated Bibliography of Music Appropriate*

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*for College and University Choirs* (Richard J. Bloesch and Weyburn Wasson, American Choral Directors Association Monograph No. 9, 1997), or any of the three volumes of *Teaching Music through Performance in Choir* (Heather J. Buchanan and Matthew W. Mehaffey, ed., GIA Publications, 2005, 2007, 2011). The author has the upmost respect for the authors and editors of these books; however, the omission of *Frostiana* is revealing.

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of Thompson's technical prowess as evidenced in that particular work will follow. Specifically, Thompson's incorporation of contrapuntal and early music elements, sensitivity to prosody, and use of pictorial devices exemplify the complexities hidden beneath *Frostiana's* façade of simplicity.

### *Thompson and Frost: Dismissal and Reappraisal*

Roughly contemporaries, Randall Thompson (1899–1984) and Robert Frost (1874–1963) are both known respectively for writing accessible music and poetry. When one considers the musical and literary trends of the first part of the twentieth century, when these men were most active, their artistic contributions vary greatly from the austere, intellectual aesthetic that was predominant at the time. Their approachable, vernacular styles make them easy targets for the elite world of criticism. It should be recognized, however, that these men summon images of rural and folk life, while they at the same time employ conventional techniques based in historical practice. For example, Thompson adhered to traditional tonality, and Frost closely followed established poetic meters and rhyme schemes. The seemingly simplistic qualities of their works are actually illusionary stages upon which they build masterful, technically constructed scenes.

Some perceive Thompson's music to be unsophisticated partly because he maintained a consistent style throughout his career.<sup>3</sup> Uninfluenced by trends, he never ventured into serialism, despite its popularity at the time.<sup>4</sup> His

<sup>3</sup> Thompson's consistency can also be seen as a "monument of calm integrity in a musically turbulent half-century." James Haar, "Randall Thompson and the Music of the Past," in *Randall Thompson: A Choral Legacy; Studies, Reflections, Tributes*, ed. Alfred Mann (Boston: E. C. Schirmer, 1983), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Vreeman, 3.

consistency can easily be mistaken as unrefined or lacking innovation. *The New Yorker*, for example, recently disparaged the popularity of Thompson's accessible style by referring to *Alleluia*, his most famous work and one of the most popular choral compositions in American history, as "deathless."<sup>5</sup> The root of Thompson's uniform style is not a lack of innovative ideas, but rather a clear and humble sense of his own voice. Thompson never sought to develop a "cult of the individual" around himself. In his article "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," Thompson describes the "plague" of composers simply trying to be unique. He notes that the first thing many composers do is attempt to "establish his own personality."<sup>6</sup> Unlike Schoenberg, who sought to break loose from the hold of the nineteenth century by inventing a new vocabulary, Thompson used "conventional sounds in a fresh context."<sup>7</sup> By writing "tuneful, singable melodies," Thompson may have bucked contemporary trends, but he remained true to his own compositional voice.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson's "all American" style and the fact that he was "inspired by the native artistic environment of this country" may also contribute to the perception of his music as being provincial.<sup>9</sup> American folk music influenced the

<sup>5</sup> "Classical Music," *Goings on about Town*, *New Yorker*, April 20, 2015, 22.

<sup>6</sup> In the same article, Thompson also bemoans the comparison of composers' similarities as prohibitive to the development of a cohesive American school of composition. He does recognize, however, the necessity of such comparisons for musicological purposes. Randall Thompson, "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," *Musical Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (January 1932): 10, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Haar, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Vreeman, 3.

<sup>9</sup> According to his own classification system of contemporary compositional styles that he lays out in "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," Thompson is a hybrid of the nationalist and eclectic styles. Elliot Forbes, "The Music of Randall Thompson," *Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (January 1949): 1.

shape of Thompson's musical phrases.<sup>10</sup> His American style also stems from *The Sacred Harp*, from which he drew inspiration in particular.<sup>11</sup> Thompson's settings of texts by iconic Americans, as well as his compositions commemorating important events in American history, may further contribute to the assessment of his works as being less than high art.<sup>12</sup>

The "diatonic" and "conservative" qualities of Thompson's music cannot justly be equated with simplicity.<sup>13</sup> To say that Thompson was an unsophisticated musician is simply a falsehood. He earned two degrees from Harvard University, won the Prix de Rome, and taught at a number of the country's finest institutions, including Wellesley College, the University of California, Berkeley, the Curtis Institute, the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Princeton University, and Harvard. He was a master pedagogue of music theory, specializing in modal counterpoint.<sup>14</sup> His compositional style is rooted

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *The Sacred Harp's* influence is seen in *A Girl's Garden*, the fifth movement of *Frostiana*. The piece relies on a six-note scale, which recalls the melodic language of *The Sacred Harp*. The omission of the seventh scale degree produces a modal quality. Bryon Wendol McGilvray, "The Choral Music of Randall Thompson, an American Eclectic" (DMA diss., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1979), 66-73 and Gloria Nell Lupo, "Expressiveness in Musical Settings of Poems by Robert Frost" (MA thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1963), 52.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson set texts by Robert Frost (*Frostiana, A Concord Cantata*) and Thomas Jefferson (*The Testament of Freedom*). He also composed *Ode to the Virginian Voyage* for the 350th anniversary of Jamestown, MA, *The Testament of Freedom* for the 200th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, *Frostiana* for the two 200th anniversary of Amherst, MA, and *A Concord Cantata* for the 200th anniversary of Concord, MA. McGilvray, 72-79.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Thomas Rawlins, "Randall Thompson: An American," *Choral Journal* 45, no. 10 (May 2005): 18.

<sup>14</sup> In his essay "On Contrapuntal Technique," Thompson states, "...When I find myself alone of an evening, I would far rather try my hand at triple counterpoint or the solution of a puzzle canon than at solving a crossword puzzle or reading a detective story." Randall Thompson, "On Contrapuntal Technique," in Mann, 20.

in his knowledge, academic background, and achievements. Archibald T. Davison dedicated his book *The Technique of Choral Composition* to Thompson, a former student, and remarked on his compositional skill, calling him, "first among our native composers in the art of choral writing."<sup>15</sup>

Similar to Thompson, Frost's accessible, deceptively "easy" side at once appeals to the common reader, as well as prompts some of the literary elite to dismiss him.<sup>16</sup> Frost's cultivation of a "deceptively homespun New England persona" is partially responsible for this rejection.<sup>17</sup> He portrayed himself as a "homespun Yankee sage, the L.L. Bean of verse, a swinger of birches and picker of apples whose wisdom and prickly wit were like a potbellied woodstove taking the chill (Eliot, Pound) out of Modernist poetry."<sup>18</sup> Frost's work is much more accessible on a surface level than that of his contemporaries, and for this very reason has long been mistakenly considered simplistic. *The Atlantic*, for example, initially rejected poems from *North of Boston* (1914), Frost's second book that made him famous. When the book received great recognition after its publication in England, *The Atlantic* solicited a submission from Frost and printed some of the same poems it had originally rejected.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See Archibald T. Davison, *The Technique of Choral Composition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946).

<sup>16</sup> Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953), 28-29.

<sup>17</sup> Helen Bacon, "Frost and the Ancient Muses," in *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*, ed. Robert Faggen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Miles, "All the Difference," Book Review, *New York Times*, May 11, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Holden, "North of Boston," *New Yorker*, June 6, 1931, 24.

Frost's poetry truly did not gain widespread acceptance within the academy until Randall Jarrell argued its merits in two famous essays.<sup>20</sup> In 1959, Lionel Trilling, then the most influential literary critic, caused a tremendous reaction within the literary world when he called Frost "a terrifying poet" at a banquet in honor of his eighty-fifth birthday. As Joseph Brodsky keenly observes, Trilling referred to Frost not as "tragic," which would imply a state of stasis following catastrophe, but as "terrifying," a more powerful word in that it piques the imagination with anticipation of humanity's (or one's own) potential for darkness.<sup>21</sup>

Layers of meaning run beneath the surface of Frost's quaint, pastoral scenes, and he encouraged readers to search for implications beyond the most obvious interpretations. He said in 1927 that "I almost think a poem is most valuable for its ulterior meanings...I have developed an ulteriority complex."<sup>22</sup> Frost's skill lies in his ability to use language that is easily understood to convey complex ideas and emotions.<sup>23</sup> For example, "Come In," which serves as the text for the third movement of *Frostiana*, can be cursorily read as a vignette depicting someone walking by woods and hearing a bird. However, upon deeper examination, one can interpret the speaker's pausing as a contemplation of entering the wood's darkness (evil? suicide?) but ultimately

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<sup>20</sup> See "The Other Frost" and "To the Laodiceans" in *Poetry and the Age*.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Brodsky, "On Grief and Reason," *New Yorker*, September 26, 1994, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Buffalo (NY) *Evening News*, November 11, 1927, quoted in Bacon, 75.

<sup>23</sup> John F. Lynen observes that "On the surface, [Frost's] work has a disarming simplicity which sets it apart...Because he demands less erudition in the reader, his poetry may seem to lack the complexity of thought one finds at the center of the best modern verse...The simplicity, however, it only apparent." John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), 2.

refusing.<sup>24</sup> Once the poem is unpacked, one finds that "terrifying" currents flow beneath its placid surface.

Despite frequently portraying himself as a rugged New Englander, Frost actually grew up in San Francisco and used New England as a stage for his works. Like William Faulkner, Frost is "both the interpreter and the representative of his regional culture."<sup>25</sup> His mythical portrayal of New England parallels that of the Virgil's Arcadia in *Eclogues*, on which Frost based what is arguably his darkest poem, "Home Burial," dealing with marital problems following the death of a child.<sup>26</sup> This gets at a key component of Frost and his poetry—often what appears to be casualness actually has its roots in classical literature and forms. His familiarity with and admiration for classical poetry is seen in his adherence to traditional concepts of rhyme and meter, while he at the same time employs speech-like American vernacular.<sup>27</sup>

Frost's allusions to works within the literary canon also demonstrate his sophistication. For example, in "Choose Something Like a Star," which Thompson set as the last movement of *Frostiana*, Frost mentions "Keats' eremite." While the common reader might skip over this comparison, those familiar with English Romantic poetry will recognize it as a reference to "Bright Star, Would I Were Steadfast," by John Keats (1795–1821). Another example of an allusion is the title of Frost's poem "Out, Out—,"

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<sup>24</sup> See Brodsky, 72–74 for a line-by-line analysis of this poem.

<sup>25</sup> Lynen, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Lynen, 51 and Brodsky, 74–76.

<sup>27</sup> The famous poet Timothy Steele notes, "The magical paradox of fine verse is that it marries fixed measure with fluid idiomatic speech, and no poet more keenly relished and embodied this paradox than Frost." Timothy Steele, "Across Spaces of the Footed Line: the Meter and Versification of Robert Frost," in Faggen, 123.

a reference to the famous soliloquy that Macbeth gives after he finds out that his wife is dead.<sup>28</sup> Frost's reference to Macbeth's grim and desperate speech is certainly appropriate given the dark subject of his own poem, a boy losing his hand in a farming accident. His Shakespearean allusion may escape some readers but demonstrates the poet's knowledge and love of historical poetry.<sup>29</sup>

In their respective mediums, Thompson and Frost continued to use traditional materials (tonality, form, meter, rhyme) at a time when other artists were disregarding anything resembling established technique. Their mutual admiration for works of the past can be traced to a shared love for the lyric poetry of the Roman bard Horace (65–8 BC). Although separated by millennia, some of Frost's poems have roots in the works of Horace, with whom he had a "spiritual kinship."<sup>30</sup> For example, Horace's "Fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro" (*Odes*, III, 13) influenced Frost's "Hyla Brook," and Frost's poem "New Hampshire" follows a form similar to that of Horace's Latin *satura* and *sermones*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing." *Macbeth*, V, v, 23-28.

<sup>29</sup> The author would like to thank David Graham, professor of English and the Helen Swift Neilson Professor of Cultural Studies at Ripon College, for sharing his knowledge of Frost. Graham, a poet himself, served as poet-in-residence at The Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire in 1996. He recently led an intriguing discussion about Frost and *Frostiana* during a rehearsal of the Ripon College Choral Union and introduced the work at their concert on December 5, 2014. His insights into and love of Frost's poetry inspired much of this article.

<sup>30</sup> Frost often referenced Horace's writings. For example, Horace wrote in *Ars poetica*, "If you wish me to weep you must first grieve yourself," which Frost appropriated as, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." Horace also coined the phrase "Carpe Diem," which Frost later used as the title of a poem. Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), 146; Jeffrey Meyers, *Robert Frost: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 84-85; Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 317.

<sup>31</sup> Bacon, 77-80; L. Thompson, 148; Lynen, 62.

Thompson was also very familiar with the works of Horace. Some of his earliest works are five settings of Horatian odes, including *O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro*.<sup>32</sup> Thompson and Frost's knowledge of the works of Horace transcends coincidence. It is indicative of their respect for the classical forms of their respective mediums. These established techniques permeate their outputs and contribute toward their highly technical qualities, undergirding their accessible language. The phrase "art that hides art" is attributed to Horace and appears to have been passed on to both Frost and Thompson.

### *History of Frostiana*

Like most of his works, Thompson composed *Frostiana* to fulfill a commission. In this case, he wrote *Frostiana* for the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the incorporation of Amherst, MA.<sup>33</sup> Amherst chose to commission Thompson to set Frost's poetry because both men had connections to the town. Thompson spent time as a child near Amherst, where he became a personal acquaintance of Frost, then an up-and-coming poet. Frost had served on Amherst College's English faculty for several short-term stints.<sup>34</sup>

From June 15 to July 7, 1959, Thompson wrote *Frostiana* at his summer home in Gstaad, Switzerland while on recess from Harvard. Because this commission would be premiered

<sup>32</sup> These settings include "O Venus, regina Cnidi Paphique" (*Odes*, I, 30), "Vitas hinnuleo me similis, Chloë" (*Odes*, I, 23), "Montium custos nemorumque, Virgo" (*Odes*, III, 22), "Quis multa gracilis" (*Odes*, I, 5) and "O fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro" (*Odes*, III, 13). See Schmidt and Schmidt, 78-84 for more information about these works.

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt and Schmidt, 7, 308.

<sup>34</sup> David Francis Urrows, "Biography," in *Randall Thompson: A Bio-Bibliography*, by Caroline Cepin Benser and David Francis Urrows (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 14, 35.

by a collection of local amateur choirs, Thompson composed separate men's and women's movements in order to make the suite easy to learn.<sup>35</sup> A sign of Thompson's practicality, the realities of the performance determined the piece's structure. As shown in the table below, only three of the seven movements require both men's and women's voices. In *The Telephone*, one of the three pieces for mixed voices, the men and women never overlap.<sup>36</sup> Only the first and last movements require substantial joint rehearsals of the mixed voices; *The Telephone* can be put together quickly before a performance.

**Table 1:** Voicings of *Frostiana*.

I	<i>The Road Not Taken</i>	SATB
II	<i>The Pasture</i>	TTB
III	<i>Come In</i>	SAA
IV	<i>The Telephone</i>	SAA/TTBB
V	<i>A Girl's Garden</i>	SAA
VI	<i>Stoppy By Woods on a Snowy Evening</i>	TBB
VII	<i>Choose Something Like a Star</i>	SATB

Thompson's settings of Frost's poetry are singular in part because, since his death, Frost's estate

<sup>35</sup> On July 9, 1959, Thompson wrote Henry G. Mishkin, professor of music at Amherst College and his primary contact regarding the commission, to inform him that he had completed the work. He wrote, "As a matter of fact, the work is a fulfillment of my long-standing wish to write something particularly suited to joint concerts by men's and women's glee clubs. In making it readier to learn by the town choirs, this wish has been fulfilled automatically." This correspondence is held in Harvard University's Houghton Library (CAh 28.1, Folder Amherst Commission *Frostiana* Correspondence), quoted in Schmidt and Schmidt, 309.

<sup>36</sup> Elliot Forbes, "Americana," in Mann, 78.

has granted few composers the rights to set his poetry.<sup>37</sup> Thompson carefully chose the seven poems for *Frostiana*, all of which come from *You Come Too* (1959) except for "Choose Something Like a Star."<sup>38</sup> Thompson originally considered setting "The Gift Outright" as the first movement but eventually decided that it would not fit well with the other pieces. Instead, he selected "The Road Not Taken" and composed this movement last, claiming it unified the suite more satisfactorily.<sup>39</sup>

*Frostiana* received its first performance on Sunday, October 18, 1959. Thompson and Frost were both in attendance at the premier in Amherst, with the composer conducting the performance himself. The event received

<sup>37</sup> In addition to Thompson, Charles Naginski, Brian Murray, Philip Gordon, Paul Sargent, Ann MacDonald Diers, S. Clarence Trued, and John Duke have set Frost's poetry. See Lupo's M.A. thesis for analyses of these settings. Eric Whitacre famously composed a setting of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" without first securing the rights to do so. He eventually requested permission, which Frost's estate and publisher denied, prompting Whitacre to contract Charles Anthony Silvestri to write a new text to fit the existing music. *Sleep* is the resulting work. See Whitacre's website for the complete story: <http://ericwhitacre.com/music-catalog/satb-choral/sleep>.

<sup>38</sup> Jerome C. Maxwell, "An Investigation of the Musical Devices Used by Randall Thompson to Compose Works on the Text of Robert Frost" (MA thesis, Ohio State University, 1966), 16.

<sup>39</sup> In his July 9, 1959 letter to Mishkin, Thompson wrote: "The first chorus was written last. I kept putting it off, because I felt a certain conscientiousness about 'The Gift Outright'. I could have set it. But when I got to the moment of decision, I realized that it was quite foreign to the rest of the work and, in a funny way, quite out of keeping. So I chose 'The Road not Taken'—one of Frost's most beloved poems—instead, to start things off. I feel a strange relief; the whole thing now is unified." Thompson may have rejected "The Gift Outright" because of its imperialistic tone, as evidenced in: "The land was ours before we were the lands..." or because of Amherst's role in the Revolutionary War. He would later set this poem as the final movement of *A Concord Cantata*, written for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town of Concord (1775–1975). This letter is held in Harvard University's Houghton Library (CAh 28.1, Folder Amherst Commission *Frostiana* Correspondence), quoted in Schmidt and Schmidt, 309–310. See also Schmidt and Schmidt, 371–374; Urrows, 35; Vreeman, 6, note 7.

rave reviews the following week. *Frostiana's* immediate popularity may have overshadowed that of Thompson's *Requiem* (1958), a work that can be considered an overlooked masterpiece.<sup>40</sup>

### *Analysis of Frostiana*

In composing *Frostiana*, Thompson did not intend to write a virtuosic work. He wanted the piece to be accessible, especially because it would be premiered by a collection of amateur choirs with limited rehearsals. He described the work by saying, "There are no fussy parts, no unreasonable high notes. There is a certain amount of unison singing, and the rest is uncomplicated."<sup>41</sup> The fact that *Frostiana* was intended for amateurs and is not overly "fussy" does not negate the compositional skill Thompson put into writing it. By examining the elements from counterpoint and early music, sensitivity to prosody, and use of pictorial devices within *Frostiana*, one finds that Thompson drew upon various aspects of his compositional and academic background, making this a well-constructed yet accessible work of art.

### *Elements from Early Music and Counterpoint*

Early in his career, Thompson was exposed to and developed a love for Renaissance polyphony. From 1920 to 1921, Thompson studied extensively with Ernest Bloch (1880–1959), who exposed him to the music of Renaissance masters and *cori spezzati* in particular.<sup>42</sup> The following year (1922), Thompson won the Prix de Rome, which afforded him the opportunity

<sup>40</sup> Vreeman, 28–29.

<sup>41</sup> See Thompson's correspondence at Harvard University's Houghton Library (CAh 28.1, Folder Amherst Commission *Frostiana* Correspondence), quoted in Schmidt and Schmidt, 310.

<sup>42</sup> Rawlins, 19.

to study with Gian Francesco Malipiero. He introduced Thompson to the music of Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), whose works proved to be particularly influential on Thompson.<sup>43</sup> These experiences with Bloch and Malipiero in the early part of his career fundamentally shaped his compositional style.<sup>44</sup> Thompson later said in an interview that "I determined that I was going to acquire something like it [the "perfection" of composers through Handel]—to be able to write with that degree of understanding for counterpoint—that choral technique... So, I bear the imprint of that period."<sup>45</sup>

The influence of early music can be found throughout Thompson's output. He employed modal counterpoint in his *Mass of the Holy Spirit* (1956).<sup>46</sup> *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1936) contains extensive use of modal and contrapuntal elements, as well as *cori spezzati* technique.<sup>47</sup> Antiphonal writing also appears in his *Pueri Hebraeorum* (1928) and the final movements of his *Requiem* (1958).<sup>48</sup> Contrapuntal elements are present throughout *Frostiana* (1959). Specifically, the rise and fall of melodic lines and Thompson's treatment of dissonance can be attributed to the influence of early music.

<sup>43</sup> McGilvray, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Many scholars have remarked on the influence of polyphony on Thompson's music. For example, Elliot Forbes identified Thompson's "assimilation and incorporation of values in music dating back to the 16th century." Alfred Mann noted: "At every turn, [Thompson's] music has its true roots in the great vocal polyphony of the past." James Haar wrote "Randall Thompson's choral works are a shining reflection of the joy and creative skill with which he taught musical craft—of Palestrina and Lasso, of Monteverdi and Schütz, of Bach and Handel." See Elliot Forbes, "The Music of Randall Thompson," 1; Alfred Mann, "Preface," *American Choral Review* 16, no. 4 (1974): 6; Haar, 49.

<sup>45</sup> Randall Thompson, interview by Bryon Wendol McGilvray, July 11, 1975, quoted in McGilvray, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Haar, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Forbes, "The Music of Randall Thompson," 15 and Rawlins, 22.

<sup>48</sup> McGilvray, 39–43 and Rawlins, 22.

Elliot Forbes, who wrote extensively about Thompson's music, identifies the rise and fall of melodic lines as the first of four quintessential elements of his style.<sup>49</sup> The ebb and flow of Thompson's melodic writing has its roots in contrapuntal technique. Markand Thakar begins his book *Counterpoint: Fundamentals of Music Making* by identifying what he calls the "primordial line." Thakar uses this term to describe a phenomenon in which elemental musical lines are connected by stepwise motion, and any notes approached or left by leap remain active until the notes that were skipped are sounded.<sup>50</sup> The melody of *The Road Not Taken*,

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<sup>49</sup> "The first is the invention of lines which, by their intervals, their rise and fall, and their points of rest, make the singing of them a matter of interest as well as ease." Forbes, "The Music of Randall Thompson," 9.

<sup>50</sup> "One essential attribute of a primordial line is the stepwise connection of the tones. When a tone is quit by leap, the tone has an active and unconnected quality that remains until its upper or lower neighbor is sounded. A tone that sounds unconnected to the others cannot participate in the

the opening movement of the suite, is a good example not only of Thompson's rising and falling lines, but also of his use of primordial lines. In Figure 1, one will notice that each phrase has a similar arched shape created by rising and falling pitches. Measures 8–15 contain several melodic skips, which are subsequently filled in, creating primordial lines. In m. 10 for example, there is a descending leap from D to F. The next measure fills in the missing Bb, A, and G; C is not considered missing because it precedes the D in m. 10. A similar leap followed by the filling in of skipped notes occurs in mm. 12–13. It should be noted that Thompson omits all Es, giving *The Road Not Taken* a modal quality. Because of the primordial lines, the melodic shape of these opening measures can be reduced to stepwise motion.

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line; it interrupts the line. Thus a primordial line is made up only of tones that are connected by step." Markand Thakar, *Counterpoint: Fundamentals of Music Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

*Figure 1 shown on next page.*



**Figure 1:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Road Not Taken*, mm. 1–16. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

1 **Andante moderato** (♩ = 70)

S. *pp* Two roads di-verg'd in a yel-low wood And

A. *pp* Two roads di-verg'd in a yel-low wood And

T. *pp* Two roads di-verg'd in a yel-low wood And

B. *pp* Two roads di-verg'd in a yel-low wood And

**Andante moderato** (♩ = 70)

Pno. *p legato pp*

7

sor-ry I could not tra-vel both And be one trav-er, long I stood And look'd down one as

7

7

7

7

12

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

12

12

12

12

Thompson closely follows conventional dissonance treatment within *Frostiana*. Given how many of his contemporaries used dissonance freely and without regard for historical convention, Thompson’s continued adherence to traditional rules of dissonance is unique. He continues to follow the established practices while using dissonance as an expressive device. In *Come In*, for example, two suspensions occur in

mm. 39–40, shown below in Figure 2. The first suspension is made more powerful by the second alto’s ascending octave leap and the soprano’s chromatic alteration to Gb. These suspensions add weight to a crucial part of this poem, in which the speaker “describes the light, which is still upon him, the opposite of the darkness of the woods.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Brodsky, 74.

**Figure 2:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana*, *Come In*, mm. 34–43. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The musical score for 'Come In' from *Frostiana* consists of two systems. The first system (measures 34-43) features three vocal parts (Soprano, Alto 1, Alto 2) and Piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'The last of the light of the sun That had died in the west Still'. The piano part includes dynamic markings *p* and *p*. The second system (measures 39-43) features three vocal parts and Piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'liv'd for one song more in a thrush's breast'. The piano part includes dynamic markings *poco cresc.*, *mf*, *p subito*, *ten.*, and *p staccato*. There are also performance instructions like *8<sup>va</sup> Red.* and *\* Red.* at the bottom of the score.

In *The Pasture*, Thompson also uses suspensions in an expressive manner. Shown in Figure 3, a series of suspensions occur between the tenor and baritone voices. This kind of suspension chain can be directly traced back to the music of Monteverdi. Compare, for example, Thompson’s suspensions in Figure 3 to those found in Figure 4, an excerpt from Monteverdi’s *Sí, ch’io vorrei morire* (no. 15 from his *Il Quarto Libro de*

*Madrigali a cinque voci*, 1603). The similarity of these passages is not coincidental. Thompson was a great admirer of Monteverdi since the time he spent with Malipiero. He once said, “I suppose that [Monteverdi] is one of the prime influences in my attitude toward music. I often go back to him like a spring of pure water—like taking a swig and going to work.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Randall Thompson, interview by Bryon Wendol McGilvray, July 11, 1975, quoted in McGilvray, 37.

**Figure 3:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Pasture*, mm. 34–35. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The musical score for Figure 3 consists of four staves. The top staff is for Tenor (T.), the second for Baritone 1 (B1.), the third for Baritone 2 (B2.), and the bottom for Piano (Pno.). The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 8/8. The lyrics for the Tenor part are "gone long--" and "long--". The lyrics for the Baritone parts are "sha'n't be gone long--" and "sha'n't be gone long--". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a similar pattern in the left hand. Dynamic markings include *mf dim.*, *mp*, and *p*.

**Figure 4:** Claudio Monteverdi, *Sí, ch’io vorrei morire*, mm. 49–54. Reproduced from the Choral Public Domain Library.

The musical score for Figure 4 shows five vocal parts: Canto, Alto, Quinto, Tenore, and Basso. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics for all parts are "deh! Strin-ge - te - mi, strin-ge - te - mi fin ch'io ven - ga me no, a que - sto". The Canto and Alto parts have the most prominent melodic lines. The Quinto and Tenore parts have a more active role in the later measures. The Basso part is mostly silent in this excerpt.

Even *Frostiana*'s structure has its roots in early music. As discussed above, the movements alternate between pieces for mixed, men's, and women's voices. It should be noted that these voicings give the suite a chiasitic structure. Although this was due in part from Thompson's desire for the piece to be easily learned by separate choirs, he orders the movements' voicings in a palindromic manner, similar to what J.S. Bach might have done. The men's movements have an additional mirror-image relationship in that *The Pasture* begins with a piano introduction in 6/8, and the meter changes to 4/4 when the voices enter. *Stopping*

*By Woods on a Snowy Evening* conversely begins with a 4/4 piano introduction, changing to 6/8 when the voices enter. The movements' keys are also related. The central movement is in A major, while the first three movements and last three movements are centered on D, F, and G of differing modalities. The structural underpinning of Thompson's music shows that even though he intended *Frostiana* for amateurs, he still poured a tremendous amount of skill and historical precedent into the work. Although they can easily be overlooked, these qualities contribute to the work's sophistication and craft.

**Table 2:** Chiasitic Structure of *Frostiana*

Myt.	Title	Voicing	Key	Meter Changes
I	<i>The Road Not Taken</i>	SATB	d	
II	<i>The Pasture</i>	TTB	F	6/8 to 4/4
III	<i>Come In</i>	SAA	g	
IV	<i>The Telephone</i>	SAA/TTBB	A	
V	<i>A Girl's Garden</i>	SAA	d	
VI	<i>Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening</i>	TBB	f	4/4 to 6/8
VII	<i>Choose Something Like a Star</i>	SATB	G	

In his essay “On Contrapuntal Technique,” Thompson wrote that in learning counterpoint, composers discover “how to write for voices, because the whole art of the Polyphonic Period and all that it bespeaks—its technique, its expression, its evolution, its perfection; every rule, every point of practice—all were determined by a single practical and aesthetic standard of what was singable, most natural, most beautiful, and most appropriate to the art of choral music.”<sup>53</sup> Thompson approached his own compositions as a contrapuntist. He wrote melodies that created harmonies rather than harmonies that determined melodies.<sup>54</sup> One would certainly not mistake a movement of *Frostiana* for a piece from the Renaissance; however, upon investigation, the influences of polyphonic technique and early music are apparent throughout this suite.

### *Sensitivity to Prosody*

Thompson’s ability to set texts in a natural manner is one of his greatest compositional attributes and is essential to his style.<sup>55</sup> He had a uniquely difficult task in setting Frost’s poetry for *Frostiana*. Frost described three planes of sound at work in his poems (what he called “the sound of sense”): metrical stress (such as iambic), how words are pronounced out of context, and how words are spoken in context to convey shades of meaning.<sup>56</sup> Thompson skillfully joins these planes of sound to his music.<sup>57</sup> His sensitivity

to prosody is evident in his aligning of the text’s stressed and unstressed syllables to the musical meter, use of anacrusis, and rhythmic layering.

Reflective of Frost’s adherence to poetic convention, many of the poems used in *Frostiana* are in an iambic meter, wherein each poetic foot contains a weak syllable followed by a strong one. When setting iambic texts, Thompson aligns the stressed syllables with the stressed beats inherent in musical meters. Throughout the suite, he uses various approaches to do so. For example, in *The Road Not Taken*, which is in 4/4, the stressed syllables appear on beats one and three (Figure 5). The dotted-quarter note on “-haps” (m. 21) and the syncopation on “grassy and” (m. 23) add further stress to these words and provide rhythmic variety.<sup>58</sup> Two different approaches to matching poetic and musical stresses are apparent in *The Telephone*. First, as shown in Figure 6, many phrases begin with an eighth rest, thereby landing the stressed syllables on the beat. Second, the meter shifts to 3/4 for the women’s portions of this piece (mm. 21–27, 46–52), the first of which is shown in Figure 7. A quarter rest separates the stressed syllables on beat one from the unstressed syllables on beat three, thus aligning with the poem’s prosody.

*Figure 5 shown on next page.*

<sup>53</sup> R. Thompson, “On Contrapuntal Technique,” 25.

<sup>54</sup> McGilvray, 37-39.

<sup>55</sup> Vreeman, 3 and Forbes, “The Music of Randall Thompson,” 9.

<sup>56</sup> L. Thompson, 65.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson describes his compositional approach to text setting as, “Decide on the best, the most fitting melody for [the text]. Don’t worry about progressions; let the tune and the words determine the form.” It is interesting to note that this approach is that of a contrapuntist. Randall Thompson, “Writing for the Amateur Chorus: a Chance and a Challenge,” in Mann, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Lupo, 39-40.

**Figure 5:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Road Not Taken*, mm. 18–30. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

18

S. *p* Then took the oth-er as just as fair, And hav-ing per-haps the be-ter claim, Be-cause it was gras-sy and

A. *p* Then took the oth-er as just as fair, And hav-ing per-haps the be-ter claim, Be-cause it was gras-sy and

T. *p* Then took the oth-er as just as fair, And hav-ing per-haps the be-ter claim, Be-cause it was gras-sy and

B. *p* Then took the oth-er as just as fair, And hav-ing per-haps the be-ter claim, Be-cause it was gras-sy and

Pno. *p*

24

S. wan-ted wear; Though as for that the pass-ing there Had worn them real-ly a-bout the same.

A. wan-ted wear; Though as for that the pass-ing there Had worn them real-ly a-bout the same.

T. wan-ted wear; Though as for that the pass-ing there Had worn them real-ly a-bout the same.

B. wan-ted wear; Though as for that the pass-ing there Had worn them real-ly a-bout the same.

Pno. *cresc.*

*Figure 6 shown on next page.*

**Figure 6:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Telephone*, mm. 6–16. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

6 *a tempo* *p* *poco rall.\** *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.\**  
 T1. 'When I was just as far as I could walk From here to-day, There was an hour All still— When lean-ing with my head a-against a flow'r  
*a tempo* *p* *poco rall.* *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.*  
 T2. 'When I was just as far as I could walk From here to-day, There was an hour All still— When lean-ing with my head a-against a flow'r  
*a tempo* *p* *poco rall.* *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.*  
 B1. 'When I was just as far as I could walk From here to-day, There was an hour All still— When lean-ing with my head a-against a flow'r  
*a tempo* *p* *poco rall.* *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.*  
 B2. 'When I was just as far as I could walk From here to-day, There was an hour All still— When lean-ing with my head a-against a flow'r  
*a tempo* *p* *poco rall.* *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.*  
 Pno. *a tempo* *poco rall.* *a tempo* *pp p cresc.* *poco rall.*  
 \*Subdivide the 2nd and 3rd beats

12 *a tempo* *mf* *mf* *p* *p* *pp*  
 I heard you talk. Don't say I did-n't, for I heard you say--. You spoke from that flow-er on the win-dow sill--  
*a tempo* *mf* *mf* *p* *p* *pp*  
 I heard you talk. Don't say I did-n't, for I heard you say--. You spoke from that flow-er on the win-dow sill--  
*a tempo* *mf* *mf* *p* *p* *pp*  
 I heard you talk. Don't say I did-n't, for I heard you say--. You spoke from that flow-er on the win-dow sill--  
*a tempo* *mf* *mf* *p* *p* *pp*  
 I heard you talk. Don't say I did-n't, for I heard you say--. You spoke from that flow-er on the win-dow sill--  
 Pno. *a tempo* *mf* *pp* *p* *pp*

**Figure 7:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Telephone*, mm. 21–27. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The musical score for 'The Telephone' from *Frostiana* consists of four staves. The top three staves are for vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto 1 (A1.), and Alto 2 (A2.). The bottom staff is for Piano (Pno.). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and dynamics are marked as *p prudente a tempo*. The lyrics for all vocal parts are: 'First tell me what it was you thought you heard.' The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests, with dynamics ranging from *pp* to *p*. Performance markings include *(accel.)* for the vocal parts and *(And. sempre)* for the piano part.

Because iambic feet begin with an unstressed syllable, anacrusis are an obvious choice for musically capturing this poetic meter. Anacrusis appear in various manners throughout *Frostiana*. In the excerpt from *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening* below (Figure 8), each phrase begins on the final eighth note of a measure. The eighth-quarter pattern within the 6/8 meter naturally captures the

unstressed-stressed relationship of an iamb. A different type of anacrusis is found in *Choose Something Like a Star*, which is written in iambic tetrameter.<sup>59</sup> In Figure 9, each phrase begins on beat four so that the stressed syllables fall on beats one and three.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> In iambic tetrameter, there are four iambic feet per line.

<sup>60</sup> Similarly, many of the phrases in *The Road Not Taken* begin with quarter or eighth note anacrusis.

*Figures 8 and 9 shown on next page.*



**Figure 8:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, mm. 4–13. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The score for 'Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening' features four vocal parts (T, B1, B2) and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in 8/8 time, marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). The lyrics are: "Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the vil - lage though; He will not see me stop - ping here To watch his woods\_\_\_\_\_ fill up with snow." The piano accompaniment is in 8/8 time, marked *mp* and *legato*. The score includes a tempo change to *col 2da* (second ending) and a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) for the piano part. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 9 and marked *dolce*.

**Figure 9:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Choose Something Like a Star*, mm. 44–51. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The score for 'Choose Something Like a Star' features four vocal parts (S, A, T, B) and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in 4/4 time, marked *ff* (fortissimo) and *sfz* (sforzando). The lyrics are: "But say with what de-gree of heat\_\_\_\_\_ Talk Fahr-en-heit\_ talk Cen-ti-grade\_ Use lan-guage we can com-pre - hend\_\_\_\_\_". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, marked *ff* and *sffz* (sforzando fortissimo). The score includes dynamic markings of *sotto* (piano) and *sopra* (piano) for the piano part. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 44.

Thompson uses a rhythmic layering device in *Come In*, which is in anapestic tetrameter.<sup>61</sup> Throughout this movement, Thompson uses a short-short-long rhythmic pattern to replicate the poetic meter. In Figure 10, for example, the unstressed syllables are set with eighth notes while stressed syllables are placed on quarter notes; an exception is made for the first two notes (unstressed syllables set with quarter notes). After a piano interlude, the voices reenter in m. 20. Shown in Figure 11, the texture is no longer homophonic. Two layers of rhythm exist, but

<sup>61</sup> In anapestic tetrameter, there are four feet per line. Each foot contains two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one.

each continues to follow the short-short-long rhythmic pattern. The second alto employs quarter and eighth notes in manner similar to that of the previous passage. The upper voices, however, use half and quarter notes in what can be interpreted as augmentation. In a third iteration of this rhythmic motif, the soprano is set against the lower voices. Shown in Figure 12, the upper voice uses quarter and eighth notes while the lower voices sing half, quarter, and eighth notes. This rhythmic layering effectively yet subtly replicates the text's poetic meter, and Thompson's use of augmentation can be seen as having its roots in his background as a contrapuntist.

**Figure 10:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Come In*, mm. 6–8. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The musical score for Figure 10 consists of four staves. The top three staves are for vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto 1 (A1.), and Alto 2 (A2.). The bottom staff is for Piano (Pno.). The music is in 3/4 time and begins at measure 6. The lyrics for all parts are "As I came to the edge of the woods, \_\_\_\_\_". The vocal parts feature a rhythmic pattern of quarter, eighth, eighth notes. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of quarter, eighth, eighth notes. The score includes dynamic markings of *pp* and the instruction *divisi* at the end of the passage.

*Figures 11 and 12 shown on next page.*

**Figure 11:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Come In*, mm. 20–22. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

20

S. *pp* Too dark for a bird *mp* By sleight of

A1. *pp* Too dark for a bird *mp* By sleight of

A2. *mp* *espress.* Too dark in the wood for a bird By sleight of

Pno. *pp* *pp* *mp* *mp*

*Ped.* \* *Ped.* \* *Ped.* \* *Ped.* \*

**Figure 12:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Come In*, mm. 34–36. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

34

S. *p* The last of the light of the sun That had

A1. *p* The last light of the sun That

A2. *p* The last light of the sun That

Pno. *p* *p*

Similar to how Frost’s poetry sounds quite speech-like but is in fact governed by strict poetic meters, Thompson’s text setting seems unremarkable at first. However, in examining his approach to setting Frost’s poetry, one quickly finds that he uses a variety of methods to capture the text’s prosody. The craft of text setting is not always apparent at first glance, nor should it be. The goal is that the text be so intertwined with the music that the two seem as though they have always gone together. After attending the premier, Frost is quoted in a newspaper as saying, “It was splendid, I didn’t think he (Thompson) could do it. It was very difficult to bring poetry to music.”<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> See a newspaper clipping of a review of the performance titled “Frostiana’ In Premier At Amherst” at Harvard University’s Houghton Library (CAh 28.5, Folder Amherst Reviews *Frostiana*), quoted in Schmidt and Schmidt, 310.

### Pictorial Devices

Perhaps indicative of his love for Renaissance music, Thompson includes many pictorial devices throughout *Frostiana*. Some instances are obvious, such as the depiction of the thrush’s call in *Come In*, the falling snow in *Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, and the rising star in *Choose Something Like a Star* (see Figures 13–15).<sup>63</sup> Notice that in these examples, the pictorial device occurs within the piano introduction at the beginning of each movement, immediately conjuring images in the listener’s imagination. An obvious example of text painting in the vocal parts can be found in *The Road Not Taken*. In m. 53, a 4-3 suspension in the tenor voice depicts “sigh” onomatopoeically (Figure 16).

<sup>63</sup> Thompson uses a similar pictorial device in “The morning stars sang together” movement of his *Requiem*. In this movement, the soprano is set against the lower three parts, another similarity to *Choose Something Like a Star*. Vreeman, 19 and Forbes, “Americana,” 79.

**Figure 13:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana*, *Come In*, mm. 1–5. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The musical score for 'Come In' from *Frostiana* shows measures 1 through 5. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo of Lento (♩ = 66). The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto 1, and Alto 2) are mostly silent in these measures. The piano accompaniment begins with a piano introduction. In measure 3, there is a triplet of eighth notes. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) in measures 1 and 5, and *p* (piano) in measure 4. There are also performance markings like *leggero* and a fermata over the triplet.

**Figure 14:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, mm. 1–4. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

1 **Lento assai** (♩ = 84)

T. *mp* Whose

B1. *mp* Whose

B2. *mp* Whose

**Lento assai** (♩ = 84)

Pno. *pp*

Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped.

**Figure 15:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Choose Something Like a Star*, mm. 1–5. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

1 **Larghetto** (♩ = 60)

S. *pp* O Star,

A. *pp* (the

T. *pp* (the

B. *pp* (the

**Larghetto** (♩ = 60)

Pno. *P* *pp* *pp* *m.d.*

**Figure 16:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, The Road Not Taken*, mm. 51–53. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

The image shows a musical score for the song "The Road Not Taken" by Randall Thompson. It includes four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "I shall be tell - ing this with a sigh". The music is in D minor, 4/4 time, and marked "pp" (pianissimo) and "a tempo". The piano part features a "m.d." (mezza dolce) marking and a "p" (piano) marking.

Pictorial devices are less obvious in other instances. In *The Road Not Taken*, for example, the piano interlude (mm. 67–75) is in D major, the parallel major of D minor, in which the rest of the piece is written. This spritely passage, marked *Poco allegretto*, can be seen as depicting time passing, reflecting the fact that the poem’s speaker is contemplating choices made earlier in his life. After the interlude, the voices repeat the poem’s final line “And that has made all the difference” back in D minor. Even though this line is not repeated in the poem itself, the repetition after the piano interlude suggests the speaker’s reflection after time has elapsed.

Another less-than-obvious example of text painting occurs in the fourth verse of *Stopping*

*By Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Shown in Figure 17, a rhythmic change conveys the speaker’s weariness. In the previous verses, the rhythm is almost exclusively a quarter-eighth note pattern. In the fourth verse, however, the rhythm is elongated at the end of each phrase, corresponding to the end of the poem’s lines. These elongated phrases can be interpreted as conveying not only the speaker’s physical fatigue, but also his grappling with not wishing to continue on but ultimately having to fulfill his obligations. The fact that the choral part ends on a VII chord (Eb in F minor) further suggests this sense of incompleteness. The piano’s entrance at m. 62 with the opening material can be seen as illustrating the speaker pulling out of his reflection and trudging on through the New England snow.

**Figure 17:** Randall Thompson, *Frostiana, Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening*, mm. 43–69. Copyright 1959 E. C. Schirmer, Boston, MA. Reproduced with permission.

43 *ppp* The woods are love-ly, dark and deep, But I have prom-i - ses to keep, And

B1. *ppp* The woods are love-ly, dark and deep, But I have prom-i - ses to keep, And

B2. *ppp* The woods are love-ly, dark and deep, But I have prom-i - ses to keep, And

Pno. *ppp legato* *legato*

\* *col* *Red.* *Red.* \* *col* *Red.* *Red.*

51 *dolce* miles to go be - fore I sleep, And miles to go be - fore I sleep. *ppp*

miles to go be - fore I sleep, And miles to go be - fore I sleep. *ppp*

miles to go be - fore I sleep, And miles to go be - fore I sleep. *ppp*

*legato*

*Red.* \*

61 *Come prima*

*p* *mf* *pp*

*pp* *m.s. sopra* *l'arpeggio più lento* *ppp* *ten.* *m.d.*

*Red.* \* *Red.* \* *Red.* (*Red. sempre*) \* *Red.*

## *Conclusion*

Robert Frost and Randall Thompson developed unique artistic voices, each of which had roots in established artistic conventions as well as contemporary colloquial language. Far from unsophisticated, the work of these men is best characterized by its craftsmanship. Their technique is so solid and so artfully employed

that one does not necessarily notice what is happening. This is the “art that hides art;” this is what makes their works “terrifying.” Perhaps it is time to stop relegating *Frostiana* to the role of a crowd-pleaser and start appreciating it as a skillfully constructed work of art. At the end of the premier, Frost reportedly stood and shouted, “Sing that again!”<sup>64</sup> Maybe, taking into account the perspectives offered here, we all should.

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<sup>64</sup> Urrows, 35.



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