

## Art with a Double A

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By Chester Lane

For composer Robert Paterson, a 35-minute work for orchestra, chorus, and narrator was not just a benchmark in his creative career. It was also the capstone of a three-year Music Alive residency with a major youth-orchestra organization, and an affirmation of deeply held concerns about the fate of Planet Earth. Paterson's *A New Eearth*, which the Vermont Youth Orchestra and Chorus premiered May 4 and 6 in Stowe and Burlington, Vermont, takes its theme and peculiar orthography—but not its text—from the recent book *Eearth* by noted environmentalist Bill McKibben. And McKibben's presence as narrator for those performances was a source of both gravitas and local interest: author of numerous books about the depletion of natural resources and the problems of humanity-induced climate change, he is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Vermont's Middlebury College and a member of its Environmental Studies faculty.

McKibben explains the title of his book early in the opening chapter. "We're every day less the oasis and more the desert," he writes. "The world hasn't ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don't quite know it yet. We imagine we still live back on that old planet, that the disturbances we see around us are the old random and freakish kind. But they're not. It's a different place. A different planet. It needs a new name. Eearth."

This was an idea that captured the imagination of Robert Paterson.



Paterson rehearses the VYO in his work "Enlightened City" at Burlington's Elley-Long Music Center, November 2009.

Photo by Kyle Martel

His three-season residency with the VYO—began in 2009 and funded by Music Alive, a program of the League of American Orchestras in partnership with New Music USA (formerly Meet The Composer)—included numerous school visits and community appearances, rehearsals with the orchestra in two previously composed works (his Suite for String Orchestra and *Enlightened City*), and the culminating premiere of his VYO-commissioned work *A New Eearth*. The form of that composition was dictated by two key factors. There was a rich vocal resource—rare for a youth-orchestra organization—available to him in the Vermont Youth Orchestra Chorus, an affiliated ensemble directed by Jeffrey Buettner. Equally important was Paterson's impulse to deliver a weighty verbal message along with his instrumental music.

The idea of commissioning a work for both orchestra and chorus originated with Troy Peters, who was the VYO's music director at the

time Paterson and the organization submitted their Music Alive application. “Almost to a week after I got the grant,” says Paterson, “Troy announced he was leaving” (for a similar post at Youth Orchestras of San Antonio). So it was two transitional conductors, Andrew Massey and Ronald Braunstein, who led the VYOA during the first half of Paterson’s residency. The current permanent music director, Jeffrey Domoto, arrived in February 2011.



Paterson works with students at Burlington’s Integrated Arts Academy magnet school, February 2012.

Paterson says that when it came time to determine exactly what kind of work he was to write for the final season of his residency, “I got together with Jeff Domoto and Jeff Buettner, and we decided that an environmental theme would be interesting. I’m very environmentally aware, or try to be. I had read two of Bill’s books, and what he was saying in *Eaarth* really resonated with me.” Once Paterson made the decision to add spoken text to the choral and instrumental forces, various well-known environmentalists—including Al Gore and actors Robert Redford and Leonardo DiCaprio—were considered as possible narrators for the premiere. “But it turned out that Bill was just right: a local figure who was also well known nationally, was interested in the project, had read the text and liked it. At one point I was thinking that spelling ‘Earth’ with two a’s was a little bizarre for the title of my own piece—I’d have to live with it the rest of my life—but I decided that if Bill was going to be in the premiere and onboard with the whole thing, I was happy to honor him by titling it *A New Eaarth*.

“It’s just the title and themes that are taken from Bill’s book,” Paterson continues. “Not once in my text do I say ‘global warming.’ I don’t quote from the book or cite figures from it. What I do is address themes in a sort of pseudo-poetic sense. I talk about glaciers crumbling, pollution, things like that.”



The chorus sings passages of poetry by William Wordsworth (“There hath pass’d away a glory from the earth”), James Joyce, Percy Bysshe Shelley (“Grief too sad for song”), and Wendell Berry, as well as translations of Native American sayings such as “A tree is known by its fruit” and “People protect what they love.” The narrated text poeticizes messages from McKibben’s *Eaarth* with such lines as “We need to believe that we can change/That we can change who we are, and all those around us/Change those who refuse to see what’s coming or already here.”

Environmentalist Bill McKibben (left), narrator for *A New*

*Eaarth*, says the score and text “get at the essential scientific truth of the moment, the sudden and violent flux of the physical world as the 10,000 years of the calm Holocene comes resoundingly to an end. It’s a very inspiring piece, and people left ready to take action, I think.”

McKibben, who avers that he is “quite happy to get up and talk to 20,000 people” in his role as an educator and environmental activist, reports that the experience of narrating *A New Eaarth* was “a lot out of the ordinary for me—in fact, I was scared silly. But it was a trip to stand amidst the orchestra while they played. The piece is quite powerful—it gets at the essential scientific truth of the moment, the sudden and violent flux of the physical world as the 10,000 years of the calm Holocene comes resoundingly to an end. A very inspiring piece, and people left ready to take action, I think.”

Paterson views *A New Eaarth* as “kind of like a canary in a coal mine. The message is, you may not see this coming because you’re not paying attention. But if for no other reason than this, think about your kids. They’re going to have to deal with this.” Musically, says Paterson, *A New Eaarth* is “probably in the same mold as my other works. I’m really big on having people latch onto things like melody and harmony. The choral stuff is a little more tonal than the rest. What I have the orchestra do is a lot crazier and dissonant and wild.” (Among other things, it employs sets of specially tuned wedding bells—Paterson is a skilled percussionist—and some aleatoric techniques in the brass, harp, and percussion parts.) Domoto says *A New Eaarth* is “the first really large-scale piece the Vermont Youth Orchestra Association has done with chorus and orchestra. It was challenging, but nothing outside of their understanding as really strong high-school musicians. There’s a strong logic to it. What I got back from the students was their pride in tackling such a piece, which was longer than anyone had anticipated.” (The commissioning agreement had specified eighteen minutes of music. “We got a two-for-one,” he jokes.)



Vermont Youth Orchestra Association Music Director Jeffrey Domoto (left) and VYO Chorus Conductor Jeffrey Buettner with the orchestra at Burlington’s Flynn Center for the Performing Arts following their May 6 performance of “A New Eaarth” by VYOA Composer-in-Residence Robert Paterson. Photo by Steven Kahn

The composer reflected on his residency experience in a Vermont Public Radio interview that aired the week before the premiere. He told host Walter Parker that while *A New Eaarth* may have been the

culminating event of the residency, those three years of interacting musically with students and the community were mostly about “being a living composer, not a dead white guy.” And the 25-minute radio program gives listeners a sampling of his creative output: it includes excerpts from *The Book of Goddesses*, Paterson’s nine-movement trio for flute, harp, and percussion; *Star Crossing*, the title cut from a CD of Paterson chamber works performed by the American Modern Ensemble; and *Did You Hear?*, a short, contrapuntally tricky piece for a *cappella* choir, set to a humorous text by David Cote, that Paterson had composed for the Vermont Youth Orchestra Chorus earlier in his residency. “It wasn’t officially part of the plan,” he says. “I wrote it for the chorus so they could warm up to me a bit, so I wouldn’t just be coming out of nowhere.”

But the bulk of the residency, Paterson notes, “wasn’t about having my own music played. For three years I was part of Reveille [a week-long mini-festival that kicks off the VYOA season each summer]. I went to lots of schools, spoke at Rotary clubs, did some lectures for the composition department at the University of Vermont. For all of my residency weeks I told the orchestra, ‘pack in whatever you want as long as I can get from point A to point B.’ My job wasn’t so much to promote myself, though there was a nice perk at the end, a cherry on top. What I liked was helping them connect with their community, build the orchestra environment. I viewed myself as one of their spokespeople.”

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