

Program Notes for An American Hymn

An American Hymn, a fantasy on “Wondrous Love” for trombone and organ was commissioned by trombonist Larry Zimmerman and premiered in 1997. It uses four lines from the text of the traditional American hymn as the inspiration for the four main sections of the work.

The piece begins quietly with muted trombone and musically depicts the words “O my soul, what wondrous love is this, o my soul.” The second section is louder and rhythmically more active as its descending chromatic line reflects the words “When I was sinking down beneath God’s righteous frown, Christ laid aside his crown, o my soul.”

The work builds in intensity to the third section which grandly portrays “To God and to the lamb, I will sing” with full organ and declaratory and cadenza-like trombone material. This climactic material leads directly into a dance-like, gigue section that is based on the text “And when from death I’m free, I’ll sing on.” References to the dance as it slows down and combines with earlier musical material and muted trombone lead back to opening of the work.

“And through eternity, I’ll sing on, o my soul, I’ll sing on” are the words of the text from which the final measures are drawn. The trombone is unmuted, and its final, sustained tone fades to nothing.

The composer writes: “I have tried to capture the strong emotional content of the hymn “Wondrous Love” in this setting. I used the fantasy form because it allows a meditative, free-flowing and improvisatory character. The music reflects a spiritual journey, and moves from contemplation to despair, exclamations of joy and thanks and ultimately, peace.”