



GUIDE OVERVIEW

Breathe JAMES ROLFE



Words by Hildegard von Bingen (Germany, 1098-1179),
Anna Chatterton (Canada, b. 1975),
Antonio Scandello (Italy-Germany, 1517-1580)

For Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Mezzo Soprano, Recorder,
Violin, Lute, Organ, percussion.

Premiere: March 23, 2011

Length of Recording: 18 minutes

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Recommended for Grade 12

Dance – The Creative Process: use the elements of dance to create and perform (increasingly complex) dance phrases inspired by a theme or source.

Dance – Performance – apply an understanding of the artistic and expressive intent of a work when rehearsing and performing.

Drama – Elements and Conventions: use a variety of drama conventions to establish a distinctive context or role in original or adapted works.

MAJOR THEMES

Classical Elements: Earth, Wind, Fire, Water;
Intimacy; Spirituality.

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ABOUT SOUNDMAKERS RESOURCES

The Soundstreams' series of SoundMakers Study Guides have been created for educators to enhance the SoundMakers.ca experience. There is a wealth of *free* streamable and downloadable music available on SoundMakers. These guides give background information, activity ideas, and curriculum connections to help teachers get the most out of the Soundstreams commissions catalogue which is available online.

In-class workshops are also available through Soundstreams. Soundstreams composers and artist-educators can visit your school or organization for in-class workshops or for a staff learning session.

For more information or to provide us with feedback please contact:

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INSPIRATION

Breathe weaves words by the mediaeval composer Hildegard von Bingen together with those of Toronto writer Anna Chatterton. Each part of the piece is focused on one of the four elements — air, fire, water, and earth — which are strongly present in the poetry. Water (“love overflows”) runs through the lyrical, flowing opening; air follows, quick and restless (breathing, sighing, rising, falling); then fire in warm, close intervals (“Most noble greenness, rooted in the sun, you shine bright and serene”). These threads, which continue throughout the piece, are also metaphors for human closeness, desire, love, spirit — invisible threads that keep us alive, connected to each other, and to the divine.

Each of the seven sections is animated by one of the four elements — in order, water, air, fire, air, earth, air, fire, water.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

b.1961, CANADA

Toronto composer James Rolfe has been commissioned and performed by ensembles in Canada (including Arraymusic, Continuum, Esprit Orchestra, Soundstreams, and Vancouver New Music), the USA (Bang on a Can All-Stars), Europe (Asko Ensemble, Ensemble Contrechamps de Genève, Ensemble Avant Garde, Ives Ensemble, Ixion Ensemble, Nash Ensemble, Nieuw Ensemble), and New Zealand (175 East). He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2000, the K. M. Hunter Music Award in 2003, the 2005 Louis Applebaum Composers Award, and the 2006 Jules Léger Prize for New Chamber Music for *raW*, which was later toured in Europe by Toronto’s Continuum Contemporary Music.

Mr. Rolfe writes music for chamber ensemble, orchestra, choir, voice, and the operatic stage. The Queen of Puddings Music Theatre Company produced his first opera, *Beatrice Chancy*, in 1998-99 in Toronto, Dartmouth, and Edmonton. In February 2009 they premiered *Inês*, which features a Portuguese Fado singer alongside four opera singers. In 2006, the children’s opera *Elijah’s Kite* was premiered in New York by Tapestry New Opera Works with the Manhattan School of Music, and given its Canadian premiere at

Rideau Hall. *Swoon* was premiered in December 2006 by the Canadian Opera Company, which has since commissioned a new opera.

LYRICISTS

Hildegard von Bingen (Germany, 1098-1179) was an abbess, who was said to have spiritual visions. She was a writer, composer, and philosopher, sometimes known as Saint Hildegard.

Anna Chatterton (Canada, b. 1975) is a librettist, playwright and performer. Her work has been commissioned and produced by various theatres, opera and music companies and festivals in Toronto and across Canada.

Antonio Scandello (Italy-Germany, 1517-1580) was an Italian-born German composer. His music combines elements of the Italian Renaissance with his contemporary German musical traditions.

IN THE MUSIC

James Rolfe has created this work which, at its core, explores relationships: relationships between people, how humans relate to the visceral experience of the world around us, and how each of the four classical elements (water, air, fire, and earth) mingles with each other. As he explains, each of the seven sections is animated by one of the four elements, while the work as a whole ebbs and flows, weaving and mixing the elemental themes together. These eight sections are highlighted below, along with the inspiration text for each. Examine the entire text, or, if more appropriate for your group, just the highlighted lines from each.

AS YOU LISTEN

Write down verbs using the present participle (“-ing words”) as you listen. Is the music rushing? Flowing? Jumping? When you are done, categorize your words under the headings: Earth, Air, Water, Fire. Do some of the words belong in more than one category? Create a poem using the verbs from one of your categories, using the chosen element as your title.

Draw or write about an image for each of the seven musical sections. What part of the music really inspired your image? Go back and refine the picture/paragraph for your favourite section.

WATER

(0:00 minutes to 1:45 minutes in the SoundMakers recording)

*Love overflows into all things,
From out of the depths to beyond the highest stars;
Love overflows into all best loved, most loving things,
Because She has given to the highest King
The Kiss of Peace. [HB]*

- As the vocalists sing of overflowing love, the feeling of rushing water grows as the single voice is layered by other voices along with (in order) the lute, organ, violin, and recorder. Listen to the lute which seems to be drip, drip, dripping underneath the vocals throughout this movement.
- What water images can you think of, where the water starts slowly and grows to a big swell? Is “overflowing love” a strong metaphor? What images spring to mind?

AIR

(1:45 to 4:00)

Breathe in, breathe out

*His throat, my sighs and we
Become trembling air
Rise and fall together
Breast, heart, neck, lip, mouth,
All one, all one, one breath. [AC]*

- The pace quickens here; the “breathe in, breathe out” has an urgency to it, and the drums make their debut in this section, driving forward the panting, rushing pace. Did you catch your breath around 3:51 when only the organ is heard?
- How does the pace of one’s breathing tell so much about emotion?
- We breathe all the time, but how often do you notice your breathing? Did you think about your own breathing during this section? Did you start to breathe in time to the sung directions? At what times in your life do you need to be reminded to breathe?

FIRE

(4:00 to 6:45)

*O most noble greenness, rooted in the sun,
You shine bright and serene upon the wheel,
None on earth can know your splendour,*

Enfolded in the arms of divine mysteries.

You are as radiant as the dawn

And burn like the sun’s flame. [HB]

- Fire and sun. Bright, warm, dangerous, alluring. This movement starts slowly, gradually, like the dawn growing brighter and more intense with time. Listen for the rolling campfire crackle of the lute’s repeated triplets at 4:45 which last throughout this section. Is the end of the movement like a sunset?
- How would you compose music about fire? What three words could you use to describe fire? Now think of some musical words (for hints, see our Talking About Music infosheet) that you might use to put your first three words into song/sound. What instruments would you need?

AIR

(6:45 to 10:15)

*I rose to open to my beloved
But he had become night air
I called but he gave no answer
O I am sick with love.
I shut tight my eyes,
And breathe him inside me.
Sweet night air
Breathe deep and long
Breathe him inside. [AC]*

- Compare the poetry above to the lyrics of a current pop song about falling in love. How do the verses compare? Which seems more romantic? Does one set of lyrics draw you in more than another? Does one engage your senses more than the other?

EARTH

(10:15 to 11:50)

*A dripping honeycomb
was Ursula the virgin
who desired to embrace the Lamb of God,
Milk and honey beneath her tongue.
**For an orchard of fruit trees, a garden of flowers,
a multitude of virgins
she gathered unto her. [HB]***

- What images spring to mind while listening to this section? What colours, tastes, scents? What is the story told during this movement? Could you relate

Continued

this to the idea of Mother Earth bringing life? Or to the growth process from seed to flower?

AIR

(11:50 to 14:40)

*He flies out from my breast
And all my soul is in the sky
Cry out night air, wet night air,
First, second breath, inner, only breath*

**Breathe in
darkness**

**Breath out
light [AC]**

- This section is perhaps the most musically intense, followed by a musical interlude from 14:09 to 14:40. What purpose does this section serve the piece as a whole? What part of the story does it depict? What emotion does it evoke?

FIRE

(14:40 to 16:50)

*Shine on us, beloved sun, give us your brightest light
Melt us in love together, we who cannot bear to live
apart. [AS]*

- The lute in this section gradually ascends the scale in three note clusters, starting on a G and increasing in pitch to two octaves above. It then descends, with the “melting” lyrics ending even lower on the scale than it began.
- How does a melting process work? Describe the differences between wax melting and water melting. Is one more poetic than the other?

WATER

(16:50 to 18:30)

*Love overflows into all things,
From out of the depths to beyond the highest stars;
Love overflows into all best loved, most loving things,
Because She has given to the highest King
The Kiss of Peace. [HB]*

- Why do you think the composer chose to begin and end the work with similar lyrics and sound? Would you have put the segments of this piece in a different order? What feelings are you left with as this section comes to a close?

ACTIVITY - WALK THE ELEMENTS

The following exercise leads cumulatively from one element to the next. Instruct participants with the following prompts so that they can move around the room, inspired by each of the four elements. Do this exercise with or without the accompaniment of music, perhaps different sections of *Breathe* or other SoundMakers music that the students have chosen for this purpose.



Alchemical symbol
for Air

THINK OF AIR

What instruments come to mind? Is air fast or slow? Heavy or light? Agile or clumsy? Does it move with purpose or indirectly?

Walk/move around like air on a still day, on a windy day, coming from the ocean, becoming dense with fog, growing into a storm, rustling through the leaves



Alchemical symbol
for Earth

THINK OF EARTH

What colours do you associate with earth? With the Earth?

If you were a creature that grew out of the earth, how would you move? What would you be looking for? Where would you be going? Walk like that creature and greet other earth-creatures as you pass by. What would you say?



Alchemical symbol
for Water

THINK OF WATER

Water can drip, pelt, gurgle, rush, fall, flood. It is fluid. Think of the different relationships humans have with water. Think of three action words (fishing, splashing, washing, etc.) that relate to water. Make three separate motions, one for each word. Meld your actions together into a choreographed piece. Join your piece with someone else's choreography to create an integrated work.

Continued



Alchemical symbol
for Fire

THINK OF FIRE

Fire is hot. It spreads quickly. It can bring welcome warmth or total devastation. Work together and set your room on fire by spreading out around the room. Start with one person moving as though they initiate a spark and watch the movement spread as the fire grows. What movement could you collectively create to put the fire out?

GLOSSARY

Classical Elements Most frequently, classical elements refer to ancient beliefs inspired by natural observation of the phases of matter; with the classical elements earth is equivalent to solid, water is equivalent to liquid, air is equivalent to gas, and fire is equivalent to plasma. Historians trace the evolution of modern theory pertaining to the chemical elements, as well as chemical compounds and mixtures of natural substances to medieval, and Greek models.^[1]

Lute A fretted stringed instrument, similar to a guitar, having a bowl-shaped body or soundbox. The European lute is used in a great variety of instrumental music from the Medieval to the late Baroque eras and was the most important instrument for secular music in the Renaissance.^[2]

Cluster A tone cluster is a musical chord comprising at least three adjacent tones in a scale. Prototypical tone clusters are based on the chromatic scale and are separated by semitones. For instance, three adjacent piano keys (such as C, C#, and D) struck simultaneously produce a tone cluster. Variants of the tone cluster include chords comprising adjacent tones separated by other intervals. Because they lack the tonal characteristics of ordinary chords, clusters often produce a dissonant sound.^[3]

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_elements

[2] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lute>

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tone_cluster