

WATER FOLK

Song Sequence for Baritone and String Quartet by Martin Shaw

PART I - The Stranger

Starless and cold is the night;
Old Ocean yawns,
And flat on the ocean, upon his belly
Squats the uncouth North Wind;
And stealthily croaking, with groan and with grunt,
Like a crotchety grumbler waxing good-humoured,
He babbles into the waters
Mad tales without number;
Tales of giants, breathing of slaughter,
And world-old stories of Norway;
And ever between he laughs and howls out
Incantations from Edda
And ancient Runes,
So darkly defiant and potent of spell
That the white ocean children
Leap up high and exulting
In turbulent frenzy.

Meanwhile, on the flat lone shore,
O'er the tide-washed sands,
Strides a stranger whose throbbing heart
Beats yet wilder than wind and waves.
Whither he treads
Sparks fly, and shells crunch beneath him
And he wraps him up in his sombre mantle,
And strides on fast through the wind and the night,
Safely led by the glimmering taper,
That beckons so sweetly inviting
From the fisherman's lonely cottage.
Father and brothers are out at sea,
And all alone by herself was left
In the cottage the fisherman's daughter,
The wondrously beautiful fisherman's daughter.

By the hearth sits she,
And lists to the kettle's
Drowsy song, full of sweet promise;
Fuel and sticks she adds to the fire,
And blows thereon,
And the flickering red light
As by magic illumines
Her blooming features,
And her tender white shoulder
That peeps forth pathetic

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From coarse linen kirtle, And illumines, too, her small hand,
Carefully tying yet faster her garments
Round her slender waist.
But on a sudden the door springs open,
And there enters the stranger nocturnal;
Full and assured of love
Rests his eye on the fair slight maiden,
Who trembles before him
Like a frightened lily,
And he throws his cloak on the ground,
And he laughs and says:

“Look you, my child, I have kept my word,
And I come, and there comes
Unto me the old time when the gods
Descended from Heaven to the daughters of men,
And embraced the daughters of men,
And begat with them
Sceptre-bearing races of Kings,
And Heroes, world-renowned,
But stand not amazed, my child, any longer
At my divinity,
But give me some tea with hot rum, I beseech you,
For it's cold outside,
And on such a raw night
Even we shiver, we gods eternal,
And easily catch we most heavenly colds,
And coughs divinely immortal.”

(Translated by Kate Freiligrath Kroeker from Die Nordsee by Heinrich Heine)

PART II - The Meeting

All under the lime-trees the music sounds,
And lads and lasses dance there, too;
A couple are dancing whom no one knows,
They are tall, and of noble air, too.

To and fro in a weird like way,
They glide and meander slowly;
They smile to each other, they wave their heads,
The lady whispers lowly:

“My fine young fellow, in your cap
A water-pink is twined, sir;
It only grows at the roots of the sea,
You come not of Adam's kind, sir.

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“You are a Merman; to beguile
These village beauties you wish, eh?
I knew you at the very first glance
By your teeth so sharp and fishy.”

To and fro, in a weirdlike way,
They glide and meander slowly;
They smile to each other, they wave their heads,
The young man whispers lowly:

“My pretty maiden, tell me why,
As cold as ice your hand is?
Ay tell me why your robe’s white hem
As moist as the wet sea-sand is?”

“I knew you at the very first,
By your curtsy all so tricky:
No mortal child of earth are you,
You are my cousin, the Nixie.”

The fiddles are silent, the dance is done,
They part with a courtly greeting:
They know each other, alas! too well,
So shun any future meeting.

(Translated by Sir Theodore Martin from Die Nordsee by Heinrich Heine)

PART III - Poseidon

The sunbeams were playing
Lightly over the billowy ocean;
Far out at sea I saw shining the ship
That was to bear me homewards;
But the right wind as yet was wanting,
And tranquilly on the white sands I was sitting
By the lonely sea,
And I read the song of Ulysses,
That old, that ever youthful song,
From whose ocean-murmuring leaves
Rose joyfully
The breath of the gods,
And the sunny spring of mankind,
And the cloudless sky of fair Hellas.

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My noble and faithful heart accompanied
The son of Laertes in toil and disaster:
It sat down with him, grieving in spirit,
At kindly hearths,
Where queens sat spinning deep rich purple;
It helped him to lie and to escape deftly
From giants' caves and from nymphs' white arms;
It followed him into Kimmerian night,
Through storm and through shipwreck,
And suffered with him unspeakable anguish.

Sighing said I, "Revengeful Poseidon,
Thy anger is awful,
And myself am afraid
Of my own return home."
Scarcely had I spoken the words,
When the sea foamed up high,
And from the white-crested billows arose
The head of the god, crowned with sea-weed,
And cried he, contemptuous:

"Fear not, my dear little Poet!
I've no intention to harm in the least
Thy poor little bark,
Nor frighten thee out of thy poor little wits
With too boist'rous a rocking:
For thou, little Poet hast never incensed me,
Thou never hast shaken the smallest turret
Of the holy city of Priam;
Nor hast thou singed e'en a single hair
From the eye of my son Polyphemus;
And never as yet has the Goddess of Wisdom
Pallas Athenae, stood counselling beside thee."

Thus cried out Poseidon,
And dived back into the ocean;
And at the vulgar old sailor's joke
I heard Amphitrite, the coarse fish-woman,
And the silly daughters of Nereus,
Giggling beneath the waters.

(Translated by Kate Freiligrath Kroeker from Die Nordsee by Heinrich Heine)