

# HALCYON SKIES

*for solo piano*

JESSICA MEYER

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*for solo piano*

4'

## PROGRAM NOTE

The song we know as "America the Beautiful" originated as a poem, written by a woman in her 30's named Katharine Lee Bates. While she was teaching at Colorado College, she and her colleagues took a trip up to Pikes Peak via prairie wagon and mules in July of 1893. Having traveled across the country by train to get to this teaching post, she was already taken with the variety of scenery our country has to offer. Though exhausted, once the summit was reached the words started flowing and she began to write this iconic poem.

The phrase "halcyon skies" appears in the first line of the first version but was replaced by "spacious skies" in the song version. The poem became quite well known, and more than 75 others have set it to music. The melody we sing today was written by Samuel Ward of Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, NJ, also written while traveling - this time on a ferry from Coney Island to New York City.

When pianist Min Kwon commissioned me to write a variation of this tune, it was during a time of great conflict in America in 2020. A line from Katharine's original poem, "Till selfish gain no longer stain" is painfully still relevant as the disparity between rich and poor, white people and people of color, men and women, all alongside the inappropriate conflation of science and politics, is on full display for all to see during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the famous melody is enmeshed within the texture, stopping at the lyric of "brotherhood" since there are countless examples of people acting very selfishly at the moment.

Katherine Bates experienced her fair share of sexist prejudice and discrimination, sometimes having to write under a male pseudonym and making the decision not to get married, for it would strip her of her hard-earned professorship at Wellesley College. As a war correspondent for the NY Times and author of many periodicals, she witnessed the ravages of the industrial revolution in both America and Britain, having seen urban poverty and misery firsthand. In addition to being an author, she was a social activist interested in the struggles of women, workers, people of color, tenement residents, immigrants, and the poor.

It was her wish for an all-inclusive American community that inspired the poem, and which also serves as the inspiration for my variation. During the same week in July that Katharine visited Pikes Peak over a hundred and twenty years ago, my family was recently able to get out of NYC for just a few days to a house on Lake Ontario. The expansive, ever-changing skies and the resonant overlapping harmonies that only windchimes provide gave me the sonic inspirations for the work. The emotional ones come from trying not to fall apart while reading the news - instead, refocusing myself to find wonder and hope again in the beauty of our halcyon skies.

# HALCYON SKIES

a variation on "America the Beautiful"  
commissioned by Min Kwon

JESSICA MEYER

♩ = 65 **Anguished**

*rit.....*

*a tempo*

*rit.....*

L.H.

L.H.

L.H.

R.H.

*a tempo*

repeat this note, get faster then slower

♩ = 50 **Spacious**

pedal roughly by the measure...  
sonorities interweaving like windchimes

*moving forward slightly*

*rit.....*

$\text{♩} = 45$  **Dreamlike**

22 *f* *p* 1.v. *Ped.* *Ped.*

27 *Ped.*

**Getting agitated**

no pedal

29 *f* 5 6

pedal as you would,  
but in the same vein

30 *f* 3

# In Distress

Measures 31-32 of the piece 'In Distress'. The music is written for piano with a treble and bass clef. Measure 31 starts with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The right hand features a sixteenth-note pattern, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. A fermata is placed over the final chord of measure 32. A '6' is written above the right hand staff in measure 32, indicating a sixteenth-note triplet.

Measures 33-34 of the piece 'In Distress'. Measure 33 begins with a fortissimo (*fff*) dynamic and a 'rit...' (ritardando) marking. The right hand has a series of chords, while the left hand continues with eighth notes. Measure 34 ends with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and a fermata. A 'Ped.' marking is present below the left hand staff.

sudden  
release  
of pedal

# From a Hymnal

pedal as you would,  
but in the same vein

Measures 35-38 of the piece 'From a Hymnal'. The music is written for piano with a treble and bass clef. Measure 35 starts with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The right hand features a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The piece concludes with a final chord in measure 38.

Measures 39-42 of the piece 'From a Hymnal'. Measure 39 begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata, and the left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 40 continues the melodic line. Measure 41 features a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic and a fermata. The piece concludes with a final chord in measure 42.