

# Improving Silence

Three Quaker texts for soprano voice and guitar

Nigel Morgan

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#### About the music

The Quakers, known today as The Religious Society of Friends, have their origins in the Puritan sects of 17 Century Britain. They hold to no creed, they have no liturgy or established doctrine, their religious services are meetings held in silence. What might be said to constitute a theology is a rich tradition of testimonial writing of personal experience; it is from this tradition three texts have been chosen, two from the late 17C and one from the beginning of the 20C. These texts have been distilled for setting to music in poetic paraphrase. No words have been added, but the texts simply stripped of any unnecessary description or amplification until they assume a poetic form. The composer has devised the descriptive titles. Together these three paraphrases pull together some of the essential aspects of Quaker spirituality, faith and practice.

**Alpha and Omega** is from a text by William Penn, one of the founding fathers of Quakers in America, whose name lives after him in the state of Pennsylvania. He was a close associate of the founder of the Quaker movement George Fox. Written during his time in America and published in 1682 in a pamphlet *No Cross No Crown* this paraphrase is a gentle guide to a right structure in daily life. It stresses the importance of time for 'retiring the mind into pure silence' and for regarding God as the 'overseer of your thoughts, words and actions'.

The School of Christ is taken from the words of a contemporary of Penn, Isaac Penington whose writings were published in 4 volumes in the late 17C. The text is a response to Romans 14.4 in which St Paul expresses concerns for the way Christians tend to judge one another. Paul says 'Let us then pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life'. Penn says 'Leave conscience to its full liberty . . . seek unity in the Light, walking together'.

**Meeting for Worship** is a meditation by the 20C social reformer and author Joan Mary Fry (sister of the artist Roger Fry). This text is part of her Swarthmore lecture of 1910, subsequently published as *The Communion of Life*. The words invite us to look first to nature as a way to grasp the essence of a silent meeting, 'Think of the high noon of summer. Think of the stillness of snow'. Fry also talks about 'sinking deeper into the life of God' where the 'tangles of the outer life may be seen in their true proportions'.

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### **Performance Notes**

The singer and guitarist might adopt a presentation and delivery that reflects something of the Quaker tradition. If appropriate and possible there could be a period of silence before and after each song.

No dynamics markings have been added to the score to allow performers to respond freely to their collective readings of the text.

A performing score in portrait is available. This contains comprehensive fingering for the guitarist to realise the many resonant effects called for in the score.

### Alpha and Omega

I will begin . . . with the morning (with the beginning of time)

As you wake, retire your mind into a pure silence, from all thoughts of worldly things, . . . and wait upon God, to feel his good presence, to commit your whole self, into his blessed care.

Then rise . . . (if well) immediately, ever remembering that God is present, the overseer of your thoughts, your words, your actions . . .

If you have intervals from those lawful occasions delight to step home (within yourself I mean). Commune with your heart and be still.

I will end . . .
with the evening,
(with the ending of time)

The evening come . . . Read again the Holy Scripture, and have your time of retirement before you close your eyes. (So the Lord may be the Alpha and Omega of your life)

William Penn 1682

#### The School of Christ

And oh, how sweet and pleasant to the truly spiritual eye to see several forms in the School of Christ. Everyone learning their own lesson, and knowing, owning, loving one another in their several places.

To feel the same spirit and life, to walk in our own order. Knowing what it is to receive truth.

For this is the true ground of love and unity.

Beware haste, not pressing knowledge and practice, but waiting patiently till the Lord fits such to be received.

Leave conscience to its full liberty. Preserve it single and entire, seek unity in the Light walking together.

Isaac Penington 1659

### **Meeting for Worship**

For each and all.
We need silence and stillness.
For each for all,
that atmosphere of waiting souls;
this is not the hush before the storm,
when no twig moves
no leaf dares to stir.

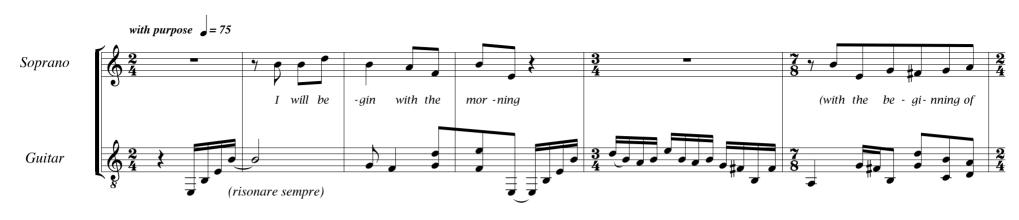
Think of the high noon of summer, think of the stillness of snow, how heat or lightness everywhere give that sense of abounding life, making a quietness of rapture

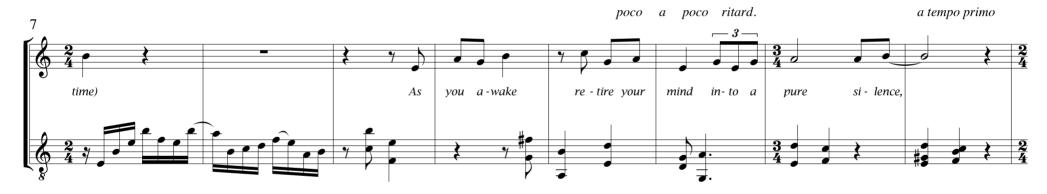
As mind, as soul, as even the body grows still, sinking deeper and deeper into the life of God, the pettiness, the tangles, the failures of the outer life begin to be seen in their true proportions, and the sense of infilling, uplifting Divine Redeeming Love becomes real.

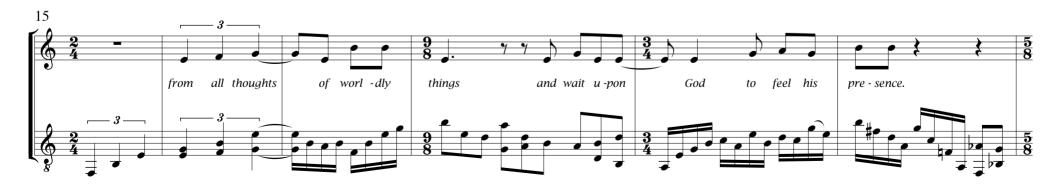
Not quiescence, the soul is alive, yet so still, it hardly knows its own intensity.

Joan Mary Fry 1911

# Alpha and Omega









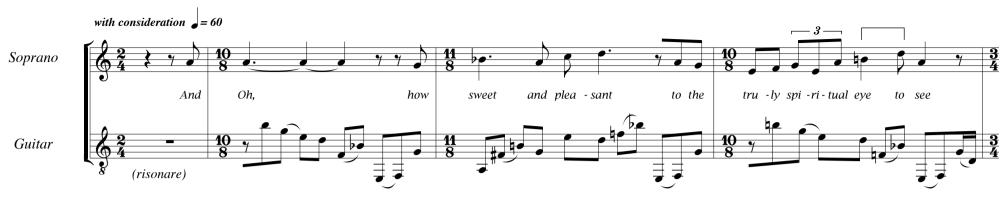


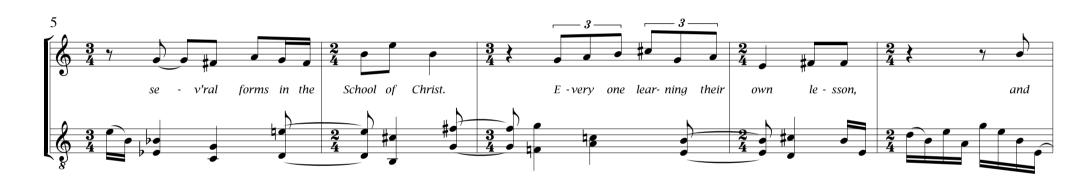




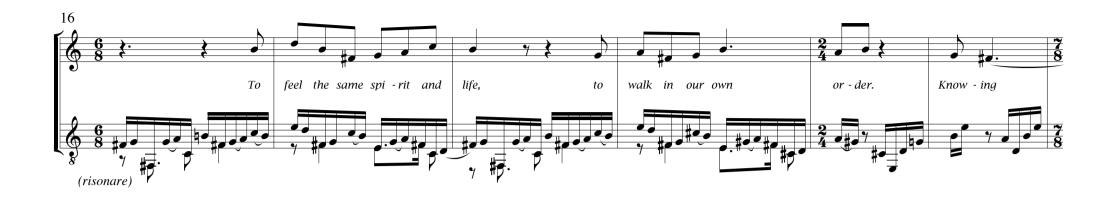


# The School of Christ

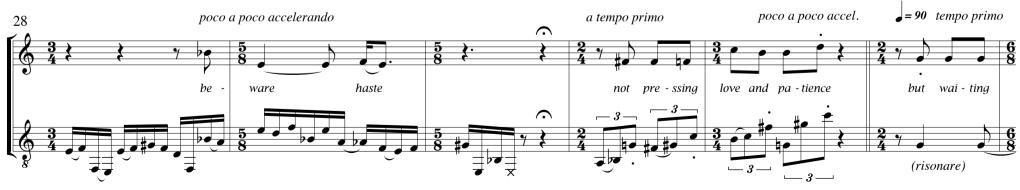




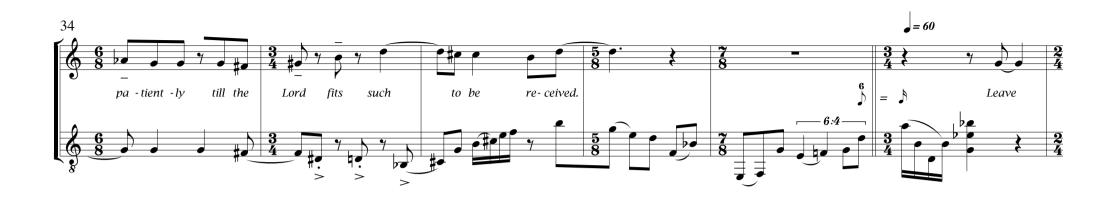


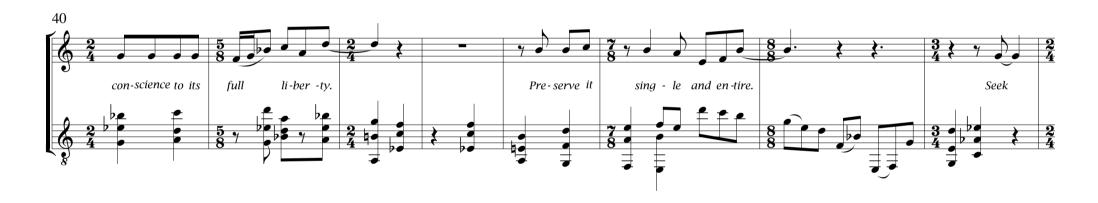






(stacatto e pizzicato)







### Meeting for Worship

