

Three Iowa Ballads

for baritone, viola and percussion/melodica

- I. The Miner's Chant
- II. The Ballad of Hardin Town
- III. My Little German Home Across the Sea

15 minutes

Brooke Joyce (2008)

Commissioned by Pi Kappa Lambda, 2008

Premiered by Spencer Martin, Andrew D. Whitfield, and Brooke Joyce, September 2008

Recorded on Innova 753, "Waves of Stone: Music by Brooke Joyce"

Program Note:

The great American writer Wallace Berry recently wrote that his work "originates in part in actual experience of an actual place: its topography, weather, plants, and animals; its language, voices, and stories." In a similar way, much of the music I've composed since moving to rural Iowa in 2005 has stemmed from my abiding interest in the landscape of the Midwest and its rich history. In composing Three Iowa Ballads, I was particularly interested in engaging with texts that come from local folk traditions. In the first and third ballads, I have also incorporated folk tunes associated with the texts.

"The Miner's Chant" was sung by James Frith, a coal miner in Oralabor, near Des Moines, in the early 20th century:

Away down in that hole,
With a light we only see
Dampness with coal and slate,
Its fall may be my fate.
Away down in that hole,
Day by day we dig and slave,
Our strength and body and our heart
Must be strong and must be brave.

Away down in that hole,
Dark, oh dark as it can be.
We pound and pound and dig
With all our strength and might.

Away down in that hole,
Our companion is the mule,
The poor beast stays in there all his life,
He's one of our only tools.

Away down in that hole,
A slide and then a groan,
One more life I've been told,
I heard that miner moan.
Away down in that hole,
We take our buddy home,
The voice of his crying wife,
My God, another life.

Away down in that hole,
Oh God, pity another soul,
We buried him on the hill.
Farewell, his voice is still.
We tramp back home alone,
To comfort wife and family,
Our hearts are sad with grief to bear,
We're the only ones to care.

“The Ballad of Hardin Town” is a 20th century ballad based on a true story from the 1840s, recounted below in the History of Allamakee County. The balladeer has changed some aspects of the story:

About 1840 or '41 a trading post was established near what is now Monona, just off the reservation, by one Jones, who sought to replenish his treasury by supplying the Indians with “fire water.” Another individual by the name of Thorn instituted a like concern near by, and by a happy application of the eternal fitness of these things these institutions were called “Sodom” and “Gomorrah” in the vernacular of those days. An old Indian visited Jones' den at Sodom, and as many a pale face has done since then traded all his worldly effects for whisky, even down to the blanket from his shoulders. On his way to his lodge he died from exposure and cold. The next morning his son found his body naked and frozen in the snow. Thirsting for vengeance, he visited the whisky den at Gomorrah and shot the first white man he saw, it happening to be an inoffensive man named Riley.

I'll tell you a tale of Ioway,
That only the old folks know;

About a crime in Hardin town
One hundred years ago.

The Indians roamed our forests then,
The wily Fox and Sac,
And lived in peace and harmony
Upon the Neutral Tract.

And there the white ken built the town
Right smack against the border;
In all the West the wickedest
With neither law nor order.

And there they built two grand saloons
Called Sodom and Gomorrah,
That lived up to their evil names
And caused a world of sorrow.

One night an old chief asked to see
Their owner Grahame Thorne,
And says, 'My daughter cries all day
'Twixt shame and sorrow torn.

'And now I would see Taffy Jones,
Who also owns this place,
That I might closely question him
About my child's disgrace:

A shot came through the window pane,
A shot came through the door,
And in the lamplight all could see
The chief die on the floor.

Then silently his son strode in,
His eyes were wild and wide,
'Confess who killed my father, sirs,
Shall vengeance be denied?'

He fired then a single shot,
But it was done most vilely.

Alas! He missed both Jones and Thorne
And killed poor Patrick Riley!

They did not know who killed the chief,
But he had murdered Pat;
They threw him into prison,
Yes! he got ten days for that!

Gone are those wild and olden times,
Gone is the old frontier;
Gone are the white men and the red
That I have told of here.

The railroad soon spelled Hardin's doom,
It died with none to mourn;
Where Sodom and Gomorrah stood
March silent fields of corn.

“My Little German Home Across the Sea” was transcribed by Harry Oster, a longtime professor at the University of Iowa. The tune which evolves throughout the ballad is an adaptation of a familiar folk tune associated with various texts (including “My Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim”).

I love to think about the days so full of glee and joy,
That never will come back again to me.
Oh, it was many years ago, when but a little boy,
That I lived there so happy, light and free.
No matter where I roam, I don't forget my home,
That home, it was so ever dear to me,
And when my evening prayer was said,
I'd lay me down to sleep
In that little German home across the sea.

I never shall forget the day I left the Fatherland,
To sail across the stormy ocean foam.
My friends, they came around me and took me by the hand,
And hoped that safely back again I'd come.
My father and my mother, old, they both stood by the door,
And gave their tearful blessings unto me,
But now, they both are dead and gone

I ne'er shall see them more,
In that little German home across the sea.

I've traveled many weary miles around this world for years,
And many more, I yet expect to roam,
But when I lay me down to sleep, then in my dreams appears,
A vision of that dear old German home,
And when my days are over here, if it were for the best,
Oh, it would bring much joy and peace to me,
If I could close my eyelids here, and lay down to sleep,
In that little German home across the sea.