

ALKMAN THE CHOIRMASTER

for

tenor voice & harp

Nicola LeFanu

Words by

John Fuller

Alkman, Seventh Century BC

Oh my sweet girls, dear girls, with your so clear round voices
Linked in the sounds I taught you, your eyes on the page
And all the air no Siren struck with such compulsion
Alive in my ear like the breath of our own Kalliope
Without whose favour dance is graceless, no song moving,
Whose name is always on my lips and in your name
My dears, as I urge you on like horses to your goal.
Now my legs fail me, standing in the colonnade
Clutching my black heart. If only I could be a bird!
An unharmed gazed-at bird, the colour of distant water,
A bird not alone, but flying in easy neighbourhood,
A noble cormorant or tilted migrant gull.
Each far wave bursting for a moment into flower,
Oh my singing pupils, flowers of the sea's same song!
I am old. Your hands slip into mine for friendship
And you sing of the new life, all that I cannot teach.
For there are three seasons: summer and winter, and autumn is three,
But in the new life when buds come there is no satisfaction,
Fruit and harvest, none, and no store. Spring is an ache,
In spring the mountains break down and weep, the snowdrop
Turns away, heavy with grief. And I clutch my heart,
My heart which is like spring lightning in the mountains when
A lantern is dashed to the ground and the gods roar with laughter.
**In my dream I am rooted and a witness, amazed and curious:
They bring a simple dairy churn, though cast in gold,
And you, my dears, fill it yourselves with the milk of a lioness!
And proceed to turn out a monstrous cheese which Hermes himself
Might well have had appetite for after he'd murdered Argos!
Ah well, my own tastes are simple enough. Something like porridge
Suits me now.* You I've groomed and coaxed, my dear sisters,
It's no wonder your skills and beauty astound me still,
As hooves, as wings. You think me an old owl chunnering
In an attic, perhaps, or dare I hope as a ship's pilot
As we steer with one voice like a swan on the streams of Xanthus,
Oh my dear girls, Kalliope's daughters, my daughters, my music.
*from Collected Poems by John Fuller; Chatto & Windus 2002
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** Words in italics are omitted in the musical setting.*

ALKMAN THE CHOIRMASTER

Alkman the Choirmaster was composed for James Gilchrist and Alison Nicholls, at the invitation of Jonathan Eato. It lasts around ten minutes.

John Fuller's poem celebrates a Greek poet and musician of the 7th Century BC. Famous in his own day, little of his work has survived. Fragments of it are skillfully woven into Fuller's text.

Performance notes:

Harp harmonics sound an octave higher than written.

'Xylo' indicates L H press/damp the string very close to soundboard; R H, play normally.

'Koto' indicates a wide vibrato; press and release the string above the forks.