

A Late Walk: A Harmony of Words and Music

By Judith Olbrych

It is no compliment when someone praises a poem as easy to set to music, Robert Frost once observed. On the contrary, Frost considered it a sign of bad writing. A poem is “a music of itself,” he said. “It ought to fight being set to music if it’s got expression in it.”¹ California-based composer Michael Karmon has won that fight with *A Late Walk*, his new setting of five selections from Frost’s first published book of poems, *A Boy’s Will*. What Frost accomplishes with ordinary language—capturing “the sound of sense,” the central challenge he pursued throughout his long career—Karmon amplifies within the realm of consonant, lyric melody. Karmon’s song cycle consists of the following movements:

- I. “My November Guest”
- II. “Wind and Window Flower”
- III. “Going for Water”
- IV. “Storm Fear”
- V. “A Late Walk”

It was just over a century ago, in 1913, that Frost’s first collection was published—not in the United States but in England. He had moved his family there a year earlier at the suggestion of his wife, Elinor, to devote himself to writing full time while associating with the London literary scene. (The American edition of *A Boy’s Will* commemorates its centennial this year.)

Scarcely before Frost’s writing career even began in earnest, he was singling out qualities that he considered crucial to great poetry. He referred repeatedly over the decades to “the sound of sense,” describing it in a 1913 letter to his longtime friend John Bartlett: “It is the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound—pure form.”² Or, as he elaborated in a 1914 letter to John Cournos:

My versification seems to bother people more than I should have expected...It is as simple as this: there are the very regular preestablished [*sic*] accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling onto the shingle.³

Nearly half a century later, in a 1959 conversation with writer Robert Penn Warren and literary critic Cleanth Brooks (the same conversation quoted in the first paragraph of this essay), he was propounding the same theme, asserting that a poem without dramatic accent “will not stay in anybody’s head. It won’t be catchy,” as it is in forms from the common street ballad to the most famous Shakespearean lines. The mood should foretell the end product. Yet he simultaneously cautioned against “singsong”; one must “break the doggerel,” he said, but “mustn’t break *with* it.” Sound should exist in playful tension with the words: “What’s the good of the rhythm unless it is on something that trips it—that it ruffles? You know, it’s got to ruffle the meter.”⁴

Karmon instinctively grasps the challenge that Frost poses with melodies that are consonant and catchy as well as structurally balanced (with the exception of “Storm Fear”). The music follows the regular iambs of Frost’s text but ruffles the meter with irregular rhythms that reflect Frost’s diversions into natural speech patterns. Karmon avoids rhythmic doggerel by compressing repeated phrases into fewer measures and introducing 7/8 meter and alternating meters. The music often retreats into a soft dynamic, a fermata, or an extended rest in order to allow the dramatic silence or speech sound of the text to dominate. Tonal and harmonic progression heighten rising tension. The music literally underscores the message. I will now discuss in greater detail three of Karmon’s *A Late Walk* song settings.

“My November Guest” (**Figure 1**, page 18) narrates a conversation between a man and his sorrow, personified as a woman, on a late autumn walk that juxtaposes isolation and community. Although the November wood has completed its display of fall color and does not yet sparkle with winter, his companion “loves the bare, the withered tree,” and finds “pleasure” in the dreary landscape. Sibilants paint the gauzy scene at the end of the second stanza: “her simple worsted grey is silver now with clinging mist.” But plosives begin the third stanza with a contrasting hardness—“The *desolate*, *deserted* trees, / The *faded* earth, the heavy *sky*, / The *beauties* she so *truly* sees”—and the poem concludes with a

¹ Robert Frost, recorded conversation with Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and Kenny Withers, 1959, in *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1995), 853–859.

² Frost, Letter to John Bartlett, *ibid.*, 667–669.

³ Robert Frost, *The Letters of Robert Frost*, Vol. 1, ed. Donald Sheehy, Mark Richardson, and Robert Faggen (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 208.

⁴ *Frost: Collected Poems*, 853, 854.

return to isolation. Although the speaker too sees the beauty that his companion perceives, he remains alone, for “it were vain to tell her so.” This conclusion, although in the same meter, demands a different mode of expression compatible with Frost’s “sound of sense.” As he wrote to Bartlett in 1913:

Take My November Guest. Did you know at once how we
say such sentences as these when we talk?

- She thinks I have no eye for these.
- Not yesterday I learned etc.
- But it were vain to tell her so.

Get away from the sing-song. You must hear and recognize
in the last line the sentence sound that supports, No use in
telling him so.⁵

Karmon’s setting of “My November Guest” establishes a sense of movement within the regularity of the walk by beginning with a statement in F major of a symmetrical twelve-bar melody in two six-bar phrases and by repeating his initial, symmetric melody in only ten measures. He underscores the hardness of the middle section with a descending bass line and chordal progression leading ultimately a half-step down to a lush jazz chord grounded in E major. An interlude signals transition to the conclusion in the original key and mood. Frost’s struggle between meter and the rhythm of natural speech in the last stanza appears with a transformation of the theme, in which the melody soars to new heights and the removal of dotted patterns from the last utterances creates a quiet declamation.

“Storm Fear” (Figure 2, page 21) introduces chromatic melody and makes a significant break with regular meter and rhyme schemes. Both text and music imitate natural speech patterns. The theme, as in previous movements, portrays loneliness within community. Wind and winter weather entrap and isolate man, woman, and child; the scene is oppressive, threatening, harsh, cold. Again, Frost uses sound to create the scene: We hear the shrill wind in unvoiced consonants—it “whispers *with* a sort of stifled bark”—and brutal “k” sounds hammer against the narrator “subdued to mark / How the cold creeps.” Likewise, Karmon’s musical silences, created by frequent rests and fermatas, join spare accompaniment lines throughout the short piece; they, along with the brevity and irregularity of the lines of poetry, emphasize quiet and isolation. From the beginning of the piece, the accompaniment’s rhythm of 3/8 + 3/8 + 2/8, though repeated, creates a tension in combination with the 4/4 vocal rhythm. The struggle is abandoned only briefly, in lines 9 and 10 of the poem,

when regularity in melody and meter appear in contrasting regular couplets that reflect community: “I count our strength / Two and a child.” Then the initial rhythmic patterns return, reestablishing the mood of both words and music.

Concluding the set is a gentle, lyric setting of “A Late Walk” (score to this movement, along with the entire song cycle, is available on the GFA website at www.guitarfoundation.org/?page=Scores). Frost once remarked that besides the pen, his favorite implements were the ax and the scythe, because they were used in peace as well as in war.⁶ Likewise, in the pastoral setting of “A Late Walk,” the phrase “headless aftermath” charges with violence a somber, quiet scene in which the words’ internal music allow us to hear a plaintive “*w*hir of sober birds / Up from the tangle of *w*ithered *w*eeds,” and the dry brown leaf “*s*oftly *r*attling down.”

In these poems and their musical settings, neither Frost nor Karmon writes as a modernist. Each creates tension by departing from established structures. In the end, Frost’s poems remind us that we do experience extraordinary contradiction in everyday life, only we do not realize it until the moment the poem reveals our own thoughts and experiences to us in a new way. Karmon, for his part, by ordinary means in an extraordinary way, manages to amplify the great poet.



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⁵ Frost, Letter to John Bartlett, in *Frost: Collected Poems*, 676–677.

⁶ Robert Frost, preface to “This Is My Best” (July 26, 1942), in *Frost: Collected Poems*, 784.