

If Trees Could Talk, Program Note (by Sheila Silver)

When Rosemary Ritter approached me about writing a new work for Songfest (2020) I was reading Richard Powers' *The Overstory*. I understood the science and importance of Powers' story because of the film my husband, John Feldman, had recently made, [Symbiotic Earth](#). I began to do more research on trees and how they fit into the ecology of our planet. Peter Wohlleben's book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, was also a source of inspiration. But within these works I couldn't find a text that cried out to be sung. Then, I was talking to my friend and colleague, hornist and author Ann Ellsworth (for whom I had composed a horn trio, *Being in Life*) and she proposed an idea in which a human is speaking to trees using the language of an abuser caught in the cycle of an abusive relationship with a loved one. The scenario is as follows: HUMAN (one singer) confronts the loved one, ranting about not being understood, not wanting to abuse the other but having no choice, blaming the victim for the HUMAN'S abuse while alternately being apologetic. HUMAN challenges the loved one to respond; TREES (three singers) respond lovingly in vocalize; gradually HUMAN is drawn into the "wisdom" of TREES; and then together they present a Buddhist proverb:

*The tree is the source of unlimited kindness,
Never demanding it offers to all the fruits of its labor.
It even gives shade to the axe man
who cuts it down.*

I found many versions of this proverb and expanded it to fit the story. Humans have laid waste to 40% of the forests that once covered the Earth and continue to destroy the old growth forests at an astounding rate. By destroying trees we are destroying the system of life that sustains us and regulates Earth's climate. Amongst a myriad of things that trees do, we need to be aware that trees, through transpiration, cool the planet. A forest is not just a bunch of trees, it is an entire ecosystem and through the bionic pump, sends water inland from the coasts. How we treat trees is symptomatic of our disconnection from nature. Life on the planet is one big interconnecting system, of which we are part.

I collaborate often with my husband, filmmaker John Feldman, who has an extensive library of nature footage. We decided to create a visual component that compliments the music but also allows the audience to watch the singers and not be glued to the screen. Most of the footage comes from his recent film, [Regenerating Life](#). And because I am a collector of Tibetan singing bowls, I decided to use them to add a magical aura to the trees' vocalize.

While Tibetan singing bowls are microtonal – they usually have two pitches: the primary lower pitch, plus an upper pitch which is usually an octave plus a perfect 5th or tritone higher. On a visit to Nepal in January 2020 I found an unusual bowl with three pronounced pitches - Ab/Eb/Cb - making an Ab minor triad. The other bowls I selected reinforce an Ab major sound.

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