The Four Elements

Ensemble Altera

CHRISTOPHER LOWREY

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

WIND

Owain Park (b. 1993)
1 The Wings of the Wind 5. 08

Sumei Bao-Smith, soprano

Anonymous (16th century)
2 Westron wynde (Arr. Michael Garrepy, b. 1990) 2. 52

Andrew Bearden Brown, tenor
Rachel Garrepy Beberwyck, recorder

Ivo Antognini (b. 1963)
3 Hope is the thing with feathers 4. 57

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)
4 Leonardo dreams of his flying machine 8. 31

Sumei Bao-Smith, soprano
Elijah McCormack, soprano & finger cymbals
Harrison Hintzsche, bodhrán
Simon Whiteley, tambourine

EARTH

William Byrd (1540–1623)
5 Terra tremuit 0. 55

Owain Park (b. 1993)
6 Upheld by Stillness 6. 16

Sumei Bao-Smith, soprano
Andrew Bearden Brown, tenor

Piers Connor Kennedy (b. 1991)
7 Bailey 3. 02

Rachel Garrepy Beberwyck, tambourine
Harrison Hintzsche, bodhrán

Daniel Gledhill (b. 1984)*†
8 For the beauty of the earth 5. 51

WATER

African-American Spiritual
9 Deep river (Arr. Norman Luboff (1917–1987)) 3. 35

Harrison Hintzsche, baritone

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924)

10 The Blue Bird 3. 40

Sumei Bao-Smith, soprano

Rebecca Dale (b. 1985)

11 There will come soft rains 5. 12

FIRE

Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988)

12 God's Grandeur 5. 12

Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943)

13 Io piango 3. 13

Lucy Walker (b. 1998)

14 I saw eternity 4. 40

Michael Garrepy (b. 1990)*

15 Flame of Love 8. 31

Sumei Bao-Smith, soprano
Elijah McCormack, soprano

QUINTESSENCE

Ēriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977)

16 Salutation 3. 30

Total playing time: 75. 14

* World-premiere recording
*† Winner of the 2021 Ensemble Altera Composition Competition

Full ensemble roster:

Soprano
Sumei Bao-Smith
Clare Brussel
Rachel Garrepy
Beberwyck
Jess Huetteman
Elijah McCormack
Victoria Meteyard
Sarah Vitale

Alto
Luthien Brackett
Aryssa Burrs
Julia Cavallaro
Sylvia Leith
Christopher Lowrey

Tenor
Andrew Bearden Brown
David de Winter
Jack Granby
Brad Kleyla
Oliver Mercer
Gregório Taniguchi

Bass
Michael Garrepy
Nathan Halbur
Harrison Hintzsche
Joseph Hubbard
Edmund Milly
Simon Whiteley

Directed by
Christopher Lowrey

NOTES FROM THE COMPOSERS

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Hope is the thing with feathers

This is one of the most famous poems by the American poet Emily Dickinson, in which Hope is represented by a little bird that comes down to earth and rests on our soul to protect us in difficult moments without asking anything in return. The piece is dedicated to a friend of mine, choir director Dario Piumatti, who during the first phase of the pandemic was seriously ill but fortunately managed to heal completely, perhaps thanks to that little bird… **Ivo Antognini**

For the beauty of the earth

This setting of *For the Beauty of the Earth* was composed as a heartfelt tribute to one of my favorite hymns and was written in response to the composition competition hosted by Ensemble Altera. It was such a joy to have the opportunity to reflect upon its beauty while exploring new harmonic colors and textures. Through this arrangement, I sought to honor the spirit of the original hymn while adding my own voice to its timeless message.

Daniel Gledhill

© Brian To

Salutation

Salutation was composed for a cappella choir to a poem by Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. The music follows one of Tagore's overall spiritual messages: that our lives may be understood as a continuous salutation to God, ending in an eternal home. It may also be heard as aligning with the ancient fifth element suggesting what lies beyond earth, air, fire, and water: the spiritual and eternal.

Ēriks Ešenvalds

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I saw eternity

I saw eternity was my first commission as Composer-in-Residence with St Martin's Voices. The piece represents the beginning of what became both a collaborative journey and a formative learning experience, and I am thrilled that it features on the present album. Beginning with a gentle, tentative melody, the music intensifies, until the return of the line 'I saw eternity', expansive and glorious in its reiteration. As the piece draws to a close, the original motif emerges from the full texture, then fades back to the contemplative atmosphere of the start. I wanted to evoke a growing feeling of certainty and affirmation, and explore the concept that eternity, while vast and difficult to comprehend, could also provide a sense of comfort and constancy. **Lucy Walker**

Bailey

Bailey was commissioned by my alma mater, St Peter's College Oxford, to celebrate the unveiling of a new quad in College, 'Castle Bailey Quad', set in the former grounds of Oxford Castle. It sets a poem by fellow Peterite Rob Yates which explores how a place which brings people together can shape identity, form community, and nurture regrowth. **Piers Connor Kennedy**

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© Mark Garrepy

Flame of Love

Having collaborated with Chris on many projects over the years, I was delighted when he invited me to write a new work for Ensemble Altera on the theme of fire. As I searched for the right text, it was my deeply spiritual mother who suggested St. John of the Cross's Living *Flame of Love*. I was immediately captivated by its vision of a love that burns so completely it transforms everything it touches. It felt like the perfect match for Ensemble Altera, whose singing blends profound intimacy with ecstatic intensity, capturing both the gentleness and the consuming power of the flame at the heart of the poem. I'm deeply grateful to Chris and Ensemble Altera for bringing this music so beautifully to life. **Michael Garrepy**

The four sacred elements, wind, earth, water, and fire, are among humanity's most ancient attempts to map the physical and metaphysical world. Long before the division between science and philosophy, these elemental forces served as both matter and metaphor, describing the building blocks of the cosmos and the temperaments of the soul. In the classical Greek imagination, their origins were divine: the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles cast them as eternal, indestructible roots, each aligned with a deity, held together by Love and torn apart by Strife, a vision of the universe at once dynamic and eternal.

This elemental taxonomy proved unusually durable. The Hippocratic medical tradition wove the four into the doctrine of the humours: sanguine air in spring, choleric fire in summer, melancholic earth in autumn, phlegmatic water in winter. Medieval scholars mapped them onto the four evangelists, the four rivers of Eden, and the four cardinal virtues. Alchemists and Renaissance magi made them the scaffolding for elaborate systems of correspondence, linking wind to the intellect, earth to stability, water to the emotions, and fire to transformation. The vision is not uniquely Western: Vedic tradition names vayu, prithvi, jala, and agni as the gross elements from which the sensory world is composed; Chinese cosmology's wu xing preserves the same cyclical, mutually generative principle; Indigenous North American traditions conceive of the elements as sacred directions, each associated with a color, an animal, and a spiritual teaching.

In all of these frameworks, the elements are not static substances but processes. Air feeds fire; fire's

ash nourishes earth; earth releases minerals into water; water evaporates into air. The wheel turns without ceasing. But the story of the elements is no longer told only in myth or metaphor. The same forces once seen as beyond human influence are now deeply shaped, and in some cases imperilled, by human hands. In an age shaped by climate science, we might hear in the elements both an ancient poetics and a pressing ecological truth: that the balance of these forces sustains the possibility of life.

This recording invites the listener into such a cycle, moving through Wind, Earth, Water, and Fire before arriving at a fifth and final chapter. The works gathered here are not literal tone-paintings of the elements, but encounters with their symbolic and sensory qualities, inviting us to hear them as both ancient archetypes and living presences, and to consider how our own hands now shape the balance of the forces that sustain us.

Wind carries seed and song, breath and prayer, and for millennia it has been the unseen companion of human imagination: breath as the sign of life, breeze as the whisper of inspiration, gale as the herald of change. It precedes all else in the elemental cycle, the first stirring before the shaping of earth, the current that will feed fire and lift water to the clouds.

***The Wings of the Wind* — Owain Park**
Owain Park's *The Wings of the Wind* draws its text from a collage of Psalm verses, woven together to invite vivid word-painting and an arch-like musical structure. The music moves between billowing choral textures and stiller, suspended harmonies, tracing the alternation between gust and calm, suggesting wind's role as divine messenger: invisible yet irresistible.

***Westron wynde* — Anonymous, 16th century, arr. Michael Garrepy**
The anonymous sixteenth-century song Westron wynde is one of the most distilled expressions of wind in English lyric. The speaker invokes the western wind and the 'small rain,' then longs for his love in his arms and himself in bed once more. Garrepy preserves the plaintive contour of the original Dorian-mode melody while clothing it in new harmonies, allowing the text's sensuous longing to speak plainly.

***Hope is the thing with feathers* — Ivo Antognini**
Antognini's setting of Emily Dickinson's celebrated poem likens hope to "a bird that perches in the soul" and never stops singing. The wind here is implicit, the invisible lift that keeps the bird aloft. Antognini captures Dickinson's paradox: hope is fragile and constant, delicate and resilient, needing nothing from us yet sustaining us through every storm.

***Leonardo dreams of his flying machine* — Eric Whitacre**
Whitacre's Leonardo imagines the Renaissance polymath not as a serene genius but as a restless dreamer consumed by the desire to fly. The choir becomes his sketchbook, whirring and exclaiming, as though his fevered marginalia had sprung into sound. Silvestri's libretto intersperses newly fashioned Italian lines in the spirit of Leonardo's own

notebooks, and Whitacre mirrors this with kaleidoscopic textures: madrigalian flourishes, sudden shifts of meter, and dense counterpoint that hums like the flutter of wings. Beneath the exuberance lies a timeless truth: wind is the element that tempts human beings to rise beyond their given limits, and sometimes, desire to succeed.

EARTH

Earth is the form itself, the bedrock beneath our feet, the mineral memory of the planet's deep time, the place to which all things return and from which they rise again. In the cyclical imagination, it follows wind as the settling of movement into matter, the shaping of the invisible into the tangible.

***Terra tremuit* — William Byrd**
Byrd's *Terra tremuit* sets an offertory text for Easter Day drawn from Psalm 75, in which the tremor of the ground gives way to a cosmic calm as God rises in judgment. In Byrd's luminous polyphony, the earth is not static but quaking, each phrase settling into harmonic repose even as voices cross and weave. It reminds us that earth is not inert matter but a living body, susceptible to upheaval, yet capable of absorbing the weight of transformation.

***Upheld by Stillness* — Owain Park**
Commissioned in 2014 by Suzi Digby and first performed by ORA, *Upheld by Stillness* is a reflection on Byrd's Sanctus and Benedictus from the Mass for Five Voices, and its placement after Terra tremuit is deliberate. Park threads fragments of Byrd's melodic shapes through a luminous, hovering texture, evoking the planet turning in slow orbit, "upheld by stillness." Where Byrd's earth trembled, Park's remains in perfect suspension, cradled by the stillness that allows all motion to exist.

***Bailey* — Piers Connor Kennedy**
In Kennedy's *Bailey*, earth is layered with the human act of building. The walls of the text are literally of stone, "star-borne, sea-scrubbed, pressed by the weathering globe," and figuratively the enclosing structures of a community, a space of safety in which minds may collect and bloom. Kennedy's music finds unceasing permanence through a metronomic percussion part shaped like the slow weathering of rock, reminding us that the element of earth is as much about the stones we inherit as the futures we build upon them.

***For the beauty of the earth* — Daniel Gledhill**
Gledhill's setting of F. S. Pierpoint's familiar text is an unashamed hymn of gratitude for the created world, naming the glories of "hill and vale and tree and flower" not as backdrops to human life but as gifts that inspire praise. The music's blooming textures give the impression of open landscapes where earth's bounty is both seen and celebrated, the season of ripeness when what has been rooted and tended comes into full view.

WATER

Water resists form: it flows, shapes, erodes, and renews, the dissolving force that softens what has been fixed and returns it to the possibility of change. In sacred traditions it washes away impurity and marks new beginnings; in myth, it is the threshold between worlds.

***Deep river* — African-American Spiritual, arr. Norman Luboff**
Luboff's arrangement of Deep river preserves the spiritual's unhurried dignity. Its refrain, "My home is over Jordan," uses the crossing of the biblical river as a metaphor for freedom, whether literal — the Ohio River and the route to the free states — or spiritual, the crossing into the promised land of heaven.

***The Blue Bird* — Charles Villiers Stanford**
Stanford's setting, to a text by Mary E. Coleridge, captures a moment of still water transformed by a sudden visitation: the lake lies cold and still until the blue bird passes overhead, its reflection briefly touching the surface. Stanford's harmonies shimmer like light on water, with a high soprano line suggesting the bird's gliding motion. Here water becomes a mirror, its calm broken only by beauty.

***There will come soft rains* — Rebecca Dale**
Dale sets Sara Teasdale's 1918 poem, written during the First World War, which imagines nature carrying on undisturbed after humanity's self-destruction: "Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree, if mankind perished utterly." The imagery of rains and blooming trees is tinged with an almost painful serenity. Water here is cyclical and eternal, the soft rain falling long after our presence has washed away.

Fire is the most volatile and paradoxical of the elements: it can warm and illuminate, or consume and destroy. Across mythologies it is the gift of the gods — Prometheus's stolen spark, the Vedic agni, the burning bush of Exodus — and also their instrument of punishment, an agent of transformation before its smoke returns to the air to begin the cycle again.

***God's Grandeur* — Kenneth Leighton**
Leighton's setting of Hopkins's dense sonnet confronts fire as both destructive and redemptive. Hopkins's lines bristle with industrial residue — "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil" — yet turn toward resilience: "there lives the dearest freshness deep down things." The closing image of the Holy Ghost with "ah! bright wings" calls to mind the tongues of fire at Pentecost, and Leighton's music burns with the same intensity, evoking the friction between human degradation and the earth's stubborn will to renew.

***Io piango* — Morten Lauridsen**
From his cycle Madrigali: Six 'Fire Songs' on Italian Renaissance Poems, Lauridsen's Io piango takes its flame from the furnace of love. Setting a Renaissance poem attributed to Vincenzo Ruffo, the speaker laments the pain of passion, a sweet burn that wounds yet revives. Lauridsen honors the madrigalian roots of the text while fanning it into modern harmonic heat, his suspensions smoldering into resolutions.

***I saw eternity* — Lucy Walker**
Walker draws from Henry Vaughan's seventeenth-century metaphysical vision of "a great ring of pure and endless light, beneath which Time and all her train were hurl'd." Fire here is transfigured into the unquenchable radiance of eternity. Walker's setting turns Vaughan's vision into sound that seems to expand beyond temporal bounds, glowing with a searching intensity that refuses to be extinguished.

***Flame of Love* — Michael Garrepy**

Garrepy's *Flame of Love* uses the ecstatic verse of St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Carmelite monk and mystic, to return fire to the soul's interior. The living flame is both divine presence and consuming passion that transforms the self. Each stanza moves between tenderness and ardor, the music glowing in long lines and sudden surges: fire as illumination from within, the element that purifies by love, lifting the heart alight.

QUINTESSENCE

The ancient philosophers knew that four elements alone could not account for everything. Aristotle proposed a fifth substance, which later scholars named quinta essentia, "fifth essence" in Latin, and which we call quintessence today. Unlike the four earthly elements, subject to change and decay, this fifth was held to be eternal and incorruptible, moving in perfect, unending circles. It transcended the other four, completing the picture of the cosmos without belonging to its turbulence. The word has since drifted into everyday English, where we speak of "the quintessence" of a quality to mean its purest embodiment — but the philosophical original is more precise: not the best of the four, but the one that lies beyond them, gathering their energies into a stillness the others cannot reach alone.

***Salutation* — Ēriks Ešenvalds**

Ešenvalds sets the final poem of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, the cycle of devotional songs that earned the Bengali poet the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The poem is an explicitly devotional address to God, whose presence is immanent in the world and in its elements: "In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet." The soul, "like a flock of homesick cranes flying night and day back to their mountain nests," makes its voyage home to the divine through wind and water, earth and light. In one image, the four elements traversed across this recording are gathered into a single act of return, dissolved not into silence but into devotion. Ešenvalds's homophonic setting mirrors this simply and beautifully: the voices move together as one body, as cranes move in formation, and Salutation offers what the whole cycle has been moving toward: stillness, gathered, and given back.

Christopher Lowrey
www.ensemblealtera.com

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