

Seth Houston, choral composer

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Big Sky

for SATB chorus A Cappella

words and music by
Seth Houston
1993

www.sethhouston.com

Notes

Houston composed *Big Sky* in a remote log cabin by a stream, where recently-melted water roared down from the snowfields in Bear Basin toward the Gallatin River. It was the summer of 1993, and Houston was working at a guest ranch in Big Sky, Montana. The summer was an unusually cold and stormy one, and the guests and llamas under Houston's care often found themselves pelted by hail rather than admiring Montana's famously blue "Big Sky." The text of the song takes the stormy skies as a metaphor for times in our lives when we encounter obstacles and are forced to abandon our cherished plans. Hopefully, these changes turn out to be for the better, both for ourselves and for the planet we inhabit.

The text is written in the style of the great English hymnodists of the 18th century, particularly Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. The music, similarly, is inspired by the American shape-note singing tradition, which set a great number of Watts' verses to powerful and often rollicking four-part *a cappella* music. Shape-note singing was popular in New England from 1780 to 1820 and in the southeastern United States ever since. It has enjoyed a revival across the country, and in England, since the 1960s. Many shape-note songs contain a "fuging section," marked by imitative counterpoint. *Big Sky* incorporates many of these features, but with a distinctly more contemporary sensibility.

Big Sky has been recorded by Northern Harmony on its 1995 album *Heavenly Meeting* and by Village Harmony on its 1997 album *Endless Light: Spiritual Songs by a New Generation*. Two choirs—one in England and one in the United States—have named themselves after the song. *Big Sky* continues to be enjoyed by high school, collegiate, and community choirs on both sides of the Atlantic.

About the Composer

Seth Houston (born 1974) is a composer, choral director, and performer currently living in Boulder, Colorado. Houston holds degrees in composition and religion from Oberlin College, and is currently completing a master's degree in choral conducting at the University of Colorado in Boulder. In 2001, he founded the youth chorus Big Sky, based in Brattleboro, Vermont. Houston currently directs the choral program at Shining Mountain Waldorf School in Boulder. Houston's choral compositions are widely performed, and many of his earlier works are included in the shape-note collection *Northern Harmony*, published by Northern Harmony Publishing Company.

Text

When the way is clear, and sunlight shines,
We pursue our way.
With nary a fear, we follow straight lines
Day after blinding day.
 But the path gets blocked, and the sky turns black
 Forcing us to pause,
 And leave, with shock, our narrow track
 For one with fewer flaws.

When the sky is blue and the grass is green
We seldom check to see
If our pathway through this verdant scene
Leads toward harmony.
 Then danger shakes our selfish minds,
 We look to the sky,
 New lives to make, new paths to find.
 Listen to Her reply:

“Live your lives,” says she, “with keen respect
For your brothers of the earth.
To be truly free, you must protect
Them with majesty and mirth.
 The ocean and air, forest, hill, and plain,
 Animal in flight,
 Are in your care; rejoice in the rain
 And walk in the way of light!”

Big Sky

words and music by
Seth Houston, 1993

With jovial conviction, $\text{♩} = 84$

mf

Soprano
When the way is clear, and sun-light shines we pur-sue our way. With na-ry a fear we

mf

Alto
When the way is clear, and sun-light shines we pur-sue our way. With na-ry a fear we

mf

Tenor
When the way is clear, and sun-light shines we pur-sue our way. With na-ry a fear we

mf

Bass
When the way is clear, and sun-light shines we pur-sue our way. With na-ry a fear we

mf

Piano
(for rehearsal only)

6

fol-low straight lines day af-ter blind-ing day.

fol-low straight lines day af-ter blind-ing day. *f* But the

fol-low straight lines day af-ter blind-ing day. *f* But the path gets blocked,

fol-low straight lines day af-ter blind-ing day. *f* But the path gets blocked and the

6

f

11

But the path gets blocked and the sky turns black, for - cing us to pause,
 path gets blocked and the sky turns black, for - cing us to pause,
 and the sky turns black, for - cing cing us to pause,
 sky turns black, for - cing us to pause,

11

11

16

and leave-with shock, our nar - row track for
 and leave, with shock, our nar - row track for
 and leave with shock, our nar - row track for
 and leave, with shock, our nar - row track for

16

16

22 *mp*
 one with few - - er flaws. flaws. When the sky is blue and
mp
 one with few - - - er flaws. flaws. When the sky is blue and
mp
 8 one with few - er flaws. flaws. When the sky is blue and
mp
 one with few - er flaws. But the flaws. When the sky is blue and

28
 grass is green, we sel - dom check to see if our path - way through this ver - dant scene
 grass is green, we sel - dom check to see if our path - way through this ver - dant scene
 grass is green, we sel - dom check to see if our path - way through this ver - dant scene
 grass is green, we sel - dom check to see if our path - way through this ver - dant scene

leads to-ward har - mo - ny. Then dan - ger shakes our self - ish

dan - ger shakes our self - ish minds, we look to the sky,
 our self - ish minds, we look to the sky,
 self - ish minds, we look to the sky,
 minds, we look to the sky,

43

new lives to make, new paths to find; Lis - ten to her

lives to make, new paths to find; Lis - ten to

lives to make, new paths to find; Lis - ten to

lives to make, new paths to find; Lis - ten to

lives to make, new paths to find; Lis - ten to

43

49

mf

re - ply. ply. "Live your lives," says she, "with keen re - spect for your

mf

her re - ply. ply. "Live your lives," says she, "with keen re - spect for your

mf

her re - ply. ply. "Live your lives," says she, "with keen re - spect for your

mf

her re - ply. Then ply. "Live your lives," says she, "with keen re - spect for your

49

55

bro - thers of the earth. To be tru - ly free, you must pro - tect them with ma - jes - ty and

bro - thers of the earth. To be tru - ly free, you must pro - tect them with ma - jes - ty and

bro - thers of the earth. To be tru - ly free, you must pro - tect them with ma - jes - ty and

bro - thers of the earth. To be tru - ly free, you must pro - tect them with ma - jes - ty and

55

55

*All parts: **ff** on the repeat*

60

mirth. *f* The o - cean and air, forest, hill, and plain,

mirth. *f* The o - cean and air, forest, hill, and plain, a - ni

mirth. *f* The o - cean and air, for - est, hill, and plain, a -

mirth. *f* The o - cean and air, for - est, hill, and plain, a - ni

60

60

66

a - ni - mal in flight, are in your care, re - joice in the
mal in flight, are in your care, re -
- - - ni mal in flight, are in your care, re -
mal in flight, are in your care, re joice

66

66

72

rit. (2nd time only)

rain, and walk the way of light! light!
rit. (2nd time only)
joyce in the rain, and walk the way of light! light!
rit. (2nd time only)
joyce in ³the rain, and walk in the way of light! light!
rit. (2nd time only)
in the rain and walk in the way of light! The light!

72

72