colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

for String Quartet
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Notes to the Performers:

• This work is based on the poem “Old Salt Woman” by Luci Tapahonso. You are encouraged
to familiarize yourselves with this work while preparing this piece. It is in the book *A Radiant Curve* published by the University of Arizona Press.

• Time is given in proportional notation with barlines given in between staves so as to not disturb horizontal spacing. The barlines delineate approximately two seconds. Performance of time can be expressively flexible but should not wildly stray from the given notation. Events in the score that are vertically aligned are roughly simultaneous but need not be executed with absolutely precise coordination.

• The violist acts as a special character in this work: a kind of narrator who “speaks” with the voice of the poet. Consider a special positioning of the quartet, perhaps with the viola standing. The given diagrams should be taken only as examples of the possible set-ups you could do. You can come up with your own positioning or simply use a standard quartet set-up if necessary.

• You are encouraged to explore performing this work with amplification. It is not, per se, necessary for performance but amplification may well enhance the listening experience.

• The sound world of this piece is not a perfectly pure world.

Notes to Violin 1, Violin 2, Cello:

• All harmonics given are natural harmonics. If a string marking is given (II., IV., etc.) all material following is only on that string until a new marking is given. The indication I-IV. indicates that all strings are available as in normal playing.

• The double-stop harmonic-touch passages are done with very light bow pressure and long continuous bow strokes, changing the finger position in an improvisatory manner (sticking
generally to the contour indicated but with lots of liberty for momentary play. During these passages the fingers frequently release to expose one of the open strings, and for extended passages such releases alternate between the open strings. The timing of the open string notes is approximate but should have a relatively regular sense of pulse. When two or more players perform this gesture at the same time the pulses should not try to line up but rather remain independent.

The square noteheads indicate overpressure. Vertical square noteheads (as used for tone-clusters) here indicate overpressure double or triple stops with the pitch dampened by the hand over the strings. These gestures are at or near the frog for the most part. The position of hand can be used to give a rough sense of glissando. These overpressure multiple stops are often used in conjunction with ricochet.

Notes to Viola:
- The key to the solo is making the instrument sound as much as you can like a spoken voice. For me this means a perpetual sliding that keeps from sounding like a clearly intoned pitch. The approximate pitch space is given with a three-line staff and a quasi-alto clef.

I've increased the vertical size of the clef because so much of the movement is in spaces between half-steps. The middle, upper and lower lines are given as a point of reference and precise pitch is not intended. The notation gives a guide to approximate pitch and a fairly clear
outline of contour and dynamic. A strong sense of gesture is desired. These “spoken” passages are all performed on the C string unless otherwise noted.

- In the spoken passages each “syllable” is articulated with a notehead. Phrases are given with long dotted slurs. Bow changes can be done as needed but during a phrase, the bow should not really leave the string, even during pauses. In gaps between syllables (sometimes indicated with a dotted glissando line), bow pressure and touch simply lighten to the point of loosing pitch, maintaining a quiet bow noise.

- This is, in many ways, an unusual part and is in some ways a solo, even without being terribly soloistic, and should always be discernible. The part forms a figure of constancy, of clarity and calm assurance. It is not so much the story as the storyteller, not outwardly dramatic but rather an axis of reflection amidst the swirling colors of the narrative around it. Nevertheless each gesture should have its own musical, gestural sense and should feel expressive.

- Moments not using the large three-line staff are performed normally.

**Program Note:**

What you notice when you meet poet Luci Tapahonso is the strong clarity of her personhood. The richness of her interaction with life comes forth from her matriarchal eyes the way I imagine it would from the eponymous mythical figure in Tapahonso’s poem *Old Salt Woman*. I find the poem entrancing for so many reasons but perhaps none more so than the intriguing sense of time. The poem begins at the beginning of human history shortly after the birth of First Baby. The narrative flows forwards full of echoes from Old Salt Woman’s past until it magically morphs into the ongoing tradition of the First Laugh Ceremony of the Navajos that continues today. The “oneness” of the Navajo worldview (in which all things are manifestations of a unity rather than the obsessive fragmentation of the Euro-American perspective) here relates to time as well, where the ancient and the present slip back and forth seamlessly.

As a sestina, the poem has built into its traditional form numerous repetitions but two of these end words are particularly important to my reading. One is “color”. In addition to the colors of early morning, clear skies and salt, there are colors of laughter, of light effervescence, of sharing, of betrothal and betrayal, as well as the intense colors of
midnight, the ageless colors of stones, and love’s radiant colors. This suggested to me a sound world driven by sonic shapes and hues more than by 19th century European melodies and harmonies. Perhaps the most important color is the color of laughter at the heart of the poem. The baby’s first laugh is a sacred rite for the Navajo that brings family together to rejoice in the healing power of sharing laughter. It was important for me to get that boisterous guttural explosion out of the quartet.

The other image source I focused on is the river. Water flows through this poem at every turn. In addition to the geographical San Juan river and the thin brown rivers at Dinétah, there are rivers of luminous beads, of baby laughter, of angry words, and the crystal rivers of salt beneath our feet. I attempted to weave that sense of motion into the fabric of the piece the way I enjoy it in Tapahonso’s words. Her sentences continue past the ends of each of the sestina’s six stanzas moving directly without break into the next, creating a sense of on-going that makes the whole poem into a river.

One last point I think is interesting is the way that age plays into the sense of time. The moving force in the poem is literally as an old person. The poem tells us early on that “her true essence became apparent in her autumn years” and it is only over time that “she was able to transform the grief into exquisite songs of beauty.” Similarly, First Baby who would ultimately grow up to be the centrally important figure White Shell Girl, guides us to old age with her lilting songs. The songs don’t rush to fill an urgent present. Just as it took time for the sorrows of Old Salt Woman to metamorphose into serenity, I’ve tried to compose this piece with an abiding sense of patience, unfolding

This piece is a setting of Old Salt Woman the way one sets a poem in an art song. The viola performs the role of singer, helping to keep us grounded in the poet’s point of view as time shifts around us and the dance of colors envelopes us. The poem is full of magical songs. I’ve deliberately not tried to recreate or even refer to the magical songs of the Navajo people, but rather to invoke something more strange and unknown that can be its own song of joy and wonder. I have, however, used my analysis of the lilting of Tapahonso’s own voice as a point of departure so that this new song, however distantly, still echoes something essential of her.

- Peter Gilbert, 2015
Intense but with a sense of stillness...as if infinite...

(2 seconds)

1. retake bows freely, varying lengths

solo
molto espressivo as speech, without a specific sense of pitch

sempre portamento (without stopping or lifting the bow off the string during the marked phrase; with bow noise, ghosting notes in between, though not necessarily all in one bow)

* 'Ai/ejaa jii!'
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

"at the beginning"
for string quartet

"of Navaho time"

"Áshįį h 'Asdzáán Sání"
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt
for string quartet

"near the shallow river"
They said

"first baby was"

"colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt"
for string quartet

"healthy"

"but her cooing was not a song"

"of joy"
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt
for string quartet

"not know sorrow"

"Old Salt Woman was called"
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

They said

\[ \pi \neq \beta \]

flautando; very airy
with spontaneously changing bow placement, ranging from sul ponticello to molto sul tasto

lifting one finger to get the open string to sound
for string quartet

flautando; very airy
with spontaneously changing bow placement,
ranging from sul ponticello to molto sul tasto

lifting one finger to get the open string to sound

"effervescence traveled with her"

"she"
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

"who is the primordial mother of the salt clan"
lifting alternating fingers to get alternating open strings to sound

1.02
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

lifting alternating fingers to get alternating open strings to sound

(not coordinated or synchronized with Cello)
But her true essence
became apparent in her autumn years
colors of early morning, of clear skies, of salt

"When Áshįįh'Asdzáán was young"