

John Riley

John Riley is the first movement of *Every Lover is A Warrior*, a cycle for solo harp that takes traditional folk songs from three different countries and recasts them with original material, using ostinati as a basis and using the harp in new ways. The first movement, which can be played on its own, transforms the Appalachian tune John Riley to create a Bluegrass piece for harp. Harpist Bridget Kibbey had suggested to me that a bluegrass piece was missing from the harp repertoire, and we decided to change that. The song tells of a soldier, John Riley, who returns home after eight years at war and tests the faithfulness of his sweetheart, who has been waiting for him. He finds her in her garden and, seeing that she does not recognize him after so much time, asks her to marry him. She says no, she is waiting for her John Riley, who has been away at war, but to whom she will remain true. He says, but what if he has died in battle? What if he has found someone else? What if he was lost at sea? And with each question she remains steadfast. Finally, he reveals his identity and says ‘weep no more, my own true love, I am your long-lost John Riley’, and they go off into the sunset.

The tune for the second movement comes from a charming French hymn that I have recast using an ostinato of harmonics. The original words depict a love more spiritual than romantic. The third movement combines two Hungarian folk songs: When they Take Me for a Soldier, and a Csardas in which a soldier laments having to depart for lonely barracks in Vienna, wishing he could remain behind and be a rosebud in his lover’s garden. The two songs become entangled in a quodlibet which culminates the cycle.

The themes of love and war unify the work. Its outer movements present soldiers as lovers, but those they leave behind are warriors too in their own way, through their faith. The central movement presents Jesus as a lover of mankind and casts him as a warrior for love.

- Kati Agócs