

HOPE

is the thing with feathers

PROGRAM NOTES

Hope is the thing with feathers for oboe, cello, and piano, was commissioned by the Chamber Music Network of Greater Cincinnati. This work is dedicated to those who lost their lives to Covid-19, and to their loved ones. Hope is a guiding light when moving forward through the darkness of heartache and tragedy.

I was sitting at my piano, improvising some themes and motives for this work, when I kept hearing the sweetest birdsong from outside. It was five distinct pitches: E-G#-E-F#-F#. I decided to mimic the sound on the piano, and to my delight, the bird responded! I “conversed” in this way with the bird (which I later realized was an oriole) for several minutes.

This sweet encounter brought a special brightness to my day, and led me to think about the following beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson:

Hope is the thing with feathers

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

I used the natural rhythm of the poem to create this “tune without...words,” (to paraphrase Dickinson.) Interspersed in the hymn is the oriole birdsong.

It is my hopeful prayer that this work will bring peace, light, and hope to those who hear it.