

Composer's Note

This setting of John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* was written for the Twin Cities' Men's Chorus during the early years of the AIDS epidemic that deeply affected our arts community. Although Donne wrote the poem in the early 17th century for his wife Ann on the eve of a trip to the Continent, it could easily be read as a final farewell to a dear friend or lover lost to the plague. The poem's main conceit is the idea of two lovers as two legs of a drafting compass; although they move apart at times, they are always connected, and the stationary leg brings the circling one back to where it began. As I studied the poem, I was intrigued with the way the sentence structure spilled past its iambic tetrametric borders. And I loved how the pause produced by the missing strong syllable at the end of the third line of stanza six showed "...an expansion, /Like gold to airy thinness beat."

A VALEDICTION: FORBIDDING MOURNING

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love.

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did, and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,

Like gold to airy thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.