

Sue Loves Butter

Words and Music by Elizabeth Alexander

Composer Notes:

Sue Loves Butter was commissioned by a women's choir in memory of Sue Fern, a beloved singer and founding member of the chorus. Because I had never known Sue, the chorus acquainted me with her character by sending me many stories, letters, emails, and even videos. They wrote of her kindness, generosity and love of singing – but the stories I loved most were about her humor and zest for life. Everyone seemed to have at least one story about Sue's laughter and good-natured practical jokes! A second alto, she was legendary for letting out a hearty "moo" during choir rehearsals, a reference to the conductor's childhood on a dairy farm.

One storyteller wrote about a fishing trip on which all the food Sue prepared was cooked in butter – fish, potatoes, eggs, vegetables, everything. Her friends teased her about that for years afterward. Butter – what a great metaphor for exuberance for life!

These stories, along with one women's observation that she always felt younger when she was around Sue – almost like she was a girl again – made me decide to write a song that was over-the-top playful. In fact, *Sue Loves Butter* is the most unabashedly playful song I've ever written! Many of my songs for women's choir, like *Why I Pity the Woman Who Never Spills*, *Life Is Not a Garden*, and *Reasons for the Perpetuation of Slavery*, bring out the strong and courageous side of women. But it was also a pleasure to just let myself have fun, and remembering what life was like when I was a curious, irrepressible girl.

In the end, *Sue Loves Butter* was SO playful that, while a portion of the chorus adored it, there was also some discomfort about having so much joy in a memorial song. After some discussion, the conductor asked me to go back to the drawing board and write a more traditional elegy for Sue. Thus I wrote *Tree Song*, a lyrical piece which reflected Sue's love of nature.

This compositional compromise pleased all parties, which pleased me. But, for the record, if there's ever a posthumous musical celebration of *my* life, I sure hope there will be room for bad puns, amateur dancing, vigorous hand-clapping, frolicking children, and – most definitely – butter.

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