

“**Of Gold**” is in many ways a work about impossibility. When Chanticleer asked me to compose a piece based on the California Gold Rush, what came to my mind were not the fantastic stories of destitutes-turned-into-wealthy forty-niners, but instead the accounts of many men and women who came to California only to see their hopes shattered after several years of frustration and suffering. At first I thought of adapting excerpts from the several surviving diaries written by some of the (mostly unsuccessful) men who emigrated to California in the mid-1800’s, but upon reading many pages of such diaries, I realized that my musical/emotional impressions on the matter were too abstract to be properly adapted to the rather mundane entries I had encountered, so I decided to commission instead poet Lia Purpura to write a series of short haiku-like poems based on the various concepts and images that my readings had generated: Hope, impossibility, inexorability, despair, gold, the sun.

The settings are, thus, rather abstract interpretations of the above ideas, as seen through the fantastically evocative and concentrated eyes of a great poet. The music itself deals with hope and impossibility in various ways, from the elusive quality of the musical material chosen, to an interpretive difficulty that borders—I would like to think, appropriately—on the impossible.

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Of Gold (poems by Lia Purpura)

1.
An ax, a mule, the strength of my back
and years. An ax and years.

2.
And of the dark’s great golden force
I was born—
of gold born
and still I go, carrying
these empty hands away.

3.
I came for gold and found it—
all around, my blessing and my curse.
—
Tired, spent, far less a man

I fought too long with rock, mud, ice and wretched
heat.

4.
It comes in the morning
with robes, bright vestments
and as day passes, turns it back,
this wash of gold is
and I am, by nightfall,
dim, and away—

5.
A kindling, a birdcall, ropes of hair,
clean straw, bell-chimes, day's end,
force through the blood, a body's
memory of flight, too close, too
close—