



Helen Frankenthaler | *Star Gazing*, 1989 | Acrylic on canvas | 71 1/2 x 144 inches (81.6 x 365.8 cm)

Composer Kenneth Fuchs • photo by David Acosta

## PROGRAM NOTE

### *Star Gazing*

#### **After Three Paintings by Helen Frankenthaler Suite for Orchestra**

#### **By Kenneth Fuchs**

HELEN FRANKENTHALER's work has made a significant impact on my creative life. I was first introduced to it in the fall of 1983 through the television documentary "Helen Frankenthaler — Toward a New Climate." I was an impressionable graduate student at Juilliard at the time and was bowled over by the beauty of Helen's painting and her free-wheeling creative attitude. This encounter helped me eventually to find my own creative path and surmount the doctrinaire rhetoric of avant-garde musical composition that prevailed in the 1980s. The aesthetic move toward the "new Romanticism" in musical composition was in its nascent stages, and it would be another decade before it was embraced in a significant way by a large group of composers.

I wrote Helen a letter shortly after I saw the documentary, telling her why I liked her work, and she wrote back immediately. She lived on East 94th Street, and I on West 71st Street. I was amazed that someone so famous would actually take an interest in what I had to say. I took her work very seriously, and I think she sensed that I wasn't a celebrity hound or a toady — I understood what she was trying to do and it resonated with me. Helen invited me to a forthcoming show that December at the Emmerich Gallery, and we met there. As you might imagine, I was awestruck and thrilled to meet an artist whose work I admired so deeply. The first painting I saw as I walked into the gallery was *Out of the Dark*. I looked at the patch of raw canvas on the upper right corner with all the paint rushing toward that spot and instantly my creative instincts harmonized with the image. It was as if my own creative aesthetic was shown to me. I will never forget that moment.

Helen and I became friends and we maintained a correspondence over the years until her death in December 2011. Her artwork adorns the covers of seven of my commercially released recordings.

I have been captivated for some time by the idea of using three large-scale emblematic Frankenthaler canvases as the basis for a three-movement suite for virtuoso orchestra on the theme of star gazing. Helen created a large body of canvases, prints, and works on paper inspired by this theme. The paintings I selected (which are also the titles of the movements) are *Star Gazing* (6' × 12'), *Stella Polaris* (8' × 9'), and *Lunar Valley* (4' × 8'). Taken together, the paintings and their titles make a logical progression visually, emotionally, and musically. The canvases were painted in Helen's mature style of staining and scumbling unstretched raw canvas spread on her studio floor, the elaborate washes of color soaking into the raw fibers of the untreated material.

The work lasts about 17 minutes and is composed in my mature musical style, incorporating hallmarks of the American symphonic school, rigorous counterpoint, and aspects of minimalism.

The music of the first movement, *Star Gazing*, is meant to suggest what the painting does: look up in wonder at the nighttime sky full of stars.

Because *Polaris* lies nearly in a direct line with the Earth's rotational axis above the North Pole, it stands almost motionless in the sky, and all the stars of the northern sky appear to rotate around it. That is the musical point of the second movement, *Stella Polaris*: a glittering sound mass around which the energetic orchestral textures revolve. The "sound mass" chord appears at the outset in the brass. It appears five times in the piece and with each appearance changes through use of various dynamics and mutes. In the last two statements, the mass merges with the woodwinds and the pitch structure gradually changes. The last time it appears, the chord has morphed into the dissonant, sinister opening chord of the third movement, *Lunar Valley*. The icy-sounding ponticello in the strings suggests the mysterious silvery-black atmosphere of the painting.

The music of *Lunar Valley* is bleak, with searching melodic phrases and stark, unresolved harmonic tension, featuring the outlier instruments of the orchestra, including English horn, bassoons, and the contrabass section, highlighted by a large array of percussion instruments. The music is meant to express a dormant, nearly lifeless and paralyzed emotional landscape, not unlike the world we risk becoming if we fail to control excessive population, consumption, pollution, and global warming.

*Star Gazing* was composed from January through November 2022 in Mansfield Center, Connecticut. I am deeply grateful for the financial support from the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation Composer Award Commission, whose generosity made possible the creation of this work for the Bangor Symphony Orchestra.