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three ancient Japanese poems

set to music by Sheena Phillips
for treble voices a cappella

I am not a Japanese scholar but am greatly attracted to these poems (each by different authors) from an ancient and learned tradition, and their translations by Kenneth Rexroth. Traditionally, Japanese poetry is intoned more or less on a monotone which draws great attention to the patterns of vowels and consonants. Also, as there are fewer syllables in Japanese than in English, there are often ambiguities or *double entendres* in the poems. Think of these songs, therefore, not as a series of declarative sentences but rather as a succession of beautiful sounds which conjur meaning from the listener. I think it would help performance in a non-Japanese setting to recite the English translations first.

duration c 3'00 (including recitation of the translations)

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1.
The purity of the moonlight,
Falling out of the immense sky,
Is so great that it freezes
The water touched by its rays.

Anon.

2.
The flowers whirl away
In the wind like snow.
The thing that falls away
Is myself.

The Prime Minister Kintsune (early 13th c.).

3.
As I row over the plain
Of the sea and gaze
Into the distance, the waves
Merge with the bright sky.

Fujiwara No Tadamichi (late 12th c)

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1. The purity of the moonlight freezes the water

♩ = 90   *with a sense of stillness*

mp

O zo - ra no tsu - ki no hi - ka - ri shi ki - yo - ke - re - ba

ka - ge mi - shi mi - zu zo ma - zu ko - ri ke - ru

Note on #1: allocate some voices to a hummed drone on middle C, over which the translation is narrated and the melody then also sung.

2. The flowers whirl away like snow

♩ = 76   *freely*

Canon 1   +   Canon 2   +

mf
Ha - na sa - sou³   a - ra - sh - i no ni - wa no yu - ki na - ra³ - de

Canon 3   +   *rit. e dim.*

fu - ri yu - ki mo - no wa wa - ga mi na - ri - ke³ - - - - ri

* move to the percussive 'sh'

Note on #2: perform each canon in 3 parts, 2nd and 3rd parts entering when preceding part reaches +

3. The waves merge with the sky

♪ = 130   *with a lilt, highlighting the two (uneven) beats of the bar*

p

Wa - ta no ha - ra ka - gi i - de - te mi - re - ba

mp   *mf*

hi - sa ka - ta no ku - moi ni ma - go

morendo

o - ki - tsu shi - ra na - mi na - mi na - mi na - mi