

# **THE LAST VOYAGE OF CAPTAIN MERIWETHER LEWIS**

**Dramatic Cantata for Men's Chorus, Baritone and Soprano Soloists and Piano or Piano Quartet**

**Lyrics by Jason Charnesky**

**Music by Bruce Trinkley**

*The Last Voyage of Captain Meriwether Lewis* is based on the life of Meriwether Lewis and the 1804-1806 Voyage of Discovery to the source of the Missouri River, across the Rocky Mountains and down the Snake and Columbia Rivers to the Pacific Ocean.

Meriwether Lewis was born in Virginia in 1774 and grew up within walking distance of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. After serving as an Army field commander, Lewis became President Jefferson's private secretary, during which time Jefferson began to groom the young man for an expedition west across the Mississippi. Lewis, an experienced woodsman, fair-minded leader, and staunch patriot, became under Jefferson's tutelage a naturalist of unusual observational prowess and a capable amateur astronomer.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition through the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase gave Americans their first documented report of the Indian nations, the river paths, the wildlife and the natural riches of the lands west of the Mississippi. Lewis returned East a hero and was made Governor of the Louisiana Territory.

Success did not last long however. His proposals for marriage were rejected. And he soon made enemies in his position as Governor. With a change of Administration, the Federal Government's attitude towards Lewis hardened. The Secretary of the Treasury accused Lewis of financial mismanagement. In 1809 Lewis determined to travel to Washington to defend himself against these unfair charges. Lewis, who had always been prone to bouts of melancholy, was weakened now by disease, drink, and calumny. Having contracted malaria during the voyage, Lewis had been treated with opium and developed a habit for both opiates and excessive drink. He fell into suicidal fits of depression during the trip. Tragically, one night alone at Grinder's Inn on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee, Lewis in despair shot himself.

The cantata begins with Lewis' last night when he doubts that his exploits and life have meant anything. The ensuing eight songs follows the explorer as he remembers the exciting days with the men of the Corps of Discovery, the beautiful never-ending Missouri River, and then the treacherous crossing of the forbidding Bitterroot Mountains. In the last song Lewis takes courage in his accomplishments and departs this life heroically, knowing that he will be remembered as a great explorer and scientist.

The spoken parts of the cantata and much of the verse are based upon the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Sacajawea's biography is substantially that which she relates in her song. All of the foods mentioned in "Mess Call" were in fact eaten by members of the Corps. York, the only black man in the Corps and a slave, did in fact tell the tall tale to the Indians about being born as a bear. The journals only relate that York took the joke too far. The cantata suggests what dreams may have fired the imagination of the slave.

*The Last Voyage of Meriwether Lewis* is dedicated to Neil Porterfield, Dean of the College of Arts and Architecture at the Pennsylvania State University.