

Singing: Most Companionable of Arts by On Being

What follows is the syndicated transcript of an On Being interview between Krista Tippett and Alice Parker

MS. TIPPETT:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

[music: "Adeste Fidelis" by Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Robert Shaw & Atlanta Symphony Chamber Chorus]

MS. TIPPETT:Alice Parker has composed operas, cantatas, and suites for chamber ensembles, as well as hundreds of anthems and songs. She is Artistic Director of the non-profit Melodious Accord. She was born in 1925 in Boston, Massachusetts.

MS. TIPPETT:I just want to say before we start that although you are all about music, and composing, and singing, and conducting, you write beautifully about it.

MS. PARKER:I love words.

MS. TIPPETT:Right. And so I have made so many notes, and I have so many quotations from you. You've written, "Song is a right and need." And I just wondered if there were roots of that. I would say it probably started as an intuition, and I think now it's a conviction.

MS. PARKER:I think that's...

MS. TIPPETT:Are there — how do you trace the roots of that in you?

MS. PARKER:I think it's mostly from being a mother. And I was 30 when I got married and had children. And so I'd been teaching for almost ten years then and...

MS. TIPPETT:You'd been with the Robert Shaw Chorale...

MS. PARKER:Yes, yes.

MS. TIPPETT:...already.

MS. PARKER:Yes. And watching those tiny babies develop, it just gave me this absolute conviction that babies — that's the language of babies. That's what they're born knowing. From their first utterance, it's all singing. And it takes a long time to learn the language, learn the words, and how to communicate from their brain.

And there was nothing that I loved that I could sing to them that they didn't love and sing back because the trade that's going on is not learning a song; it is human communication at its most elemental level, from the mother to baby, wordless hum or something like that. Which also leads me to conclude that song predates language, and that the first way that humans communicate is with vocal sound, which is much closer to song than it is to thought-out, measured, rational language.

MS. TIPPETT: Sentences. Bobby McFerrin once said to me — he said he suspected that we sang before we spoke.

MS. PARKER: I'm certain that that's true.

MS. TIPPETT: Because we do — we talk a lot, and there's a lot of study of how we learn language and the kind of elemental template in us, however that functions. And for you to point out which — we don't need any scientist to prove this to us, right? That singing also emerges, that sound emerges just as naturally. It's a possession almost.

MS. PARKER: It is. It's one of the things that we're born with. And it's the great international, inter-everything language because it's dealing with our inner emotional life. It's as if singing is the language of the emotions. And it's our intuitive life as opposed to our rational life. And we live in a society that has glorified rationality.

MS. TIPPETT: I sense that you perceive that — that that move to — I kind of think, in the 21st century, the place we've come is that we're understanding that even things we've pretended were rational aren't. [laughs]

MS. PARKER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Like economic behavior, political behavior...

MS. PARKER: Absolutely.

MS. TIPPETT: These things we've called sciences. But I kind of — I sense that you see — that that moved kind of — idolizing, preferencing what can be rational has also taken us away from singing.

MS. PARKER: It's partial. It's a partial view of reality. I have a basic division kind of thing that I make between what I call God-made and what is man-made. And if God made it — which is the whole created universe, sound, and all the things that are in it, or man-made. And because man is imperfect, everything that we do is not whole.

I think different people's ideas of defining God, of course, are very different, but it's the creative force for me. It's what began things if things began. And it's the all-encompassing view. Wendell Berry has a wonderful poem about the natural world where he talks of a complete economy where every bit is accounted for. What we don't account for in our economy at all is waste. And there's so much of it.

Before we buy anything, we should have money allocated for taking care of that product when it is past its useful time, like our buildings and our cars and everything, so that we don't think in wholes. And for me, the intuitive mind comes much closer to thinking in wholes than the rational mind because the rational mind erects walls. It defines. And the minute you define, you exclude something as well as include it.

If we're intuitively in music, the kind of thing that can happen at a concert where there's a person singing a spiritual from their soul — and they may have just been doing gorgeous art song and symphonic Arias, operatic Arias and things like that, but nothing goes straight to the heart of the audience like that one voice with that one song.

[music: "Take Me To The Water" by Pamela Warrick-Smith]

MS. PARKER: So my question then is, "What's going on?" And I try to define it in my book about melody. And I always — when I go into a class, as I did this morning, I said, "How many people here have had a course in melody?" Not one hand ever goes up. And that's the thing that we begin with as babies, as children.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. Well, let's talk about that because that is one of your themes.

MS. PARKER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Melody and — how do you say it? That at some point we started to preference harmony over melody. But I think you just — you say again and again that melody is elemental...

MS. PARKER: Harmony is a subset of melody.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. And I mean, I don't even think most of us have ever thought any of this through, right? Or have any sense of this.

MS. PARKER: Most people are just astonished when I say that because it's melody and harmony and rhythm. Right? That's what music is. But harmony doesn't develop until you have — four centuries ago, five centuries ago, harmony as we define it in our traditional practice. And it doesn't develop until there's notation.

And notation, our notation doesn't develop until maybe, I can say, 1200 or during the Dark Ages that people begin to write down chant and stuff like that. But as it begins to be more and more precise, we write down what we hear, and that limits it. Any notated piece of music is so severely limited by the fact of putting it down in those dumb black blobs on the paper.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] Right. I think you've said that — what did you say? Like, that 5 percent of what you hear and what you're composing is what gets put down on paper.

MS. PARKER: You're just condensing, just leaving off all of this other stuff. You can't notate the emotion. You can't — you can notate the words. This is also true of language, and I'm sure that the first people that notated language were just as horrified at what gets left out because the tone of voice.

[music: "Deep River" by Frank Timmerman & The Atlanta Singers]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, with the composer, conductor, and writer Alice Parker.

[music: "Deep River" by Frank Timmerman & The Atlanta Singers]

MS. TIPPETT: So, I want to understand why it matters that we take this in, like what

difference it makes. Also, just in terms of how any of us move through the world, whether we have perfect pitch or are tone deaf or had never read a note, why does that matter, understanding the primacy of melody?

MS. PARKER:It's the language — as I said before, it's the language of emotions. It's the way — if you think of a tiny baby, what does it have the possibility of doing? It has the possibility of a cry, which is the first one, which is for attention, for what it needs. And then very quickly, it has the ability to please, to register not only pleasure but delight. Watching a tiny baby laugh is just one of life's great moments. So that we're communicating, not what the words mean, because you can't read Shakespeare to a tiny baby. But you can certainly read Shakespeare to a 2-year-old, and what they get is the flavor of the voice.

The voice is a part of us much as our physical appearance is, and the customs that we have, the way we use our bodies. So I don't wish my grandfather had any other voice. I remember him singing to me in a very kind of scratchy voice. But that means grandpa, the way he sounded. So we each have a sound. And we communicate emotional states through that sound that are impossible to get at any other medium. It's deep. Sound gives us what is behind the surface. Sight gives us the surface.

What we miss when we don't have song is the means of creating a community, of creating a whole out of a group of people. And it doesn't matter if it's a group of people in an old folk's home that can't really sing anymore, or if it's a kindergarten classroom, or a nursery school classroom, or a bunch of seventh-grade boys who can be fairly hard to get to function as a unit.

Wherever they are, if you get them on a song, you can establish a kind of group feeling that is really — well, it's exemplified at its most marvelous after a perfectly wonderful concert when the last note is sound, and you get that silence in the room, which is a silence of completion, which is opposite from an anticipatory silence. But it just means that everyone — it's as if all of our inner ions have been scheduled to be moving in the same direction at the same time.

MS. TIPPETT:That's just so true. Right, right.

MS. PARKER:Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT:You say somewhere that, I think, singing is the most companionable of arts. That's also just a wonderful way to think of it. And it's an art that's there for all of us too.

MS. PARKER:For everyone.

MS. TIPPETT:And we've — well, I hope most of us have had that experience you just described, if even briefly, right?

MS. PARKER:Well, and it can be from other things too. It can be from hearing — the memory of the songs that your grandmother loved or something like that. I mean, memory works in such amazing ways, the depth of our sound melody. I think each one of us is a walking encyclopedia of all the sounds we've ever heard in our lives. And it takes a sympathetic vibration, kind of light glinting off something, or a color, or a representational object, or an occurrence, or remembering the first love or — all those things. What they call forth, the kind of communication they call forth is music.

Trying to get them in words is loads of fun. It's a marvelous game trying to pin these things down. But the really important things that you're always talking about just defy definition. And the lovely thing with the music is that we don't have to be limited by the way that words are limited by our rational minds.

MS. TIPPETT:I love that. There's this beautiful thing you say. You talk about the human qualities of song, that it does not exist until it is incarnate in the human throat. Now, I grew up Southern Baptist in Oklahoma, and it was a culture where there was a lot of singing in church.

MS. PARKER:Of course.

MS. TIPPETT:The church was at the center of a culture. And then there were choirs, and this was a craft that was really valued and cultivated. And there was a Baptist University where I grew up, Oklahoma Baptist University. It had an outstanding music department. In that experience I had growing up, I did know — have the experience of the kind of magic and mystery of people singing together. And I mean, you are a choral conductor, and there are choirs all over the world. Now, are you 91 now?

MS. PARKER:Mm-hmm. Well, I'll be 91 in two months.

MS. TIPPETT:OK. So in your 90th year, so this is still going on. There are all these choirs all over the country, possibly all over the world, singing music that you've arranged and composed, and putting them up on YouTube. It's so joyful to listen to that. It made me so happy to — it was such a happy thing to prepare for this conversation. I also think unlike, let's say, conducting an orchestra, there's something quite mysterious about how a good choir conductor or leader — well let's say it this way: somebody who's not great at what they do can be working with a wonderful collection of human voices, and the sound is not pleasing.

MS. PARKER:Right.

MS. TIPPETT:But I've also seen this — my son was in a great choir program at his high school — how somebody who has that craft can take a collection of very ordinary people, some — many of whom have no training, maybe all of them have no training, probably a fair number of any group like that is tone deaf, and yet make a gorgeous noise. There's something very mysterious about that, but...

MS. PARKER:It is.

MS. TIPPETT:I mean, that's a lot of where you've spent your energy and your creativity.

MS. PARKER:I do, because I...

MS. TIPPETT:So what is that? [laughs] Because you couldn't do that with people playing instruments, right? You need everybody to have a modicum of expertise.

MS. PARKER:That's right. And it also — you have to overcome technical difficulties in the beginning. But I've always said I've never found a group that couldn't sing in a very conservative church down south, or wherever they are, a classroom. In any place there's a group of singing, where two or three are gathered together, we can sing. And it doesn't even take that. I sing by myself all the time, as if I am both a producer of sound and listener to the sounds. So the circle is complete.

But what's happening is that — if I just make it personal again — I have a conception of the sound of the song, what the life of this song is. And my understanding is that if we have ears, the realm of music is open to us. If I, in my own training, start out singing in church, and was a child, and loving the music, and having piano lessons, and gradually learning more about it, I'm enlarging the capability of imagining sound that is suggested by a page. So that the more different kind of sounds that I have experienced, the more different sounds I have at my fingertips to use in my own craft. I don't think we make up anything. I think it's all there and we discover it in the world, exactly as a painter...

MS. TIPPETT: We discover the music?

MS. PARKER: Yeah. Well — as a painter discovers color. I know red, green, all those things, but I can't remember a color and reproduce it somewhere else. And I can with music. And if I am absolutely convinced that the possibility of song is always there, no matter where I am, and my job is to birth it. It's as if it's floating around right here. And if I start to sing with my very failing voice, I can evoke that spirit. And if I do it gently enough, I can get anybody that's around me into joining me just by going like this: "Help me. Help. I'm on my own."

And the more that we listen to each other, the more wonderful the sound is. And, for instance, my little church congregation at home, we have to have 40 or 50 people in the room for the congregation. The choir is about 12. But they have learned over the years to let me line out a song, a brand new song to them, and sing it back, hear what I'm doing. And I hardly ever repeat or go back unless there's a real difficulty, but I want to solve that right then. So I repeat...

MS. TIPPETT: And so this lining is this — you call this technique you use.

MS. PARKER: Lining out, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: And so just explain that or demonstrate it. [laughs]

MS. PARKER: Yeah, so it's just — if I'm going to teach a song, as I was just doing with the university choirs, if I take, [singing] "Let your little light shine, shine, shine." And you can't — if one is written down, it looks like [singing] "Let your little light shine, shine, shine." And that's the way somebody who's reading music sounds. But if you have this other one, and you're trying to get over an idea — and it's always — it's a dramatic idea. It's an opera scene. It's a video. It's something — [singing] "Let your little light shine, shine, shine. Let your little light shine, oh my Lord. There might be someone down in the valley trying to get home. So let your little light..."

And I get this picture in my mind of the only way that that person is going to get out of that valley of whatever it is that they're going through is because my light is shining, because nobody else is around here at the moment that can do it. So you start thinking that way. See where we are? It's almost in tears. [laughs]

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah, there's something you wrote: "Somehow, in music, you get exactly what you ask for and no more."

MS. PARKER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And that's what you — but you are calling forth — really what you're calling

forth is that natural gift and the fullness of the humanity that has been accumulated alongside that.

MS. PARKER:Exactly. Yeah, it has nothing to do with music from Mars or anything like that. It has to — or with music divorced from emotion. It has to do with the fact that the walls that we put up around ourselves in order to get through growing up in polite society and stuff simply dissolve when we are all listening together to a song, and when we've called forth the emotional underpinning of that song, the context out of which the song arises.

And the sound can be vastly different as it comes from different groups and develop in vastly different ways. But I am not happy unless the group I am singing with is always in that emotional connection. I have no patience with learning the notes.

MS. TIPPETT:OK. [laughs]

MS. PARKER:You learn them by hearing them and always keeping the emotional quality there.

[music: "Lowlands" by Cantus]

MS. TIPPETT:You can listen again and share this conversation with Alice Parker through our website, onbeing.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. On Being continues in a moment.

[music: "Adios, Catedral de Burgos" by Alice Parker, Melodious Accord Musicians, male section & Jacqueline Pierce]

MS. TIPPETT:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, I'm with the composer and conductor Alice Parker. She's best known for her 20-year collaboration with the Robert Shaw Chorale and her arrangements of folksongs, spirituals, and hymns that are performed around the world. She's also composed operas, cantatas, and suites for chamber ensembles, and hundreds of anthems and songs. Now in her 90s, she is also a gorgeous thinker and writer about singing as the most companionable of the arts — "song as a right and a need" for us as humans and in our life together.

[music: "Adios, Catedral de Burgos" by Alice Parker, Melodious Accord Musicians, male section & Jacqueline Pierce]

MS. TIPPETT:I want to talk a little bit about your imagination about the physical properties of sound because this is also something you've thought a lot about, worked with — how tones are produced, how tones strike the ear, time, vibration, energy, the physics of motion. Just talk to me about what goes through Alice Parker's mind when she hears the word "sound." Define. [laughs]

MS. PARKER:Yeah. Well, it's vibration. And if you think back to — I'd have to try to go back to beginnings, the Big Bang, except I can't really quite imagine the Big Bang. And God moved upon the face of the waters, right? Smack in the beginning of Genesis. If you're moving on the face of the waters, you're creating vibration. There's a wonderful Native American creation story that starts, "In the beginning was the sound."

And in a way, I think that's very true, except light is also vibration. We learn that all of the little molecules and everything in our bodies are in constant motion; they're all vibrating.

So vibration is almost at the center of life. And we can experience it through all of our different senses. But if we have ears, music is the kind of glorification of the possibility of hearing. That that's where it all is, and that that's the gift that is given us. And it partakes of energy exactly the way the physical world does. Every time we start a song, we're setting something in motion.

And it keeps going. Once we get it started, it's fairly easy to keep it going if we remember the words and aren't stopped in some way. But then how do you stop it? How do you connect one verse to the next verse? What's the emotional line through this piece? Where is the moment of most intensity? Where's the climax? How high is that climax, and how are you going to get down from it?

But you're dealing with this energy, and it's when you don't realize it, what you're doing, is that you get the boring performance or the performance that everything is technically right, but it just doesn't happen because you're not riding that energy.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. I think somewhere you talk about what — songs that have lasted, that have proven themselves, which is true of folk songs, it's true of a lot of religious music, they carry accumulated emotion, not just the imagination of one poet or one text.

MS. PARKER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: And kind of, as you said, generation upon generation has recreated that majesty, that loveliness and worked with it.

MS. PARKER: Right. Yeah. That's a wonderful quote.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. Which is an interesting way to think about how music can work on us, how we will turn to music — I mean, to even to use the word "mood" superficially — when we don't — when we want to feel something different. Right?

MS. PARKER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Or want to be taken outside.

MS. PARKER: Right, exactly. And it does that for me all of the time. If I'm going to bed at night, and my head — I always have music playing in my head. It drives me crazy sometimes. And the only way I can turn it off is play other music.

MS. TIPPETT: [laughs] OK.

MS. PARKER: But I've got — my head is all in a jangle because so many things have happened, and there's unresolved issues in my life or relationships or whatever like that. And if I go to bed and put on a recording of Gregorian chant, or of string quartets, or something like that — it can't be with words because I have a different way of listening to them. I get caught up in the words and in the technical things of that. But chant — and then I absolutely love guitar music, the gentler instruments and the quieter things.

Or if I've heard a whole lot of late romantic music with big orchestra and lots of big sounds since I was — kind of run and hide for a while in much quieter songs. And I've gotten much bolder about writing fewer notes for people to sing, so the music gets sparer and sparer. So there's space around it to get that quality of listening that comes from when you're just listening to one line, or two people sharing a song back and forth.

MS. TIPPETT:It's kind of interesting. I spoke with Mary Oliver this year, and one thing she said about — as she goes through her life, her poetry becomes shorter, sparer. [laughs]

MS. PARKER:Yes. That's...

MS. TIPPETT:What is that? What is that about the passage of time?

MS. PARKER:I sometimes think about aging. That as we're born, everything is new. So we have all of these experiences we have to go through to begin to have some idea of about what's going on. So you have all these learning years, and in your teens, you're beginning to learn about relationships with other people, and emotions, and all that that leads to.

Then you're 20 to 50 — maybe 20 to 60, you are so caught up in the business of living, in the business of being a parent, in the business of being a teacher, or whatever your occupation is, that you don't have time to look at it as a whole. And it seems to me, I was about 60 when I began to see my own experiences adding up to me instead of being very diverse experiences in conducting, and composing, and teaching, and mothering, and all the rest of it.

And so it's as if before then I've been in this going — living through this miasma, this series of scenes and acts that are just so full of activity there's no time to think. And when you begin to get out of it, it's as if you're putting your head up above water, and you're looking out and saying, "Oh, is that the way it works?"

When your doctor is younger than you are, when the policeman is younger than you are, the authority figures that you've looked up to — all of a sudden they're your children, or are the age of your grandchildren.

MS. TIPPETT:[laughs]

MS. PARKER:And you just see differently. So that your vision gets farther, and you begin to see how things relate in a way that you can't when you're right in the middle of them.

MS. TIPPETT:That sounds wonderful. And then you've had 30 years to live that way.

MS. PARKER:I see — it's just such a gift. It is such a gift, and I've just — I don't want to go back and change anything else that happened because that's all part of what brought me here.

MS. TIPPETT:I want to actually read — you have wonderful quotes all the way through. This quote of Martin Luther — where was it? About — something about all of nature has its sound. "There is nothing on earth that hath not its tone. Even the air invisible sings when smitten with a staff."

MS. PARKER:Yes. Isn't that lovely?

MS. TIPPETT:[laughs] Yes. And then here's another one, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Listening to great music is a shattering experience, throwing the soul into an encounter with an aspect of reality to which the mind can never relate itself adequately. Such experiences undermine conceit and complacency and may even induce a sense of contrition and a readiness for repentance. I am neither a musician nor an expert on music. But the shattering experience of music has been a challenge to my thinking on ultimate

issues. I spend my life working with thoughts. And one problem that gives me no rest is: do these thoughts ever rise to the heights reached by authentic music?"

MS. PARKER: Because we're leaving the rational mind behind. We're surpassing it. And we have it. What we need is a balance. We need to be whole and relate intuition to rationality. But I believe so strongly that intuition has to come first, and the rational is the ordering of the intuitive thing. Because if the rational comes first, it's incomplete and leads in the wrong direction.

[music: "Saints Bound for Heaven" by Alice Parker, Washington Master Chorale & Washington Master Chorale Ensemble]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today with the composer, conductor, and writer Alice Parker.

[music: "Saints Bound for Heaven" by Alice Parker, Washington Master Chorale & Washington Master Chorale Ensemble]

MS. TIPPETT: You were born in 1925.

MS. PARKER: Yes.

MS. TIPPETT: One thing that occurs to me as I think about the sweep of your life and work is that churches and religious traditions have been such a primary inspiration center for great music. Obviously not the only center, but the choral music — I mean, in the United States, what do we think of? We think of churches. And that institution itself is evolving, the way people, like I was and probably like you were — born into a congregation, born into a set of hymns.

MS. PARKER: Right, right.

MS. TIPPETT: And I just — I'm curious about how you think about that evolution and with your love of this piece of our life together. Where do your thoughts go with that?

MS. PARKER: As a composer, I only write on commission for performance. I don't write anything that I don't know how it's going to be performed or when. And the church, as it always has been, is full of opportunity. There's just such room there. The story really is about the human story, and the human story in relationship to that which we cannot understand.

And so there's just such room there for play. And then the words about it, the poems. Dickinson is full of Christian allusion, and she never mentions Jesus, and she rarely mentions God. But it is that — exactly that same, trying what so many of us are trying to do now. What is our relationship to the natural world? And how has it become so misguided? And how have we become so blind to what's obvious around us?

I love the Native American saying, "We teach our children to see when there is nothing to see, and to listen when there is nothing to hear. Because if you're in the woods at night and you listen for the quiet, you discover it's not quiet at all." There are all kinds of things going on, and we don't listen for the quiet. And that's a huge focus that we need.

MS. TIPPETT: And I think what's also there in your thinking is that — and I so agree with you — there's this great searching right now, and it's about — what is our relationship to

the natural world? It's also about the connection between that and our physical selves and whatever our spiritual selves are, whatever that is.

MS. PARKER: We persist. Why does every generation keep wondering about God? If you don't believe, you don't believe in the same God I believe in. [laughs] You know? It's that we've realized we are not perfect. We are not complete. We don't have control over our own destiny. I love the image of the goldfish in the bowl. And we're like goldfish in the bowl, and somebody else from outside looking at us sees very clearly what our limitations are. We don't see that at all.

And we try to reorder what is around us instead of trying to understand, as other cultures have done much better, what our place is in it and what to honor. But people are always honoring something, and we honor what we cannot understand. And we're, in our culture, very loath to admit that we can't control it. So the more that we can feel at home in a universe of what we are, an infinitesimal speck in the great sweep of time, if there is such a thing as time and space — this ever-expanding universe — I can't get my head around that. I have a feeling it's a game of mirrors, and you're expanding except there's a mirror. So it looks as if you're going in a million directions, but actually it's very controlled.

This — who am I? So a lifelong job is to discover who I am, and therefore who you are, and who anybody else is. And the big challenge for us now is to be secure and accepting of who we are so that we can look at someone else and be secure and accepting of them. And it seems as if we go from generation to generation, certainly amassing knowledge of all kinds of things, but we haven't advanced one iota in understanding each other, ourselves or each other.

And so this is the huge challenge, and that anything like group singing that can overcome those differences, the ego taking shape over anything else, anything that we can do is going to lead to a better world. And there's no way — you can't do it from a big platform. You can't do it from the TV camera because it has to be face-to-face, and it has to be local.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, that — as I was thinking about you and realizing, again, this idea that singing is the most companionable of arts, and that there's this — there's a public life aspect of singing and song and sound, even — the way you — so, I mean — I'll read something. And what it makes me realize — because I said I see singing coming back. I see people finding ways to reinvent group singing, even if there's not a tradition intact. I also experience a great longing for cross-generational relationship, which went away with the way we restructure.

MS. PARKER: Yes. Right.

MS. TIPPETT: And of course, how has all this music of the ages been passed down but through generations, people hearing their parents and grandparents sing? Anyway, here's something you wrote I found so beautiful that just speaks to this communal aspect of this. "As the first often faint sounds come from my throat, I'm beginning to spin a web connecting me to the group, and my whole effort is to get connecting threads coming back from them. As the song builds, the thread becomes a line, a rope, a cable, a bridge. And finally, there is no division. We are all one in song."

MS. PARKER: I feel that every time I start to lead any group. There's always an initial resistance, or almost always an initial resistance of the group. "I don't dare make a sound," kind of thing. And then it grows. And my job is to submerge myself in this. I'm not

trying to control the song; I'm trying to bring the song out of them.

It's astonishing what's happened. I just remember, in our little church, my mother reporting to me once after a Christmas carol sing that I'd done. That she saw two local farmers who were very strong-minded individuals, and had had some kind of a quarrel for a generation or so, never speaking to each other, just turning around after they'd just sung a carol together, and smiling at each other. It just — it breaks down those walls.

MS. TIPPETT:Yeah. Well, I also — I mean, there are stories all over the world, also. I remember in Bosnia, after the war there, there were choirs forming, or peoples whose groups — whose families were literally killing each other, but singing was a way to transcend that, both emotionally and physically.

MS. PARKER:Absolutely. Absolutely.

MS. TIPPETT:One thing I also really love — I have watched you kind of on YouTube. [laughs] With people in this universe of singing who work with what you've done. And this sense of joy — and you speaking often about — I think you said in one group, "Our work is our play." [laughs]

MS. PARKER:Yes. It is.

MS. TIPPETT:What a gift to have work like that.

MS. PARKER:It is. The comment I get more than anything else after a sing, when I've just gone and with no anthems or anything else like that — it's not a rehearsal, and we just sing songs — "That was so much fun." As if all the other music-making they've done wasn't fun. And my interior assessment of what goes on is that I've released them into the intuitive. And their rational minds, which are the critical minds, that say, "Oh, well, we haven't done this." Or, "This isn't really in tune."

MS. TIPPETT:Or, "This is serious. It's music."

MS. PARKER:Yes. Or, "This it's serious." Yeah. It's the game. It's the game of tones, and it is so much fun to play that game.

MS. TIPPETT:If I ask you how this life in music and in sound, composing, conducting, arranging, how this has evolved your sense of what it means to be human, how would you start to answer that question?

MS. PARKER:That there is no such thing as song without human beings to sing it. There might be, but there's no way that I can possibly ever know that. And if my calling, my work is to get people singing, then my job is to release them into the knowledge that there is this whole means of communication which does not depend on rational thinking, which does depend on using our voices differently to create tones and rhythms. But as you've kept coming back to, it's the only one of the arts that is immediately available to human beings. You don't have to have paints. You don't have to have a brush. You don't have to have a pencil. You don't have to have anything else.

MS. TIPPETT:You don't have to have lessons.

MS. PARKER:Yeah, you don't have to have lessons. So that it's just there. And in a way, because it is so available, we don't value it. "Well, anybody can do that. I want to do

something that nobody else can do.” But when you honor it, I think it is given us to overcome these these differences that we have between these walls that we build up of between one person and another, or one culture and another. It’s not that we can all sing the same songs because our languages are very different and our experience is different. But a lullaby is a lullaby all over the world, and a love song is a love song.

Boy, can you hear it in the language that you don’t speak at all, but it’s right there. And the song in coping with death and loss is right there. And they are so deeply, fundamentally human. It’s almost as if the song — well, the song is the language of humans. I go so far as to say, for me, there is absolute daily proof that there is a God because there is music. It’s all right there, inherent in us.

So in some ways — oh, here’s another one that I come back to: that I feel the most complete when I’m singing. And it has nothing to do with the sound of what’s coming out of my mouth. But I am using every bit of any ability that resides anywhere in me, the limits of my imagination. It’s founded on my breath, and breath is spirit in the writings. It’s founded on my breath, and my lungs keep it going. And I certainly want to use my rational mind in what I’m doing to make choices and to criticize and to mold it. But the language is right there.

And I’m using spiritual, physical, mental, sensual, whatever the other senses are that we have no idea of and don’t acknowledge. They’re all I’m using, every one of them. When I’m spinning out a melody just all by myself, it doesn’t take anybody else, and particularly when I can enlarge that into other people joining me in that melody, that it’s the most — it sounds ridiculous, but I really believe it’s the most complete human experience that there is. Everything else is partial.

[music: “Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal” by Mark O’Connor, Alice Parker, Gloriam Dei Cantores, Kathryn Shannon, Elizabeth C. Patterson & Francis Hempel]

MS. TIPPETT: Alice Parker is Artistic Director of the non-profit Melodious Accord and is the author of Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church. CDs of her compositions and arrangements — featuring music you’ve heard this hour — include My Love and I and Take Me to the Water. On December 16th, 2016 Alice Parker will celebrate her 91st birthday.

[music: “Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal” by Mark O’Connor, Alice Parker, Gloriam Dei Cantores, Kathryn Shannon, Elizabeth C. Patterson & Francis Hempel]

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MS. TIPPETT: On Being was created at American Public Media. Our funding partners are:

The Ford Foundation, working with visionaries on the front lines of social change worldwide, at fordfoundation.org.

The Fetzer Institute, helping to build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. Find them at fetzer.org.

Kalliopeia Foundation, working to create a future where universal spiritual values form the foundation of how we care for our common home.

The Henry Luce Foundation, in support of Public Theology Reimagined.

The Osprey Foundation, a catalyst for empowered, healthy, and fulfilled lives.

And the Lilly Endowment, an Indianapolis-based, private philanthropic foundation.