

Eldorado

Music: Emma Lou Diemer (b. 1927)

Lyrics: Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Gaily bedight*,
A gallant knight,
In sunshine and in shadow,
Had journeyed long,
Singing a song,
In search of Eldorado.

But he grew old—
This knight so bold—
And o'er his heart a shadow—
Fell as he found
No spot of ground
That looked like Eldorado.

And, as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow—
'Shadow,' said he,
'Where can it be—
This land of Eldorado?'

'Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,'
The shade replied,—
'If you seek for Eldorado!'

*"bedight" is an archaic term that means "adorned".

Background

Eldorado, a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, was first published in April 21, 1849 issue of the Boston-based *The Flag of Our Union*.¹ It tells of the journey of a knight in search of the mythical city of gold, *El Dorado*. *El Dorado* was

the term used by the Spanish Empire to describe a mythical tribal chief (zipa) of the Muisca native people of Colombia, who, as an initiation rite, covered himself with gold dust and submerged in Lake Guatavita. The legends surrounding El Dorado changed over time, as it went from being a man, to a city, to a kingdom, and then finally to an empire.²

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Eldorado (poem)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 29 Mar. 2018. Web. 26 May. 2018.

² Wikipedia contributors. "El Dorado." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 21 May. 2018. Web. 26 May. 2018.

The poem is set in four strophes, each at a different stage of the knight’s journey. In the first strophe the knight is young and eager – ready to take on the challenge. In the second strophe he has grown old, and it is intimated that he begins to fear that he will not find *El Dorado*. The third strophe finds him frail, possibly confronting death. Finally, the fourth verse has him crossing into the “Valley of the Shadow” where he is promised he will find *El Dorado*. Poe uses the various meanings of the word “shadow” to help the reader follow the knight on his journey – in the first strophe, “shadow” means simply a place where there is shade. In the second, a “shadow” falls over his heart – meaning an ominous feeling. In the third, he meets a “pilgrim shadow” – likely an incarnation of death, which is frequently portrayed as a shadow or shade in literature. Finally, in the fourth strophe, the “shade” (the pilgrim shadow from the third strophe) instructs the knight to boldly ride into the “Valley of the Shadow” to find *El Dorado*. The “Valley of the shadow” is likely an abbreviation of the “valley of the shadow of death” from the Biblical Psalm 23. If the shade is telling the truth, the knight may find his *El Dorado*, but at the cost of his life. In essence, the story is of a futile pursuit.

Recordings

Yonsei University Mixed Choir – this is an energetic and committed performance. We will work with a rounder tone and probably a slightly slower tempo, but this is worth your time to hear: [Eldorado](#)

Wausau West Concert Choir: [Eldorado](#)

Analysis

Key: The home tone is g, and the feel is g minor, but there is significant tonal instability throughout, often due to the use of real sequences in the melody. See Figure 1 below.

Meter: 2/2

Form: More or less AAABA + coda, details below.

Sequence 1
Segment 1 Segment 2 Segment 3

Gai-ly be-dight a gal-lant knight in sun-shine or ___ in sha-dow ___ had

Sequence 2
Segment 1 Segment 2

jour-neyed long ___ sing-ing a song in search of El-do-ra-do. ___

Figure 1

SECTION	MEASURE	EVENT AND SCORING
Intro	1-4	piano only
A (strophe 1)	5-12	a 5-8 – all voices in unison b S/T sing melody in unison, A/B sing harmony in unison
A' (strophe 2)	13-21	a and b S/T sing melody in unison, A/B now have their own harmony parts, moving in contrasting rhythm to other parts, but homorhythmically with each other
interlude	22	one measure piano interlude
A'' (strophe 3)	23-31	a 23-26 - T/B sing melody in unison, altos have supporting harmony very similar to ms. 14-15, sopranos harmonic support on “ah” b 27-31 – SII has melody, SI, A, B provide harmonic support on “ah”, tenors provide harmonic support with a counterrhythm
interlude	32-33	piano only
B (strophe 4)	34-55	c 34-37 – sopranos have the melody, all other voices sing homorhythmic harmonic support c 38-41 – identical to 34-37 d 42-46 - Use of more sequences – S/T in unison on melody, A/B in unison on harmony in counterrhythm c' 47-50 – mostly like 34-37 with a slight variation at the end of the soprano part d' 51-55 – very similar to 42-46, slight variations in the melody, A/B now have melody, S/T have supporting harmony
A (strophe 1)	56-63	a 56-59 – just like 5-8 b 60-63 – just like 9-12
A'''' (strophe 1)	64-72	a' b' musically identical to 23-31
coda	73-86	e 73-77- new material all voices moving homorhythmically, sop I has melody e' 78-86- slight variation on e at cadence, both rhythmically and harmonically