

Program Notes and Texts

Introduction

A phrase (repeated six times!) from the third to last song in this concert illustrates just the opposite of what the Chamber Chorale and its partners are expressing for us. Instead of complaining about “the trouble with the world today,” their singing and dancing give us glimpses of what’s right with the world!

From thanking God who has been with us from our beginnings, to exclaiming that we’re “no ways tired” toward the end of our lives, all eleven pieces proclaim what is positive, wonder-provoking and fun in our world – even when confronted with the deep sadness of suffering and death. From as far back as the Hebrew psalms (and no doubt before) the human voice has created beauty out of troubled times and surroundings. And we often forget that the same King David who sang the psalms also danced for joy before the Lord when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem.

***Nun danket alle Gott* by Johann Pachelbel**

*Nun danket alle Gott
der große Dinge tut
an allen Enden;
der uns von Mutter Leibe
an lebendig erhält,
und tut uns alles Guts.*

Now thank ye all our God
who does great things
everywhere;
who sustains us
from our mother’s womb
and does all the best for us.

*Er gebe uns ein fröhlich Herz,
und verleihe immerdar Friede,
Friede zu unsern Zeiten in Israel,
und dass seine Gnade
stets bei uns bleibe,
und erlöse uns solange wir leben.*

May he give us joyful hearts,
and grant us peace forever,
peace at our time in Israel,
and may his grace
abide with always
and deliver us as long as we live.

*Nun danket alle Gott
mit Herzen, Mund, und Händen,
der große Dinge tut
an uns und allen Enden;
der uns von Mutterleib*

Now thank ye all our God
with heart, voice, and deeds,
who does great things
for us and all around us;
who for us from birth

*und Kindesbeinen an,
unzählig viel zugut,
und noch jetzund getan.*

and early childhood on,
has done such countless good,
and still does so now.

This is not Pachelbel's most famous "canon," but it is based on one of the best-known hymns in the world. I think "Now Thank We All Our God" is found in just about every hymnal. The message of the text by Pastor Martin Rinkart announces the goodness of God. You have to dig a little into its history to discover that it was written during the very bleak period in Germany known as "The Thirty-Year War" (1618-1648). The tune by the church musician Johann Crüger (1598-1662) also proclaims God's goodness – but in the emotional, subjective form of music.

As an English-major who has been writing about music for the last twenty-five years, my way of getting a handle on what Pachelbel has done in this canon is to say, "He has created something new out of his sources – just like Shakespeare did with the sources of his plays."

***Abendlied* by Josef Rheinberger**

*Bleib bei uns,
denn es will Abend werden,
und der Tag hat sich geneiget.*

Bide with us,
for evening shadows darken,
and the day will soon be over.

– Luke 24:29

Josef Rheinberger's "Evening Song" is directly connected with a very well-known English hymn whose opening words come from the same source. These words are, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide..." from Luke 24:29. The scene is the emotional one where two disciples are entreating the stranger they have met on the road to Emmaus to stay with them.

Rheinberger has literally embellished this one verse into a whole song. I think its beauty is intensified by its preservation of what the Gospel text also preserves: the fact that the speakers (read: singers) do not know that they are addressing the risen Jesus. They are simply offering hospitality to someone they would like to know better, to the person who had just caused their hearts "to burn within them while he opened to them the Scriptures."

Rheinberger is a composer I would like to know better. He was born in the romantic-sounding Duchy of Liechtenstein. He was a child prodigy – already a church organist at age seven and writing his first composition a year later! (He composed the first version of *Abendlied* when he was 15!) He went on to write a great number of works, including twelve masses and three operas. An estimation of his organ music by the turn-of-the-century English musicologist, T. Weston Nicholl, struck a chord in me: “His organ sonatas are characterized by a happy blending of the modern Romantic spirit with masterly counterpoint and dignified style.”

***Jubilate Deo* by Christopher Frye**

Jubilate Deo omnis terra. (Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands!)

Servite Deo. Serve the Lord with gladness

and come before his presence with a song.

Know that the Lord is God.

He himself has made us.

We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Go into his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him and bless his name

for the Lord is good and his love everlasting.

His faithfulness endures from age to age.

Jubilate Deo. Amen

-*Psalm 100*

“Jubilate” gives us “jubilant” – and this is a jubilant piece. It comes from the heart and mind of our local composer, UW-L professor Christopher Frye. We can share in his happiness in these, the premiere full performances of his setting of Psalm 100.

In his own words, Chris wanted to bring out the “dance-like, colorful aspects” of this familiar text. And then, because he is a professional musician, he challenged himself to find new ways to express the “joyful noise” of the psalm. He chose the strong and pure sound of the oboe. He chose the loud and clear sound of the drum. He chose the meter of five to create the exotic, dance-like effect. He chose some harmonies that challenge our ears. And he chose a translation of the original Hebrew that uses both English and Latin. All this to “make the work more interesting.” He also added to the original by having it conclude with a five-fold “Amen.”

I asked Chris, "What's your favorite part of this composition?" He answered, "The conclusion, where, accompanied by oboe, drum and some hand-clapping, the sopranos and altos start the Amens. They're answered first by the tenors and basses, and they continue until all four voices join in a confident but quiet final 'Amen.' Then he added, 'I can't wait to hear it.'"

"Blessed Art Thou, O Lord," from the *All-Night Vigil*, by Sergei Rachmaninoff

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes.

The angelic host was filled with awe,
when it saw Thee among the dead.
By destroying the power of death, O Savior,
Thou didst raise Adam, and save all men from hell!

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes

"Why do you mingle myrrh with your tears of compassion,
O ye women disciples?"
cried the radiant angel in the tomb to the myrrhbearers.
"Behold the tomb and understand:
the Savior is risen from the dead!"

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes.

Very early in the morning
The myrrhbearers ran with sorrow to Thy tomb,
But an Angel came to them and said:
"The time for sorrow has come to an end!
Do not weep, but announce the resurrection to the apostles!"

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes.

The myrrhbearers were sorrowful
As they neared Thy tomb,
But the Angel said to them:
"Why do you number the living among the dead?
Since He is God, He is risen from the tomb!"

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
We worship the Father, and His Son, and the Holy Spirit:

the Holy Trinity, one in essence!
We cry with the Seraphim:
“Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O Lord!”
Both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Since Thou didst give birth to the Giver of Life, O Virgin,
Thou didst deliver Adam from his sin!
Thou gavest joy to Eve instead of sadness!
The God-man who was born of Thee
has restored to life those who had fallen from it!
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Glory to Thee, O God!

You don't have to be Russian Orthodox to love this piece – the ninth of the fifteen sections of Rachmaninoff's masterpiece. It is the Easter narrative, with some imaginative additions and theological commentary, in song! It is an archetypal story of sadness being transformed into joy.

It starts with a declaratory prayer to Jesus for saving Adam and it ends with a prayer of thanksgiving to Mary who, “since she gave birth to the Giver of Life,” saved Adam from his sin. And who is Adam? Adam is Everyman and Everywoman – a child of God.

Please read the text, perhaps more than once. The imaginative additions include putting words in the mouths of the Easter angels which are not found directly in scripture (e.g. in the third stanza, “The time for sorrow has come to an end!”) and by proclaiming something that's not said directly in the Bible, that the birth of Jesus “gave joy to Eve.”

As with almost all church music, the *All-Night Vigil* is both liturgical (that is, traditional) and innovative. It is in the nature of music to need innovation and change, all in the midst of stability. Stability and tradition are reflected in this ninth section through the repetition of the verse adapted from Psalm 119:12, which we hear four times: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me thy statutes.”

We who are not Russian Orthodox will have a hard time identifying and resonating with the ancient church melodies that Rachmaninoff incorporated into this work. What we can do is sit back and enjoy both its formality and its foreignness. We could call it “an appetizer” in anticipation of the full serving of the *All-Night Vigil* which the Chamber Chorale will give us in the Mary of the Angels Chapel in April. Alleluia!

(Or as the universal Hebrew expression of praise is transliterated (and sung!) in Church Slavonic – “Alliluiya”!)

Dance Set by Libby Larsen

It is fortunate that the composer herself has provided a note about this imaginative, fun piece. For if she hadn't, my commentary would have begun by asking us to “go back, go way back” to the oldie but goodie with the unforgettable line – “There she goes just a-walking down the street, singing doo-wah ditty, ditty dum ditty-do!” But I don't need to “go there.” Nor do I need to explain the meaning of Libby Larsen's “doo-wah” syllables. It will all be made clear right before our eyes by the dancers of the La Crosse Dance Centre.

So here, right in the nick of time (or rather, right on the beat) is Libby Larsen's own “program note:”

Dance Set is a reflection on American dance music from the turn of the century. I am intrigued by the vitality of this music (cake walk, fox trot, etc.) and have combined its rhythms with a choral sound. I chose three dance forms – two step and drag, waltz, and polka – to make this set. In “Two Step and Drag,” the couple begins dancing in a duple meter; suddenly the rhythm changes in an attempt to fool the couple, creating a whimsical effect. “Her First Waltz” evokes the image of a young girl shyly dancing; she begins tentatively, then whirls grandly into an elegant waltz. The “Polka” is a rhythmic, raucous, and jaunty country dance. Dance Set was composed especially for the Dale Warland Singers under the auspices of the MN State Arts Board Individual Fellowship Program and is dedicated to Dale Warland.

Thou Alone Art Immortal by Aleksandr Kastalsky

Thou alone art immortal,
Our Maker and Creator;
but we are made from dust and are mortal indeed.
To this very dust we shall return once more,
for this Thou didst command when Thou didst make me,
saying: “Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return.”
To the earth we mortals all shall go;
yet as our dirge we shall sing this hymn of praise:
“Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”

This hymn to God the Creator comes from a larger work, in the same way that “Blessed Art Thou” heard earlier is just one part of Rachmaninoff’s *All-Night Vigil*. This piece comes from Kastalsky’s *Memory Eternal to the Fallen Heroes*, which the composer describes as “A Service of Remembrance for soldiers who have fallen for the common cause.” It is of interest that it concludes with a triple “Alleluia” – just like the *All-Night Vigil*.

As I encourage over and over: read the text. It contains a surprising, subjective element – the “me” of the fifth line. It’s surprising because it doesn’t follow the grammar of the first four lines which would require an “us.” But Russian Orthodox theology is always Biblical, and the “me” is the right word, for it is to the individual Adam that God speaks the verse quoted directly from Genesis 3:19: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Kastalsky’s music expresses and expands the text. Again, as in the Rachmaninoff, he takes an ancient liturgical chant and adds his own variations, his own creativity. Musicologists like to point out how he is musically alluding to the *Dies Irae* (“Day of Wrath”) of the Latin Requiem. (But conductor Paul Rusterholz would have to stop everything at measure 28 to explain this to the vast majority of us!)

Kastalsky began this work in 1914 at the outbreak of the “War to End all Wars.” The figure for “soldiers who fell for the common cause” in Russia alone is a staggering one: 2,254,369 military casualties. “Yet ... as our dirge we shall sing this hymn of praise: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

Serenity (O Magnum Mysterium) by Ola Gjeilo

<i>O magnum mysterium,</i>	O great mystery,
<i>et admirabile sacramentum,</i>	and wondrous sacrament,
<i>ut animalia viderent</i>	that animals should see
<i>Dominum natum,</i>	the new-born Lord,
<i>iacentem in praesepe:</i>	lying in their manger!
<i>Beata Virgo, cujus viscera</i>	Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
<i>meruerunt portare</i>	was worthy to bear
<i>Dominum Christum.</i>	the Lord Jesus Christ.
<i>Alleluia.</i>	Alleluia!

We minor musicologists have a beatitude of our own that goes, “Blessed

be composers who write notes for *their* pieces.” Here is what the Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo (who’s now living and working in New York City) wrote about his 2012 work, *Serenity*:

With it, I wanted to write choral music that has a symphonic, abundant feel. This is the case with quite a few of my more recent works for choir. I love a warm, lush sound that can give a feeling of space and evocativeness – but still be intimate, somehow.

The text of *Serenity* is taken from a well-known medieval hymn that combines elements of Christmas carols with traditional praises to Mary. It is both devotional and popular. Many other composers have set its poetic words to music. One of the main ways that the unknown Latin poet conveys the amazing message of the incarnation is by using all those words (eight out of twenty) which end with the letter “m,” thus forcing speakers (and singers!) to shut their mouths for an instant and ponder the great and wondrous mystery.

We here in the Coulee region can show off our Norwegian heritage by saying “Tusen takk!” to Ola Gjeilo. (And I’m going to write him a note when we send him this program and ask him why his name is not spelled “Ole.”)

Circle of Life (Native American Song-poems) by Sheena Phillips

1. Falling

You,
Where have you fallen from?
You have been falling, falling.
Have you fallen from the top of the salmon-berry bushes?
You,
Falling, falling....

2. Waking

I am happy.
This is good!
There is nothing but ice all around.
That is good.
I am happy!
For land we have slush.
That is good.

I am happy!
When I do not know enough
It is good.
When I tire of being awake
I begin to wake.
It gives me joy!

3. Singing

The voice that makes the land lovely,
Again and again it sounds
Among the dark clouds,
The thunder's voice.
The voice above,
The voice that makes the land lovely.

The voice that makes the land lovely,
Again and again it sounds
Among the little plants,
The voice of the grasshopper,
The voice below,
The voice that makes the land lovely.

4. Leaving

It is time for the eagle to depart.
It is time for the white clouds to be swept away.
In the west, the ocean is heaving.
In the sky, the colors are changing.
Altair is rising.
Antares is rising,
Venus is rising,
And the Milky Way hums.
It is time for the acorns to fall,
It is time for the eagle to be flying.

5. Rising

The spirits of people will rise above,
Swaying like women while men dance.
You,
Rising, rising...
The spirits of people rising above.

My brother-in-law Stephen Billington, who's a California musician and band teacher, once asked me, "Where do composers go to find texts to set to music?" I remember answering, "Mainly in the Bible and in old poetry – especially poetry written by no specific author, such as in folk songs and nursery rhymes."

Sheena Phillips, a contemporary English-Gaelic-American composer (to coin a compound adjective which I'll explain in a minute) has gone to a seldom-used source of texts: a 1996 Dover Book entitled *Native American Poems and Songs*. By creating her *Circle of Life*, she has shown how it sometimes takes a foreigner to discover something we natives have been sitting on for a very long time. A complete program note to this work would amount to a larger ethnological lesson than could be digested in one sitting. But still the basic facts should be known about the sources of the five lyrics that make up the five "movements" of this *Circle of Life*.

"Falling" comes from a lullaby of the Haida Indians. They live in the area where Canada's British Columbia meets our Alaska. It was first published in 1912.

"Waking" is from an Inuit (or as used to be said, Eskimo) song whose original title perhaps does identify its author. It is called "Utitia'q's Song." It was published in a scholarly journal in 1894.

"Singing" comes from a tribe almost everyone knows: The Navajo Nation of the Southwest. Sheena Phillips adapted it from a lyric entitled "Song of the Mountain Chant." Its publication also dates from the turn of the last century: from 1896, but it is, of course, much older than that date.

"Leaving" brings along with it lessons in both sociology and astronomy. It is an autumn song of the Luiseño Indians, a Native American tribe who lived (and still do!) in southern California. A collection of their songs were published by the University of California in 1908. The astronomy lesson here is about two stars that rise in the autumnal sky along with Venus and the Milky Way: Altair ("the 12th brightest star of the night sky") and Antares ("the brightest star of the constellation Scorpio").

"Rising" comes from one of the six Wintu poems entitled "Dream Songs" first published in 1935. Its original title was "Dandelion Puffs." The Wintu people are a historic tribe from the Sacramento valley of northern California.

Sheena Phillips is an “English-Gaelic-American” composer because she grew up in London; studied Mathematics at Cambridge University; worked for peace and justice organizations in Scotland for ten years; then, having developed a second career as a conductor and composer, moved herself and her family to Columbus, Ohio for fifteen years. There, in the Buckeye State, she directed community, church and college choirs, collaborating with numerous dancers and instrumentalists.

We should send her not only the program of this concert but a video of Nikki Balsamo’s dancers interpreting the five songs she has resurrected, so to speak, from North America’s ethnic heritage.

Coffee (in a Cardboard Cup) by Fred Ebb and John Kander

There is some irony for us today in this highly caffeinated song from the 1971 Broadway show *70, Girls, 70*. The irony is that in 1971 no one knew that coffee and cardboard cups would improve to such an extent that they would become part of the solution, not part of the problem. But as language changes more slowly than the demand that created the universe of Starbucks and its satellites, something that tastes like cardboard still tastes bad.

The fact that this song commits the sin of getting its central premise wrong will be forgiven, for it has much energy and humor. It also teaches us a little about slang and New York City 45 years ago. It turns out that “back then” you could call cardboard “c-board,” and that there was an inexpensive cafeteria in a hotel (that still exists) called “The Belnord.”

Some of the words have been modernized and “improved” in this 2008 arrangement, such as adding “microwaves,” which didn’t yet exist in 1971. And there’s some ad-libbing and some (very old) jokes about coffee and its effects that aren’t “in the original.” But who’s complaining? Is it really a faster paced world? Can we talk? Can we have coffee together sometime? I wish I had time to tell you all I’ve learned about this song, but I’ve got to run!

Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier, English folk song, arranged by René Clausen.

I have a friend named Lindi Sarno who wrote a long historical novel to set the record straight about the tune of “Greensleeves.” (It’s Irish, not English!) I think the same case could be made for *Johnny has Gone for*

a Soldier. Something so sad and beautiful just has to be Irish, don't you think?

Of course as a folk song, it belongs to everyone and every culture. René Clausen in his program note records the fact that this song was "commonly sung throughout the American Revolutionary War period." But he doesn't tell us by which side! My guess is ... both sides. It's a universal song with many extent variations. I recently listened to one that contains an extra chorus with the line, "When he comes back, he'll marry me."

The minor musicologist in me is curious to learn if there are many other songs or ballads with the same form: four lines of eight syllables, with the first three lines having the same rhyme, and the fourth line receiving special emphasis because it doesn't rhyme!

***I Don' Feel No Ways Tired*, traditional Spiritual, arranged by Stacey V. Gibbs**

Okay, the election is over, so I can again wear my "I Like Ike" button at the top of my lapel and sing his favorite song ("The Caissons Go Rolling Along!") at the top of my lungs. And I can share how Hillary Clinton used a variation of this spiritual at the end of a memorable speech in her first presidential campaign. (You can find it on YouTube.) She alluded to Rev. James Cleveland's much longer version. It begins with a line that must speak to the heart of every politician, whether successful or not: "Nobody told me that the road would be easy..."

But every song has multiple histories and meanings – we can't possibly know or experience all of them. YouTube can educate and entertain, but it can also overwhelm us. Yet I want "for to join in that holy number" of eternal optimists. I believe that there is more good than trouble in "dis worl." And so, I'm sure, does Stacey V. Gibbs, who arranged this version of "I Don' Feel No Ways Tired" for The Boys Choir of Harlem and its director, Walter Turnbull.

– Program notes by Rev. Donald Fox, who wants to thank the Chamber Chorale of La Crosse and its director, Paul Rusterholz, for being part of what's right with his world for the last twenty-five years. (But where were you on September 16, 2016 when I needed your help to sing "When I'm 64" to Elizabeth?)