

## **First Light: The James M. Collier Festival of New Choral Music**

March 3 and 4, 2018

Program Notes by Ed Wight, Musicologist

**FIRST LIGHT** Paul French and the Repertory Singers inaugurate this first year of an annual program of new works with an absolutely lovely piece by Jodi French written for this concert. Even the title is appropriate to the occasion, a setting of text of a psalm from the New Zealand Prayer Book. After the instrumental opening, she begins quite slowly and softly (like a morning sunrise), letting us revel in the lush modal harmonies set homophonically. A contrapuntal section in faster rhythms follows, as she fashions a gradual accelerando towards the forceful and dramatic conclusion on "Raise our eyes to see you as the new day dawns. You are the first light...Alleluia."

**SOFT STILLNESS and the NIGHT** Craig Kingsbury has often written sweetly understated works of rich harmony and poignant effect for the Repertory Singers – and he returns with just such a piece again for this concert. After the instrumental introduction, listen for the first choral entrance. It is quintessential Kingsbury, its softness reinforcing the lush harmonies of stacked seconds. While he writes frequent passages of dialogue between instruments and chorus, they rarely share the same material. Each entity maintains its own sound, making their independent sonorous contributions to the overall effect. Kingsbury's strengths are tailor-made to capture the full effect of the final lines of this text from *Merchant of Venice* "Draw her home with music, soft stillness and the night." With the marvelous restraint, coupled with sweet modal cadences of bVI, bVII, to I, the light dynamics of the final seventeen bars so wonderfully reflect that "soft stillness."

**DATA EST MIHI OMNES** This is one of four "Strathclyde Motets" written in 2007 for Glasgow's University of Strathclyde Chamber Choir. It forms a striking contrast to the gentle passages of the previous pieces, as James MacMillan leaps right into the opening text – "All power has been given to me." Its forcefulness, as well as the dramatic setting and powerfully effective harmony of the Alleluias which follow (and returns at the end), frame a gentle central passage. This devout Catholic then writes a tender setting of "Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Its restraint is particularly effective in highlighting this seminal phrase of text before the fireworks return to close the piece.

**THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD** Simpleness, in the right hands, remains an underrated virtue. Will Todd wrote this setting of "The Lord is my Shepherd" for its premier performance by 120 school children. With one exception, it avoids complex textures - often writing single lines, homophonic passages for choir, or light counterpoint. Yet it is beautifully written, his skills as a composer enlivening every bar. The surprising and wonderful harmonic shift at "And I will Dwell in the House of the Lord" also reflects his other active career, as a jazz pianist. That expertise informs Will Todd's most celebrated work, *The Mass in Blue* (originally titled "Jazz

Mass"). The light harmonic touches of a sophisticated jazz artist are perfectly suited to this setting of yet another famous Christian text.

**STAY WITH ME, LORD** Though Will Todd fashions a more complex piece here, you can still hear a similar and rewarding resemblance to "The Lord is my Shepherd." He writes fewer single lines for one voice and the four-voice counterpoint becomes more complex as "Stay with me, Lord" proceeds. Yet the overall effect remains one of gentleness. Near the end he returns to a single melody for the sopranos – for a special effect. The chords are sustained and Todd avoids a sense of regular meter as he attempts to recapture the metrical freedom of plainsong performance in the early Christian church. The words and syllables provide the rhythm, as well as the nuance in this passage. Ben Dunwell wrote the text of "Stay With Me", basing it on a prayer after communion written by Padre Pio (1887-1968).

**ONLY IN SLEEP** Three years ago, the Repertory Singers presented a concert titled "The Passage of Time." It included a work by American poet Sara Teasdale, whose "simply stated thoughts are complex... and reverberate in the mind" (Poetry Foundation). Critics also found her poetry to be "full of musical language and evocative emotion.'...[short works] of joyous and unstudied song." No wonder she's proven such a tempting poet to set to music. Eriks Esenvalds captures the rich sentiments of "Only in Sleep." He provides the closest setting to a gentle homophonic lullaby on today's program, appropriate for a poet who can still see the faces of her childhood companions only in dreams. With time's passing, "And for them, am I too a child?"

**GAVILEJIET DIEVAM** Eriks Esenvalds studied two years at the Latvian Baptist Theological Seminary before concentrating on his music career. That religious background permeates the most extensive setting on the first half of today's program, "Sing Unto the Lord, All ye Lands" (Psalm 23). His elaborate original scoring for this 2008 piece included boys choir, girls choir, mixed choir, soprano solo, orchestra and organ. With such large forces at his disposal, his vocal writing often turns to homophonic blocks of harmony, with the text sung at the same time in all voices. This harmonic emphasis highlights a special penchant for the colorful effects of the raised fourth of the Lydian mode (G-sharp in the key of D Major). Yet his wide range of vocal textures also includes the simple (passages with soprano solo, so poignant and effective in "Only in Sleep"), the complex (several imitative passages in canon for the smaller choirs), and a variety of choral counterpoint in between. The further addition of instrumental color in this longest and most dramatic setting thus far provides a truly rousing conclusion to the first half of today's program.

### *INTERMISSION*

**UNQUENCHABLE LIGHT** The second half of the program is given over entirely to the newest work presented today, Jodi French's 2017-18 *Unquenchable Light* - a multi-movement work of great breadth. Three movements are highlighted below, each one strikingly different from the others.

**THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN** The Irish poet, dramatist and prose writer William Butler Yeats became “one of the greatest English language poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Encyclopedia of Literature). He included “The Cloths of Heaven” in his third volume of poetry *The Wind Among the Reeds*, published in 1899. It is one of his most popular poems, and also one of the shortest. French writes an extensive prelude and postlude for cello and harp, which also play throughout this choral work. The narrator can’t afford the gold, silver, blue and dark colors of Heaven’s cloths to spread at his beloved feet – but he has his dreams. “Tread softly,” a direct and simple spirit wonderfully reflected in a choral setting almost completely devoid of chromaticism except for the colorful raised fourth.

**SLEEP OF THE SEVEN LIGHTS** For this traditional Celtic blessing, French fashions an *a cappella* piece that emphasizes the full choir throughout. The text offers a sweet and tender blessing focusing on the primal virtues of ‘home’ and ‘love.’ French offers a rich and colorful harmonic palette, with two breath-taking modulations. The variety of choral textures in the middle lends further shape to the simpler homophony which opens the piece (on ‘home’) and closes it (with ‘love’).