

Among Angels

Program Notes by Ed Wight, Musicologist

SAINTE-CHAPELLE Charles Silvestri wrote this poem about the effect that entering a cathedral has upon a young girl. It is not just any cathedral, but Sainte-Chapelle in Paris – a glittering jewel box with some of the most dramatic and massive stained glass windows ever built. Silvestri directly refers to this in the text ‘Light filled the chamber, many-coloured light.’ In addition to the effect on sacred believers of entering any cathedral, the holiness that overwhelms her may also stem from something Silvestri does not mention. When built in the 13th century, Sainte Chapelle originally housed one of the most sacred of all relics – Christ’s Crown of Thorns (now in Notre Dame). A holy monument indeed.

The modal setting that composer Eric Whitacre provides for the men at the opening evokes the medieval atmosphere of monks, priests, and sacred ritual in the ancient cathedrals. The particular mode Whitacre chose - Phrygian – was associated in the Medieval era with “unbounded, ecstatic” emotions, an appropriate choice for the sacred feelings overwhelming the young girl. That musical motive appears throughout the piece. Whitacre also supplies recurring motives for “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus” and “Dominus Deus sabaoth,” each appearance slightly varied in this often understated and beautiful piece.

YA ERES MIA Considered the national poet of Chile, Pablo Neruda became one of the most prolific 20th-century poets in the Spanish language. His collected works total over 3000 pages, including both brief verses and epic poetry. Gabriel Garcia Marquez considers him “the greatest 20th century poet in any language.” His poetry rose to international prominence in 1924 with the publication of *20 Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. He included today’s sonnet in another collection of love poetry from 1959, *100 sonnets of Love*, dedicated to his wife Mathilde.

Ya Eres Mia (“Now you are mine”) pairs him with one of America’s true heavyweights in choral composition, the internationally celebrated Morten Lauridsen. The piano introduction establishes the understated mood which opens the piece, soon supplanted by outbursts of passion by the choir. One aspect of Lauridsen’s skill: he fashions this marvelous setting of love poetry without a single chromatic pitch in the choral parts.

HARPSONNETS “The Sonnet is unique among poetic forms in Western Literature in that it retained its appeal for major poets for five centuries” (Merriam Webster Encyclopedia of Literature). Originating in the 13th century, Petrarch became its first major exponent the following century. The great flowering of Elizabethan lyric poetry “marks the peak of the sonnets’ English popularity.” Shakespeare published his 154 sonnets in 1609, “expressions of strong feeling within an exquisitely controlled artistic form.” American composer and professional pianist James Bassi, earning a well-deserved international reputation for performances and recordings of his choral music, creates rich, atmospheric settings for choir

and harp for the sonnets. The three on today's program include love's comparison ("to a summer's day"), jealousy yet ultimate humorous triumph for the poet over the composer ("how oft, when thou, my music"), and the wisdom that true love survives even the "devouring ravages of time."

A 21st-century critic for *The Observer* writes, "Shakespeare's Sonnets must be the most uneven work in the entire canon of English literature, slipping from blandness to a jarring intensity." The intensity speaks for itself. But who wouldn't take Shakespeare's supposed "blandness" over most other poets' attempt at artistry?

AMONG ANGELS One of the most prominent contemporary British composers, Will Todd states that he "lives something of a double life." He is a composer steeped in the classical tradition, yet also an accomplished jazz performer and improviser. One of his most celebrated works, *Mass in Blue*, reflects one direction that combination of skills led him towards: the setting of the mass with pentatonic blues harmony and extended improvisation. *Among Angels* features a different approach; he combines the harmony of classical music while still employing extensive passages of improvisation. Written for 16 voice parts and two harps, at times he offers up to ten improvising parts (fixed motives, but different speeds) supporting a single melodic line.

The first section, "Fear Not," provides the central motive for the piece, appearing in varied fashion throughout the piece. The sopranos first state it, after the introduction. Its spirit also sums up the message of the piece, "Fear not, Angels will carry you on soft wings." It ends on soft harmonics in the harp, the instrument representing angels throughout history. In "Find Only Joy," Todd creates perhaps the most striking effects. A single pattern of choral improvisation (in the altos and tenors) serves as background for the soprano and bass melodies. Todd simplifies the harp parts to a few scattered harmonics – until their sweeping chromatic run ushers in a glorious full choir passage in the major mode at the very end. "Seek Out Light," the final section, opens with the extensive elaboration of a single-beat, "scotch-snap" motive introduced by the sopranos in the previous section. Todd then returns to a varied presentation of the music and text ("Fear not") to close the piece. With tone clusters and elaboration of classical motives – and with improvisation but no "jazz" – Todd creates remarkable and memorable effects for this combination of choir and harp.

INTERMISSION

TO-NIGHT Composer-in Residence Jodi French continues the focus on heartfelt love songs, with her setting of Sara Teasdale's *To-night*. "The moon was made for the sky to hold, And I for you." Teasdale included this poem in her 1917 collection titled "Love Songs" – which won the first Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1918. French's designation of "Dreamily" for the mood of this

subtly understated music setting matches Teasdale's celebrated "classical simplicity and quiet intensity" (Encyclopedia Britannica). The harp accompaniment reinforces the prevailing gentleness of this setting, as does the rich harmony of the conclusion, "Eternity was made for them [luminous moon and sky], To-night for us."

ANGEL SONG II The improvisatory element so centrally featured in Will Todd's *Among Angels* plays a similarly prominent role in *Angel Song II*. Though primarily known as a choral composer, this accomplished jazz pianist also wrote a Clarinet Concerto for Emma Johnson in 2009. Improvisation continues to play a seminal role in his musical thought. Such chance elements appear in every bar of *Angel Song II* until the final phrase. And even then it returns for the cadence that ends this gentle, mysterious and colorful *a cappella* piece that has no text. Perhaps the implication is that the angels will astound us, leaving us only able to respond "Oh" and "Ah."

THE CALL OF WISDOM After the improvised complexities of the previous two pieces by Will Todd, *The Call of Wisdom* demonstrates his wonderfully broad stylistic range among choral compositions. For this piece, he creates one of the simplest and most gentle works on the program. Listen for the sweet effect at the opening, from a motive for sopranos alone to the tender warmth of its harmonization by full choir in the next phrase. That opening motive and its variants permeate the entire piece, further enhanced by the tone clusters and rich harmony of the understated organ accompaniment. Todd used Michael Hempel's text based on Proverbs 8, and the piece was commissioned as part of Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee Celebration in 2012.

KPANLAOGO American composer Derek Bermel studied composition at Yale, the University of Michigan - and Ghana - in between winning prestigious Fulbright and Javits Fellowships. This West African folksong celebrates dance, and Bermer appropriately writes many challenging, syncopated lines that coalesce into a wonderfully lively setting. He also includes "nonsense" syllables, percussion instruments, and communal "shouts" in the soprano part in this joyous arrangement.

INDODANA This South African folksong comes to us from music professionals in that region. Michael Barrett is a conductor and lecturer at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, and Ralf Schmitt is an African choral music specialist. They fashioned a somewhat quiet, understated arrangement of a traditional isiXhosa folksong. A region just east of the Cape, this is home of one of the official languages of South Africa, spoken by almost 20% of the population. Barrett and Smith offer one main refrain, varied slightly on each appearance - sometimes by the presence of a high descant. It enfolds a brief contrasting passage in the middle.

HORIZONS Peter van Dijk concludes this section on Africa with an original composition written for the King's Singers and their 1995 South African concert tour. He sets it among the Bushman or San people in the Western Cape region. They see a ship but think little of it - as musically, the village joyously and loudly embraces hunting for food and drink to feed themselves and their

children. The soft motive introduced at the beginning appears throughout. It quietly and sadly closes the piece as well, after the colonial ships return - and in collusion with local tribes destroys the San community.

LULLABYE With hit albums spanning four decades and 19 different albums charting in Billboard's Top 200, Billy Joel "has probably written as many rock-era standards as any other living songwriter" (critic Stephen Holden). Joel wrote this lullaby in 1993, while married to Christie Brinkley, for their seven-year old daughter, Alexa. Written for piano and his own solo voice, Philip Lawson's choral arrangement results in an even softer and more gentle version. Lawson replaces Joel's rhythmic piano accompaniment with choral harmony, to very tender effect.

YONDER COME DAY So many songs are focused on spiritual issues in today's concert that ending with a traditionally joyful spiritual seems especially appropriate. Paul Rudoï couples the text from the Sea Island section of Georgia with a folk melody from the same region. But the harmony, rhythmic accompaniment, and inclusion of references to other spirituals stems directly from Rudoï's skills. Singing eight years with Cantus as a professional tenor may account for the solo tenor introduction. Paul graduated from both the Hartt School and the University of Oregon. He remains "devoted to new music trends and resources," has won many grants, and his creative arrangement brings today's concert to a lively close.