

PROGRAM NOTES BY ED WIGHT
For Southern Oregon Repertory Singers
“She Walks in Beauty” Concert
October 26 and 27, 2019

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY by PAUL MEALOR

The dynamism of Lord Byron’s poetry and life captivated early 19th-century Europe. He wrote the short lyrical poem, “She walks in Beauty,” in 1813, shortly after he first achieved international fame with the first two cantos of *Child Harold’s Pilgrimage* the previous year. It distills an essence of beauty not only of physical attraction but of character as well. Paul Meador wonderfully captures the delicate imagery of Byron’s poetry with his gentle yet rich tone clusters and soft dynamics. Currently on the music faculty at Aberdeen University in Scotland, Meador won the Scottish Samurai Award in 2019 for people making “a distinguished contribution to their field of expertise.”

VERSA EST IN LUCTUM by ALONSO LOBO

Alonso Lobo fashioned an esteemed career as a Spanish composer in the late Renaissance era. He won the position of music director (*maestro de capilla*) at both the Toledo Cathedral (1593) and later at the Seville Cathedral (1604). The celebrated Spanish composer Victoria regarded him as an equal, and Lobo’s fame lasted well beyond his death in 1617. Well-used copies of his works in Spain, Portugal, and Mexico demonstrate “Lobo was regarded throughout the Baroque Era as one of the finest Spanish composers” (2001 New Grove Dictionary).

Like Victoria, Lobo employs chromaticism somewhat more frequently than the Italians. It intensifies the emotion of mourning in this minor-mode motet written to commemorate the death of Phillip II in 1598.

ARDENS EST COR MEUM by TOMAS LUIS de VICTORIA

Such late-16th century Renaissance composers as Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, Palestrina, and Lassus created a true golden era of sacred music. This renders the New Grove Dictionary statement about Victoria all the more compelling: “He was not only the greatest Spanish Renaissance composer, but also one of the greatest composers of church music in his day.”

In the same six-voice motet sacred genre as Lobo, the heightened use of chromaticism even beyond this Spanish contemporary gives his sacred works “a poignancy rarely encountered in other music of the period.” Several times in *Ardens est cor meum* (“My heart is burning...to see the Lord”) we see the chromatic alteration of the same pitch – E natural and E flat, for example

– in consecutive bars, sometimes even in the same bar. Yet his contemporaries also knew him as a joyous man, and that comes across as well in the quicker tempo and dialogue of this motet.

DIE MIT TRANEN SAEN WERDEN by HEINRICH SCHUTZ

Heinrich Schutz, prominent in the early years of the Baroque era, was the first of the great German composers. Unfortunately, Germany was decimated by the Thirty Years War (1618-48) during the peak years of his career. Yet this great and relentless composer still oversaw most of his 500 works (in fourteen collections) into print, a rare achievement for any early composer. All of his surviving music is vocal, and today's selection stems from the 29 sacred motets he published in 1648 (*Geistliche Chor-Music*), just as the war ended.

Taken from Psalm 126 ("They who sow with tears shall reap in joy"), today's piece also reflects the fact that "he set biblical texts almost exclusively" (New Grove). This 1648 set was one of only two he modeled on earlier styles (*stile antico*). Yet unlike the modal style of the Renaissance motets on this concert, the cadences Schutz employs more often reflect modern tonality – which first appeared during the mid-17th century. Duple meter sections often feature that quintessential German trait – imitative counterpoint - alternating with faster, triple meter passages in a declamatory homophonic style.

A BOY AND A GIRL by ERIC WHITACRE

Eric Whitacre often tells the story of his wanting to be a rock musician. But when he joined a choir in college and they began rehearsing a Mozart *Kyrie*, he said, "My life profoundly changed on that day." All who love classical choral music will be eternally grateful. Born in 1970 and one of the most gifted choral composers of his generation, Whitacre was soon writing works that "quickly became standards for choirs throughout the country and eventually abroad" (conductor Gary Cannon).

His gentle setting of *A Boy and a Girl* includes frequent tone clusters that his voice-leading turns into sweet harmony. Also listen for the remarkably expressive word painting for "silence."

SLEEP MY CHILD by ERIC WHITACRE

Paradise Lost: Shadows and Wings, a musical theater work composed by Whitacre, who also wrote the lyrics along with David Noroña, premiered in Pasadena in 2007. Its wide-ranging eclectic mix includes elements from opera, musical theater, movie scores and electronic music in telling a story of abandoned angels in search of their wings. In *Sleep my child* from Act II, Whitacre creates an extraordinarily tender lullaby that we wish for every child. "You'll awaken tomorrow and spread your wings."

GOODNIGHT MOON by ERIC WHITACRE

American author Margaret Wise Brown (1910-1952) established herself as a very popular writer of children's books. Many of her books remain in print with their original illustrations. Others have been re-issued with new drawings, and 70 more stories unpublished during her lifetime are now being printed. She wrote *Goodnight Moon* in 1947 as a bedtime story, and Whitacre's often whimsical setting captures the fanciful, childlike imagery.

***I Will Arise and Go* and *I'll Be on My Way* by SHAWN KIRCHNER**

Born in Cedar Falls and with a composition degree from the University of Iowa, Shawn Kirchner is a throwback. And thank goodness. Composers in the past usually led multi-faceted careers as performers, music directors, conductors, and teachers in addition to writing music. These multiple skills remain rare among contemporary composers, but Kirchner nonetheless continues that older tradition as both a tenor soloist with the Los Angeles Master Chorale and jazz pianist with the Shawn Kirchner Quartet. That breadth of musical activity extends to style as well. In addition to classical choral music, this wide-ranging composer embraces "bluegrass, folk, country, gospel, and jazz" (Santa Barbara Music Publishing).

His folk interests surface in both pieces that close the first half of today's concert. He wrote the accompaniment in *I Will Arise and Go* for either the folk-oriented hammered dulcimer or piano. After the opening solo, the occasionally sumptuous jazz harmony of the full choir adds to his atmospheric setting of the text by W. B. Yeats and its yearning for pastoral escape.

Escape of different, fundamental sort – of the soul from the body – governs his lively gospel setting of *I'll be on my way*. While often drawing upon 19th-century folk and spiritual traditions in his arrangements for those genres, both the text ("I'll have left my feet of clay...I'll be glory bound") and music this time are Kirchner's own.

***SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY* by TOBY HESSION**

The 22-year old British composer Toby Hession excels in several professional activities, similar to Shawn Kirchner. Hession is also an award-winning pianist and accompanist. As a composer, he seems equally at home in a wide range of genres – orchestral, chamber, solo instrumental, choral and vocal solo. His vocal music has been performed by The King's Singers, Voces8 and Cambridge's Clare College.

She Walks in Beauty won the inaugural Voces8 VCM competition in 2017. His rich, sophisticated harmonic palette often withholds immediate warmth, letting it blossom in the most expressive moments.

***O SALUTARIS HOSTIA* and *ANCIENT PRAIRIE* by ĒRIKS EŠENVALDS**

Latvian composer Ēriks Ešenvalds has become one of the most popular and most performed of all internationally renowned choral composers. *O Salutaris Hostia* is one of his most popular pieces. Originally written for women's voices, Ešenvalds reflected that scoring with two soprano

soloists in this later version arranged for a *cappella* choir. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote the lyrics (“the saving grace of heaven’s gates”) for the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264. In a concert filled with vocal beauty, Ešenvalds creates the most tender and lovely work of all.

Ešenvalds also continually adds to his already extensive library of accompanied choral works. His accompaniments range from the traditional piano and strings, to the more colorful scoring of percussion or even tuned water glasses and chimes. Awash in great choral writing, *Ancient Prairie* delays the solo violin for the second half of the piece, rendering its appearance all the more expressive (especially its passages over textless choral accompaniment). Ešenvalds’ title refers not to the American Midwest, but the Asian prairies of the 9th century by Chinese poet Bai Juyi (772-846).

***WANTING MEMORIES* by YSAYE BARNWELL**

Multi-talented composers such as Shawn Kirchner and Toby Hession are by no means confined to classical music. Pop singer, composer and arranger, educator, producer, and actor, Ysaye Barnwell sang for 25 years with Sweet Honey on the Rock, and also wrote several children’s books. With a Masters Degree in Public Health and a Doctorate in Speech Pathology, she leaves most of her fellow composers in the dust.

Barnwell introduces *Wanting Memories* in wonderful fashion. She begins with just the bass-section accompaniment, soon adding soprano melody, then tenor harmony, and turning finally to a delightful full choral texture with occasional vocal/percussive accompaniment.

***UNDERNEATH THE STARS* by KATE RUSBY**

This wonderful folk song represents an all-British collaboration. Folksinger and songwriter Kate Rusby composed *Underneath the Stars* for her album of the same title in 2003. Composer Jim Clements wrote a choral arrangement of it in 2017 for one of London’s great chamber choirs, Voces8, and it has become one of their most-requested pieces. (Voces8 performed it here in Ashland two years ago.) Either Rusby, Clements, or both fashioned a telling refrain on the most poignant words as lovers part: “go gently.”

***LIGHT of a CLEAR BLUE MORNING* by DOLLY PARTON**

From a British singer/songwriter, we now cross the pond to one of the most popular American stars ever in those same fields – Dolly Parton. She has had 25 songs reach No. 1 on the Billboard Country Music charts, a record for a female artist she shares with Reba McEntire. Like the previous Kate Rusby song, Parton’s 1977 *Light of a Clear Blue Morning* also stems from the heart-breaking end of a romance. Craig Johnson’s tender and effective 2010 choral arrangement still emphasizes its origins as a soprano solo.

***JOHN THE REVELATOR* arranged by Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory**

The Calvin College Alumni Choir commissioned this marvelous Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory arrangement in 2001. It is a traditional gospel blues song, and Gospel music can be traced back to African-American oral tradition in the early 17th century. But its more popular meaning stems from African-American “revivalist religious songs from the late 19th century...succeeding the Spiritual” (Norton /Grove Encyclopedia of Music). Caldwell and Ivory create a wonderfully lively version of the song with piano accompaniment. They save their most effective touch for late, a blues-harmonized, *a cappella* passage. It gradually builds into a joyous call-and-response dialogue with the piano, growing ever louder with several patterns of clapping to noisily celebrate the spirit of John and his Book of Revelation.