

## Program Notes by Ed Wight

**Ne Irascaris Domine** Of all the internationally outstanding late Renaissance composers – Palestrina, Monteverdi, Lassus, Victoria, Byrd – the latter stands out for an unfortunate reason. Only William Byrd endangered his life by his compositions. He was an ardent Catholic in a country that Henry VIII had just established as Anglican in religion. However, Henry's daughter, Queen Elizabeth, though Anglican, protected Byrd, even issuing him a publishing patent to continue spreading his music. As a result, most of Byrd's music was published during his lifetime – a rare feat for that era.

Byrd's "expressive range was unusually wide for his day" (Norton/ Grove Encyclopedia). It included important instrumental music, as well as plentiful sacred works for both Catholic and Anglican religions. Byrd issued *Ne Irascaris Domine* ("Be not angry, O Lord") as part of his 1589 collection of motets, *Cantiones sacrae*, Volume 1. He wrote all of them in the 1580s, and this one features his rich, masterful counterpoint throughout, never pausing for even a moment of homophonic contrast, so typical of the other celebrated masters of Renaissance style.

**Die Mainacht** Brahms is justifiably celebrated as an instrumental composer. By 1950, his symphonies and concertos ranked second in popularity in American orchestral concerts only to Beethoven. And with 26 accomplished chamber works (duos, trios, quartets, quintets, and sextets of myriad variety), he also wrote the greatest body of chamber music since (again) Beethoven.

Yet these often overshadow an extraordinary achievement in vocal music as well. Musicologist (and president of Bard College) Leon Botstein writes that "Of all the major composers...Brahms was perhaps the only one to distinguish himself as a choral conductor." He won the appointment as conductor to four remarkable choirs during his career, including his first posting in Vienna, the *Singakademie* in 1863. "Throughout his life he repeatedly turned to choral [composition] as a source of inspiration, and...the result is a unique and distinguished body of work" (Botstein).

However, Brahms wrote *Die Mainacht* ('May night') as a vocal solo with piano. (James McCullough wrote this choral arrangement.) His 200 Lieder composed over a 40-year period include "heights of nostalgia and longing scaled by no other songwriter" (New Grove Dictionary). *Die Mainacht* is the second of four songs he published as Op. 43, and Brahms himself performed the piano part on its premier in 1868, with baritone Julius Stockhausen.

"Brahms's output of lieder stands out from Schubert and Schumann in the [greater] number of songs utilizing folk poetry and texts" (Botstein). So it's not surprising that the poet of this song, Ludwig Holty, drew on "nature, folklore and ballads." In this **A B A** setting, with the Brahmsian emphasis on clarity of form, the first two sections deal with nature - especially the cooing of turtledoves in the "B" section - before leaving nature behind for tears stemming from absence and grief in the final "A" section. As in so much German art song, poets and composers save the unexpected punches for the final bars.

**Water Night** We turn from a text of solitude and regret to its very welcome opposite in the poetry of Octavio Paz. "His most prominent theme was human ability to overcome existential solitude through erotic love and artistic creativity" (1995 Webster Encyclopedia of Literature). The striking depictions of two people in joyous union – "If you open your eyes...the secret kingdom of water opens" – is also marvelously captured by composer Eric Whitacre.

"His acclaim and attention...across continents and oceans...is well deserved." Whitacre is "fiercely, organically original [in] his use of harmony and unusually knowing way with choral effects" (critic David Vernier). His rich and almost continual tone clusters (close and colorful neighbor tones added to the main chord) wonderfully

paint in music the human closeness Paz writes of. Such passions by both artists inspired the title of today's concert, and led to the frequent appearance of other choral works in this spirit.

**A Long Time I Have Loved** In 1924, the young Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda published "his most widely read work" (Webster Literature), *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. It created his international reputation, and poetry critic Robert Clemens of Saturday Review wrote "it established him at the outset as a frank, sensuous spokesman for love." One of several memorable lines in this love poem is, "I want to do with you what Spring does with the cherry trees." And composer-in-residence Jodi French singles that line out in a special way.

A sophisticated composition technique involves opening a piece with an accompaniment figure. This highlights the later appearance of a primary theme (against that continuing accompaniment), making the theme even more prominent. French begins the piece with the text "cherry trees," a puzzling suggestion which only becomes clear later in the piece. This quietly understated work reserves a memorable musical effect – the depiction of perhaps the symbolically most important word, "kisses" – with the only pronounced tone clusters in the piece, immediately repeated for emphasis.

**A Drop in the Ocean** Eriks Esenvalds, from Latvia, has become one of the most internationally celebrated of all contemporary choral composers, and one of the most performed. In addition to many *a cappella* works, Esenvalds also provides both standard instrumental accompaniments (piano, guitar, violin) and turns to some special effects, such as tuned water glasses, percussion, chimes etc., for his vocal works.

Esenvalds's penchant for special effects extends far beyond that for *A Drop in the Ocean*. It opens with wind effects - women's whistling and men's exaggerated breathing, which also return at the very end. Esenvalds dedicates this wonderfully experimental sacred work to Mother Teresa, and includes freely spoken sacred chants as accompaniment as well, opening with The Lord's Prayer and including other Latin chants such as the Prayer of St. Francis, a song of the Sisters of Teresa's Calcutta Mission, and ending with a quote from Teresa herself, which provides the work's title.

Esenvalds renders all of these aspects of the piece in aleatory fashion, a free, improvisatory (chance) performance of the pitches or text he provides. Combined with standard written notation for soprano solo and TEN vocal parts for choir, Esenvalds produces a stunning sacred homage to Mother Teresa, and one of the most challenging works Repertory Singers has ever performed.

**TaRaKiTa** Born in Los Angeles, Indian-American composer Reena Esmail searches for common ground between the music of India and Western classical music. She attended Juilliard for her Bachelor's degree, and received her Doctorate from Yale University, writing a thesis on *Finding Common Ground* between Hindustani and Western classical musicians. She also focuses on three genres, writing orchestral music (with commissions from the Baltimore and Seattle Symphonies) chamber music (Kronos Quartet) and choral music (winning the 2020-25 Artist-in-Residence competition for the prestigious Los Angeles Master Chorale).

*TaReKiTa* reflects her background, as she writes that the "text" consists "onomatopoeic vocalizations of sounds produced by Indian instruments. She also sets it as a "Jog," an Indian raga incorporating both major and minor sounds in a single scale. Like Jodi French, she opens with four statements of accompaniment, before the major and minor-pitched melody appears in this delightful piece.

**In Paradisum** As with Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, which he wrote and revised continually in three versions from 1805-14, Faure wrote his *Requiem* in 1877 and then revised aspects of it until the final version in 1900 that we now know. Such extensive work paid off in spades, producing "probably the most loved of all Requiem settings" (musicologist John Bawden). The prevailing gentleness suggests one source for its continued

popularity, as Faure omitted a favorite passage for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century composers – the dramatic and terrifying Judgment Day effects of the *Dies Irae*.

That gentleness plays an especially prominent role in *In Paradisum*, a passage of almost heartbreaking tenderness (usually sung in a funeral procession). Its sentiment is particularly appropriate as we honor a remarkably generous man, Jim Collier, whose presence and support in the Rogue Valley the past 20 years meant so much for the local arts.

**Nada Te Turbe** American composer Jake Runestad sets a text by Saint Teresa of Avila. She was a 16th-century Spanish nun, and one of the great mystics of the Catholic church. Teresa joined the Carmelite Convent in 1535, and after a great religious awakening in 1555 became the “originator of Carmelite Reform, which restored and emphasized the austerity and contemplative character of primitive Carmelite life” (Encyclopedia Britannica). She insisted on a life of poverty; her reforms “required utter withdrawal so that nuns could meditate on divine law” (Britannica) and she went on to establish sixteen more convents throughout Spain. “Her ascetic doctrine has been accepted as the classical exposition of contemplative life” and like Hildegard von Bingen - another great church mystic - she was also a poet.

Perhaps the most dramatic of all Bernini’s statues throughout Rome is the one depicting her 1555 conversion: the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* in the church of Santa Maria Della Vittoria. The text of *Nada Te Turbe*, “Let nothing disturb you...Whoever has God lacks nothing,” reflects her contemplative spirit, and with contemporary harmony, Runestad adopts the contrapuntal texture of the Renaissance sacred music she would have known. Listen closely as the bass section opens the piece. All subsequent voices imitate the opening bass triplet, forming 16th-century points of imitation in Runestad’s appropriately understated, meditative setting, though in a very un-Renaissance key of F# Major!

## INTERMISSION

**Swept Away** Sarah Quartel remains a rising international star. Focusing primarily on choral music, “her works are performed by choirs around the world...and she receives international commissions” (Oxford University Press). As in *TaReKiTa* earlier, Quartel opens with an accompaniment of nonsense syllables, in a lively, rhythmically complex style of pop syncopation. This throws the main text into high relief, which, like the earlier Jodi French and Eric Whitacre pieces, focuses on being “swept away” by romantic love.

**When the Earth Stands Still** Don MacDonald holds a rare distinction. A composer of opera, over fifty film scores, and much vocal music, he is also a professional performer three times over: saxophone, violin, and voice. A singer for over fifty years, most of his compositions feature the voice in some fashion. Like so much German lieder whose opening verses disguise the unexpected and different conclusion, *When the Earth Stood Still* opens with nature imagery. Yet as this tender piece progresses, the underlying message hinted at early finally surfaces. As with the romantic passion in other works on this program, “Feel the tremor of your heart beat” (from the second verse) becomes “Stay with me, held in your arms.”

**God Will Give Orders** In addition to her prominence as a vocal composer, Sarah Quartel also promotes choral music “as a clinician and conductor in music education classes and choral events” (Oxford University Press). But her focus is not strictly *a cappella*, as this piece also includes parts for piano, cello, and African djembe drumming. The title sounds draconian, until Quartel reveals that God gives those orders “to his angels about YOU, and all his angels, his armies, sing.” The complex rhythms for both choir and djembe recall her lively pop style in *Swept Away*, with a focus ultimately on children and faith: “Sweet child, hear my song...I’ll show you how to love.”

**Carrickfergus** On a concert that often celebrates romantic passion, not every dream bears fruit. By age seven, English composer Joshua Pacey joined the chorus at Winchester Cathedral, and went to study music at Clare College of Cambridge – joining its celebrated choir as well. This gentle setting of a traditional Irish text begins in hope for the beloved in *Carrickfergus*, but ends as a lament: “Boyhood friends and relations have passed...my bed is free.”

**The Maid of Culmore** What is it about Irish folklore? Another traditional Irish text takes unrequited love a decisive step further than in *Carrickfergus*! Our rejected suitor wishes destruction at sea for *The Maid of Culmore* who has sailed away. Several ironies abound, however. Irish composer Kevin Whymys is a professional guitarist in demand across many musical genres. While it’s not surprising that he originally wrote this choral work with guitar accompaniment, this prolific composer prefers to write orchestral music for X-box and Playstation computer games, film (*Knockser, The Return of the Father*) and television (*The Unteachables, Big Week on the Farm*). And the other irony involves the fact that despite the more graphic negativity of our hero, the music setting might be even lighter and gentler than *Carrickfergus*. Whymys also writes a more harmonically rich score, perhaps stemming from lifelong performance on guitar.

**Mo Ghile Mear (“My Gallant Lad”)** And a trifecta - yet another traditional Irish lament. The 18th-century Irish poet Sean Mac Domhnaill mastered Latin, English, and Ancient Greek literature as well as his native Irish language. *Mo Ghile Mear* became his most famous work, a lament for the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. The text doesn’t mention him by name, but “My gallant lad – a noble, proud young cavalryman – went far away...and no news is told of him.”

The piece opens as a gentle lament, but becomes more rowdy as the dynamic bodhran drumming begins. Though written in Irish Gaelic, it deals with Scotland’s tragedy. The defeat at Culloden ended the dreams of Scottish independence, crushed by British forces under the Duke of Cumberland. This is still the last pitched military battle on British soil, as the “Battle of Britain” in World War II was fought and won in the skies over England.

**Soay** Our last two songs have little or no text – but the contrast couldn’t be greater. *Soay* features no words, just vocalise (vowels) in support of a cello solo. It is from the ‘Lost songs of St. Kilda.’ St. Kilda is an archipelago, the westernmost islands of the Outer Hebrides, off the coast of Scotland. It had to be abandoned in 1930 after repeated crop failures. But some of their songs existed in oral tradition, and were finally transcribed in 2016 by Trevor Morrison. Rebecca Dale arranged *Soay* as a gentle ballad for cello with choral accompaniment, beginning quietly and gradually soaring towards a late peak. But be ready for the quiet, understated coda at the end with its unexpectedly rich harmony, perhaps the single most beautiful passage on today’s concert.

**Mouth Music** With several traditional Irish pieces in the books, we close the concert by dipping into Celtic (and Scottish) folk heritage. *Mouth music* forms a separate Celtic genre itself – lively vocal music without instrumental accompaniment, but with the singers’ nonsense lyrics “imitating the music of “fiddles, bagpipes and jew’s harps” (earthsongs) before the main and often bawdy lyrics take over.

Such pieces featuring “astonishing verbal acrobatics...appeared frequently at dances, but also at weddings, chore times, or just for sport” (earthsongs). Both the nonsense syllables as well as the actual text, “Dance to your shadow when there’s nothin’ better near ye,” occur with new syllables on each 16<sup>th</sup> note. Challenging verbal acrobatics indeed, and a festive non-stop conclusion to today’s concert.