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Program Notes

– *Written By Robert Hanshaw*

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) – *My Spirit Sang All Day*

Gerald Finzi was a British composer whose life was cut too short by leukemia; he died at age 55, at the height of his compositional prowess and his prominence in British musical circles. He was a friend of Vaughan Williams, though his style is strongly distinct from that of his British contemporaries – partially because he was self-taught.

His philosophy of text-setting was simple and faithful to the spoken rhythm of the words, with clarity and expressive emotion as his guiding principles. He did appreciate the complex music of midcentury Europe, however, and the harmonies in this piece are quite adventurous. But, in testament to his deep fluency with part-writing, they are ultimately not difficult to sing.

Finzi set this poem – a short work by Bridges on the joy of love – while he was courting the artist and violinist Joyce Black, whom he later married. It is a sweet, lively piece of music.

~ Earth ~

Eric Barnum (b. 1979) – *Afternoon On A Hill*

The composer has named two other composers on our program – David Dickau and Gerald Finzi – as some of his major influences. You may hear the commonalities in their harmonic language. But Barnum has a sensitive ear on his own for natural text stress, for pulling meaning out of a poem, and for amplifying the effect of the words beyond what they represent when merely written or spoken.

Barnum's style is vividly on display in this piece. His harmonies have a breath of pandiatonicism (chords with added non-chord tones) in them, creating crystalline-sounding suspensions that hang in the air, emphasizing the heightened sense of nature in the text. And his stirring setting of the line "I will touch a hundred flowers, and not

pick one” brings out an unexpected pathos – no longer a flighty and sweet impulse, but a holy dictum, this love of nature, holding its fragility in sacred trust.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, the author of the poem, is a fascinating character in her own right. She was a prominent figure in literary America of the 1920s-40s. And as much as her poetry celebrates the natural world and the sensual world of people, so she, too, celebrated these aspects in living her life. Millay was a person who fell in love easily and often, with women as well as men. And she rarely confined herself to one love at a time. In this light, that single line of poetry takes on greater meaning.

Frank Ticheli (b. 1958) – *Earth Song*

This piece is so personal to the composer, that it would be an injustice to introduce it using anything but his own words:

“Earth Song is one of only a few works that I have composed without a commission.” ... “I felt a strong impulse to create something that would express my own personal longing for peace. It was this longing which engendered the poem’s creation.”

... “I knew I had to write the poem myself, partly because it is not just a poem, but a prayer, a plea, a wish – a bid to find inner peace in a world that seems eternally bent on war and hatred. But also, the poem is a steadfast declaration of the power of music to heal.

In the end, the speaker in the poem discovers that, through music, he is the embodiment of hope, peace, the song within the Song. Perhaps music has the power not only to nurture inner peace, but also to open hearts and ears in a world that desperately needs love and listening.”

Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) – *I Will Be Earth*

Gwyneth Walker intended this piece to be a simple and straightforward representation of the sentiments of this love poem. And indeed, it hews very closely to the shifting styles of the text – it begins with a sweet and wistful melody for the first lines, bare-faced and innocent; proceeds to a stormy section that encompasses such robust obscurities as, “We will be desert, pure salt the seed / Burn radiant love, born scorpion need,” and ends with an elaboration on the initial theme and words.

The poem is by May Swenson, with whose work Walker found a special connection – though sadly only after Swenson’s death. (Walker discovered her work literally by reading her obituary.) She loves it for its humor and caprice, its honesty and its unashamed embrace of eroticism. *I Will Be Earth* gives us a small taste of that worthy oeuvre.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) – *Vier Zigeunerlieder*, Op. 112b

These pieces, literally “Gypsy Songs,” are Brahms’ settings of various Hungarian rhymes. It is unclear precisely how “Gypsy” the rhymes are – they were translated from the Hungarian, after all, not the Romani language itself. They were also initially translated into German – not by Hugo Conrat (formerly Cohn), as it states on the music – but by the Conrat family’s ethnic-Hungarian nurse!

Nevertheless, in Romantic-era Europe, Hungarian more or less meant “Gypsy,” and “Gypsy” meant an exoticism that appealed to bourgeois audiences and publishers.

Yet the music of the *Vier Zigeunerlieder* is very German. We do not find the same syncopation or common recurring harmonic tropes as we might find in other pieces labeled as “Hungarian” or “Gypsy.” Why this disconnect? Brahms was certainly familiar with the *style hongrois*, because he arranged band music in this style during his youth, and wrote some very convincing *Hungarian Dances* later. The scholar Seth Houston, in a paper presented at the Brahms Society, suggests that this was an intentional move: Brahms “[eliminated] specific ethnic or national connotations” to “[avoid] threatening implications” in the zealously nationalistic climate of late-19th-century Vienna.

But they are simple, a little raucous, a little mischievous; the melodies are catchy pseudo-folk tunes and the piano accompaniments often blindingly fast. For all their political complexity, they are charming pieces to sing.

Ola Gjeilo (b. 1978) – *The Ground*

David Rutherford at Colorado Public Radio writes that Ola Gjeilo “blends contemporary elements of minimalism within a traditional tonal framework.” This is very true of *The Ground*, the finale from Gjeilo’s *Sunrise Mass*. His homophonic choral setting of parts of the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* texts flows over a repetitive piano accompaniment, strongly tied to a home key signature, creating a wash of consonant sound. Important structural points in the piece are marked by vigorous modulations, from the key of G to B to E-flat (D-sharp) – rising by a major third each time.

Gjeilo wrote the *Sunrise Mass* as a metaphor for the process of transforming from a child into an adult. He writes that this last movement is meant to convey “a kind of peace and grounded strength after the long journey of the Mass,” which begins in a very airy and diffuse place and gradually works its way to a place of solidity and “identity.”

~ Water ~

Rollo Dilworth (b. 1970) – *Take Me To The Water*

This piece opens with a brash piano tag (complete with a clashing C against C-flat), and we are instantly transported into the harmonic language of jazz, the rhythms of gospel music, the aesthetic of the African American tent revival – complete with a medley of traditional spirituals and a call-and-response between the “preacher” and the choir. Dilworth ties together “Wade In The Water,” “Down By The Riverside,” and his own words and melody to create an inspired whole.

The texts resonate with a shared meaning. In the composer’s words: “The subject of water became a common theme [in slavery-era spirituals]. Not only was water viewed as a means of spiritual cleansing and purification, but it also served as a means of covering the scent of an escaping slave. Hence, slaves would often make references to water images in their songs (especially the Jordan River) in the hope that they would become free.”

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) – *The Seal Lullaby*

This beautiful piece evokes the “slow-swinging seas,” with its fluid Dorian (a minor-like mode) harmonies and rolling triple meter.

According to the composer, it was originally written for a promising film adaptation of Kipling’s story, also called *The Seal Lullaby* – a story that he described as “dark and rich and not at all condescending to kids.” When the film company dropped that project in favor of the highly successful *Kung Fu Panda* franchise (and what a comment on American cinema!), Whitacre sang it to his baby son instead, and eventually made this arrangement for the Towne Singers.

This piece does not indulge in the kind of shimmering dissonance that is Whitacre’s usual hallmark. The harmonies are fairly straightforward, and the melody simple and prominent. It is a very Disney-esque work, a touching, lush and cinematic piece that is a joy to sing.

Robert Hanshaw (b. 1988) – *Tacciono i boschi e i fiumi*

This sonnet describes a forbidden love, that most ancient of human sorrows. Tasso’s delicate images of nature bring the entire world into a conspiracy of silence with the lovers: just as their kisses and their sighs must be soundless, so must the forests, the caves, the ocean.

Much of Tasso’s work is formally suitable for setting into madrigals using the Renaissance technique of “text-painting” (where the music depicts the words in some literal sense, such as rising in pitch on a word like “high”). This was favored by

composers of the period, but even modern composers have made good use of it – William Hawley, for example, did so beautifully with *Io son la primavera*, another Tasso sonnet. But this poem presented a challenge. How do you musically communicate this idea of smothering silence, hiddenness, suppression? One must, after all, sing.

So rather than joining the lovers in their mute secret, the choir sings of the tension and the ache that come from keeping it. The hollow choral swells of the opening, set against a plaintive soloist, immediately bring us to a place of floating, of uncertainty. And the piece is forever reaching forward, shifting unexpectedly, never giving a true resolution. Life is like that, more often than not.

I am very grateful to Tom Lerew and ARS for giving me the opportunity to write for the ARS voices, and to the choir for gamely singing this challenging piece. It is dedicated to Elise Lopez, who showed this poem to me long ago.

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) – *As Torrents In Summer*

Elgar was a quintessentially British composer, although he had a certain contempt for British folk music – and, in fact, many British composers – as being “commonplace” and greatly lacking in taste. (An ironic point of view, perhaps, since he was born into the working class as the son of a piano tuner!)

As his work matured, he became known for his near-Wagnerian chromaticism, the brilliance and clarity of his orchestral writing, and the profundity of his melodies – chief among these, such things as the Enigma theme and the slow movement of the ubiquitous *Pomp And Circumstance*.

Yet in this choral piece, we experience Elgar *a cappella*, and with great tenderness.

This piece is the epilogue to his oratorio *The Saga of King Olaf*, a Norse myth. The text is an excerpt from Longfellow’s longer poem, beginning “In the convent of Drontheim / Alone in her chamber / Kneel Astrid the Abbess...” who was, it turns out, talking to the shade of St. John, who conveyed to her various overblown sentiments (“Stronger than steel / Is the sword of the Spirit...”). But in the middle of all this, which was rightfully criticized in its time for a certain banality, we have two gorgeous verses:

*As torrents in summer, / Half dried in their channels, / Suddenly rise, tho’ the sky is
still cloudless. / For rain has been falling, / Far off at their fountains;*

*So hearts that are fainting / Grow full to o’erflowing, / And they that behold it, Marvel,
and know not / That God at their fountains / Far off has been raining!*

Elgar was raised Catholic, and had a sometimes fractious relationship with the Anglican establishment. And more profound disagreements: on his deathbed, he told his doctor, “I believe there is nothing but complete oblivion.”

Yet we may imagine that, on composing this work, he was at peace.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) – *Sicut Cervus*

Palestrina is the most well-known composer from the Roman school, a polyphonic tradition that flourished in southern Italy in the 16th century. His personal style more or less defines that movement. It is extremely consistent, to the point that it could be codified and taught by generations of music theorists. It is based on the Counter-Reformation musical ideals of textual clarity and dignified mood, and is the inheritor of a hundred years of polyphonic development from the Franco-Flemish school (whose best composers would often relocate to pursue opportunities in Rome).

This piece is a gorgeous example of Palestrina's oeuvre. The melodic lines weave in and out of prominence, governed by appropriate emphasis on the Latin syllables. Palestrina was a master of creating a sense of harmonic motion without being a slave to the (then-new) idea of a chord progression: each voice is melodically independent, but their coincident harmonies do have a rhythm and purpose that is often missing from earlier Renaissance polyphony.

The listener may hear three melodic themes which are taken up by each voice in turn: a rising one on *sicut cervus*, one on *ita desiderat* that falls and then rises again – and a last, falling theme on *anima mea*. They are ornamented and elaborated as each voice takes them up.

~ Sky ~

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809) – ‘The Heavens Are Telling’ from *Die Schöpfung*, XXI:2

This piece is the closing movement of Part I of Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation*, a work directly inspired by Haydn's experience hearing Handel's oratorios *Messiah* and *Israel In Egypt* at a festival in London. Indeed, the libretto for *The Creation* was first offered to Handel himself near the end of his life. He refused it, purportedly because of its wordiness.

But a few of Haydn's associates saw its promise, as Haydn ultimately did as well, and the libretto was reworked and translated into English. The imperfect fluency of the translator, Baron van Swieten, did give rise to a few “intermittent absurdities” [Richard Wigmore, 2009], such as the tortuous phrase “Today that is coming speaks it the day.” (KJV: “Day unto day uttereth speech.”)

The work was originally published in English and German versions simultaneously. Neither the English nor the German stayed true to the standard Bible translations of their time, but rather, both were altered so that their respective syllable stresses fall in the same places. Thus, the music itself could remain unaltered between the two versions, yet still be

sung in a naturalistic way in either language.

This choir's rendition is in English. Careful attention is paid to the subtle stresses of the words that tradition has bequeathed us.

David Dickau (b. 1935) – *Stars I Shall Find*

Sarah Teasdale was an American poet, whose strict Victorian upbringing brought on such grief and self-denial that she ultimately committed suicide. Her poetry is rich and lyrical, full of desire for the unattainable; she channeled into words, all the sensuousness that her life denied her. This piece, written only months before her death, speaks achingly of a retreat into oneself: "I will make this world of my devising / Out of a dream in my lonely mind." Its resignation is devastating.

But Dickau's setting of this text brings out the hope that is buried in the poetry. In light of his music, the words "stars I shall find" reach ever upward, grasping for something better. Dickau's romantic harmonies will be familiar to the contemporary choral audience; indeed, the astute listener may catch several clear references to his own breakout piece, "If Music Be The Food Of Love," the text of which celebrates music for its own sake.

This brings a new nuance to the text – subtly hinting that music ("The music of stillness, holy and low") may be the redemption that the narrator implicitly seeks.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) – *Let Their Celestial Concerts All Unite (from Samson, HWV 57)*

At first blush, this piece may appear to be a stereotypical, if very bombastic, praise chorus – the sort that is forever associated with the Baroque choral repertoire (and typified by Handel's own "Hallelujah" chorus). It has the virtuosic vocal runs, the anthemic repetition of phrases, the broad harmonic architecture, the vigorous climax characteristic of such masterworks.

And so it is. But it is also a piece that contains a certain violence.

This piece is the closing movement of Part I of the oratorio, *Samson*. By the time these words are sung, Samson has been enslaved, imprisoned, has wished for death, challenged a Philistine to a duel, been ridiculed, and finally planned and executed a dire suicide plot – pulling down a Philistine temple on himself and a multitude of worshippers.

And for this act, as the Israelites pull Samson's corpse out of the rubble, they sing these words:

Let their celestial concerts all unite, Ever to sound His praise in endless morn of light.

This oratorio was Handel's most popular during his lifetime, and it has never fallen out of favor since.

arr. Susan Brumfield – *No Time*

A renowned music educator, conductor and composer, Susan Brumfield has arranged music from around the world, publishing collections of Scottish, English and Italian children's songs as well as respected teaching materials using the Kodály method. In this piece, she takes on the American frontier Christian tradition, setting a medley of a few “Camp Meeting” songs.

The traditional American camp meeting – precedent of the tent revival – was a phenomenon of the Second Great Awakening, an early-19th-century evangelical movement that shaped the religious landscape of rural America for the 19th and 20th centuries. At a camp meeting, itinerant preachers would gather in remote locations for days or weeks, drawing hundreds or thousands of worshippers to listen to fiery sermons, fall into ecstatic trances – and sing (and create) hymns.

On the birth of camp meeting songs, musicologist Annie Randall writes:

“[A congregant] would take lines from a preacher’s text as a point of departure for a short, simple melody,” either borrowed or improvised, and it would be ‘taken up by the throng,’ transforming into a new hymn, sung by all present, and only later written down – if at all!”

Brumfield’s setting captures some of this process. The texts are sung first separately and without adornment, and then gradually build to a full choral harmony where the two themes are elaborated and woven together. It is to be hoped that some of the joy and the ecstatic spontaneity of the camp meeting, is translated through this rendition.