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Program Notes

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Songs of Sweet Starlight

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In *Songs of Sweet Starlight*, we are guided on our musical journey by the brightest Star in the night sky – in reality, several stars – much like the Magi from the East were lead by the Star on the first Christmas. From West Africa to France, Germany, England, South Africa, the United States and guideposts in-between, all roads will lead to a connection with the Star of Bethlehem and the hope, peace, joy, and love that was born there. Our maps will be the words of the songs ARS will sing, and the music will be our escort. The composers of this music have painted moving pictures for us to take in along the way; sonic snapshots that inspired them to express through music, the experience we are about to share. Spurred on by stars as our source of inspiration, we take flight. Our first stop lays to Tucson's east and south: West Africa.

Known as the “Nigerian Christmas Song” or “Nigerian Carol,” *Betelehemu* was imported to the United States by Babatunde Olatunji (c. 1920-2003). *Betelehemu* is in the Yoruba language, the native tongue of Olatunji, who immigrated to America in 1950. He settled in New York, where in the 1960s, he established a cultural performing arts school - the Center of African Culture - in Harlem. A man of considerable charisma, Olatunji became very well connected with the most influential musicians, including performances as a percussionist on several occasions with the Grateful Dead. Through his acquaintance with Morehouse College professor Wendell Whalum (1931-1987) and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Olatunji introduced *Betelehemu* into the American consciousness. Barrington D. Brooks (1959-1996), a graduate of Morehouse, did his part in keeping the “Nigerian Carol” alive through his imaginative 1994 arrangement for four-part chorus and drums that begins our concert.

By way of France, *Sing We Now of Christmas* reaches back at least to the beginning of the 1500s to what has become known as the traditional Provençal Carol, Noël *nouvelet*. The French equivalent to English carols, Noël's were defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

(1712-1778) in his *Dictionnaire de Musique* of 1768 as “tunes intended for certain canticles which the people sing at Christmas: these types should have a rustic and pastoral character.” *Noël nouvelet*, loosely translated as “news of newness,” appears to have been intended for New Year’s Eve celebrations. However, even the original verses proclaim the news of Christmas, with the dramatic action remaining in and around Bethlehem for several stanzas. If the standard English text of *Sing We Now of Christmas* (arranged by James E. Clemens, b. 1966) sounds peculiar or “old,” it may be that the tune to which it is set remains true to its *Noël nouvelet* roots, and is neither in a major nor minor “key,” but rather, in “Dorian mode,” one of the eight historical church musical scale systems.

Franz Biebl’s (1906-2001) *Ave Maria* shares many similarities with the *Ave Marias* that came before it. Biebl’s setting, derived from Biblical text in the Gospel of Luke, incorporates ancient chant-like declamation, along with a characteristic rise and fall of the melodic line. Where it diverges from its predecessors is Biebl’s selective addition of text from parts of the *Angelus*, a Roman Catholic prayer ritual that dates back 600 years. On a far more mundane level, Biebl’s *Ave Maria* is unique because he composed it (in 1964) for his choir of firemen with the hope that they would win a summer choral competition in his native Bavaria, Germany! Biebl’s *Ave Maria* remained quite obscure until the Cornell University Glee Club toured Bavaria in 1970 and heard the work performed. Since then, *Ave Maria* has become an international phenomenon, following the release of “Our Heart’s Joy, A Chanticleer Christmas” in 1984 by the well-known men’s choral group. Our seven-part arrangement of the music for soloists and sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses is the one made by Biebl, himself, for Chanticleer.

Still in Germany, we stay in the distant past with *In dulci júbilo* (“In Sweet Joy”), a Latin-texted carol attributed to Johann Mathesius (1504-1565) and the Nuremberg publication *Sarepta* from 1571. Whether or not Mathesius is really the author, *In dulci júbilo* became widely known in its day, and was given recognition by Praetorius (1560-1629), Scheidt (1587-1654) and J.S. Bach (1685-1750). The modern arrangement of *In dulci júbilo* by Matthew Culloton (b. 1976) that we are singing, exhibits ingenuity equal to its forebears by incorporating repetitive catchy rhythms. Culloton, a graduate of Concordia College (where he was a student of René Clausen) and the University of Minnesota, sets the words in the “macaronic” style. Not only are there multiple languages in the same piece of music (Latin and English), they alternate so quickly that, at times, it becomes difficult to know which language is being sung. Enjoy the ride!

Following Matthew Culloton’s choral mixture of styles and eras, we come upon two brilliant motets that can be claimed by both England and Germany. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847), a native of Berlin, was an avid traveler. From 1830-32, the “wunderkind” quenched his wanderlust by touring Western Europe – Paris, Rome and London in particular. By the end of 1834 he procured a prestigious position in Leipzig – where J.S. Bach had lived and worked – and where Mendelssohn kept an address for the rest of his life. When Frederick William IV (1795-1861) ascended to the throne of

Prussia in mid-1840, he had a plan to establish a model academy in Berlin that was to be emulated throughout his kingdom, and the musician he had in mind to set the standard was Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Frederick William IV worked hard to convince Mendelssohn to accept the job, and Mendelssohn finally agreed to be Berlin's General Music Director of Sacred Music for the 1843-1844 season. It was during this time that he composed both of our next two works.

Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen was originally a stand-alone chorus, as we hear it today. Composed in 1844, it reflects Mendelssohn's fluency with the double-choir masterpieces of the Venetian Renaissance. Divided four-part choruses of women and men alternate choral lines with a rich, Romantic-era harmonic language, as Mendelssohn interprets the Psalm text (91:11-12). During the same time period, Mendelssohn was coming to a final decision about which Bible passages would form the storyline of his second oratorio, *Elijah* (op. 70/MWV A25), which was to premiere in 1846 in Birmingham, England. To represent God's provision by sparing Elijah from God's judgment, Mendelssohn inserted *Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen* as a "double quartet" to be sung as movement number seven in his oratorio. In so doing, Mendelssohn made a connection between the account of Elijah alone in the wilderness and a parallel passage found in the New Testament that describes Jesus in similar straits and receiving the attention of angels. It is fitting that the well-versed Mendelssohn, who personally identified as both Jewish by heritage and Christian by conviction, would synthesize these chronicles from the Old and New Testaments together to fashion one thoughtful narrative of hope.

For Christmas in 1843, Mendelssohn selected one of the king's favorite Bible passages, Psalm 98, for musical interpretation. (Psalm 98 was also the inspiration for Isaac Watts's (1674-1748) famed 1719 hymn, "Joy to the World.") The resulting motet, *Weinachten* (MWV B42), premiered within the framework of a worship service with the purpose of preceding and replacing the *Alleluia* (situated directly prior to the reading of the Gospel for the day), which is why the short piece concludes with the word "Hallelujah." Utilizing the same voicing as *Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen*, *Weinachten* is scored for eight-part chorus, but without the same level of alternation between the female and male vocal parts. Again, understanding the text is of paramount importance, which is demonstrated by Mendelssohn's emphasis on having the choir consistently sing the same syllables at the same time.

Englishman John Rutter (b. 1945) continues to be a superstar in the choral music world, which he has been for more than 50 years. Gratefully recognizing his popularity for producing quality Christmas carols for choirs, Rutter is proud to point out, "(Carols) are the first forms of vernacular choral literature. Back in the fifteenth century when Latin was used for everything else in church, English was permitted for carols." For Rutter, the journey began with his *Shepherd's Pipe Carol*, which he composed at the age of eighteen to a lyric he had penned, himself. *What Sweeter Music*, the first of his two

carols for choir on our program, has been beloved ever since it was commissioned and premiered in 1987 as one of the carols in the *Service of Nine Lessons and Carols* celebrated annually at King's College, Cambridge. Choosing to set a Robert Herrick (1591-1674) poem that was published in 1647 with the title "A Christmas Carol, Sung to the King in the Presence at White-Hall" as part of the collection *His Noble Numbers: Or, His Pious Pieces*, Rutter crafted a fittingly sweet, yet angular, melody accompanied in the uncommon key of G-flat major. Rising to its apex at the statement, "The nobler part of all the house here, is the heart," Rutter's *What Sweeter Music* is inclined to transmit its essence through more subdued dynamics, as in the immediately preceding, "The darling of the world is come, And fit it is, we find a room to welcome him." And that room, according to Herrick and amplified by Rutter, is warm, as if cold December has turned to fragrant May in an instant.

Back on American shores – actually, in mid-America – Leavenworth, Kansas native John Leavitt (b. 1956) completed *Gloria* in 1990. The next year, he added four movements to it and published it as part of his *Missa Festiva* Mass cycle. Packed with rhythmic energy, Leavitt's *Gloria* takes all of its cues from the words the angels sang to the shepherds with great excitement as part of the Nativity Story in the Gospel of Luke (2:14). Leavitt includes requisite exclamations of jubilation juxtaposed with a more contemplative utterance at "we give you thanks for your great glory." The highly animated accompaniment traverses the gamut of emotion, along with virtually every key on the piano, at the beginning and end of the piece – even hinting at the capriciousness and light-hearted angle that Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) famously exploited in his *Gloria* (1960). Among many compositions by John Leavitt that are lasting well with time, *Gloria* strikes a particularly charming chord.

Sweet Was the Song is a gentle English carol dating to around the year 1590 and a lute book by a William Ballet that is mentioned by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598). Inspired by the carol on the occasion of his daughter, Katie's, birth in 1984, René Clausen (b. 1953) collaborated with his wife, Frankie, to fashion a moving lullaby, slightly modifying the traditional words of the first verse and leaving it up to his wife to pen a new, second verse. Since 1986, René Clausen has directed the renowned Concordia Choir of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. In 2013, a recording by Charles Bruffy (b. 1958) and the Kansas City Chorale comprised exclusively of Clausen's compositions, *Life and Breath: Choral Works by René Clausen*, won international acclaim and garnered three Grammy awards. In *Sweet Was the Song*, Clausen spotlights the birth in Bethlehem, masterfully evoking an intimate environment by designating a solo soprano to sing the first strophe cradled by a smoothly rocking choral accompaniment. By the end of *Sweet Was the Song*, all comes to rest on a unified, single note; the Jesus child and the culminating peace in his purpose are adjoined, conjuring a sense of awe that dissolves to silence.

Though its history has been traced to African customs and to folk songs of the British

Isles, the spiritual is one of the first musical genres generally accepted as innately American. When spirituals began to be put into print in the 1860s, they were labeled “slave songs” or “work songs.” *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, the spiritual most commonly connected to Christmas, has been dated to 1865, but of special significance is its inclusion in *Folk Songs of the American Negro* by Nashville native and Fisk University professor John Wesley Work II (1873-1925) in 1907. By the 1960s, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* was wedded to another spiritual, *Go Down, Moses*, and served as an emblem of the American civil rights movement. Donald McCullough (b. 1951), current director of the Kennedy Center’s Master Chorale of Washington (D.C.), arranged our version of *Go Tell It On the Mountain* in 2006. Two years after, McCullough premiered his seventy-five-minute cantata entitled *Let My People Go!*, which musically chronicles the story of the underground railroad that so valiantly worked to rescue slaves from bondage up to, during, and after the American Civil War (1861-1865). As with many spirituals, the music of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, in general, and our arrangement, in particular, belies the pain and suffering behind it and resounds with the hope of a preferred future: salvation that came “That blessed Christmas morn.” Whether a mental escape from captivity or a heart-felt celebration of faith, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* has always lifted the spirits of those who have sung it and heard it.

We find ourselves next in Scandinavia for *Gaudete*. When it was originally published in Greifswald, Germany in 1582 as one of the seventy-four works in Finland’s own Theodoricus Petri Nylandensis’s (c.1560-c. 1617) collection *Piae Cantiones*, *Gaudete* boasted a title of forty-seven words in length. (By comparison, this last sentence is only thirty-eight words long.) The Latin text seems to have been written by Nylandensis, himself, though its resemblance to many similar texts is evident. During the Romantic era, the tune of *Gaudete* caught the ear of Finland’s most illustrious composer, Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), along with two other tunes from *Piae Cantiones*, and he included it in an 1898 orchestral work he titled *Carminalia*. Our arrangement by Craig Kingsbury (b. 1952) from 1996 will be performed macaronically: the refrains in Latin and the verses in English. Angels and Mary and shepherds and wise men are mentioned as those who gathered under the star to adore the Christ child. Through the commotion, the exclamations of “Rejoice, rejoice” and “Noël, Noël” ring out constantly, as if coming from the distant past to meet us.

John Rutter now makes another appearance, this time from the very familiar territory of supplying both the words and the music for his 1988 *Angels’ Carol*. “Eagerly” drawing us in with a bright undercurrent supplied by a harp and a spacious F-major melody, we hear questions: Have we heard the sound? Have we seen the star? Have we heard the news? The answer Rutter provides comes from an outburst from the angels, themselves: “Gloria in excelsis Deo!” (“Glory to God in the highest!”). Highlighting historic themes of the season, including peace, love, light, and hope, with an overall sentiment of joy, *Angels’ Carol* is quintessential John Rutter and an excellent example of why he is so popular around the world, and in his “second home,” the United States.

Minnesotan Eric William Barnum (b. 1979) came to prominence by winning the 2003 Chanticleer Composer Competition with his *She Walks in Beauty*, which Chanticleer then premiered and included on tour. In a similar vein, Barnum's 2007 ***Sweeter Still: A Holiday Carol*** exhibits his mature mastery over the tools of the musical trade as well as a text from his own hand. A truly modern American carol, *Sweeter Still: A Holiday Carol* is illuminated by a nostalgic melody that pilots us over and around the outdoor aura surrounding softly falling snow, gently blowing wind, brightly shining lights, and ringing Christmas bells. The carol then hones in on the indoor spectacle of children silently dreaming, and then being awakened by what they think could be Saint Nick's footsteps on the housetop: "They rush down the stairs hoping to see the bright smile of Santa before he disappears." But, for Barnum and for us, what is even sweeter is the singing of a carol, the glow from a fire, and the family gathered together around the Christmas tree. What joy! What "sweet joy it brings to me."

With its evocative poetry and evolved musical syntax, **Stars** brings the sparkle and the wonderment of the starry host to life. Latvian composer Ēriks Ešēnavalds (b. 1977) scored *Stars* in 2011 for the Salt Lake Vocal & Choral Artists for eight-part chorus and six resonant glasses tuned with as little water as possible. To recreate the intended shimmering effect simulated by the glasses, handchimes—a simplified variant of handbells—will be played today. The poem selected by Ešēnavalds appeared in the collection *Flame and Shadow* in 1920 by New Yorker, but St. Louis-born, Sara Trevor Teasdale (1884-1933). Teasdale was a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who is well admired for her use of classical forms and for treating passionate and romantic subject matter with simplicity and clarity. *Stars* consists of five brief verses, with the shortest line devoted to the single word, "Witness," near its end. In Ešēnavalds's hands, *Stars* builds gradually in clusters of tones from a flexible *piano*, deliberately delaying any sense of arrival until "The dome of heaven" is attained. All musical forces are marked *forte*, but not so loud that the overall effect is broken. We are suspended in a "heaven full of stars" for a considerable length of time with all eight vocal parts declaiming the poetry in even note values, repeating the lines "Myriads with beating/Hearts of fire" in place of the contrasting lines "I watch them marching/Stately and still." It is not until Ešēnavalds decides it is time for a peaceful statement of the final verse, sung by the altos, that the vocal dynamic comes 'back to earth,' as it were, with a quiet *mezzo piano* before it fades away to nearly nothing.

Continuing with the theme of stars and explicitly, returning to the outskirts of Bethlehem and the star that shone over startled shepherds, **Follow the Star!** (2000) captures the frenzy—perhaps, even panic—that might have overtaken the humble country folk who were confronted by stars that lit up the sky as bright as day, and a horde of heavenly beings telling them what to do at a volume greater than all the animals they had ever seen or heard, combined, could have mustered. It was Alan Bullard's (b. 1947) take that the shepherds, in these circumstances, might just have "hurried" and "raced" and made

“good speed” to “follow the star.” Going with his intuition and adapting lines from the American spiritual, “Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow,” Bullard crafted a witty and ingenious spin on a facet of the Christmas story that, though ideally sounding musically simple in performance, would challenge even the best English cathedral choirs.

Follow the Star!, therefore, is a study in ironies. English music does not customarily borrow from American models; for centuries, it has worked the other way around a majority of the time. And, it might not be thought that a composer who had been a student of the venerable Herbert Howells (1892-1983) at England’s Royal College of Music and who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Essex would possess much of a sense of humor.

From the purview of paradox to the breathtakingly sublime, St. Paul, Minnesota-based composer Abbie Betinis (b. 1980) gives us the gift of *In the Bleak Midwinter*. *In the Bleak Midwinter* is based, as would be expected, on the extraordinary poem with the same title by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), a woman with Italian lineage who lived in London. Rossetti’s five-stanza paean, which is known to be at least as old as the 1872 *Scribner’s Monthly* in which it was published, was destined to be set to music. Notably, it was given a simple, yet emotive tune (appropriated by Betinis) and harmonization by Gustav Holst (1874-1934), an Englishman of German descent, for *The English Hymnal* of 1906. The poem establishes a snowy landscape for a third-person retelling of the Christmas story. But, at the final verse, a switch occurs to the first person and asks the question, “What can I give Him, poor as I am?” Betinis chooses to make this moment yet more poignant by changing one word: “What can I give **you**, poor as I am?” (*emphasis added*). Accentuating the personal nature of this expression and what is to follow, Betinis brushes a brilliant stroke by presenting the question with two treble soloists, singing antiphonally in different registers over the humming of the chorus, thus increasing the “everyman” meaning of the query. The answer, in Betinis’s care, with accompanimental commentary played by the harp, is given an introspective *pianissimo*.

Our trek through the diverse shades of *Songs of Sweet Starlight* is approaching its destination. At this juncture, *Carol of Joy* provides an apt summation of many of the motifs we have beheld on our journey, coming to its zenith with the theme of joy. Dan Forrest (b. 1978) is from New York but migrated to the Midwest and earned a Ph.D. in composition from the University of Kansas. His works have been compared with John Rutter’s due to their singability and sheer beauty. In fact, Forrest received first place in a 2004 choral composition competition in which Rutter was the runner-up. In *Carol of Joy*, with the challenging text by his friend, Eileen Berry, Dan Forrest skillfully navigates the contrasts between the verses and choruses to create a contemporary classic carol. Beginning in the key of D minor, but also borrowing from the previously mentioned Dorian mode, Forrest establishes a stark atmosphere for the first strophe, indicating that the accompaniment is to be offered “with icy solitude.” When “through the stillness, carols begin,” a shift to the bright key of D major hearkens a chorus of hope,

addressed to the “fallen world.” This pattern of D minor/D major mutation is continued for the remaining text – the second chorus sung to the “fearful world” and the third to the “friendless world.” Rising to *fortissimo* for most of chorus three, with added emphasis marking the word, “laden,” the expected climax is not to be found. It is not until Forrest features the final phrase, “A Savior is born!” instructing the singers to decrease the musical dynamic, that *Carol of Joy* reaches its apex with intensity, and its message is suddenly complete.

Hope for Resolution brings us full circle with an amalgam of styles, languages, ideologies, epochs, and themes. Displaying the subtitle *A song for Mandela and deKlerk*, *Hope for Resolution* embodies the ambition for all-encompassing and enduring hope, even between diametrically-opposing cultures. Distinctively, our concluding port-of-call is South Africa and a commemoration of the official end in 1994 of the sanctioned practice of apartheid (“separateness”) in that country. The Zulu song of the Nguni people that is the basis of the second half of *Hope for Resolution* has a local history as a protest song from around the 1960s. In a broader respect, the Latin hymn *Divinum mysterium*, which lays the primary foundation for the piece and is integrated at the end with the Zulu anti-apartheid song, has an even richer past. It dates back as far as the Roman poet Aurelius Prudentius (348-ca. 401), and has been associated with the Roman rite since the eleventh century or earlier. The fusion of the first-blush apparent opposites is an underlying current for this and other works by arrangers Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory, who have been writing music collaboratively since the early 1990s. *Hope for Resolution*, in the words of Caldwell and Ivory, is a “celebration of diversity” through “respect for divergent musical styles (that) points toward our potential for peaceful coexistence.” By combining a South African tribal song with an ancient Latin Christmas Carol, Caldwell and Ivory’s *Hope for Resolution* represents the concept that there is hope that for everyone, together, “Jehovah will protect us,” “Evermore and evermore.”

Hope. Peace. Joy. And love. The Star of Bethlehem and the wonder of the stars in the Heavens have inspired the composers and lyricists in this program to express their thoughts and feelings in word and song. In our journey through *Songs of Sweet Starlight*, we have returned to where we started. And, it is possible that we may not be the same people we were when we first arrived.