

Choral Arts Northwest
Northwest Solstice: *Mid-Winter Songs*
December 16-17, 2023

Program notes by Joshua Shank

Touch Hands..... Abbie Betinis (b. 1980)

In 1922, the Rev. Bates Burt (1878-1948), a self-taught musician from Michigan, began writing annual Christmas carols to send out as postcards. The tradition was then carried on by his son, Alfred Burt (1920-1954), whose musical offerings have gone on to become some of the standards of the winter repertoire and are now recorded all over the world. Minnesota-based composer Abbie Betinis—whose middle name is “Burt”—took up the family tradition in 2001 and has written a new carol-as-holiday-card nearly every year since, continuing the tradition started by her great grandfather over 100 years ago.

For *Touch Hands*, Betinis uses a text by W.H.H. “Adirondack” Murray—an American author who became known as the father of the Outdoor Movement—and sets it using a canon. That musical device always sounds easy and intuitive as it’s being performed, but anyone who’s ever received formal instruction on how to write one knows that they can be maddeningly difficult to compose. Betinis’s carol, however, is beguiling, welcoming, and sounds effortless as it speaks of the deep, generation-spanning connections we can experience with others.

Ah, friends, dear friends,
as years go on
how fast the guests will go!

Touch hands, touch hands,
with those that stay.
Strong hands to weak,
Old hands to young,
for who may say if ever this day
may come to us again.

Text: W.H.H. Murray (1840-1904)

The Owl Toby Young (b. 1990)

Traditional poetry about the winter season often references either the untamed, shadowy realm of winter or the warm, comforting glow of communal festivities. In English composer Toby Young’s ***The Owl***, the titular nocturnal predator serves as a secular symbol of the wild natural world that spends much of its nights prowling beneath the pale glow of the December moon; an enchanting contrast to the hub-bub of blazing fires, sumptuous banquets, and lively parties of the indoor holiday world.

Out in the sweet and solid winter dark
the owl is hunting on a silver wing.
It skims above a world fallen asleep
and knows the many secrets of the wind.

Within we have our comfort and our rest,
we nod engulfed in richness at the heart.
The owl overheard is sleepless still
it watches the waking of the earth.

Praise for the ring of gold that rounds the year.
Praise for the Christmastide and what it keeps.
Praise for the owl beneath the stars,
unresting guardian of peace.

Under this soaring heaven here is the glory written,
fleet as a comet falling through the sky.
All through the silver stillness wingbeats rise in chorus.
Owl of the midnight forest, silent king soaring high.

Text: Jennifer Thorp (b. 1988)

The Oxen Jessica French (b. 1984)

Oxen are one of the animals most frequently depicted in Nativity scenes and, since they were indispensable tools for field work, it's no surprise to find them in a stable. What *would* be extraordinary, though, is the sight of an ox—which can sometimes weigh up to 3,000 pounds—kneeling at the foot of a manger with a delicate newborn child inside. Fascination with this scene is what the text by English poet Thomas Hardy is all about, and Seattle-based composer Jessica French sets his poem, *The Oxen*, with ease. At the final refrain, the choir sings strongly together, before gently fading into an ending that sounds almost like a question mark; as if they intend to set out into the twilight themselves with the hope of seeing the ancient Christmas scene of the kneeling oxen with their own eyes.

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
“Now they are all on their knees,”
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

(Refrain)

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
“Come; see the oxen kneel,

(Refrain)

“In the lonely barton by yonder comb
Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

(Refrain)

Text: Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Poor wayfaring stranger American Folk Song, arr. Alexander Lloyd Blake (b. 1987)

Poor wayfaring stranger is a well-known American tune likely originating sometime during the early nineteenth century. Given that time period as well as the subject matter in the text, it's no surprise that the song was absorbed into the repertoire sung by formerly enslaved people in the South. Facing the brutal conditions of the Reconstruction era, they often turned to the promise of a blissful afterlife as a way to sustain themselves through their earthly hardships.

In his arrangement of *Poor wayfaring stranger*, Los Angeles-based composer/conductor Alexander Lloyd Blake's intent was "to fuse two musical styles that are innately American—the folk spiritual and jazz—to create a new perspective with the familiar melody" in order to allow us to make connections to modern-day issues surrounding homelessness, displacement, or marginalization. As the choir rises in the phrase "I'm goin' there," he captures perfectly the song's hope for something better *tomorrow*...which is simultaneously tinged with the suffering of *today*.

I am a poor wayfaring stranger
A-travelin' through this world of woe,
But there's no sickness, toil, nor danger
In that bright land to which I go.

I'm goin' there to see my father.
I'm goin' there no more to roam.
I'm just a-goin' over Jordan.
I'm just a-goin' over home.

I know dark clouds will gather round me.
I know my way is rough and steep.
But beauteous fields lie just before me,
Where God's redeemed their vigils keep.

I'm goin' there to see my father.
I'm goin' there no more to roam.
I'm just a-goin' over Jordan.
I'm just a-goin' over home.

I'm goin' there to see my loved ones.
I'm goin' there no more to roam.
I'm just a-goin' over Jordan.
I'm just a-goin' over home.

Text: American Folk Song

Mid-Winter Songs Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943)

Morten Lauridsen is a titan in the field of choral music in the West. In 2007, he was the recipient of the National Medal for the Arts—the highest honor given to artists by the U.S. government—and his 52-year tenure at the University of Southern California, which he dedicated to educating aspiring musicians, was punctuated by the composition of some of the most oft-performed choral works in the world. Those pursuits were complemented by lengthy periods at his secluded cabin in the San Juan Islands, and the significance of that place in Lauridsen's life highlights the interconnectedness of environment and artistry within his musical works; it underscores the importance of the Pacific Northwest's aesthetic and ecological ethos—a combination of the region's geography, climate, and people—in helping shape his profound cultural and artistic expression.

Lauridsen is one of the undisputed masters of the choral song cycle, and here Choral Arts Northwest presents his 1980 work for choir and piano, *Mid-Winter Songs*, which uses texts by English poet Robert Graves. According

to the composer, "In reading [Graves's] complete works, I became very much taken with the richness, elegance, and extraordinary beauty of his poetry and his insights regarding the human experience." Graves wrote of the pain and promise of love so often that there is a wealth of material on that subject for *any* composer to tie a cycle of songs together, but the through-line Lauridsen found has to do with the motif of winter which, as the composer says, "Is a particular favorite of mine, rich in the symbolism of dying and rejuvenation, light and darkness." One can almost see the early December sun rising and setting in the northern part of the Puget Sound.

Because Lauridsen illuminates Graves's words so exquisitely, not much else needs to be said about *Mid-Winter Songs*. In the first movement, "Lament for Pasiphaë," the speaker in the poetry is spurned by their lover before bitterly freezing them into ice in the second, "Like Snow." In "She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep," we learn that despite this enmity—or perhaps *after* it—love will return. Then, in "Mid-Winter Waking," it *does* return, before the year dies again in the final movement, "Intercession in Late November," reminding us that the possibility (and the potential sadness) of love is always lurking, and that we should make the most of it when it shows up.

Over the course of the song cycle, you'll hear some of the most gorgeous piano interludes ever written in a choral work, clustery harmonic language that would become extremely popular nearly 20 years after Lauridsen wrote his *Mid-Winter Songs*, and maybe even a glimpse of his wildly successful *O Magnum Mysterium*, a piece of music that would bring worldwide acclaim to a composer who wrote most of his life's work alone in an island cabin in the Pacific Northwest.

I. *Lament for Pasiphaë*

Dying sun, shine warm a little longer!
My eye, dazzled with tears, shall dazzle yours,
Conjuring you to shine and not to move.
You, sun, and I all afternoon have laboured
Beneath a dewless and oppressive cloud--
a fleece now gilded with our common grief
That this must be a night without a moon.
Dying sun, shine warm a little longer!

Faithless she was not: she was very woman,
Smiling with dire impartiality,
Sovereign, with heart unmatched, adored of men,
Until Spring's cuckoo with bedraggled plumes
Tempted her pity and her truth betrayed.
Then she who shone for all resigned her being,
And this must be a night without a moon.
Dying sun, shine warm a little longer!

II. *Like Snow*

She, then, like snow in a dark night,
Fell secretly. And the world waked
With dazzling of the drowsy eye,
So that some muttered 'Too much light,'
And drew the curtains close.
Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,
And to soil friendly;
Holding the histories of the night
In yet unmelted tracks.

III. *She Tells Her Loves While Half Asleep*

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:

As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
And puts out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.

IV. *Mid-Winter Waking*

Stirring suddenly from long hibernation
I knew myself once more a poet
Guarded by timeless principalities
Against the worm of death, this hillside haunting;
And presently dared open both my eyes.

O gracious, lofty, shone against from under,
Back-of-the-mind-far clouds like towers;
And you, sudden warm airs that blow
Before the expected season of new blossom,
While sheep still gnaw at roots and lambless go—

Be witness that on waking, this mid-winter,
I found her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see.

V. *Intercession in Late October*

How hard the year dies: no frost yet.
On drifts of yellow sand Midas reclines,
Fearless of moaning reed or sullen wave.
Firm and fragrant still the brambleberries.
On ivy-bloom butterflies wag.

Spare him a little longer, Crone,
For his clean hands and love-submissive heart.

Texts: Robert Graves (1895-1985)

The Rose Joel Thompson (b. 1988)

American composer Joel Thompson has experienced much success since his 2015 choral work, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, was premiered to great acclaim. His 2021 opera, *The Snowy Day*, was commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera and he has collaborated with a multitude of world-class ensembles since—including a commission that same year from our very own Seattle Symphony while still a graduate student at Yale—and his works are regularly performed all over the U.S. in ways which celebrate Blackness and attract new audiences to his art form.

The Rose is an exercise in simplicity (which is actually no easy task). Taking a text which uses one of Christian poetry's favorite metaphors for the birth of Jesus—a rose that has somehow miraculously grown in the cold

darkness of a winter's night—Thompson writes an exquisite work that seems to continually bloom. By the time the final chord settles, you'll have some insight as to why Thompson is lauded as one of his generation's most promising emerging artists.

A Rose unfolds on tender vine,
as seers foretold, from Jesse's line.
In petals radiant in the light
of stars aglow this holy night.

Isaiah divined the Flower would bloom
a spotless Rose from Mary's womb,
as angels praise the glorious sight:
the blessed Babe this holy night.

E'en though we now our anthem raise
in gratitude and joyous praise,
I wonder why, for me, God chose
to show such love with a spotless Rose.

Verses 1 and 2: 16th-century German (translation by Joel Thompson)
Verse 3: Joel Thompson

Himig Pasko Traditional Filipino Christmas Carol, arr. George Hernandez (b. 1978)

Given that the average temperature in December in the Philippines can stretch into the 80s, you'd be forgiven for being surprised at the first line of *Himig Pasko*. However, the "coolness in the air" is actually a reference to *Amihan*, the time of the year dominated by the trade winds that roll into the region from the northeast. Arranged by George Hernandez—an expert on traditional Filipino music—the work comes and goes as pleasantly as a gentle breeze.

Malamig ang simoy ng hangin
Kay saya ng bawat damdamin
Ang tibok ng puso sa dibdib
Para bang hulog na ng langit
Himig pasko 'y laganap
Mayro 'ng sigla ang lahat
Wala nang kalungkutan
Lubos ang kasiyahan
Himig pasko ay umiiral
Sa loob ng bawat tahanan
Masay ang mga tanawin
May awit ang simoy ng hangin

There is coolness in the air
How joyful each one is feeling
Each beat of the heart
is like a blessing from heaven (God)
The Christmas spirit (feeling) is everywhere
Everyone is excited (full of life)
There is no more sorrow
but great joy! (to all)
Christmas spirit is prevailing
in every home
What a joyful sight to behold
There's a song in the air

Traditional Filipino Christmas Carol
English translation by Gladys N. Hernandez

Angels we have heard on high Traditional French Christmas, arr. Saunder Choi (b. 1988)

Angels we have heard on high is a Christmas carol that has become so well-known in the English-speaking world that it's been given hundreds of different arrangements for thousands of different concerts just like tonight's. This version, by Los Angeles-based Filipino composer and choral artist Saunder Choi, begins in the hushed, incense-scented cathedrals of the Medieval era, with a familiar text chanted in Latin over a drone. However, a mere sixty seconds in, the arrangement takes a jarring left turn into technicolor, 1960s-era vocal jazz your grandparents might've heard on a Swingle Singers album. Then another turn—adding a soloist in the passenger

seat—to something you could've easily heard on *Glee* in 2005. Then it's back to the Swingles, but now underlaid with body percussion reminiscent of 1973's *Clapping Music* by one of the masters of American minimalism, composer Steve Reich. All of these turns are style-perfect, of course, showcasing Choi's mastery of genre.

Angeli canunt praecones
nuper natum Dominum,
pacem nobis, veniamque
erga genus humanum.
Gentes surgite gaudentes,
cum caelicolis canentes
Dei Filium, Regem,
natum iam in Bethlehem:
Ecce, canunt angeli gloriam novo Regi!

English translation:
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born king
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled"
Joyful all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With angelic host proclaim
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the new-born king"

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains.

Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?

(Refrain)

See Him in a manger laid
Jesus Lord of heav'n and earth;
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid,
With us sing our Savior's birth.

(Refrain)

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him Whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.

(Refrain)

Text: Traditional French Christmas

Wassail!..... Toby Young (b. 1990)

Wassailing is the practice of going door-to-door, singing, and offering a boozy drink in exchange for gifts. In the middle ages, it was an accepted means for peasants to request gifts from their feudal lords (unlike begging), and the lord of the house would provide food and drink in exchange for the wassailers' blessings and goodwill. In *Wassail!*, Toby Young takes a traditional text and sets it in a way that conjures up a jostling match to get to the front of the gifting line.

Wassail, wassail, all over the town,
our bread it is white and our ale it is brown;
our bowl is made of maple tree;
so here, my friends, I'll drink to thee.

From this bowl a toast within,
come fill it up unto the brim,
fill it up that we may see,
with this wassail bowl I'll drink to thee.

(Refrain)

Come and bring a bowl of your best.
We hope your souls in heaven shall rest,
but if you bring a bowl of your small,
down you shall go, the bowl and all.

And here is to Dobbin and his right eye,
God send to us all a good Christmas pie,
such a pie we ever did see
with this bowl I will drink to thee.

Here's to May and his broad horn,
God send to us all a crop of corn
as we may see
with this wassail bowl I'll drink to thee.

(Refrain)

Here's to Colly and her long tail
we hope that our master's heart will not fail,
bring us a bowl of your good beer,
and then we shall taste the happy new year.

(Refrain)

Text: Traditional English

We Toast The Days..... Linda Kachelmeier (b. 1965)

After a brief interlude of the Betinis piece from earlier, we turn to a work from another Minnesota-based composer. Linda Kachelmeier wrote both the tune and text of *We Toast The Days* to be performed by her friends and family on New Year's Eve; a sort of "updated" version of the song traditionally sung on that night, *Auld Lang Syne*. The older tune asks whether it's right that old times should be forgotten—which is usually meant as a call to remember treasured friendships—and Kachelmeier's version is no different. However, the immediacy in her lyrics draws the listener directly into their own individual experiences, social circles, and hopes for the new year.

That process is helped in large part by the music she sets the text to, which—at the risk of sounding hyperbolic—is almost blindingly elegant. Composers can spend their entire careers and never write something so simple yet still so profound; a perfect way to “stand on the edge of another bright year.”

When the clock strikes twelve and another year has gone,
I give a kiss to you
As remembrance of the past we have shared and the future yet to come.
We toast the days, both good and bad,
the old friends and the new.
When the clock strikes twelve and another year has gone,
I give a kiss to you.
While the night is long and the bitter cold has come,
we lengthen our embrace
To sustain us as we mourn our regrets and the fear of days unknown.
We toast the days...
As we stand on the edge of another bright new year,
I take your hand in mine
With assurance of the courage we will find
and the hope that leads us on.
We toast the days...

Text by the composer