

Northwest Solstice: A Choral Arts Wintertide Concert

December 17-18, 2022

Program notes by Joshua Shank

*A night that seems like a lifetime
If you're waiting for the sun
So why not sing to the nighttime
And the burning stars up above?*

So goes the song, "The Longest Night," by Minnesota singer/songwriter Peter Mayer. The title is a reference to the winter solstice, the day with the shortest period of daylight and, therefore, the longest period of darkness in whichever hemisphere it's occurring in (December 21 in Seattle this year, if you're curious). Because it's an astronomical event rather than one that relates to the ideas, customs, or behaviors of a particular society, observances of it in some form or another take place in cultures all over the world. The works on tonight's program all relate back to the relationship humanity has with light or the passage of time—beginnings and endings—experienced by the world during the occurrence of the longest night of the year.

Opening the concert is a work by Portland-based composer Emily Lau called ***Universal Prayer***. The work uses an additive process to build itself up by continuously incorporating new layers and, by the conclusion of the work, the concept serves as a reminder that a group working together is greater than the sum of its parts; a simple yet profound concept reflective of the Hindu mantra about possibility the piece is constructed with.

In 168 BCE, the king of the Seleucid empire launched a massive campaign against the Jewish religion. His motives for this remain unclear, but religious practices were banned, community places of worship were defiled, and Jerusalem was put under the brutal control of the Seleucid government. However, under the leadership of a priest named Judas Maccabeus, a group of Jewish fighters given the nickname of the Aramaic word for "hammers"—the Maccabees; for the way they drove their enemies from their land—engaged in a campaign of guerilla warfare which ultimately escalated into a full-scale military conflict. Over the course of seven years of battle, the Jewish armies eventually cast off the yolk of their oppressors and were able to cleanse and rededicate the altar of their temple. This repatriation of the holiest site in the Jewish religion is the inspiration for the celebration now known as Hanukkah.

Because of the tradition of lighting a menorah during the eight nights and days of the holiday, music written for or about Hanukkah often speaks of the lighting of candles, and Chaim Parchi's ***Aleih Neiri*** ("Rise up, my light") is no exception. Born in Yemen and raised in Israel, Parchi is primarily a visual artist but was inspired by the story of the Maccabean Revolt to write a simple yet meaningful tune. Parchi's song is taken up beautifully by American composer-conductor Joshua Jacobson who clothes the tune in warm harmonies and choral effects that suggest the flickering of a candle.

The text for this Latin hymn written in the nineteenth century by James Barmby was rediscovered in 2009. In setting it, English composer Alec Roth has the choir move rhythmically together, keeping the text easy for the listener to understand. In ***Sol Justitiae*** ("Sun of Justice"), the only times he departs from this method are when a single beam of light seems to shatter the darkness in the soprano and a few tiny melodic flourishes in the "amen." It's a monolithic use of the ensemble which, given the central subject in the poetry, seems fitting.

One of Christian poetry's favorite metaphors for the birth of Jesus is a rose that has somehow miraculously grown and bloomed in the cold darkness of a winter's night. What Seattle-based composer—and Choral Arts

Northwest member—Andrew Jacobson’s work, *A Lovely Rose Is Sprung*, seems to remind us of, though, is that the story of the Nativity is, at its heart, about a mother, an adoptive father, and their new baby. God is there too, of course, but Jacobson’s music is tender, gentle, and feels incredibly human in its holding of the sixteenth-century poem.

A breviary is a book containing the daily Roman Catholic services to be recited in a prescribed order and, since these services take place over the course of a day, texts in it often have a relationship with light, and Indian-American composer Reena Esmail’s elegant *The Winter Breviary* is a beautiful example of this. The first movement references a “single star, [a forgiving] light, our guide,” while the second movement frets that “the path is dark, [and our] star is gone” before reminding us in the vibrant finale that “in us the sun believes.”

The work is structured around the traditional canonical hours found in a breviary (Evensong, Matins, and Lauds) but, what is remarkable about Esmail’s work is how she seamlessly incorporates her own multicultural upbringing into the music by mapping Hindustani *raags*—melodic frameworks for improvisation in Indian classical music akin to a melodic mode—for those same times of day (Raag Hamsadhvani, Malkauns, and Ahir Ahairav) onto the historic, pre-ordained times of daily prayer in the Roman Catholic tradition. Of the work, she writes, “This set is a meeting of cultures, and of the many ways we honor the darkness, and celebrate the return of light.”

Of her work, *The Language of the Stars*, Canadian composer Katerina Gimon writes that it is meant to be “a celebration of the beauty and majesty of our night sky—a song sung to the stars themselves.” The text, by nineteenth-century poet Martha Lavinia Hoffman, “speaks of a longing to understand the mysteries of our vast and remarkable universe.” Gimon evokes the image of the sky seen at night by the use of a “twinkling” motive in the piano and the resultant music conjures up the grandeur of a sky full of stars; the human gazing up miniscule in comparison.

Mother’s Song, by Minnesota composer Jocelyn Hagen was written at the height of the COVID-19 shutdowns as a reminder—to both the listener and the composer herself—that it takes a village to raise a child. Using an anonymous Japanese text which contains a plea from a parent to a sacred bird, Hagen wraps the listener in a blanket of sound in much the same way the parent in the poem pleads for the crane to do for their child. Of the work she writes, “During this time of quarantine and crisis it is impossible to forget that, of the many roles I play in life, my role as a mother is of most importance. I nurture my children and protect them. I take their health and well-being into account with every decision I make. They remind me that we were all children once, and that we are all worthy of the utmost care from our friends and neighbors.”

When European colonizers descended on Central and South America, they brought with them their own musical traditions. One was the *villancico*, a common poetic and musical form which eventually became synonymous with the Christmas carol. *Xicochi*, by Mexican Renaissance composer Gaspar Fernandes, uses the consonants of the indigenous Nahuatl language in order to suggest the rocking of the child referred to in the text.

From Mexico we journey south and forward in time to twentieth-century Argentina where the story in *La Peregrinación* (“The Pilgrimage”) is familiar to many; Joseph and a laboring Mary search for a place to safely have their child. The tale eventually finds the couple in the midst of a bevy of supportive barnyard creatures and Argentine composer Ariel Ramirez uses the playfulness of that scene—the sheer calamity of childbirth surrounded by curious farm animals—as an excuse to write a boisterous tune you might hear wafting out of a dance hall in Buenos Aires.

Although relatively unknown in the United States, Modesta Bor was one of the outstanding Venezuelan composers, conductors, music educators, and musicologists of the twentieth century. Having grown up in a family of musicians, she attended the Escuela Superior de Música José Angel Lamas in the capital of Caracas and, just before graduating with a degree in piano performance, was stricken with an illness that made it

impossible to play the piano at a high level. During her convalescence, a friend gave her a poem by legendary Spanish poet Federico García Lorca and asked if she might try her hand at setting it to music. This act of kindness during what must have been a difficult time in her life set her on a path—one which would take her all the way to the Moscow Conservatory and back—to becoming one of the most respected musicians in her country.

During her lifetime, Bor wrote music for vocal ensembles, orchestra, chamber groups, solo piano, art songs, and incidental music, but it is her compositions for children's choirs that have become especially influential. So perhaps it's no surprise that she wrote something with a child at the center of the narrative. Her work, ***Con esta parrandita*** ("With this [musical] party"), is full of revelry and ecstatic celebration, with the tiny infant Jesus somehow able to sleep through it all in the comfort of a haystack.

The original title of the traditional carol, ***Deck the Hall***, contains only a singular space to be decorated (as opposed to the numerous "halls" most people often sing about). The tune dates back to the 1500s while the lyrics, written by Scottish musician Thomas Oliphant, date to 1862. Here composer Jocelyn Hagen takes the familiar carol and supercharges it into a rollicking, propulsive, and utterly charming piece that quite literally causes laughter.

The origin of the term "halcyon" lies in an ancient Greek story about the god of the wind protecting a kingfisher bird (the genus *halcyon*) so she can safely lay her eggs. This eventually became synonymous with a period of calm during the winter when there are no storms. Over the years, this span of time became colloquially known as "halcyon days" and was heavily invested with nostalgia and sentimentality and it is from this jumping-off point that Philadelphia-based composer Melissa Dunphy's work takes its inspiration from.

Whereas Hagen's *Mother's Song* was written during—and about—a time period where choral singers were shuttered indoors to protect from COVID-19, Dunphy's ***Halcyon Days*** evokes the return from isolation, the beginning of something new, and how it felt to be together again after the ordeals of quarantine. It asks the listener to reflect on what may have been lost, but encourages facing what comes ahead with joy, gratitude, and goodwill.

Although they've changed over the years to the version you're likely familiar with, the lyrics for the original version of ***Auld lang syne*** have been attributed to the iconic Scottish poet, Robert Burns, and their combination with a tune that's been arranged by the likes of Ludwig van Beethoven and John Philip Sousa has become a way to mark endings and beginnings for more than just the Western world.

Having gone through the winter solstice—the longest night of the year—sunrises and sunsets will now get a little further apart each day. Dark and light; melancholy and possibility; death and rebirth. The furthest we'll get from the light has come and gone but, to harken back to the song these program notes began with, *Maybe light itself is born...in the longest night of the year.*