

Stephen Paulus: A Lyrical Life

By Joshua Shank

Commissioned by Conspirare (Craig Hella Johnson, conductor)

May 2015

Program notes

One of the things that we as composers are taught about the history of our art is that it is founded on a linear progression of ideas. Medieval chants lead to the Renaissance polyphony of Palestrina, and composers like Monteverdi took those ideas and gently ushered in the Baroque era before Bach and Handel later defined it. A boy genius named Wolfgang and a kind man named Haydn subsequently gave us the Classical era and a composer who would eventually go deaf complicated their harmonies and pushed us into the Romanticism of the nineteenth century. Then the twentieth century yielded a plurality of styles that were...well...there's just not enough pages here to delve into that particular kettle of fish. Of course, I'm making it sound *much* more simplistic than it actually is, but all of this is to say that a lot of the identity of our art music is tied up with the idea that composers throughout history were always consciously standing on the shoulders of giants. Essentially, attempting to innovate new styles was their primary concern.

But Stephen Paulus's music isn't "new" in this sense. The harmonies aren't complicated and esoteric like his twelve-tone progenitors, and an overarching process doesn't govern it like the music of the minimalists. It's elegant, warm, and inviting to the listener; some folks might even call it "conservative." But that's the wonderful thing about Steve's music and what made him so successful. As a composer he was less concerned with saying something new than he was with *saying the right thing*. And over the course of his career, he had a lot to say.

Though he wrote in literally every genre—opera, chamber, oratorio, orchestral, etc.—Steve most frequently wrote for and was beloved by the choral world. He wrote over 400 works for choral ensembles and tonight Conspirare presents a retrospective of that particular aspect of his staggeringly large body of work. We'll hear short, hymn-like works written so elegantly you'd think it took him forever to get them right (it didn't), as well as some of the dozens of arrangements of pre-existing melodies he had a knack for casting in his unique and generous compositional voice.

Alongside this remarkable music there will also be a world premiere by a gifted British composer, an iconic American piece often used as a means to grieve, and a moving musical eulogy a son wrote for his father. But most of all—and to borrow a phrase from one of Steve's pieces we'll hear—"the night shall be filled with music." But perhaps, for tonight, that might mean something else:

"A *life* shall be filled with music."

This is the life and work of Stephen Paulus.

Pre-concert lecture

Good evening, everyone. My name is Josh and, as you just heard, I'm a composer living and working in Austin, Texas and I sit here as a fan of both Conspirare as well as the composer you're going to hear a lot from tonight, Stephen Paulus.

Ask any composer what they're greatest fear is when it comes to working with their art and, invariably, they'll treat that question as if it were a setup for the punchline, "a blank page."

Yeah, it's funny...but it's also one hundred per cent true. Willing something new into existence is one of the most difficult things a composer faces when they set out to fulfill a commission, but I have to say that staring at the particular blank page that was before me when Conspirare so graciously asked me to give this talk caused me a little more fear than others.

We're talking about *Stephen...Paulus...y'all*. Taking a survey of his choral works would be like getting a graduate degree in writing for the voice. He had a once-in-a-generation mind for choral writing and a kind spirit to go along with it. I'll never forget the first time I sang a piece of his. The graciousness with which he wrote for singers is something I try to honor every time I put musical pen to paper.

It's difficult for me to put into words what he has meant for our art. The guy was a titan in the field. He wrote over 400 works *just for choir*. I mean, to put that in perspective, Mozart wrote just over 600 works total...in every genre. Of course I'm not comparing Steve to Mozart because...like...Steve had a stable personality and was good with money. But the statistic is an interesting one to note.

The story of Stephen Paulus's music is one wrapped up in a particular state of our country: Minnesota. It's legacy in the choral arts casts a large shadow, and for good reason. It's one of the places in the United States where the tradition of a *capella* singing in America first sprung up. Minnesotans *love* to sing. Choristers around the United States refer to it as "choral country" or, on a play on the state's official nickname, the "Land of 10,000 Choirs." There's a wonderful documentary about Choral Country called *Never Stop Singing* that you should absolutely check out if you're interested.

We could talk about that long history and where it came from, but that's another lecture altogether. I bring this up to note that, alongside all these choirs that flourish in Minnesota, there is also a legacy of choirs with a voracious hunger for new music. This is the climate which nurtured a young man who attended the University of Minnesota in the 1970s and turned him into an icon in his chosen field.

The eminent choral conductor Dale Warland led his Dale Warland Singers for over 30 years and, throughout most of them, there was a Paulus score in front of them. I asked Dale about his experiences with Steve's music over the years and he said:

You know I think I was either his first or second commission. I asked him to write my choir at Macalester College something when he was just a student. How could I know the decades-long relationship that would foster? Sometimes you just see young talent and ask them to write something for you.

Steve and Dale would become lifelong friends and colleagues. There are stories of them with music spread out over the floor in the heat of the Minnesota summer, trying to figure out which carol Steve would arrange for that season's Christmas concert.

As a composer myself, I can tell you a lot about how Steve's music is structured—essentially in diatonic harmonies with stacked chords in quintal or quartal voicings, or climaxes to pieces that are ratcheted up by moving voices higher in their respective tessituras (I learned a lot of tricks from his music)—but that would be missing something of the man behind it. As a huge fan of his music, I'll try to offer some brief insight about the pieces you're about to hear from the perspective of one who toils in the same proverbial vineyard as he did.

So if you'd like to open your program, I'm going to talk about a few pieces you'll be hearing tonight.

Arise, My Love takes its title from a famous passage from the Song of Solomon and this piece is vintage Paulus. The most amazing thing he does with it is the complete left turn near the end. The tenors and basses begin

repeating the word “arise” over and over...almost like an incantation. Eventually the choir settles and you think he’s done with you. However, then Steve does something amazing: he adds a quartet singing some of the most beautiful—and, frankly, erotic—music in his entire catalogue.

Over the course of his career, Steve arranged dozens of pre-existing tunes (there’s actually an entire album of *only* Christmas carols he lent his talents to). Included on the program tonight are his takes on a song traditionally associated with Thanksgiving Day (**We Gather Together**), a hymn about the anticipation of restoration and reward (**Shall We Gather**), an American folk-tune supposedly originating from homesick canoe-going fur traders (**Shenandoah**), and a traditional song told from the point of view of a lovesick young man (**Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair**).

Steve wrote for literally every genre—opera, chamber, oratorio, orchestra, etc.—but, for me, the pieces in his oeuvre that were always the most moving things to sing were pieces like **Little Elegy**; short, hymn-like works written so elegantly you’d think it took him forever to get them right (which they didn’t).

I sang a benefit concert once which took place at Steve’s house on Summit Avenue in Saint Paul. We gathered and sang through a new hand-written arrangement of “Silent Night.” We hit the final chord, cut off, and Steve stood there contemplating it for a second. He said, “No. Hand those back.” A few weeks later we received an entirely new arrangement of that tune which was equally as beautiful.

This is all to say that it’s hearing works like “Little Elegy” that I’m reminded of the generous nature so many of his friends talk about.

Steve frequently collaborated with the English poet (and current Minnesota resident) Michael Dennis Browne, and he makes his first appearance on this program in a gentle piece, **Song of Gratitude**. I’ve known Michael for some years now—and, in fact, the Conspirare audience has already met him as he provided some of the texts for Craig’s work, *Considering Matthew Shepard*. My grandmother gave me an old *New Yorker* compilation of poetry once and, in it, there was a single Michael Dennis Browne poem in which he used the line, “the men are making death in the woods.” I told him about this and he just chuckled and said in his slight British accent, “Ah. That’s my Vietnam War poem. When that thing got published, I thought I was going to be world famous.”

There’s a picture which popped up on Facebook after Steve passed away. It was he and Michael and, for some reason they were just sitting at the foot of a tree with these goofy smiles on their faces; just two friends mugging for the camera. It’s impossible not to smile yourself when you see it.

Hymn for Dad. The title says it all. It’s a tune by Steve’s son, Greg, arranged by a family friend for Steve’s funeral. The event was a “Who’s Who” of the music scene in the Twin Cities and was held at the church he and his wife attended, House of Hope. I spoke with the music director there about it—and this piece in particular—and, of the event, he simply said, “I remember Cary working long into the night arranging Greg’s tune. Music was something Steve loved sharing with his kids.”

Conspirare commissioned and premiered **Poemas de Amor** in 2007 as part of their American Masterpieces Festival. Steve was brilliant at setting his native language but these five songs on texts by an anonymous sixteenth-century Spanish poet showcase his deftness at setting other languages as well. The harmonic language fits the poetry perfectly. At times it’s light on its feet, others it’s slow and seductive; sexy even!

We’re in for another treat tonight as Conspirare will be giving the world premiere of Tarik O’Regan’s **Turn**. The inclusion of a world premiere by another composer, however, has some relevance to the life of Stephen Paulus. He was a tireless advocate for emerging composers. He helped co-found the Minnesota Composers Forum, which eventually went on to become the *American* Composers Forum. That organization is still working at helping fund the creation of new pieces of music all over the country.

O'Regan is a gifted, young British composer who is familiar to this audience through Conspirare's stunning album of his works, *Threshold of Night*. My first encounter with his music came from that wonderful live album the choir recorded at the Long Center in Austin. A movement of O'Regan's pulsing *Triptych* appears on it and, hearing that for the first time sent me into the Conspirare store to buy their album of his works. *Turn*, as it turns out, is a very different piece.

O'Regan and I emailed back and forth about it and he told me that he was originally inspired by seeing a painting of the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Dutch poet, Albert Verwey. Of the experience, he says "I was struck by it, partly because of the imagery, but also because I realized I simply didn't know any Dutch poets or poetry. So I went out to find a collection of Verwey's poetry and fell in love with one text called *Cycle*. I feel especially connected to the sense of journey and direction."

You'll hear just how successful he was at sticking to that sense as soon as the first phrase begins. There's no crashing, pulsing strings this time around. It's light and nimble with the sopranos and altos singing in canon "I am a spark without a goal." Eventually everyone enters and the piece becomes this stunning cataract of sound. For some reason, when I hear it, it reminds me of what it must have been like to ford a river on a horse down in Big Bend. That being said, *Turn* winds down until it ends on a single pitch in the second altos—a B-flat—which gently fades away into the ether. The piece is so elegantly written that you'll hardly notice that nearly five minutes have passed since it began.

Composed in 2012, **When Music Sounds** is the most recent of Stephen Paulus's works on the program. Here he doesn't seem to want to repeat any of the text by British poet Walter de la Mare so, when he begins to repeat a pivotal phrase, we know we're in for a treat. But he was a master at setting text and a voracious reader of poetry; you'd have to be if you wrote 400 works for choir. Let's listen to a brief interview he did in which he talked about the importance of text in his vocation:

PLAY RECORDING

In 1936, American composer Samuel Barber wrote his only work for string quartet and almost immediately arranged its second movement for a full string orchestra. The new piece, now called *Adagio for Strings*, was performed by the famed conductor Arturo Toscanini—a classical kingmaker at the time—and its composer became an overnight sensation. The *Adagio* has gone on to become something of a universal expression of grief over the loss of a loved one and, in arranging it for choir, Barber pulls the music even closer to this notion by laying it under the **Agnus Dei** from the Roman Catholic mass. The result is a meditation which unfolds in endless spirals before the bottom drops out and the music rises to a deafening climax. Then the supplicating cries waft gently back into the ether.

Arranging a piece for choir which was originally written for instruments who don't have to breathe is a difficult thing. I've performed this piece a number of times and I can tell you that it is *difficult*. I once heard someone describe singing it as being synonymous with needing "a set of iron lungs." Incredible performances of Barber's *Agnus Dei* are instances of commitment and artists at the top of their game.

Conspirare offers this performance in loving memory of Stephen Paulus.

Hymn to the Eternal Flame. This piece comes from Steve's 2005 massive oratorio, *To Be Certain of the Dawn*. The work was commissioned to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps and the fortieth anniversary of the "Nostra Aetate" ("In Our Times"), a document issued by the Vatican II which condemned blaming Jews for the death of Christ. The oratorio involves massive forces: full symphony orchestra, a symphonic choir, boychoir, four soloists, and a cantor. Nothing so ostentatious for "Hymn to the Eternal Flame," though. The movement takes place nearly 45 minutes into the hourlong oratorio in a section where Paulus gives the instrumentalists a break and draws the listener in close with this *a cappella* gem.

All Things Are Passing, on a text by Teresa of Avila, is a massive, sprawling piece. You can hear Steve throwing around musical architecture on only a few lines of text. Hearing and performing this work always reminds me of Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao for some reason. There's nothing subtle about it...but that's why it's beautiful.

When Conspirare first sent me the list of pieces they were going to perform tonight, it was fun to see **Afternoon on A Hill** on the program because I actually sang the world premiere of that piece almost exactly 10 years ago when Steve was commissioned by the National Federation of Music Clubs to write something for the Minneapolis-based professional choir, The Singers—Minnesota Choral Artists. This piece is the fourth and final movement of a larger work called *Four Songs on Poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay*. The text by the titular poet is a joyous celebration of nature which is cast appropriately in bright harmonies which convey Millay's love for all things outdoors.

After The Singers premiered it, we ended up recording an entire album of Steve's music under his supervision and one time when the conductor told the choir to get out the third movement, titled "Kin to Sorrow," Steve chuckled loudly. When we asked what he was laughing about he said, "I never realized it until now, but that sounds like some kind of Japanese covered dish. *Kintosaro*."

I asked the conductor of that choir, Matthew Culloton, what he remembered of Steve:

The non-musical conversations were the most fun for people who knew him. He was a stitch. He would invite us over to the house for pizza at 11pm on a weeknight. And he knew *everyone*. People were like, "How was that guy not mayor yet?"

Hymn for America was a 2004 commission from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and is yet another collaboration with Michael Dennis Browne. As with any Paulus hymn, simplicity and elegance reigns.

When I think of this piece I remember one of the first times I was at his house. In the room where he composed there were all kinds of pictures. I looked at one of them in which it was just him and an older woman and, when I leaned in to get a closer look, it turned out it was none other than former First Lady Barbara Bush! I asked him about it and he kind of shrugged and said, "Yeah. I wrote a piece to commemorate a new wing at the Mayo Clinic and she was there."

So, yeah. Steve and Barbara Bush. Sometimes it boggles the mind.

If there were a *Greatest Hits of Stephen Paulus* album, **Pilgrim's Hymn** (from his church opera, *The Three Hermits*) would undoubtedly be the first track. This piece was something of a Number One hit for Steve and has since been performed around the world, and at not one but two presidential funerals; Reagan and Ford, for the record. Pay close attention to how he sets the phrase "And through all the days that follow so fast." The music slows to a brief halt as if, for an instant, it's weightless.

The Day is Done was the result of a 2006 commission from a married couple who were supporters of the arts in the Twin Cities who wanted to commemorate their anniversary. Each night before going to bed their habit was to read poetry to one another, and it was this nightly ritual that inspired Steve's choice of a text by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

This is one of my favorite pieces in his entire catalogue. It's slow and gracious; the harmonies like a warm blanket meant to keep out the cold Minnesota winter.

"And the night shall be filled with music." I hear that phrase and I always miss him a little bit.

He came to a concert I had a premiere on once. Afterward he found me in the audience and just said, "You are way more courageous than I am, Josh." I asked him what he meant by this and he just smiled and said, "You repeated that phrase about 12 more times than I ever could." Looking back on it, it's not actually that funny (I mean as far as musician stories go), but hearing that from one of your musical idols is thrilling at 24 years old and wet-behind-the-ears. I couldn't tell if it was a backhanded compliment but, after hearing all these wonderful stories about him as a friend, husband, father, and colleague, I don't think it was.

My informal title for this talk is "Most Folks Just Called Him Steve" because of the journey I had with him as someone who toiled in the same proverbial vineyard as he did. The first time I ever encountered his music was

when I was 20 years old. It was *Pilgrims' Hymn* and I was overwhelmed by its beauty. After 9/11 that piece took on new meaning in my life as a musician when I saw people being pulled out of the rubble and then had to sing Michael Dennis Brown's haunting words at a memorial service for the victims, "Even with darkness sealing us in, we breath your name." For weeks after that, I couldn't get the image of someone trapped in darkness speaking the name of someone they loved out of my head.

Aside from my life as a composer, I've also worked heavily as a teacher, and the notion that you should have a connection with—and sympathy for—the experience of a perfect stranger is something that I've tried to foster in my students but, at the time I first heard *Pilgrim's Hymn*, I didn't have it myself. Steve's music helped me realize this and I've been grateful for it ever since.

But, at the point I first sang *Pilgrims' Hymn*, he was still "Stephen." It wasn't until after a concert near his home in Saint Paul where I spotted him down the aisle and, for some reason, he recognized me and sought me out to say nice things about my music. He didn't have to do that because, you know, he was *Stephen Paulus*. Gradually, though, as I encountered more and more of his music—honestly, from the years 2001-2010, there wasn't a year where I *didn't* have a Paulus score in front of me at some point—I encountered more and more of him. Then, like everyone else in the musical community he was a part of, he just became "Steve." He wasn't this huge composer, he was a guy you could have a cold beer with in the heat of the Minnesota summer.

Since Steve passed away Craig has occasionally programmed his pieces for various concerts, all of which I've attended—like I said, I'm a fan. One thing that has always struck me in those performances is the final chord of the Paulus that Conspirare was performing. For me, it hangs in the air for an instant and, for a brief time, it feels like Steve is in the world again. But that luminous moment is always bittersweet because it reminds me that he's not. When Craig and the singers finish singing, it feels as if Steve is taken from us again; a voice silenced far too early.

I spoke with the eminent choral conductor Dale Warland a few weeks ago. We missed our first scheduled phone call, so I ended up having to rush into the empty party room at a local pizza place to chat with him. There, surrounded by a bunch of local sports memorabilia and television screens broadcasting various sports programs, he told me how he and his wife, Ruth, had been long-time friends with Steve and his wife, Patty. He told me that they had grown close because they had spent many important moments—birthdays, Thanksgivings, Christmases—together. Their cabins in northern Minnesota were also very near one another and they used to go together every summer.

Dale told me that, when Steve had his stroke he and his wife had been up at the cabins. Steve's wife went home in a rush so, a few days after he went in the hospital, Dale went back to straighten some things at the Paulus's cabin. Steve had an electric piano that he had been writing on while he was there and, in the rush, it had been left on. I'm not one to speculate on what went through Dale's mind in that private moment, but I'd like to think that he heard some of Steve's music in his ears as he clicked the power button and silenced that piano.

Enjoy tonight, friends. Steve would have loved every minute of it.