

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
December 1/2/3, 2017
Subscription Concert No.4
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For this year's edition of "A Madison Symphony Christmas" we welcome two fine vocal soloists, soprano Emily Pogorelc and tenor Eric Barry—and as always the program features three great choral groups from Madison, the Madison Youth Choirs, the Mount Zion Gospel Choir, and our own Madison Symphony Chorus. We are also delighted to feature the MSO's principal bassoonist, Cynthia Cameron-Fix. Music is of course one of the great joys of this season, and this annual celebration of the holidays has become a beloved Madison community tradition.

Among the most famous hymns of Christmas, *Joy to the World* may also be the most famous case of misattribution among Christmas hymns. It has traditionally been credited to Handel, and indeed one of its first publishers, the hymn writer William Holford printed it with Handel's name in the early 1830s, probably because of its close resemblance to a few bits from the ever-familiar *Messiah*: the choruses "Lift Up Your Heads" and "Glory to God," and the instrumental sections of the aria "Comfort Ye." Hymn tunes were generally given shorthand titles, and Holford in fact titled the tune *Comfort*. The great Methodist hymn writer Lowell Mason cemented the association with Handel when he revised the tune in 1839 (retitling it *Antioch*) and used it to set a Christmas hymn text by Handel's contemporary Isaac Watts. This familiar hymn is heard here in an appropriately joyous arrangement by Mack Wilberg.

The *Mass in B minor*, Johann Sebastian Bach's most monumental sacred work, was completed in the last year of his life, but it is actually an immense patchwork of movements assembled over the course of some thirty years. The choruses heard on this program date from the 1730s, when Bach was increasingly dissatisfied with the limited resources available to him as Kantor of the Thomaskirche. He made several attempts during this period to better his situation. In 1733, he sent a "Missa," a setting of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the mass, to the opulent Dresden court of the Elector of Saxony. Bach hoped that this sample of his work, which he referred to as a "trifling product of that science which I have attained in Musique," would lead to a position in Dresden. In the end, only a more modest request was granted: that the Elector name him court composer, a position of little more than honorary significance. The chorus *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is joyous, with complex vocal lines intertwining with a trumpet *ritornello*. At *Et in terra pax hominibus*, the

mood becomes more pensive, with a pair of musical ideas combined in ever more complicated counterpoint.

Before Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart married Constanze Weber in August 1782, he made a solemn vow that he would write a Mass of thanksgiving to be presented in his hometown of Salzburg— at least partly to pacify his father Leopold, who strongly objected to the marriage. It took nearly a year and half for Mozart to make good on his vow...and then only partially. His *Mass in C minor* was incomplete, without a *Credo* and *Agnus Dei*. The portions that were complete were performed at the Salzburg church of St. Peter in October 1783. Despite its “unfinished” nature, the *Mass in C minor* stands alongside the equally unfinished *Requiem* as one of his greatest works. By all accounts, Constanza Mozart had a fine, if small, soprano voice. The soprano solos in the Mass were written for her, and she sang them at the first performance. Among the music Mozart wrote for his wife is the aria “Laudamus te,” drawn from the Mass’s *Gloria* movement, a brilliant *coloratura* showpiece for solo soprano.

John Rutter’s distinctive musical style, together with his skill as choral conductor have made his a familiar name in the world of choral music. His *Shepherd’s Pipe Carol*, written while he was at school in the early 1970s, is one of the most popular of his many Christmas carols. Its melody is a jazzy syncopated tune that accompanies a host of people “on the way to Bethlehem.”

Composer Noel Regney and his wife, lyricist Gloria Shayne Baker wrote the Holiday standard *Do You Hear What I Hear?* in 1962 and it became a huge hit for Bing Crosby in 1963, selling over a million copies. Though usually heard as a sentimental song to the Baby Jesus, Regney later said “I am amazed that people can think they know the song, and not know it is a prayer for peace.” It was written in October 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when nuclear war seemed imminent. Contrary to their usual practice, Regney wrote the lyric, and his wife wrote the melody. The result was a song that they found so moving that they couldn’t bear to sing it at first. The final stanza, with its “Pray for peace, people everywhere!” makes this as appropriate in 2017 as it was in 1962.

Carl Maria von Weber, best known in his day as opera composer, was nevertheless *very* kind to the woodwind section, producing several fine solo works for clarinet, flute, and bassoon. In 1811, Weber was in Munich, overseeing the production of his opera *Abu Hassan*, and found the time to write a bassoon concerto for a bassoonist in the Munich court orchestra, Georg Friedrich Brandt. The concerto was a great success, and Brandt quickly asked Weber to write a new work for

bassoon and orchestra. The *Andante e Rondo Ungarese*, completed in 1813, was in fact a reworking of a piece for solo viola he had composed in 1807. The second section, *Rondo Ungarese*, is heard here. Hungarian music—with its exotic melodies and dramatic rhythm—was wildly popular in 19th-century Germany, and the main reoccurring theme is a boldly-accented theme in Hungarian style. Weber has several contrasting episodes that provide the solo bassoon with moments of technical and expressive display, culminating in a blazing virtuoso ending.

We of course know Giacomo Puccini as the greatest opera composer of his generation. But he was a member of a family of church musicians who worked quietly and respectably in the northern Italian city of Lucca for four generations, stretching back to the early 18th century. He seemed destined to follow in the family business, and while still a teenager, composed a couple of large sacred works performed at the cathedral. Though Puccini had already been smitten with opera, he studied at the local music school until age 20, and his graduation piece was an impressive setting of the Latin Mass, published long after as his *Messa di Gloria* scored for tenor and bass soloists, chorus, and orchestra. The Mass was performed on the eve of Lucca's patron saint, St. Paolino, on July 12, 1880. Though it was a success, it was filed away: Puccini left to study at the Milan Conservatory, and spent the rest of his life in the world of opera. The manuscript lay quietly in his papers until 1952 when it was finally performed again, in Chicago and Naples. The *Messa di Gloria* is perhaps his finest early work, and gives every indication that Puccini would become a great musical dramatist. *Gratias agimus tibi*, a passionate aria from the *Gloria* for tenor and orchestra, spins out a whole series of emotions from quietly pastoral lines to a sweeping climax, around the tenor's simple lines of thanksgiving.

Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Hodie (This Day)*, composed in 1953-54, is among the most famous Christmas choral works of the 20th century. This sprawling cantata brings together texts from many sources: the "King James" Bible, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and poetry by Milton, Hardy, Herbert, and Vaughan Williams's wife Ursula. We hear three excerpts, beginning with the forceful prologue *Nowell!* This exultant piece opens with brass fanfares and sets a text from the Latin Vespers service for Christmas day, to which Vaughan Williams adds the joyous acclamation *Nowell*. No. XV *No sad thought his soul affright* is an *a capella* chorale set in purest Church of England style: its two verses are drawn from an anonymous Christmas poem and a poem by Ursula Vaughan Williams. No. XVI *Epilogue* is a powerful meditation on the Christmas story: after an opening paraphrase of the Gospel of John, Vaughan Williams sets three stanzas of Milton's poem *Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Birth*.

In 1717 George Friderick Handel moved to England to compose and produce opera. For nearly two decades, Handel was the most successful impresario in England, but by the 1730s, Handel's Italian opera had gone out of fashion, and he turned increasingly to the English oratorio. His oratorios—dramatic renderings of Biblical stories familiar to his English audiences—were enormously successful, and their popularity endured and grew long after Handel's death. *Messiah* of 1741 is, of course, Handel's most enduring "hit," but it is somewhat unusual among his oratorios in that his text is a pastiche of direct quotes from the St. James version of the Bible. The finale to our first half is the concluding *Hallelujah* chorus from Part II.

Kansas-born Kirke Mechem is a prolific composer of music in all genres, from operas—including his acclaimed *Tartuffe*—to orchestral and chamber works. He is best known, however, for his well-crafted and often witty choral music—Mechem has been lauded as the "dean of American choral composers." In 1964, he was serving as composer-in-residence at the San Francisco College for Women, now part of San Francisco State University. His *Seven Joys of Christmas* was written that year for the College's Chamber Singers. It was his intent to set carols that might not be particularly popular, but which could be utilized to express the many shades of joy in this season. He also chose traditional holiday music that gave this work an international flavor. We present four movements, beginning with No.2 *The Joy of Bells*, a tintinnabular setting of the old French carol "Din don! Merrily on High." No.4 *The Joy of Children* is a sweet version the Burgundian carol "Patapan." In No.6, *The Joy of Dance*, there is a light-footed version of the Spanish song "Fum, fum, fum!" and a hint of the Japanese "New Year's Song." For the final movement, No.7 *The Joy of Song*, Mechem adopts a popular Renaissance song form, the *quodlibet*—a polyphonic combination of several popular songs. Here he cunningly works in several familiar Christmas tunes into a setting of the English song "God Bless the Master of this House."

Fred Silver was a well-known figure on Broadway, composing seven musicals (including the successful *In Gay Company* of 1974), and working as a pianist and vocal coach to several major Broadway singers. Silver also composed over 120 choral works and songs, including the hilarious *The Twelve Days After Christmas*, written in 1968 and popularized by Carol Burnett. This is a wickedly twisted take on *The Twelve Days of Christmas* that begins with the lines "The first day after Christmas, my true love and I had a fight: and so I chopped the pear tree down and burned it just for spite." The singer proceeds to dispose of all those birds in various

nasty ways (the French hens get turned into broth...) and “sends back collect” all of the assorted maids, pipers, ladies, lords, and drummers.

The traditional Caribbean song *The Virgin Mary Had a Baby Boy* probably originated in Trinidad. It was first popularized in this country in the holiday season of 1958, when Harry Belafonte had a hit with this song during a Calypso craze in United States. Stephen Hatfield’s *a capella* setting makes the most of the song’s light Calypso rhythm, spicing it up with clapped accents and blue notes.

The well-known *Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)*, with all of those cozy wintertime images, was actually written during the roasting heat of a California summer. In his popular autobiography, Mel Tormé related the story how in July 1945, he drove to the home of his lyricist and collaborator Robert Wells in Toluca Lake. He found the lyrics lying on the piano, and when Wells finally appeared sweating and hot even in shorts and a t-shirt, he told Tormé: “It was so damn hot today, I thought I’d write something to cool myself off. All I could think of was Christmas and cold weather.” Tormé replied: “You know, this just might make a song.” *The Christmas Song* was written in about 45 minutes later that day. Tormé quickly showed the song to his friend Nat Cole, whose 1946 hit recording is now a beloved holiday classic.

This is that Time of the Year was introduced by singer Jack Jones in 1967. The music is by Edward Thomas, and the words are by noted Broadway lyricist Martin Charnin. The song is a quick Jazz-style waltz that manages to include references to just about every traditional secular symbol of Christmastime, including the food—a “perfect excuse to go right off your diet!”

We end with the Mount Zion Gospel choir, with three arrangements created specifically for these concerts by their director, Leotha Stanley. John P. McKee’s joyous *Celebrate* opens the set, which also includes two original songs by Leotha and Tamera Stanley, *Christmas Peace* and *A Christmas Greeting*.

And then, friends, it’s *your* turn to sing!

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