

Program Notes

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Heavenly Light

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O Heiland reiss die Himmel auf (Op. 74, no. 2) – Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) is one of the quintessential composers of the Romantic era, and considered to be among the “three B’s” of all-time great musicians and composers: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. Born into a Lutheran family in Hamburg, Germany, he spent most of his professional life in Vienna, Austria, where his popularity and influence were considerable. Brahms associated with such music “notables” as Wagner, Liszt, Johann Strauss, and maintained a close friendship with Robert Schumann and his pianist wife, Clara, until his death. A virtuoso pianist himself, Brahms wrote and premiered many of his own works that have become standards of the concert repertoire. He masterfully composed music in both traditional and innovative musical styles for chamber ensembles, symphony orchestras and for voice and chorus. One of Brahms’ most famous works is *A German Requiem*. Brahms is known for honoring the purity of German musical structure, while simultaneously creating new approaches to melody and harmony. His genius is well represented by *O Heiland reiss die Himmel auf*, a fitting example of the Lutheran chorale. The melody is actually an Advent hymn, which originally appeared in a 1666 hymnal from Augsburg, Germany. Each verse of this work is based on the “cantus firmus” (melody) and builds upon this theme with inspiring, rich contrapuntal harmonies that end with a grand ‘Amen.’

*O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf,
Herab, herab vom Himmel lauf!
Reiss ab vom Himmel Tor und Tuer;
Reiss ab, wo Schloss und Riegel fuer!
O Gott, ein Tau vom Himmel giess,
Im Tau herab, O Heiland, fliess!
Ihr Wolken, brecht and regnet aus
Die Koenig ueber Jakobs Haus!
O Erd, schlag aus, schlag aus, o Erd,*

*O Saviour, tear open the heavens,
Flow down to us from heaven above!
Tear off heaven’s gate and door,
Tear off every lock and bar.
O God, a dew from heaven pour,
In the dew, O Saviour, downward flow!
Break, you clouds, and rain down
The king of Jacob’s house!
O Earth, burst forth, burst forth, O Earth,*

*Dass Berg und tal gruen alles werd!
O erd, herfuer dies Bluemlein bring,
O Heiland, aus der Erden spring!
Hier leiden wir die groesste Not,
Vor Augen steht der bittre Tod;
Ach komm, fuehr uhs mit starker Hand,
Vom Elend zu dem Vaterland!
Die wollen wir all danken dir,
Unserm Erloeser, fuer und fuer;
Da wollen wir all loben dich
Je allzeit immer und ewiglich.
Amen.*

*So that mountain and valley all become green!
O Earth, bring forth this little flower,
O Saviour, spring forth out of the earth!
Here we suffer the greatest distress,
Before our eyes stands bitter death;
Ah come, lead us with your powerful hand,
From this misery to our Father's land!
Therefore we all want to thank you,
Our Redeemer, forever and ever;
Therefore we also want to praise you
At all times, always and forever.
Amen.*

Ave Maria – Sergei Vasilevich Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was born in Oneg, Russia and died in Beverly Hills, California. He was a famous pianist, conductor and prolific composer of the late Romantic period and was heavily influenced by Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and other Russian composers of the period. Some of his most recognizable works are his piano concertos. Rachmaninoff is well known for his melodic expressiveness and use of rich orchestral color. In comparison to his characteristically lush instrumental works, the *Ave Maria* has relatively sparse harmonies, and is set in the Russian liturgical style of the 19th century Russian Orthodox Church. Listen for the continuous “reciting tone” (prominently long-held pitch) throughout the piece overlaid by a simple, beautiful melody that uses biblical text of the angel Gabriel’s greeting to the Virgin Mary to create a mood of deep devotion and mystery.

*Ave Maria, gratia plena.
Dominus vobiscum.
Sancta Maria, mater Dei,
Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc et in ora mortis nostrae.
Amen.*

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
The Lord be with you.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and in the hour of our death.
Amen.*

Salvation is Created – Born near Moscow, Russia, Pavel Grigorevich Tschesnokov (1877-1944) was a prolific composer of vocal works. He attended the Moscow Conservatory where he gained recognition as a conductor and choirmaster, received extensive training in both instrumental and choral composition, and studied with prominent Russian composers who greatly influenced his liturgical musical style of choral composition. Unlike Rachmaninoff who traveled widely, Tschesnokov remained in Russia his entire life, where he composed over 400 choral works, 300 of which were sacred. After the Russian Revolution, composition of sacred music was banned by the Communists, so Tschesnokov turned his talents to composing secular music. In 1933, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow where he had been choirmaster, was razed to make room for a newly-constructed skyscraper for the House of Soviets. Tschesnokov was so deeply upset that he stopped writing music of any kind.

Salvation is Created is a luminous chant-like expression of praise to God, written for six voice parts in the characteristic liturgical style of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was one of the last pieces that Tchesnokov composed before he was forced to write secular music by the Soviet government. He died before he had a chance to hear a performance of his own work.

The Angel's Song — Pavel Tchesnokov's *The Angel's Song* with its sparkling harmonies is best described in this quote from the publishers, M. Witmark & Sons:

“There is all the sweep and surge of a cold midwinter wind across the snow-covered steppes in this Russian conception of the first Noel. Few composers have caught the intensity of the spirit of jubilation that permeates the story of the angels' appearance with glad tidings to the shepherds. This song alone would entitle Tchesnokov to a position among the most talented of modern Russian choral composers.”

O Magnum Mysterium — Morton Lauridsen (b. 1943) was the professor and Chair of the Department of Composition at the University of Southern California for 40 years. In addition to his university duties, he was the Composer in Residence for one of the premier choirs in the world - the Los Angeles Master Chorale. A recipient of numerous awards, grants and commissions, Lauridsen's choral works have a permanent place in the standard choral repertoire and are performed regularly by distinguished choruses throughout the world. Gentle dissonances and harmonies that sound both romantic and ethereal mark his choral music. According to Lauridsen, “For centuries, composers have been inspired by the beautiful *O magnum mysterium* text...This affirmation of God's grace...is celebrated in my setting through a quiet song of profound inner joy.” From the opening measures of *O Magnum Mysterium* one is drawn into the religious mystery, spiritual awe and the miracle of Jesus' birth. Close your eyes and allow yourself to be washed in pure, choral sound.

O Magnum Mysterium
Et admirabile sacramentum
Ut animalia viderent Dominum natum
Jacentem in praesepio.
O beata Virgo, cujus viscera meruerunt
Portare Dominum Jesum Christum.
Alleluia!

Oh Great Mystery
And wondrous sacrament
In order for the animals to see the Lord born
Lying in a cradle in a stable.
Oh blessed Virgin, whose womb was deserving
To have carried the Lord Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!

Here is the Little Door / A Spotless Rose — British composer, Herbert Howells (1892-1983), was a composer, organist and music teacher best known for his Anglican church music. In 1912 he began studying at the Royal College of Music; among his teachers were Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry. Although Howells was influenced by English post-Reformation composers including Thomas Tallis, his most profound inspiration came from 20th century composer, Ralph Vaughan Williams, who took Howells under his wing as a composition student. Howells enjoyed much success as an English composer throughout his life, and was commissioned to write a motet (vocal composition based on sacred text) for the memorial service

of John F. Kennedy. The work, entitled *Take Him Earth, for Cherishing*, included an epigraph from Howell's most famous work, *Hymnus Paradisi*, that paralleled the untimely death of his own 9-year-old son from polio.

Howell's *Here is the Little Door*, *Spotless Rose* and *Sing Lullaby* form a musical tryptich celebrating the birth of Jesus. This concert features two of them.

Here is the Little Door describes the stable in which Jesus is born, the arrival of the Magi with their gifts, and God's gift of Jesus to the world. This quiet, intimate lullaby is occasionally laced with an unexpected pathos foreshadowing the sorrowful events that occur later in Jesus' life.

A *Spotless Rose* is a reverent song dedicated to Mary with harmonies that evoke the harshness of the Holy Child being born in a stable "on a cold, cold winter's night." The opening phrase, "a Spotless Rose is blowing" has a bittersweet, double meaning: both the blooming (blowing) of the Rose and blowing wind. Listen carefully and you can hear the choral sounds of wind blowing through all the voice parts.

Quatre Motets pour le Temps de Noel (Four Motets for the Season of Christmas)

The French composer Francis Jean Marcel Poulenc (1899-1963) was famous for his varied and prodigious musical compositions - including orchestral concert music, operas, ballets, and works for chamber groups, choirs and solo piano. One of his best-loved works is the *Gloria* for soprano, choir and orchestra. Although his mother was an accomplished pianist, Poulenc was largely self-taught because his father expected him to pursue a career as a businessman, and forbade him from enrolling in a music college. While under the tutelage of Eric Satie, Poulenc became part of the early 20th century group of French composers known as "Les Six." Poulenc's earlier works were sometimes dismissed as frivolous because of his lighthearted, irreverent style. But it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that, in the 1930's, he began to compose serious music and religious works along with the more humorous compositions for which he was already known.

Quatre Motets pour le Temps de Noel demonstrate programmatic music at its finest during the 20 century - with a decidedly French accent.

For *O magnum mysterium* (see translation under Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, above) Poulenc uses open harmonies sung very quietly to create a mood of mysticism. He adds to the feeling of mystery with a section that is hummed by the singers, which is intended to evoke the sound of a gentle breeze.

In *Quem vidistis dicite*, one can also hear a light breeze as the shepherds, who have been told about the birth of the Savior by a chorus of angels, eagerly rush back to their dwellings to tell the others what they have seen and heard.

*Quem vidistis pastores, dicite:
Annuntiate nobis
In terris quis apparuit:
Natum vidimus
Et chorus angelorum collaudantes Dominum.
Dicite quidnam vidistis
Et annuntiate Christi nativitatem.*

*What have you seen, shepherds, tell us:
Announce to us
Who has appeared on earth:
We have seen a new birth
And a chorus of angels praising the Lord.
Tell us what you have seen
And announce the birth of Christ.*

Videntes stellam is a cheerful motet that describes how the Magi follow the star to find Jesus' birthplace so they can offer Him gifts to celebrate His presence on earth.

*Videntes stellam,
Magi gavisum sunt gaudio magno.
Et intrantes Domum
Obtulerunt Domino
Aurum, thus, et myrrham.*

*At the sight of the star,
The Magi rejoiced among themselves.
And entering the House
Offering to the Lord
Gold, incense, and myrrh.*

Hodie Christus natus est is a jubilant proclamation announcing that "Today Christ is born." Poulenc treats the memorable melody in a very theatrical fashion employing jazz chords and jarring dissonances that were popular during the early 1950's. He also uses 'Allegro Maestoso' tempo markings and a series of quick-paced sixteenth notes to add musical power and the feeling of elation that he wants the motet to portray. Notice that the Latin text is musically accented on seemingly unimportant syllables (Ex-cel-sis Deo vs. normal emphasis Ex-cel-sis Deo). This compositional style, which is especially noticeable in the *Hodie*, was common among French composers who often ignored the way Latin words and syllables were musically accented because French text set to music tended to be more evenly accented.

*Hodie Christus natus est,
Hodie Salvator apparuit,
Hodie in terra canunt angeli,
Laetantur archangeli,
Hodie exsultant justi dicentes:
Gloria in excelsis Deo,
Alleluia!*

*Today Christ is born,
Today the Saviour appears,
Today on earth the angels sing,
The archangels rejoice,
Today the righteous exult, saying:
Glory to God on high,
Alleluia!*

Interval

Deck the Hall — Born in London in 1945, John Rutter is among the best-known and most popular choral composers and arrangers. He studied music at Clare College, Cambridge, where he wrote and published his first compositions. In 1981, Rutter founded the Cambridge Singers which he conducts and with whom he produces recordings under the Collegium label. Rutter's compositional career has embraced orchestral and instrumental pieces and a prolific number of

both large and small-scale choral works that are widely sung and very popular, particularly in the United States and Canada. He continues to conduct many choirs and orchestras around the world.

Rutter's *Deck the Hall* is a familiar carol set in a joyous and festive context. He treats some of the voice parts as stringed instruments and bells that support the immediately familiar melodic line. Rutter borrows musical idioms from the madrigal form - common during the Renaissance era - that utilizes imitative and simplistic music for the verses and refrain (typified by nonsense syllables 'fa-la-la'). Fa-la-la's would have been sung as entertainment during a festive gathering.

Rise up Shepherd and Follow — John Rutter's tuneful arrangement of this piece is written as a Spiritual - songs that were designed to tell the story of familiar Bible characters, using a 'leader and group' or 'question and answer' format. The leader (a soloist) introduces the melodic motive and the group (the singers) responds with the familiar refrain. It's easy to imagine a group of shepherds on a chilly winter's night sitting around a fire, singing this piece to keep their minds off of being cold! Composers have arranged this popular piece for many choral groups, including the Robert Shaw Chorale.

Gesu Bambino (Baby Jesus) — The Italian-born Pietro A. Yon (1886 - 1943) immigrated to the United States in 1907 to become the organist at St. Francis Xavier Church in Manhattan. He also taught organ and composed many works for organ, piano, and orchestra. Yon's choral piece, *Gesu Bambino*, is probably his best-known work and a perfect example of an early 20th century Italian folk song. The waltz-like quality of this joyful melody celebrating the Baby Jesus might inspire both singers and listeners alike to sway with the music, and sing along with the familiar-sounding choral refrain "Venite adoremus" ("Come let us adore him") - the choral response to the soloist's proclamation of the traditional Christmas story.

There Is No Rose — Howard Helvey (b. 1968) is a pianist, composer, arranger and conductor living in Cincinnati, where he serves as organist/choirmaster of Calvary Episcopal Church. Although he has composed several piano pieces, his many choral compositions and commissioned works are more widely performed.

There Is No Rose is based on an anonymous text dating back to the Middle Ages that praises the "Rose of Virtue," namely, the Virgin Mary. ARS has performed several versions of this reverent text set to music by various composers. All of these choral pieces, including Helvey's, elicit a beautiful, lyrical melody line with luscious harmonies, a common sense of awe and wonder, and just enough dissonance to intrigue the listener.

Christmas Day — The popular English composer Gustav Holst (1874 - 1934) is best known for his widely performed and recorded seven-movement orchestral suite, *The Planets*, which musically depicts each planet in the solar system. Holst came from a multi-generation family of musicians, and composed many other works in a range of styles. He was influenced by several of his contemporaries - Richard Strauss and Wagner - and was also inspired by Ravel and other

composers during the early 20th century revival of English folk songs. A colleague of Vaughan Williams, Holst was, in turn, an influence on Benjamin Britten.

Christmas Day is a musical feast of traditional English Carols including, “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” “Come, Ye Lofty, Come, Ye Lowly,” and “The First Noel.” Holst’s intent is for the audience to hear all of the melodies separately in a recognizable, traditional fashion initially, and then as a combined festive and joyous choral fusion. He creates interest for the listener by alternating lively songs with pieces that are more reflective.

A Christmas Lullaby – Stephen Chatman (b. 1950) is Professor of Composition at the University of British Columbia School of Music in Vancouver, Canada. A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory and the University of Michigan with a Doctorate in Musical Arts, Chatman is the recipient of numerous awards for his orchestral, piano, and widely performed choral music.

A Christmas Lullaby and *The Huron Carol* are from the 7-piece song cycle, *Carols of the Nativity*. *A Christmas Lullaby* with its simple melody, swaying tempo and consonant harmonies evokes the feelings of a loving mother rocking her baby to sleep. The last section of the piece is a canon that creates a perfect lullaby atmosphere for the listener.

Based on a 16th century French Canadian melody, ‘Twas in the Moon of Winter Time,’ *The Huron Carol* (*‘Jesus Abatonnia’*) translated as ‘Jesus, He Is Born,’ is believed to be the first Canadian Christmas carol. It was composed in 1643 by Father Saint Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649), a Jesuit missionary, and was intended as a present for the Huron people. Initially penned in the Huron language, *The Huron Carol* was eventually translated into French and then into English. The first verse is in the Huron language; the subsequent verses in English portray the traditional Biblical characters and images in traditional Huron metaphors that their people would understand: angel choirs announce the birth of King Jesus to hunter braves rather than shepherds, and the Christ child is born in a broken bark lodge instead of a stable. Chatman’s sparse harmonies and minor key evoke a cold, snowy Canadian landscape in winter.

The Little Drummer Boy – This new arrangement of the popular carol, “The Little Drummer Boy,” was written by Canadian composer, John McCarthy, for the professional *a cappella* choral ensemble, The King’s Singers. The original piece, composed in 1941 by American Katherine K. Davis, was most notably used in the 1968 stop motion television special by the same name. This arrangement uses a very simple melody set over the “Prum, Prum” rhythmic imitation of a beating drum sung by the men’s voices. In the traditional sense, *The Little Drummer Boy* could be considered a folksong. Listen for the changing drum rhythms as the verses progress.

The Twelve Days of Christmas – This version of the famous tune, first published in England in 1780, was arranged by Geoffrey Keating for The King’s Singers. Its origin and purpose has many roots; most prevalent among them is a children’s memory game, in which a leader recites and adds verses that each player must then repeat in sequence. Keating’s humorous setting incorporates numerous tunes that are familiar to classical music enthusiasts including,

“Ding Dong Merrily on High,” “Minuet in G” by Beethoven, a trumpet fanfare, “Three little maids from school are we” from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta “Mikado,” and the ‘Gloria’ refrain from the Christmas carol, “Angels We Have Heard on High.”

There Is Faint Music — Dan Forrest (b. 1978) is an award-winning composer whose music has become well established in the repertoire of choirs across the U.S. and abroad. He holds graduate degrees in composition and piano performance, and is active as a composer, educator, and pianist. Forrest’s concert and church choral music has also been widely published. *There Is Faint Music* uses a simplistic, tender melody supported by harmonically rich chords to match the delicate text by contemporary American poet Nancy Buckley, which depicts the solemn awe and infinite love of Mary for her newborn Son.

What Sweeter Music — The words for John Rutter’s *What Sweeter Music* were originally penned as a Christmas poem by the English poet Robert Herrick (1581-1674). His composition is lyrical and quietly luminous, with the quality of a lovely lullaby – especially in the women’s shimmering three-part harmonies.

Ave Maria (Angelus Domini) — Franz Biebl was born in 1906 in Pursruck, Germany. He held various choral conducting positions in Germany and Austria and, curiously enough, spent a few years as a prisoner of war in the United States during and after World War II, where he was allowed to compose and conduct. *Ave Maria*, his best-known composition, was originally composed as a men’s chorus for the Cornell University Glee Club and later rewritten for mixed chorus. It is a tender and exultant setting of the well-known prayer, with lush, inspiring harmonies.

*Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae,
Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto.
Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum,
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventri tui, Jesus.
Maria dixit: Ecce ancilla Domini,
Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.
Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum,
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventri tui, Jesus.
Et verbum caro factum est
Et habitavit in nobis.
Sancta Maria, mater Dei,
Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.*

*The angel of the Lord announced to Mary,
And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Mary said: Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord,
Be it to me according to thy word.
Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
And the dear Word was made
And dwelt among us.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
Pray for us sinners,
Now and in the hour of our death. Amen.*