

O Radiant Dawn

Choral reflections from scripture, poets, and an astronaut

The year's end brings us together to rejoice in our common humanity and in light that emerges from darkness. These longings find expression in the music of *O Radiant Dawn*, Oriana's choral program that you are about to hear, and that will open the celebration of our twenty-fifth season.

Much of this music is meant specifically for the Nativity season, and much of it is not. But what all this music has in common is that is about *all of us*, so we think that it's music that is especially worth hearing at this time of the year.

From our 30 *a cappella* voices you'll hear J. S. Bach's brilliant double-chorus motet *Singet dem Herrn (Sing to the Lord)*; Johannes Brahms' impassioned *O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf (O Saviour, rip the heavens open)*; Giuseppe Verdi's transcendent *Ave Maria*; choral psalm settings by Claudio Monteverdi and Gregor Aichinger; James MacMillan's setting of the Advent antiphon *O Radiant Dawn*; old and new carol texts in new settings by Libby Larsen, Ola Gjeilo, Philip Stopford, and Cecilia McDowall; and Kirke Mechem's choral setting of the poem *Island in Space* by the Apollo 9 astronaut Russell Schweickart — who, while orbiting the Earth in 1969, observed that no political borders were visible on our planet; that it contained everything that meant anything to us; was utterly silent; and looked totally fragile.

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We hope to see you at a concert, and at the reception that will follow!

—Walter Chapin

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b. 1950

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1567-1643

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arranged by Ola Gjeilo

b. 1978

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Sing to the Lord a new song

1685-1750

A Simple Gloria

Libby Larsen

b. 1950

Cantate Domino canticum novum *Sing to the Lord a new song*

Claudio Monteverdi

1567-1643

Libby Larsen, born in 1950 in Wilmington, Delaware, has composed a prolific body of choral, vocal, chamber, symphonic, and operatic music, which has been noted for its way of sounding refreshingly contemporary while yet remaining very accessible to the listener. In the words of Denise von Glahn, Larsen's biographer: "Libby Larsen has made a mark on American music culture in multiple ways. She is first and foremost a remarkably productive and performed composer. Her works are heard around the world and beloved by amateurs and professionals alike."

A Simple Gloria, composed in 2007 for the St. Thomas Liturgical Choir in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a delightful choral miniature. Its concise text, by M. K. Dean, a poet of the same age as Larsen and quite possibly a personal friend, portrays the Nativity in an uncomplicated and warm manner:

The poem's first seven syllables are sung by the choir in unison as it quickly ascends the scale; this serves as an attention-getting preparation for the key word "*Gloria*". Similar scales, ascending and descending, introduce several more instances of the word "*Gloria*", and the word "*stars*". The word "*Gloria*" is then repeated several more times, with an acceleration of tempo, in order to introduce the four Latin phrases ("*Gloria in excelsis Deo ...*"). Several climactic points occur during the Latin words, after which the music subsides and returns to the opening tempo. A gentle denouement is reached with four reiterations of the ascending scale and an extended sojourn on the tonic chord of the key.

Claudio Monteverdi's *Cantate Domino canticum novum* was published in 1620, as one of the pieces in his collection *Libro Primo di Motetti (First Book of Motets)*. It is a perfect example of the *stile concertato* of choral composition (roughly, this Italian term means "different groups of instruments and/or voices sounding together"; a nearly equivalent term is "polychoral"). *Stile concertato* arose primarily in Venice in the late 16th and early 17th century through the work of the composers Andrea Gabrieli and his nephew Giovanni Gabrieli. At this time the Renaissance musical style was giving way to the early Baroque style, and *stile concertato* was a distinct feature of the new Baroque; it was extensively further developed by Claudio Monteverdi.

The Gabrielis took advantage of the fact that the architecture of the Cathedral of San Marco in Venice, which dates to the 11th century, featured multiple choir lofts that face each other. This arrangement allowed dissimilar vocal or instrumental choirs to be placed in different lofts; these groups would then make music simultaneously, so that a variety of different musical textures would be readily apparent to the listener in the sanctuary below.

Yet *Cantate Domino* is written for a single ensemble of six choral voices, not for separate choirs. How could such a group produce polychoral music? It could, by employing a clever device that Monteverdi often used: If the six vocal parts are divided into subsets — for example, the three lowest parts versus the three highest parts, and if these two subgroups sing in alternation — then the listener would hear a convincing *illusion* of independent groups making polychoral music.

Monteverdi's *Cantate Domino* employs this device. It begins with just four of the six voices singing the initial words "*Cantate Domino canticum novum; cantate et benedicite nomine eius*" ("*Sing to the Lord a new song; sing and bless his name*"). These words are then repeated, but with the addition of the remaining two voices of the choir. The change of sound, at the repeat, is immediately apparent to the listener!

The following words, "*quia mirabilia fecit*" ("*for he has done marvelous things*") are also sung by the full choir of six voices, but with a noticeable change of musical meter that is likewise immediately apparent to the ear.

With the next words, "*Cantate, exultate...*" ("*Sing, rejoice...*"), the choir-subset illusion is employed to the full: The third, fourth, and fifth highest ranges of the choir sing these words as a trio (on an exciting rapid-note motif), answered by another trio formed of the first, second, and sixth ranges (i.e. the remainder of the choir). Three more subsets, each of different ranges, carry on with this idea; then all six voices cadence together on "*et psallite*" ("*and sing psalms*").

Then the words "*psallite in cythara*" ("*sing psalms with the harp*") are made to alternate between two choir subsets, one of two voices and the other of four, though here the words are dovetailed, so that one group starts before the other has finished.

Finally, all six voices reunite for the closing words "*quia mirabilia fecit*", sung as a reprise of these words' first appearance.

A historical note: *Stile concertato* was not just a musical fad! The notion of different groups that produce contrasting sounds — the exact opposite of the homogeneous choral texture that had been cultivated during the Renaissance by composers such as Palestrina, des Prez, and Byrd — was a signal of the nascent Baroque era. *Stile concertato* eventually evolved into the sacred *cantata* and the secular *concerto grosso*, two central forms of the Baroque era. And the idea of dividing a choral body into different subsets, to generate variety in choral sound, is still with us today.

Although *stile concertato* itself had gradually died out by the end of the Baroque era, it continued to be used by certain Baroque composers — such as J. S. Bach, as we shall see when we come to the final work on this program.

And it was in a simple Gloria that quiet morn,
And it was in a simple Gloria the Child was born.

The angels sang a simple Gloria
That echoed gently through the stars.

The shepherds heard the simple Gloria:

“Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Salvator mundi est.
Ergo nos cum gaudio:
Natus est Emmanuel.”

“Glory in the highest to God.
The Savior of the world is [here].
Therefore we [sing] with joy:
Born is Emmanuel.”

—M. K. Dean

Cantate Domino canticum novum;
cantate et benedicite nomine eius,
quia mirabilia fecit.

*Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing and bless his name,
for he has done marvelous things.*

Cantate, exultate, et psallite
in cythara et voce psalmi,
quia mirabilia fecit.

*Sing, rejoice, and sing psalms
with the harp and the voice of a psalm,
for he has done marvelous things.*

—Psalm 98

II

The First Nowell

arranged by Ola Gjeilo

b. 1978

Lully, Lulla, Lullay also known as *The Coventry Carol*

in a new melody and harmonization by Philip Stopford

b. 1977

Now may we singen

15th-century carol, in a new setting by Cecilia McDowall

b. 1951

Ola Gjeilo (pronounced YAY-low) was born in Norway in 1978; he studied music in Oslo, and later at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City and at the Royal College of Music in London. His many compositions are primarily for choral voices, though his larger works (e.g. *Sunrise Mass*, *Dreamweaver*, *Song of the Universal*) have orchestral accompaniment.

Gjeilo has been a Composer-in-Residence with the professional-level Phoenix Chorale in Arizona, and is currently Composer-in-Residence with Distinguished Composers International New York.

His choral music, neither overly difficult nor overly easy for the performer, has become a favorite of choral singers and audiences in the USA and in Europe, and is often to be found on many a current choral program.

In 2012 he brought out seven arrangements of Christmas carols, in two volumes, of which *The First Nowell* is one. What is remarkable about these works is that they are by no means just re-harmonizations of familiar melodies, for each of them contains sparks of originality that will greatly impress the listener's ear.

The familiar words of *The First Nowell* can be traced to an 18th-century broadside ballad in Cornwall, England. A “broadside”, so-named after the manner that information was printed on paper, was one way that news was distributed to the public

in England and Ireland from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Songs of popular origin were printed and distributed as broadsides; thus such a song came to be known as a “broadside ballad”. The exact origin of the tune and the words of this carol is apparently lost to history.

Gjeilo’s arrangement of *The First Nowell*, after a soft introduction of jazz-tinged harmonies that float under a brief soprano solo, gives out the familiar melody in the choir’s soprano section, but with harmonies that immediately strike the ear as being pleasantly different from those of the traditional Sir John Stainer harmonization of this carol. A striking change of texture is heard as the full choir, singing in unison, ends the refrain with the words “*Born is the King of Israel*”.

Two solo tenor voices sing the second verse, during the latter half of which a lovely solo soprano descant is heard, which touches on several notes that distinctly sound “out of the key”.

The third verse starts strangely, with an open fifth interval in the tenors and basses that announces that the key center has suddenly changed. The sopranos now sing the melody in this new key — but something is weird! What can it be? The sopranos are singing it *higher on the scale by the interval of a third*, which isn’t what we expect to hear! While the tenors and basses cling to their constant open fifth, the altos add a harmony part to the sopranos. Then the tenors and basses sing the refrain of the third verse, but, like the sopranos, they do this a third higher in the scale.

On the word “*Then...*”, the soprano solo abruptly changes to yet another new key, and sings the fourth verse. (She reverts to the “correct” melody, no longer a third higher on the scale, though it’s now in a new key.) This solo is joined by the tenor section for the refrain, whose words “*Born is the King of Israel*” are sounded over a single chord that is long and “wrong”!

A brief coda, sung by a smaller group, closes the piece. With its soprano solo descant, it is reminiscent of the introduction.

Philip Stopford, born in England in 1977, is a graduate of Keble College, Oxford, and was a member of the choir of Westminster Abbey. His choral compositions are primarily sacred. He is currently organist and choirmaster at a church in the New York City area.

This writer has been told, by a choral singer who knows Philip Stopford, that *Lully, Lulla, Lullay* (a.k.a. *The Coventry Carol*) was written in the space of one hour, and that its composition was prompted by the immediate need of one more piece to fill out a choral program that was to be recorded on a CD by Stopford’s choir, Ecclesium, at St. Anne’s Cathedral in Belfast, Ireland. This story is possibly apocryphal, but hopefully not; at any rate it’s a fascinating little tale.

From the 5th century until the end of the 16th century, Mystery Plays — staged by craft guilds — were an important way for an illiterate populace to learn stories from the Bible. One group of these plays was periodically presented in Coventry, England; one of them was called the Shearmen and Tailors’ Pageant, which portrayed the

biblical events from the Annunciation to the Massacre of the Innocents. The latter was the horrendous account, in the Gospel of Matthew, of the order given by King Herod the Great, of Judea, that all male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem of the age of two years or less should be executed — for, so the story goes, Herod had been told by his emissaries that a young King had been born in that town, and he was not going to abide any challenge to his authority.

Scholars have argued as to whether this gruesome story has any basis in fact, and if it has, what the actual truth might be. Some point out that the story is unlikely, for the contemporary historian Josephus makes no mention of it. Others say that the story could be true, as it is consistent with Herod's general behavior, given the fact of his cruelty toward others; and that since the town of Bethlehem was quite small at the time, only about a dozen or so infants would have been affected, and thus widespread attention would not have been attracted.

At any rate, the story did find its way into various non-scriptural accounts during the first millennium, and finally into the Shearmen and Tailors' Pageant of Coventry. In the late 16th century an unknown musician composed *The Coventry Carol* for this play, in which the horrendous story is told from the point of view of a mother of one of the ill-fated children. This carol is still generally familiar to us, though it is perhaps not everyone's favorite. Its verses are most painful to read, for we realize that we are hearing a lullaby, sung by a mother to her child, about something that no mother should ever have to sing.

As with many of his choral pieces, Stopford composed a new melody and harmonization for the unchanged traditional words, and changed the title to *Lully, Lulla, Lullay*, the lullaby's refrain as it is repeated by the singing mother. Stopford's simple harmonies, and the final refrain of the song accompanied by a poignant solo soprano descant, form a brief piece of music that is a study in tragic contrast. For this is beautiful music that portrays an ugly unspeakable act: violence against young children, as an inhuman display of political power.

Violence against young children, as an inhuman display of political power. It was quite probably committed by King Herod two thousand years ago. It was committed seventy-five years ago, at Auschwitz. And, in a somewhat less violent but still inhuman form, it is still being committed today — at our own southern border with Mexico.

Cecilia McDowall, born in London in 1951, studied at the University of Edinburgh and Trinity College of Music, London, where she earned a MMus. in Composition. She delayed devoting herself fully to composition, however, until after her children reached their teenage years. Since resuming her craft she has become a most outstanding composer.

Notes on McDowall's website, <https://ceciliamcdowall.co.uk/biography>, point out that she is "often inspired by extra-musical influences". Indeed so! For the titles of her works include *Everyday Wonders: The Girl from Aleppo*, a cantata about the escape of a girl from that city; the *Da Vinci Requiem*, written to coincide with the 500th anniversary

of Leonardo's death, last May; *Seventy Degrees Below Zero*, to commemorate Captain Robert Scott's 1912 expedition to the South Pole, which he did not survive; and *Night Flight*, which celebrates the 1912 flight of the aviatrix Harriet Quimby across the English Channel. She has written much choral music with perhaps more ordinary titles, both sacred and secular, much of which was commissioned.

One such commission, in 2007, was by the Concord Singers, of Bedfordshire, UK, Michael Lock, Director: *Now may we singen*, a setting of a 15th-century carol, which McDowall wrote in an archaic style that evokes music of that era. Its five verses all have the same melody, but that melody is never sounded twice in the same way: it is first sung by the treble voices, then by the bass voices, then by the sopranos with an alto descant, then by the tenors with a harmonized part by the basses, then again by the sopranos with the lower three parts harmonizing.

In between each of these verses comes a refrain, which is repeated with the identical four-part harmonization each time. The general effect on the listener is to hear something new, then something familiar, then something else new, then the familiar part again, and so on.

The harmonies are jagged and unusual; the rhythms are ever-changing and unexpected, and the tempos are unrelentingly fast. Actually this is the effect that one would hear in actual 15th-century music; Cecilia McDowall has given us a marvelous update!

The first Noel, the angels did say,
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay:
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel!
Born is the King of Israel!

They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the east beyond them far,
And to the earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel...

And by the light of that same star
Three wise men came from country far.
To seek for a King was their intent,
And to follow the star wherever it went.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel...

Then entered in those wise men three;
Fell reverently upon their knee,
And offered there in His presence
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel...

—originally an 18th-century broadside ballad from Cornwall

Lully, lulla, lully, lulla,
By by lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do,
For to preserve, this day,
This poor youngling, for whom we sing:
“By by lully, lullay”?

Lully, lulla, lully, lulla...

Herod the king, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might, in his own sight,
All young children to slay.

Lully, lulla, lully, lulla...

That woe is me, poor child, for thee,
And ever morn and day
For thy parting, neither say nor sing:
“By by lully, lullay”.

Lully, lulla, lully, lulla...

—from a 16th century mystery play in Coventry, England

This Babe to us that now is born,
Wonderful works He hath y-wrought;
He would not loss what was forlorn,
But boldly again it brought.

And thus it is, forsooth y-wis,
He asketh nought but that is His.
Now may we singen as it is,
Quod puer natus est nobis.

forsooth y-wis = in truth indeed

For the boy is born to us.

This bargain lovèd He right well;
The price was nigh and bought full dear.
Who would suffer and for us feel
As did that Prince withouten peer?

And thus it is, forsooth y-wis...

His ransom for us hath y-paid;
Good reason have we to be His.
Be mercy ask'd and He be prayed,
Who may deserve the heavenly bliss.

And thus it is, forsooth y-wis...

To some purpose God made man;
I trust well to salvation.
What was His blood that from Him ran
But fence against damnation?

fence = defense

And thus it is, forsooth y-wis...

Almighty God in Trinity,
Thy mercy we pray with whole heart;
Thy mercy may all woe make fell,
And dangerous dread from us to start.

And thus it is, forsooth y-wis...

—English carol of the 15th-century

III

Ave Maria

Giuseppe Verdi

1813-1901

Laudate Dominum in sanctis eius *Praise the Lord in his sanctuary*

Gregor Aichinger

1564-1628

After Giuseppe Verdi, in 1874, completed both his opera *Aida* and his monumental *Messa da Requiem* (in memory of the Italian poet and patriot Alessandro Manzoni), he ceased composing major musical works for a period of twelve years. In 1886 he resumed, and in that year wrote *Laudine alla Vergine Maria*, for female voices; this was the first of four works of his later years that came to be known as the *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* (*Four Sacred Pieces*). The second of these, in 1889, was *Ave Maria*, for mixed choir *a cappella*. His *Te Deum* followed in 1896, and the last of the four was his *Stabat Mater* of 1897.

(He also resumed writing operas after his twelve-year pause, for he brought out *Otello* in 1887 and *Falstaff* in 1893.)

The story of how Verdi composed *Ave Maria* is fascinating!

A musician by the name of Adolfo Crescentini published what he called a *scala enigmatica* (*enigmatic scale*) in the *Gazetta Musicale di Milano*, a musical journal run by the Ricordi publishing house, along with an invitation for composers to harmonize this strange scale. Verdi became intrigued. Using the *scala enigmatica* as an ascending bass line, he devised accompanying harmonies for the tenor, alto, and soprano parts, to which they were to sing the words of the *Ave Maria*. He continued by having the basses sing the *scala enigmatica* in descending order, and again found accompanying harmonies for the other three voice parts. Then he assigned the *scala enigmatica* to the altos, likewise first ascending and then descending; and devised accompanying harmonies for the sopranos, tenors, and basses. Next he gave the *scala enigmatica* to the tenors, ascending and descending, with accompaniment for sopranos, altos, and

basses. Finally the *scala enigmatica* went to the sopranos, again ascending and descending, with the altos, tenors, and basses accompanying.

But this led to a problem! Because tenors and sopranos sing in a higher range than basses and altos, Verdi had to transpose the *scala* up by the interval of a fourth when assigning it to tenors and sopranos. Thus, when the sopranos finished their descent, their final note was F. But since the piece had started in the key of C major (the basses' first note), it ought to end in that key. But F isn't part of the C chord! What to do? Verdi's solution was to add a coda, on the word "Amen", whose harmonies would take the singers back to the starting key of C major.

Just what was this *scala enigmatica*? It was only the ordinary major scale on C, but revised in such a way that the second step of the scale is flatted by a half step, while the fourth, fifth, and sixth steps are sharped by a half step.

Here is the ordinary C major scale, followed by a restatement of that scale, but with four of the seven steps lowered or raised, in order to form the *scala enigmatica*:



But what makes this scale *enigmatic*? Because it is very difficult to harmonize! And here is why that is so:

The ordinary C major scale contains four intervals of a perfect fourth (C>F, D>G, E>A, G>C), and four intervals of a perfect fifth (C>G, D>A, E>B, F>C). These are the intervals upon which most chord progressions are based. The *scala enigmatica*, however, contains only one of these eight combinations (E>B), which makes it difficult to find harmonies that will fit as the *scala* notes progress upward (or downward).

But this difficulty was hardly anything that would stop Giuseppe Verdi, a master composer who moved as easily within the complicated harmonies of the Late Romantic period as ordinary mortals move through air. To Verdi, the *scala enigmatica* was apparently a stimulus, not an obstacle. Using the *scala* as one of the four choral voices, he devised a setting of the *Ave Maria* of unsurpassed beauty. And to hear it is a marvelous listening experience, because the strange features of the *scala enigmatica* make almost every chord progression an *unexpected event* for the listener's ear!

Gregor Aichinger was one of the many German composers who was active in the transition from the Renaissance style of composition to that of the Baroque.

He was born in Regensburg in 1564. In 1577, when only thirteen, he went to Munich to study music with Orlandus Lassus, a noted Flemish composer of the Renaissance period. In 1578 he enrolled at the University of Ingolstadt, where he met members of

the Fugger mercantile and banking family, whose continued financial support he was fortunate enough to receive throughout his career as a musician and, later, cleric. In 1584 he was appointed both as organist at the Basilica of Saints Ulrich and Afra at Augsburg, and as house musician to the Fugger family. Soon thereafter, with the Fuggers' support, he went to Venice to become a student of Giovanni Gabrieli, from whom he learned the secrets of the new Italian *stile concertato*.

In 1588, again with the Fuggers' support, Aichinger began studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Ingolstadt. He continued to be musically active, however, for in 1590 he began to publish collections of his own choral works. In 1597 he published the large collection *Sacrarum Cantionum a 5-8 vocum* (*Sacred Songs for 5 to 8 voices*), of which *Laudate Dominum* is number 14. He published some 30 such collections over his lifetime.

He was in Rome from 1598 to 1600, where he took holy orders in the Catholic Church, then returned to Augsburg, where he remained a musician and canon at the Basilica of Saints Ulrich and Afra until his death in 1628.

Aichinger was but one of many German composers who went to Italy in the decades before and after 1600 to become fluent in the Italian *concertato* style. (The famous Heinrich Schütz was another.) Their efforts in the late 16th and early 17th centuries paved the way for the magnificent flourishing of the Baroque style in German-speaking lands during the 18th century.

In *Laudate Dominum*, Aichinger employs *stile concertato* in a very simple manner: he contrasts a small group of solo singers against a double chorus of four vocal parts each. The small group sings five verses of Psalm 150 — the first as a duet, the second as a trio, and so forth; the fifth verse is sung as a sextet. In between these verses the double chorus provides a refrain, by alternating two verses from Psalm 69 whose words fit nicely with the Psalm 150 words.

From the text below, it looks as though the singers in the double chorus have to sing the same two verses over and over. Aichinger spares them this boredom, however, for he has the double chorus singers exchange parts every time a refrain is sung.

This bright *concertato* piece provides the listener with a constant kaleidoscope of contrasting sounds; hopefully hearing it will be a charming experience!

Ave Maria, gratia plena;
Dominus tecum.

*Hail Mary, full of grace;
the Lord [is] with you.*

Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
et benedictus
fructus ventris tui, Jesus.

*Blessed [are] you among women,
and blessed [is]
the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*

Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.
Amen.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and in the hour of our death.
Amen.*

Laudate Dominum in sanctis eius; laudate eum in firmamento virtutis eius.	<i>Praise the Lord in his holy place; praise him in the firmament of his power.</i>
Laudent illum coeli et terra, mare et omnis creatura eius.	<i>Let the heavens and the earth praise him, the sea and all its creatures.</i>
Laudate eum in virtutibus eius, laudate eum secundum multitudinem magnitudinis eius.	<i>Praise him for his acts of power, praise him according to his many greatnesses.</i>
Laudate Dominum, laudate Deum.	<i>Praise the Lord, praise God.</i>
Laudate eum in sono tubae, laudate eum in psalterio et cythara.	<i>Praise him with the sound of the trumpet, praise him with the lyre and the harp.</i>
Laudent illum coeli et terra, mare et omnis creatura eius.	<i>Let the heavens and the earth praise him, the sea and all its creatures.</i>
Laudate eum in tympano et choro, laudate eum in psalterio et cythara; laudate eum in chordis et organo.	<i>Praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the lyre and the harp; praise him with the strings and the pipe.</i>
Laudate Dominum, laudate Deum.	<i>Praise the Lord, praise God.</i>
Laudate eum in cymbalis benesonantibus, laudate eum in cymbalis jubilationis: Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum.	<i>Praise him with well-sounding cymbals, praise him with cymbals of jubilation: Let every breath praise the Lord.</i>
Laudent illum coeli et terra, mare et omnis creatura eius.	<i>Let the heavens and the earth praise him, the sea and all its creatures.</i>

—Verses are from Psalm 150; choral refrain is from Psalm 69:34

Please enjoy a 15-minute intermission!

IV

O Radiant Dawn

James MacMillan

b. 1959

an English-language setting of the sixth-century antiphon O Oriens

O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf

Johannes Brahms

O Savior, rip the heavens open

1833-1897

James MacMillan, born in Scotland in 1959, studied at the University of Edinburgh and at Durham University in England, where he earned a Ph.D. in 1987. From 1986 to 1988 he lectured on music at the Victoria University of Manchester. Then, returning to Scotland, he devoted himself primarily to musical composition. He is an Associate Composer with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra.

MacMillan's body of works is *astoundingly prolific*. It includes three operas; three works for music theatre; twelve symphonies or other works for symphony orchestra, many with programmatic themes; four works for chamber orchestra; sixteen concertos; two cantatas; thirty-six works for small chamber ensemble; ninety choral pieces, some with accompaniment, some *a cappella*; solo songs, and works for piano.

Twelve of his choral pieces are known as the *Strathclyde Motets*, as they are dedicated to the University of Strathclyde and were premiered by the Strathclyde University Chamber Choir. *O Radiant Dawn* is one of the *Strathclyde Motets*.

The text of this piece is an English translation of *O Oriens*, which is an Advent antiphon of great age — it is liturgy from the sixth century. It is one of the seven so-called "O Antiphons", since the Latin text of each begins with the vocative "O". Each of these is designated for one of the final days of Advent: *O Sapientia (O Wisdom)* is for December 17, *O Adonai (O Lord)* is for December 18, and so on. *O Oriens* is designated for December 21.

The setting of the text is very straightforward and very effective. The music is homophonic; that is, everyone sings the same syllable at the same time. There are two parts to the text: the call to Dawn (a symbol of the Nativity), and the prophecy of Isaiah.

The first part itself has two sub-parts: first, the full choir evokes Dawn and its two descriptors ("*splendor...*" and "*sun...*"); next, the word "*come*" is repeated six times by the singing voices for emphasis, which is followed by the imperative "*shine on...*".

The second part, "*Isaiah had prophesied*", is sung by the sopranos and altos in a lovely duet.

A repetition of the first part follows, then a coda concludes the piece: the upper three vocal parts sing "*Amen*" on repeated notes, while the basses skip about underneath them, changing the harmony in interesting ways.

Johannes Brahms, like most of the composers on this program, was amazingly prolific. As his music is well known and listings of it are readily available, no summary of it is needed here.

O Heiland, reiss die Himmel auf is the second of the two motets of Brahms' Opus 74; it was composed in 1863, when Brahms was thirty years of age. The text, which first appeared in 1622, is attributed to Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, a Jesuit priest who wrote the words for many hymns, Advent songs, and Easter songs that became popular in the Lutheran Church during the 17th century. The mood of the words suggests deeply-felt suffering and longing, so it is probably no coincidence that von Langenfeld wrote this Advent song in the midst of the Thirty Years War that so

ravaged the German-speaking lands from 1618 to 1648. (In some areas, over 50 percent of the population was lost.)

The tune of this song (Brahms uses this old tune without alteration in his motet), is thought to be of anonymous 17th-century origin, and would have been written at about the same time as the words. Quite possibly words and music were written simultaneously, though probably by two different people.

Brahms studied the music of J. S. Bach devotedly, and in this motet we can detect the hand of the great Baroque master upon the shoulder of Brahms, the Romantic. For the five verses of the motet are what Bach would have called *chorale variations* — the use of a chorale tune as a basis for a set of distinct fairly brief pieces, all of which differ from one another, but each of which is derived and based on the chorale tune itself. This form of composition was originally confined to the organ, but Bach himself (ever the eclectic) often transferred the idea to choral voices. Brahms is doing exactly the same in this motet.

For each of the first four verses, Brahms assigns the tune, unaltered, to one of the voice parts of the choir. In the first verse, the tune is very audible in the soprano voices; one can hear a different phrase for each of the four lines of the poem. The range of the tune starts on the lowest tone of the scale, reaches its highest point in the third line, then in the fourth line descends back to the lowest scale tone.

The first verse is a straightforward harmonization; it almost sounds too simple to be by Brahms. In the second verse (here sung by a quartet) the tune is again audible in the soprano voice, and the harmonization is again not especially elaborate — but in this verse the new element is the rapid motion in the three harmonizing parts.

In the third verse the tune passes to the tenors of the choir, as the surrounding voices portray the words with short jabbing phrases: “O Erd’, schlag aus...” (“O Earth, break out...”). Throughout this verse, Brahms introduces one of his favorite rhythmic devices: the triplet. Instead of two pulses on each beat, from time to time there are three. Very audible!

The fourth verse (again sung by a quartet) is perhaps the most “Brahmsian” of the five. On almost every beat one can hear “leaning tones” (technically, *appogiature*) that sweeten the underlying harmonies and give them poignancy: for here the words are about *suffering*, and about longing for “*the Father’s land*”. The tune is still present and still unaltered, but here it is in the bass voice.

In the fifth verse the tune reverts back to the soprano choral voices, but this time it is quite ornamented: many passing tones fill in the spaces between the previously bare intervals. The tune has the same rhythmic weight as the other voices, so it doesn’t stand out as much, but it’s still there.

The words of the fifth verse conclude with a cadence on the word “*ewiglich*” (“*eternally*”) — but the music isn’t over! For now comes a very rapid and very florid “*Amen*”, in the form of a fughetta, or a little fugue. The four choral voices enter in S A B T order, go through some quite fancy harmonies, and finally come to rest on a *major*

chord. (The previous four cadences were all on the *minor* chord of the key.) That "Amen" is about as Brahmsian as you can get!

O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of Justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.

Isaiah had prophesied: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone."

O Radiant Dawn...

Amen.

—An English translation of *O Oriens*, a sixth-century antiphon for December 21

O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf;
Herab, herab, vom Himmel lauf!
Reiß ab vom Himmel Tor und Tür;
Reiß ab, wo Schloß und Riegel für!

O Gott, ein' Tau vom Himmel gieß;
Im Tau herab, O Heiland, fließ.
Ihr Wolken, brecht und regnet aus
Den König über Jakobs Haus.

O Erd', schlag aus; schlag aus, O Erd',
Daß Berg und Tal grün alles werd';
O Erd', herfür dies Blümlein bring;
O Heiland, aus der Erden spring.

Hier leiden wir die größte Not;
Vor Augen steht der bittere Tod.
Ach komm, führ uns mit starker Hand
Von Elend zu dem Vaterland.

Da wollen wir all' danken dir,
Unserm Erlöser, für und für;
Da wollen wir all' loben dich,
Je allzeit immer und ewiglich.

Amen.

*O Savior, rip the heavens open;
Run down here, from heaven!
Rip from heaven [its] gate and door;
Rip away where there are locks and bars!*

*O God, pour a drop of dew from heaven;
Flow down here in that dew, O Savior.
You clouds, break and let rain out
The King over the house of Jacob.*

*O earth, break out in buds,
So that on hill and in valley all becomes green;
O earth, bring this Flower forth to here;
O Savior, leap out of the earth.*

*Here suffer we the greatest need;
Bitter death stands before [our] eyes.
O come, lead us with [a] strong hand
From wretchedness to the Father's land.*

*Thus we all wish to thank you,
Our savior, forever and ever;
Thus we all wish to praise you
Ever, always, and eternally.*

Amen.

—Advent poem by Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld (1591-1635), after Isaiah 64

V

Island in Space 1991

Kirke Mechem b. 1925

a setting of poems by Russell Schweickart and Archibald MacLeish

Kirke Mechem was born in Wichita, Kansas in 1925 and attended Stanford University after serving in the US Army in World War II. He had been attracted to music as a boy through his mother's love for it and through the piano lessons that she gave him, and he did some composing in his teens. But he had not thought of music as a career until his third year at Stanford, when he switched his major from English to Music. After graduating in 1951, he earned an M.A. in Music at Harvard in 1953, studying under Randall Thompson and Walter Piston; he subsequently was assistant choral director at Stanford and composer-in-residence at the University of San Francisco.

Mechem held teaching posts at many institutions during the following decades, but his primary activity was composition. Most of his more than 250 works are vocal and choral music, though he wrote much instrumental music; two of his symphonies were premiered by the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in the 1960's. His interest in opera was awakened during the 1970's: his first opera, *Tartuffe*, after Molière's play, was premiered by the San Francisco Opera in 1980. Three more operas followed, of which the most recent, *Pride and Prejudice*, after the Jane Austen novel, was given its first fully staged performance by the Peabody Institute in Baltimore in November 2019 — only last month.

In the year 1991, the famous Apollo 11 mission of July 1969, during which a human being had set foot on the Moon for the first time, was twenty-two years in the past. Yet something about the Apollo program apparently had been holding Mechem's interest, for in 1991 he composed and published *Island in Space*, which combines three texts: the Latin liturgical phrase *Dona nobis pacem* (*Give us peace*); a poem by Russell Schweickart, who had been an astronaut on the Apollo 9 mission in March 1969; and a poem written by Archibald MacLeish shortly after the Moon landing, in which that poet noted that all human beings are "riders on the Earth together".

The Apollo 9 mission did not travel to the Moon as did the Apollo 11 mission four months later, but was carried out in Earth orbit. Schweickart's task in Apollo 9 was to test-pilot the "LEM" — the Lunar Excursion Module — as it separated from the command module and then rejoined it. While remaining in Earth orbit, he tested the LEM's propulsion systems in order to demonstrate that the craft would be able to descend to the Moon's surface and then re-couple to the command module. The test went perfectly. Schweickart, a graduate of MIT, an aeronautical engineer, a USAF pilot, and an astronaut, paved the way for fellow astronaut Neil Armstrong, four months later, to pilot the "Eagle" — another LEM — and to make his famous first descent to the Moon's surface.

At some point after Apollo 9, Schweickart wrote the beautiful poem that Mechem chose as the second part of his text for *Island in Space*. In his poem he reflected that

political borders are not visible from space, that everything in our lives happens on that "small spot" of Earth, that the experience of seeing Earth from space happens in utter silence, and that Earth appears to be quite fragile.

No written discussion of the music in Mechem's *Island in Space* seems necessary, for the two poems and the music speak for themselves.

Mechem has no use for what he called "[the] common practice in the 20th century [of] deliberately making [music] unintelligible to most music-lovers." He wrote: "We composers are speaking a very old language. The new ways in which we speak must be understood by our contemporaries. Otherwise, we are simply spinning our wheels, and music becomes just... an elitist way of putting down the uninitiated. I prefer [music] to be the magnificent source of joy, consolation, beauty, ingenuity, and inspiration that it has been for generations, and was in my own family."

Dona nobis pacem.

Grant us peace.

—the final words of the Mass liturgy

Up there you go around the earth
every hour and a half,
time after time after time.

You look down;
you can't imagine how many borders
and boundaries you cross,
and you don't even see them.

The earth is a whole —
so beautiful, so small, and so fragile.

You realize that on that small spot
is everything that means anything to you:
all history, all poetry, all music,
all art, all death, all birth,
all love, all tears, all games, all joy,
all on that small spot.

And there's not a sound —
only a silence,
the depth of which you've never known.

—Russell Schweikart, the Apollo 9 astronaut who in March 1969 tested the lunar module

To see the Earth as it truly is —
small and blue and beautiful
in that eternal silence where it floats —
to see the Earth is to see ourselves
as riders on the Earth together,
brothers on that bright loveliness,
brothers who know now they are truly brothers and sisters*.

Dona nobis pacem.

Grant us peace.

*The words “and sisters” were added by the composer. Though MacLeish was a very fine poet, he wrote this in 1969, when poetry could still be gender-insensitive.

VI

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied *Sing to the Lord a new song*
Johann Sebastian Bach 1685-1750

Bach’s double-chorus motet of 1726, *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, has more in common with two of the pieces you heard in the first half of the program than you might at first think. Although *Singet dem Herrn* does not at all sound like Monteverdi’s motet *Cantate Domino canticum novum*, nor like Gregor Aichinger’s motet *Laudate Dominum in sanctis eius*, Bach’s motet takes its words from the same sources as Monteverdi’s and Aichinger’s motets, and stylistically it stands in the same line of musical evolution.

The first movement of *Singet dem Herrn* begins with the first line of Psalm 149, and Monteverdi’s *Cantate Domino* begins with the first line of Psalm 98, yet both of these mean “*Sing to the Lord a new song*”. The words that begin the third movement of *Singet dem Herrn* — “*Lobet den Herrn in seinen Taten*” (“*Praise the Lord for his deeds*”) — are from the second verse of Psalm 150, while the words that begin Aichinger’s “*Laudate Dominum in sanctis eius*” (“*Praise the Lord in his holy place*”) are from Psalm 150’s first verse. The words from Psalm 150 that conclude the final verse of Aichinger’s motet — “*Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum*” — are the same as those of the final line of Bach’s motet, “*Alles was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn*” (both mean “*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord*”). The lifetimes of Monteverdi and Aichinger, contemporaries just two years apart in age, preceded the lifetime of J. S. Bach by about a hundred and twenty years, yet these three composers, in seeking texts for their choral works, all frequently drew from a common source: the enormous body of Psalms of the Hebrew Bible. That much-beloved literature was repeatedly borrowed by these three composers, by their contemporaries, and by the hundreds of choral composers who lived long before them and long after them, right down to our own day.

As mentioned earlier in these annotations, Monteverdi’s and Aichinger’s works are written in the Baroque *concertato* style, in which one body of performers is usually sounding in contrast to another. *Concertato* style was still very much in use during Bach’s time, and *Singet dem Herrn* employs it in all three of its movements; thus Bach’s motet stands in the same line of musical descent as do the motets of the first two.

But, notwithstanding these similarities, there are enormous differences between the motets of Monteverdi and Aichinger on the one hand, and Bach’s motet *Singet dem Herrn* on the other. This has to do with the fact that Monteverdi and Aichinger were active at the very beginning of the Baroque period (c. 1600 – c. 1750), a time when the Baroque style was gradually superseding that of the Renaissance (c. 1450 – c. 1600); while Bach, in contrast, was active at the very end of the Baroque, as it in turn was

Choir II's tenors do the same, followed by its altos, and finally its sopranos. The eight voices have gradually coalesced into a single gigantic four-part choir — as though Choir II's voices, annoyed with their secondary supportive role, had not been able to resist joining in the joyfulness!

After a brief return to the forceful "Sing-et" motives that began the movement, the combined choirs end gloriously with the words "*mit Pauken und mit Harfen sollen sie ihm spielen*" ("*with drums and with harps shall they play for him*").

Second movement

Here Bach uses the two choirs in a totally new and much simpler manner! Choir II begins by singing a simple four-part chorale setting, "*Wie sich ein Vater erbarmet*" ("*As a father shows mercy*", one of the hundreds of chorale settings that Bach wrote), while Choir I sings a slightly more elaborate aria, "*Gott, nimm dich ferner unser an*" ("*God, take us to you in the future*"). Each of these texts is dovetailed into the other, for Choir II's first line is followed by Choir I's first line; then the second lines alternate similarly, and so on.

For variety, we are performing this movement with each of the two choirs represented by just a quartet of voices.

Third movement

Back to an elaborate *concertato* setting! This movement has two very distinct parts:

Part 1: The two choirs exchange, over and over, the words "*Lobet den Herrn in seinen Taten; lobet ihn in seiner großen Herrlichkeit*" ("*Praise the Lord for his deeds; praise him for his great glory*") Sometimes they alternate this complete phrase, sometimes only part of it. Toward the end, the two choirs again coalesce into a single eight-part choir to cadence at the final repetition of these words.

Part 2: A gigantic fugue! The musical meter changes abruptly, and very audibly, from 4/4 to 3/8. From here to the end, the two choirs sing as a *single four-part choir* (no more double chorus). Basses, now thus combined, are the first to enter, followed by tenors, then by altos, and finally by sopranos. The buildup of voice parts, on the words "*Alles was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn*" ("*Everything that has breath — let it praise the Lord*"), brings a new level of excitement to the piece in its last moments (as though all that preceded were not exciting enough!).

We might wonder: For what occasion was the elaborate and joyful *Singet dem Herrn* composed?

In the Baroque period, a motet — choral music on a (usually) sacred text, for unaccompanied voices, or with instruments used only for supporting purposes — was often composed for (and performed on) a solemn occasion, such as a funeral. Happier events would have been celebrated not with a motet, but with a cantata, whose music would be ornamented by independent instrumental parts. What kind of occasion, then, would *Singet dem Herrn* have been used for? For the piece is contradictory: it is active, joyful, and celebratory, and never mournful, as most motets would be. Was

this motet used for some happy event, for which a cantata for some reason would not have worked?

For an answer we can look to the eminent Bach scholar Christoph Wolff, who writes, in his *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, that Bach, who was Kantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig from 1723 to his death in 1750, used his own motets for “regular choral exercises ... A work such as the eight-voice motet of 1726-27, ‘Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied,’ ... may in fact have been composed just for this purpose — no other being known.”

Wolff goes on to observe that “[i]t is clear that the traditional sixteenth-century motets from the standard collections ... would have been insufficient to prepare the choral scholars for the challenges they had to meet in Bach’s cantatas. It was therefore necessary for Bach to prepare the pupils by way of demanding and interesting pieces that would keep them on their toes.”

So *Singet dem Herrn* was not written for any particular occasion, but for *didactic purposes!* Bach’s idea was that only by mastering choral parts in a motet like this could his choral scholars come up to a level necessary for performing his own cantatas!

If Bach’s scholars learned their craft by performing *Singet dem Herrn*, he must have had highly-trained scholars indeed.

1. Choir I, II

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied;
die Gemeinde der Heiligen
sollen ihn loben.

Israel freue sich des, der ihn gemacht hat.

Die Kinder Zion sei’n fröhlich
über ihrem Könige;

sie sollen loben

seinen Namen im Reih’n;

mit Pauken und mit Harfen

sollen sie ihm spielen.

*Sing to the Lord a new song;
the congregation of saints
shall praise him.*

Let Israel rejoice in him who made her.

*Let the children of Zion be happy
with their king;*

they shall praise

his name with the row [of dancers];

with drums and with harps

shall they play for him.

—Psalm 149

2. Chorale (sung by Choir II, whose lines alternate with those of the Aria sung by Choir I)

Wie sich ein Vater erbarmet

Über seine junge Kinderlein,

So tut der Herr uns Armen;

So wir ihn kindlich fürchten rein.

Er kennt das arm Gemächte;

Gott weiß, wir sind nur Staub.

Gleichwie das Gras vom Rechen,

Ein Blum und fallend Laub,

Der Wind nur drüber wehet,

As a father shows mercy

To his young little children,

Thus does the Lord to us poor [people];

Thus do we fear him as would a child.

He knows the poor creature;

God knows we are only dust.

Even as grass after raking,

[Even as] a flower and falling leaf —

The wind only blows over it,

So ist es nicht mehr da;
Also der Mensch vergehet;
Sein End das ist ihm nah.

*So that it is no longer there —
In this way does mankind pass away,
[Thus comes] his end, which is near him.*

—Verse 3 of the chorale “Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren”, Johann Gramman, 1548

Aria (sung by Choir I)

Gott, nimm dich ferner unser an!

God, take us to you in the future!

Denn ohne dich ist nichts getan
mit allen unsern Sachen.

*For without you nothing is to be done
with all our affairs.*

Drum sei du unser Schirm und Licht,
und trägt uns unsre Hoffnung nicht,
so wirst du's ferner machen.

*Therefore be our shield and light,
and let our hope not deceive us,
so that you will do this in the future.*

Wohl dem, der sich nur steif und fest
auf dich und deine Huld verläßt!

*Well-being to the one who completely
depends on you and your favor!*

—from an unknown author

3. Choir I, II

Lobet den Herrn in seinen Taten;
lobet ihn in seiner großen Herrlichkeit.

*Praise the Lord for his deeds;
praise him for his great glory.*

Alles was Odem hat,
lobe den Herrn, Halleluja!

*Everything that has breath —
let it praise the Lord, Hallelujah!*

—Psalm 150: 2, 6
