

## Program notes

Chicago Master Singers is proud to celebrate the tradition of British cathedral music in our spring performances. Our repertoire includes highlights of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and prominently features Glenview Community Church's magnificent Buzard organ (op. 21, 1999). I titled this program "Jubilate Deo" to reflect the theme of ecstatic praise that runs throughout the repertoire.

We begin with Benjamin Britten's exuberant setting of Psalm 100. Unlike many other composers of the twentieth century, Britten wrote extensively for voices, including a significant amount of music for children's and amateur choruses. Although it is somewhat quirky, Britten's output stands in opposition to modernism and the *avant garde* styles of many of his contemporaries.

Britten composed *Jubilate Deo* in 1961 at the request of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. It was subsequently performed in commemoration of his eightieth and ninetieth birthdays, and, per his request, was sung at his funeral last year. It complements another liturgical piece by Britten, *Te Deum in C*. Britten's style is typified by the effective use of speechlike rhythms to capture the prosody of the English language. Other attributes of his style present in this piece include thematic material derived from only a few pitches, chromatically colored diatonicism, and alternating textures.

Gerald Finzi studied with luminaries Sir Edward Bairstow and Ralph Vaughan Williams and eventually became a tremendous voice in twentieth-century British music. Unfortunately, his life was cut short by Hodgkin's disease, and many scholars lament his stunted fame and grieve for what he could have accomplished during a longer lifetime. Finzi held a melancholy worldview due to losing his father at age seven, as well as witnessing the horrors of two world wars. He retreated to the countryside and led a bucolic life on a sixteen-acre property, where he oversaw an orchard of rare apple trees and amassed a superb collection of eighteenth-century poetry that is now housed at the University of Saint Andrews.

Finzi composed *God Is Gone Up* in 1951 in honor of St. Cecilia's Day. In it, he sets an excerpt of the Puritan poet Edward Taylor's twentieth *Sacramental Meditation*, which is based on Philippians 2: 9 and Psalms 24 and 27. Two orchestral accompaniments exist for this anthem, but it is best known in this setting for organ.

The centerpiece of our program is Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. Rev. Walter Hussey commissioned Leonard Bernstein to write this piece in 1965 for Chichester Cathedral's annual summer music festival. Hussey did a great service to the choral arts by commissioning many other important works, including Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* and Finzi's *Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice*, which appears later on our program.

In *Chichester Psalms*, Bernstein promotes interfaith unity by setting passages from the Book of Psalms, sacred texts in all Abrahamic faiths. The piece begins with a dissonant introit in which we are all certainly "roused"! The following dancelike section joyfully portrays Psalm 100 through its rollicking asymmetrical meter. The central movement is quite poignant as Bernstein effectively juxtaposes faith and trust with the ugliness of violence. It begins with a solo

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treble voice singing Psalm 23 with a simple harp accompaniment, evoking images of David as a young shepherd. The Sopranos and Altos eventually join this lovely melody before the Tenors and Basses harshly interrupt. Their setting of Psalm 2 (“Why do the nations rage?”) is vehement and convoluted; it stands in stark contrast to the previous material’s beauty. The opening material eventually returns and remains “blissfully unaware” as the beautiful melody gives way to harshness once again. The final movement begins with a craggy instrumental prelude, followed by a lush melody sung by the choir. The piece ends with the *Hineh mah tov*, a text drawn from Psalm 133 that commemorates unity and togetherness. Bernstein referred to this ending, which feels somewhat unresolved, as a “prayer for peace.”

Finzi’s *Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice* is a true highlight of British cathedral music, in large part due to its closing Amen. This extended anthem is a Eucharistic drama, portraying both the suffering and redemptive qualities of Christ’s death. The text is by Richard Crashaw (c. 1613–1649), who, along with George Herbert and John Donne, is considered to be a quintessential metaphysical poet. Crashaw’s rich imagery draws no distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds. His reference to the ancient Christian symbol of the “self-wounding pelican,” who drew blood from her own breast to feed her young during a famine, is particularly moving. Finzi skillfully shifts tonal centers, meters, and textures to accentuate the text’s meaning.



*Fourteen Angels* does not fit the theme of this program—it is an American setting of an old German prayer recorded by Wilhelm Grimm. Nonetheless, this short, intimate piece is an important part of our musical offering today. The title refers to fourteen Roman Catholic saints who were venerated for their protection during times of disease and strife. This sincere prayer offers contrast to the grandeur of much of today’s program and, unfortunately, seems quite timely given current events.

Tarik O’Regan is a bright star in contemporary music. When the Bournemouth Sinfonietta Choir commissioned him to write this work, O’Regan intentionally scored it for organ, harp, and percussion, so that it might be a companion piece to *Chichester Psalms*. *Dorchester Canticles* may be presented as a continuous concert work, as it will be today, or the two movements may be divided and replace the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis during an evensong service. The work portrays a sense of awe at the expansiveness of the Divine. O’Regan colors his harmonic palate by using the Lydian and Mixolydian modes and, to great effect, overlaps the texts to suggest the ascent of a gathered congregation’s silent prayers. The piece is very much in O’Regan’s own voice; however, the exuberant ending seems to be an homage to Bernstein’s sense of play.

Thank you very much for coming to our performance today. Your support of Chicago Master Singers, especially during these challenging times, is valued and appreciated. I look forward to seeing you during CMS’s 2022–23 season!

John C. Hughes, D.M.A.  
Music Director