

Program notes

So much has changed since Chicago Master Singers' last performance in December 2019. The world continues to endure this pandemic and mourns the loss of life, hope, and stability. Additionally, the members and patrons of CMS have lamented the silence of the past year and a half. The very nature of ensemble singing requires us to be physically together, a reality that has not been safe for some time. At long last, we are able to join our voices and share our music with you—a joy none of us will ever take for granted again.

Our program, "Reflection," explores our collective grief and offers hope for a brighter future. We begin with *Spiegel im Spiegel*, an instrumental work by Arvo Pärt (b. 1935). This quintessential minimalist work demonstrates a compositional technique that Pärt invented called *Tintinnabuli*. The piano plays triadic material while the cello weaves between consonance and dissonance. This technique serves as an allegory: the piano's steadiness and repetition recalls God's unchanging love, and the cello's wandering represents the suffering of humanity. At its root, *Spiegel im Spiegel* is a profound piece about redemption.

Sure On This Shining Night is a setting of a poem from James Agee's "Permit Me Voyage" by perhaps the greatest living American composer, Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943). Some listeners may know that this text was first set as an art song and later as a choral piece by another great American composer, Samuel Barber (1910–1981). To his setting of this text, Lauridsen brings a sense of lyricism and supreme compositional craft. The piece has both a melody ("Sure on this shining night...") and a countermelody ("The late year lies down the north..."), each of which stands on its own merits. The hope of this text seems to fit what we all long for at this particular moment: "All is healed, all is health...hearts all whole."

The next three pieces will be performed without pause. The first two, *You Rise, I Fall* and *Child of Wonder*, are the final movements of an extended work called *The Sacred Veil* (2019) by Eric Whitacre (music) and Charles Anthony Silvestri (poetry). This work processes the grief experienced by Silvestri who lost his 35-year-old wife to ovarian cancer in 2005, leaving him with two small children. In the introduction to the score, Silvestri writes that scars left by grief "...are powerful talismans, evidence that we loved—and still love—those we have lost. Oh, but they are not lost; their journey continues. The Veil is thin. They stand so close, just there, just on the other side of eternity." *You Rise, I Fall* uses extended techniques such as fall-offs and *portamenti* to portray the anguish of such a horrific loss and create suspense similar to tightening a violin string and anticipating it breaking.

Child of Wonder is a simple benediction. The repetition of the piano accompaniment recalls Pärt's minimalism. Whitacre and Silvestri are long-time friends and creative partners, and, in *Child of Wonder*, Whitacre quotes two of their previous collaborations, *Sleep* and *A Boy and a Girl*.

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Directly after *Child of Wonder*, the Tenors and Basses of the chorus will sing an arrangement by Terre Johnson (b. 1959) of the hymn *Come, Ye Disconsolate*. Programmatically, this piece offers us comfort that “Earth has no sorrow that heav’n cannot cure.”

We continue the theme of comfort with a setting of Psalm 23 (*Gott ist mein Hirt*) by Franz Schubert (1797–1828). A German translation by Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of Felix and Fanny, serves as the text for this piece. Schubert succeeds in musically portraying the import of these famous words—chromaticism depicts wandering, *forzandi* illustrate strength, and the rising line at the end of the piece represents heavenly ascension.

Gott ist mein Hirt is followed by a setting of another Old Testament passage, *Set Me as a Seal* by Nico Muhly (b. 1981). Muhly is a bright star in modern concert music and has been recognized as such by being the youngest composer ever commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera. Entrenched in the Anglican choral tradition since his youth, Muhly writes idiomatically for choirs while bringing freshness and playfulness to time-tested Scriptural passages. The macaronic text of this piece represents not only God’s love for humanity, but also our love for each other.

The next two pieces center on divine love. Audience members may already be familiar with *O Love* by Elaine Hagenberg (b. 1979), which members of CMS performed as part of a virtual choir in 2020. The author of the text, George Matheson (1842–1906), a Scottish minister who was blind from birth, was familiar with suffering, yet still found hope in God’s redeeming promises.

Kevin Siegfried (b. 1969) originally composed *More Love* as an art song for his wife when they were expecting their first child. He reworked the piece for choir the following year for their son’s baptism. The text comes from the Shaker tradition and uses an agricultural metaphor to encourage us to sow and nurture love throughout our lives.

The theme of healing, which began with *Sure On This Shining Night*, concludes with Stacey V. Gibbs’s arrangement of the restorative spiritual, *There Is a Balm in Gilead*. A Detroit native, Gibbs builds on the tradition established by Hall Johnson, William Dawson, Moses Hogan, and many others in creating fresh, well-crafted arrangements of spirituals.

We are truly happy to be performing together again and are glad that you are here sharing this moment with us. Singing together makes our “hearts all whole,” and we hope you depart feeling similarly rejuvenated and nourished. Thank you very much for coming.

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