

Director's Note

Encounters with the Divine

Throughout history, humans have been seeking the divine, and sometimes not seeking it, but encountering it unsought, everywhere: in the things around them (creation), in others, in the desert or the wilderness, or deep within themselves (in meditation or contemplation). When we have that brush with the divine, our responses vary from silence and wonder to art, poetry, song, or dance. This program presents choral works reflecting that meeting of human and divine in many different forms and stories; some in Biblical texts, others in pure poetry.

Gwyneth Walker's setting of Rilke's poem begins the concert with these words: "God speaks to each of us as he makes us,/ then walks with us silently out of the night." The poem describes a divine presence at birth that sends us out into the world, and Walker's setting expands out harmonically from a unison line like sunlight bursting forth on the day. It sets the stage for the rest of the encounters on the program — both quiet and dramatic, both found within the familiar and crashing in as the absolute 'other' — all somehow experiences of the 'awesome' in the original sense of the term.

In the first half of the program, the music sets some of the most dramatic encounters. First, Jacob wrestling the angel in Christina Whitten Thomas' *The Deceiver*, commissioned last year for our 20th anniversary, in an encore performance. Thomas makes us experience musically the struggle in its violence and uncertainty which ends miraculously when, despite Jacob's many failings and deceptions, God marks him as His own and beloved, with a new name, Israel. In both Hovland's *Saul*, depicting the moment Saul is knocked from his horse on the road to Damascus, and Vaughan Williams's *Voice out of the Whirlwind*, when Job must reckon directly with God, we hear God speak. But as Job learned quickly, it is not a comforting but a terrifying and demanding voice. In *Saul*, God asks a simple question, "Why?" but for Vaughan Williams God speaking through the chorus overwhelms Job in an avalanche of questions meant to bring him up short — "Where were you when I built the foundations of the earth?" and on and on, until we imagine Job barely able to stand as God's words rain down on him. Listen in both pieces for the drama of the interplay of unison and harmony, homophony and polyphony. God speaks in different ways, trying to get us to hear him, and the musical challenge is to represent that transcendent voice by using multiple valences.

Ramsay's *Mirabile mysterium* and Woodman's *The Annunciation* treat another kind of dramatic encounter — that between the human and divine in the Annunciation and Incarnation. Woodman's composition depicting the encounter of Mary with the angel Gabriel takes as its theme the contrast in Muir's poem between the world of time and matter and the immaterial and eternal as the two worlds, impossibly but ineluctably, converge. Ramsey's setting of Sophronius' short poem, "Mirabile mysterium," captures the mystery of the Incarnation, the paradox of Christ remaining God while becoming human.

The second half of the concert opens with Renaissance compositions by Victoria and Schein in smaller ensembles. Victoria's *Resplenduit facies eius* gives us the Transfiguration, and Schein's *Maria Magdalena*, the encounter of Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, at the tomb on Easter morning. Christians also encounter God in the Lord's supper, and the Renaissance setting of Thomas Aquinas' poem, *O sacrum convivium*, for men's voices, is paired with Poulenc's very different, modernist *Ave verum corpus*, sung by the women. All voices come together for Finzi's joyful setting of Henry Vaughan's poem "Welcome, Sweet and Sacred Feast," which recounts the history from creation through Jesus' gift of the Eucharist.

The German Romantic lyric poets Klaus Groth and Friedrich Rückert, in settings by Brahms and Schumann, glimpse something in Nature (the season of autumn; the far-off stars) that speaks to them of the divine.

Frank Ferko's piece, *O Llama de amor viva (The Living Flame of Love)* closes the program. It takes St. John of the Cross's lyric portrayal of the ecstatic encounter with the Divine. The poem dwells in "the deep caverns of feeling" in a love that "tenderly wounds." It takes a double choir to

express the experience of the overwhelming presence of the divine; the music is both complex and sweet, tender and wounding, imagining the paradox of resting in the wholly other divine.

— Jennifer Lester, Music Director

Program Notes

Gwyneth Walker, *God Speaks to Each of Us* (1999)

Dr. Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) is a graduate of Brown University and the Hartt School of Music. She holds B.A., M.M. and D.M.A. degrees in Music Composition. A former faculty member of the Oberlin College Conservatory, she has been a full-time composer since 1982. Widely performed throughout the country, Walker's music is beloved by performers and audiences alike for its energy, beauty, reverence, drama, and humor. Walker has received many honors from her own state of Vermont, and she is receiving the 2018 "Alfred Nash Patterson Lifetime Achievement Award" from Choral Arts New England this very weekend! Walker's catalog includes over 350 commissioned works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, chorus, and solo voice. A special interest has been dramatic works that combine music with readings, acting, and movement.

The composer remarks on her choice of text: "The poem by Rainer Maria Rilke provides an especially thoughtful and sensitive text. The musical setting takes the form of two waves of growth, each time returning to the central lines: 'God speaks to each of us as he makes us, and walks with us silently out of the night.' For, as we set out in life, we are constantly reminded that God is with us. The first wave moves from 'These are the words we dimly hear' to 'make big shadows I can move in.' And the second carries from 'Let everything happen to you' to 'give me your hand.' The closing section merges the words 'give me your hand' and 'walks with us silently out of the night,' for these are the essential images of the poetry. The final patterns of high sixteenth notes in the organ might be heard as stars."

Christina Whitten Thomas, *The Deceiver* (2017)

Christina Whitten Thomas (b. 1979) is an active teacher, vocalist, and composer based in Pasadena, CA. Thomas's works have been performed throughout the United States including at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Disney Concert Hall. Christina has received commissions from many groups from Los Angeles to Denver to Boston. Thomas has received many awards, including 1st place in the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir competition and 1st place in the Los Robles Master Chorale competition. Her choral cycle *Choral de Bêtes* can be heard on Musica Sacra's 2012 CD release *Messages to Myself*. Christina holds a M.M. in composition from the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music. Seraphim commissioned and premiered *The Deceiver* last year for our 20th anniversary season and are happy to reprise it today within the theme of "divine encounters"

Last year lyricist Marian Partee reflected on her understanding of the story of Jacob from Genesis (32:22-31). She was struck by the difficulty and dysfunction of Jacob's life, much of it his own doing, tricking his brother into giving him his birthright, having been deceived into marrying a woman he didn't love, and then marrying her sister, whom he did love, but creating strife as the two women vie for his affections. The text begins with Jacob fearing he will be destroyed and seeking God's blessing as his only hope. What ensues is his struggle with the angel for that blessing. Partee concludes, "Like any person of faith, Jacob yearns to understand the identity and destiny that a mysterious God has planned for him. Tenacious and courageous, he will not meekly accept an ill fate. He clings to the promises his Maker has made. He implores God to deliver him

from danger and to bless him. In His mercy, the Lord redeems his broken, desperate life.”

Composer Christina Whitten Thomas describes structuring the music for Partee’s text as if writing a story, with prologue, exposition, increasing conflict, climax, resolution, and epilogue. In the opening section, the men’s and women’s voices trade the tasks of “spinning the story of Jacob’s troubled past” and evoking the scene — “the resonances of the wind in the trees, the echoes across a vast river valley, and the hushed sounds of evening.” In Jacob’s struggle with the angel, “the tenors and basses trade off a relentless, unnerving line as the choir depicts Jacob facing his adversary.” The music builds to the climax around the words identifying the adversary as divine, “the shaper of worlds,” “sustainer... builder... maker...”; “giver of covenants, curses, blessings.” Thomas describes the resolution as beginning with the moment of realization in the text, “Why did he contend with men when their hands did not hold his fate?” She concludes, “We must put our faith in God alone. The choir returns to the opening motive from the soprano and alto voices. They begin with uncertainty, then gradually evolve to deliverance as Jacob receives his new name ‘Israel’. You can hear the harmonic language blossom and shift to a feeling of contentment and momentary peace.”

Egil Hovland, *Saul* (1972)

Egil Hovland (b. 1924) was born in Råde, Norway, and is one of the most noted composers of the modern era. He studied at the Oslo Conservatory, then later in Copenhagen, Tanglewood (with Aaron Copland), and Florence (with Luigi Dallapiccola). He was the organist and choir leader in Fredrikstad from 1949 until his death. Among his compositions are two symphonies, a concerto for trumpet and strings, *Music for ten instruments*, a set of Variations for two pianos, and *Lament for Orchestra*. His sacred works include *Norwegian Te Deum*, a *Gloria*, a *Magnificat*, and numerous works for organ.

Hovland composed in diverse styles with forays into Romantic, Gregorian, neoclassical, twelve-tone, aleatoric and serial techniques. In honor of his work as a composer and organist, in 1983 he was knighted into the Royal Norwegian order of St Olav. In 1992 he received the Fritt Ord Honorary Award.

Saul is a short composition published in 1972 based on the New Testament account of the conversion of Saul into Paul on the road to Damascus. The work is scored for narrator, four-part mixed chorus, and organ, and utilizes such modernistic devices as having each individual singer set his or her own tempo independent of the other singers. The effect intensifies the vehement emotions stemming from Saul’s persecution of the Christian community in Jerusalem. The final segment of the composition is a more rhythmically straightforward setting of Jesus words, “Saul, why do you persecute me?”

James Woodman, *The Annunciation* (2017)

James Woodman was born in Portland, Maine, in 1957, and educated at Phillips Exeter Academy, Princeton University, and New England Conservatory. He was appointed the first Composer-in-Residence at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Boston, and is currently in his 20th year of service as Monastery Organist for the Society of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge. James Woodman’s compositions have been widely programmed in Europe, Asia and across the U. S., as well as on the nationally syndicated radio broadcast “Pipe Dreams,” and on recordings by Mark Brombaugh, Nancy Granert, Christa Rakich, Erik Simmons, Peter Sykes, Victoria Wagner, the Boston Boy Choir, the Harvard University Choir, and the Schola of the Society of St. John the Evangelist.

The Annunciation was commissioned by Seraphim for our 20th anniversary concert in the spring of 2017. Of the work, the composer writes:

My warm regard for Jennifer Lester and the sterling members of Seraphim goes back nearly 20 years, and my admiration and affection for my friend John Dunn extends back 10 years again further. When offered a commission honoring both, I

was delighted but also somewhat daunted — how to make a piece worthy of such an occasion? Happily, while pondering the matter, I by chance ran across John Muir's magical "The Annunciation." After reading it through just once I knew I'd found exactly the right text. With simple, almost stark language, Muir conjures a world between two worlds, and a meeting which transforms both participants — one from the highest sphere, the other from the lowest — and in the process transforms the universe which contains them. All this is achieved, and more. My task was simply to create a sort of sonic frame in which this extraordinary picture might be contemplated. It was a deeply joyous six weeks of my life.

Graham Gordon Ramsay, *Mirabile mysterium* (2012)

Graham Gordon Ramsay (b. 1962) is in demand as a creator of vocal and instrumental works for venues throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Ramsay studied music at the Tanglewood Institute, Boston University, and the Fontainebleau School in France. He has received commissions from numerous solo performers, ensembles, and festivals including the Burgett Ensemble, the Seraphim Singers, American Classics, and the 2017 Montréal Organ Festival. He has been commissioned to create liturgical works for the choirs of King's Chapel in Boston, St Stephen's Episcopal Church in Providence, Rhode Island, and St. Thomas More Church in New York City, among others. His discography includes two albums devoted to his compositions on the Albany Records label: *The Sacred Voice: Heinrich Christensen Conducts Sacred Vocal Works by Graham Gordon Ramsay* (2011) and *Compendium: Selected Solo Instrumental Works* (2013). He is the recipient of various grants and awards, including a Massachusetts Institute of Technology Council for the Arts grant, and first prize in the 2003 Roger Wagner Contemporary Choral Composition Competition.

Mirabile mysterium was composed for the King's Chapel Choir, Boston (Heinrich Christensen, dir.) in memory of Reverend Arthur W. Perkins, (1926-2012); it was premiered on Christmas Eve, 2012. The hymn-like motet celebrates the coming of light into the world through a Christmas metaphor ("*innovantur naturae*" / "a new thing is wrought in both natures"). Its seventh century Latin text is by St. Sophronius (c560-638), Patriarch of Jerusalem while it was partly occupied by the Saracens. A widely traveled Byzantine Greek, Sophronius published Christmas sermons, wrote liturgical and historical poetry, and negotiated treaties with Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (584-644) to preserve the rights of Christians in Jerusalem. This mystical text explores one of Sophronius' favorite themes: the two natures of Christ, human and divine, concluding in a beautiful Alleluia.

The composer describes his setting of the text: "The text for *Mirabile Mysterium* has been used for countless choral settings over the centuries. In my 2012 setting, I have attempted to capture the sense of mystery and wonder through a direct presentation of the text that is rhythmically straightforward, but with tonal manipulations that bring the listener through unexpected harmonic territories. Using very soft dynamics throughout the exposition of the Sophronius text, tightly voiced chords and step-wise vocal lines lead into dissonances that eventually transition into traditionally tonal, familiar points of arrival and resolution."

Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Voice out of the Whirlwind* (from *Job: A masque for dancing*) (1947)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was born into a family with Anglican and Unitarian roots. When Vaughan Williams was only two, his father died, and his mother Margaret (née Wedgwood) and the children moved in with her family. His great uncle on his mother's side was Charles Darwin, a frequent visitor at the Wedgwood/Darwin home. Like most of the Wedgwoods and Darwins, Vaughan Williams read history, literature, natural science, and music at Cambridge. He mixed composition with conducting, lecturing, and editing the music of Henry Purcell and

the *English Hymnal*. By 1904, Vaughan Williams began to collect and transcribe English folk songs, which were fast being lost due to the increase of literacy and printed music in rural areas.

By the 1920s, Vaughan Williams was a leading composer of English music, and his one-act ballet *Job* (1931) was the first such work to be produced by an all-British creative team. Originally proposed to the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev (who rejected it), *Job* was a ballet in nine scenes inspired by Biblical texts as illustrated by William Blake in 1826. *The Voice out of the Whirlwind* was the first choral work commissioned as part of the revival of St. Cecilia's Day musical services in London after World War II. This lively motet adapts the eighth scene of *Job* (*Galliard of the Sons of Morning*); it was premiered in 1947 by combined singers from the Chapels Royal, Canterbury, St Paul's, and Westminster Abbey.

Tomás Luis de Victoria, *Resplenduit facies eius* (1585); *O sacrum convivium* (1572)

As a Spanish Catholic, Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611) was born in 1548 in Avila, one generation after St Theresa of Avila (1515–82), he was educated at Avila's cathedral. His relatives included priests, lawyers, a naval commander, and a brother-in-law of Cosimo I de' Medici. From 1565-68 and 1569-78, he resided at the Jesuit College of the Collegio Germanico in Rome, rising to the position of *maestro di cappella*. In 1575 he was ordained as a priest, and he acted as chaplain of San Girolamo (alongside Filippo Neri) for ten years. His 1585 *Motecta festorum totius anni* published his own Latin motets alongside other Spanish Catholic masters like Guerrero, and in 1586, he was named chaplain to the sister of the Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor Philip II, the Dowager Empress Maria in Madrid.

Resplenduit facies eius is an elegant five-part Latin motet dating from 1585. Its two soprano parts form a perfect canon: a daring display of contrapuntal complexity. The text is an antiphon for the feast of the Transfiguration (August 6).

The beautiful hymn, *O sacrum convivium*, is the Antiphon for the Second Vespers Magnificat on the feast of Corpus Christi. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) wrote the mystical hymn text in praise of the Blessed Sacrament and Victoria set it for both four and six voices.

Johann Hermann Schein, *Maria Magdalena et altera Maria* (1615)

Johann Hermann Schein (1586-1630) grew up in Baroque Saxony, singing in the Elector's (Catholic) choir in Dresden and studying law at the University of Leipzig. In addition to composing Italian-influenced church music, he served as the (Lutheran) *Kapellmeister* in Weimar and for St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig (including the Thomanerchor for boys), preceding Bach's two dozen years in that position.

Schein's motet *Maria Magdalena* was first published in a collection of Latin and German motets (*Cymbalum Sionum*, 16XX). The work bears Schein's signature style of combining the older Renaissance style with the modern Venetian techniques. The text relates the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (James' mother) finding Jesus' tomb empty.

Francis Poulenc, *Ave verum corpus* (1952)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was born into a wealthy Parisian family and grew up near the Élysée palace. He studied piano with Ricardo Viñes (a friend of Debussy), analyzed Bach chorales with composer Charles Koechlin, and fell under the spell of modernism after attending Satie and Picasso's cubist ballet *Parade*. Poulenc was a member of *Les Six*, a group of Parisian composers whose music was seen as a reaction against the works of both Wagner and the Impressionists Debussy and Ravel.

In August 1936, while Poulenc was vacationing in southwestern France, he learned that one of his closest friends, composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud, had been beheaded in a roadside

accident. Deeply affected by the news, Poulenc retreated to nearby Notre-Dame de Rocamadour, a famed cliffside pilgrimage site focused around a black wooden statue of Mary. That night he began his first religious works, the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* (1936) and a set of four Latin motets with Lenten texts (*Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence*, 1938-39). Through over a dozen sacred choral works written over the next twenty-five years, Poulenc returned to the Roman Catholicism of his childhood and developed a unique religious musical style, one that confirms and in turn questions the significance of faith.

Poulenc's final motet, the three-minute masterpiece *Ave verum corpus*, was composed in August 1952. Poulenc described the work as "very simple, very pure, and very successful," and his contemplative approach combines Renaissance-style melodies and a bright, sunlit tunefulness that recalls Victoria with bittersweet modern harmonies. The text is a contemplative communion hymn attributed to Pope Innocent VI, the fifth of seven Avignon Popes (1352-1362). It is a meditation on the Catholic belief in Jesus' presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist at communion, tying it to the redemptive power of suffering.

Gerald Finzi, *Welcome, Sweet and Sacred Feast* (1953)

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956) was educated privately, and he eventually became one of the most characteristically "English" composers of his generation, amassing a personal library of over 3,000 volumes of English poetry and a large personal collection (over 700 volumes) of eighteenth-century English music. Although an agnostic of Jewish descent, his varied settings of Christian poetry have greatly enriched modern choral and vocal repertoire.

Finzi's challenging eight-minute motet *Welcome Sweet and Sacred Feast* for mixed chorus and organ (1953) shares a Eucharistic theme with his better-known *Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice* (1946, orchestrated for the Three Choirs Festival in 1947). *Welcome* was published in 1954 as the third of three anthems (Op. 27, preceded by *My lovely one God is gone up*). It contains some of Finzi's most impressive word painting, with a moving point of arrival at the words "O rose of Sharon! O the lily of the valley," developed from the opening organ theme. Finzi hoped that the yearning melodies and wistful harmonies of his many songs (over 100) and choral miniatures would assure him a lasting place among fellow British modernists such as Vaughan and Holst, remarking, "The artist is like the coral insect, building his reef out of the transitory world around him and making a solid structure to last long after his fragile and uncertain life."

Johannes Brahms, *Im Herbst* (1886-1888)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) composed symphonies, chamber music, and choral music for both amateur and professional ensembles for more than four decades. His choral music in particular shows his high regard for the motets of Schütz and Bach's mastery of polyphony and fugal writing.

Many of Brahms's later works evince his preoccupation with the specter of the grave and a deep sense of emotional isolation. *Im Herbst* was published as part of *Fünf Gesänge*, op. 104 (1886-1888), just after Brahms had stopped touring as a pianist/conductor. One feels here that he has compressed all the dread, the faith, and the craft of his famous *Requiem* into poetic miniatures. The text is by Kiel literature professor and poet Klaus Groth (1819-1899), who along with Brahms loved folk poetry and Plattdeutsche ("Low" German), which they understood as a foundation for German cultural identity.

"Ernst ist der Herbst" uses autumn as a metaphor for death, both mocking and rewarding unfulfilled hopes. Brahms set the poem like a Lutheran chorale, in the musical form AAB. The B section sets Groth's hopeful third stanza, in which man experiences in his welling tears "blissful effusion," with a breathlessly ascending sequence of German sixths that propels the sopranos into a soaring line. Like Brahms' *Requiem*, this last motet tracks the emotional journey from despair to comfort and consolation.

Robert Schumann, *An die Sterne* (1849)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was Brahms' mentor and the husband of piano virtuoso and fellow composer Clara Wieck (daughter of his illustrious teacher, Friedrich Wieck). Until the age of thirty, Schumann's critical writing and composing focused on solo piano works, and he co-founded the still-active *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (*New Journal for Music*) in 1834. He suffered from depression beginning in his mid-twenties and was eventually diagnosed with "psychotic melancholia." After 1840, Schumann expanded his output to hundreds of songs, an opera, four symphonies, choral music, and chamber works. As his symptoms increased, he attempted suicide and eventually entered a psychiatric hospital, where Brahms visited and read both poetry and the Bible to him.

An die Sterne (*To the Stars*) is the earliest of Schumann's only four works for double choir (*Vier Doppelchörige Gesänge*, op. 141 / *Four double-choir partsongs*). The partsongs are similar in style to many of Schumann's solo songs, filled with exploratory Romantic harmonies. For *An die Sterne*, Schumann chose a poem by his contemporary Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866). More than fifty of Schumann's compositions were inspired by Rückert's poetry.

Each stanza opens with "Stars in the distant Heavens" ("*Sterne, in die Himmels ferne*"), and explores whether peace can be found among the stars. Schumann varies each verse, traveling further away from the home key each time a question is asked. After receiving no answers (or musical resolutions), Schumann reaches a tonic chord (home?), although in second inversion, and provides no comforting resolution for the 'star-struck' wanderer.

Frank Ferko, *Llama de amor viva* (1996)

Frank Ferko (b. 1950) has focused much of his career on the creation of vocal solo and choral music, and his works have been performed around the world by many of the finest musical artists of our time. These include The Netherlands Chamber Choir, Trinity College Choir (Cambridge), ORA Singers (UK), Los Angeles Master Chorale, and the Dale Warland Singers—with whom he worked as Composer-in-Residence from 2001 to 2003. Notable venues in which his music has been presented include Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall, Disney Hall, national conventions of the AGO, ACDA and Chorus America, and festivals such as *Jusqu'aux oreilles* and *Festival Oude Muziek*. His works have been recorded on such labels as Harmonia Mundi, Hyperion, Arsis, Cedille and Loft.

St. John of the Cross (Juan de la Cruz, 1542-1591) was a Castilian Carmelite friar and contemporary of Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611) two of whose works are also being performed today. In 1567, he joined Teresa of Avila's reform movement, traveling with her and founding a monastery based on her reformed rule. At Avila he had a mystical vision of the crucified Christ and changed his name to John of the Cross. In 1577 he was imprisoned and tortured by Carmelite and government forces opposed to the reform movement; one night, he heard a popular love song being sung from the street. The lyrics evoking the theme of dying of love, inspired him to begin composing poetry in his cell, he saw as "the only means of expressing the ineffable." After nineteen months, he dreamed that the Virgin Mary commanded him to escape, so he pried open his cell door and climbed the city's walls: he went on to publish the eleven love lyrics composed during his imprisonment, from which this beautiful Spanish text is taken. The composer remarks on the relationship of the music to the text:

St. John of the Cross had a very uniquely intimate approach to expressing his loving relationship with God. The creation of the music for this motet was driven entirely by the vivid imagery of the texts which, at times, call for rich harmonic color, and at other times, for rhythmic exuberance. The interaction of two choirs made it possible to realize this musical concept through changing textures and overlapping harmonies of the two groups, as well as alternating rhythmic patterns—at times, calm and meditative, and at other times exuberantly joyful.