

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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Welcome to A Madison Symphony Christmas! As always, this concert is a rich and varied feast of music for the season, ranging from serious to lighthearted, and from classical works to popular holiday favorites. We welcome a pair of fine vocal soloists: Madison favorite, mezzo-soprano Adriana Zabala, and baritone Nate Stampley, a UW–Madison grad and Broadway star. The Madison Symphony Chorus is joined by two community choirs: groups from the Madison Youth Choirs and the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir. We also feature soloists from the orchestra: flutist Stephanie Jutt, violinist Suzanne Beia, and our new principal oboist, Izumi Amemiya. And as always, after a rousing Gospel finale, *you* get a chance to join in.

The music of **John Rutter** (b. 1945) is nearly always part of our holiday concerts, and here we begin with his setting of the Christmas hymn that has the most ancient roots of all, *O Come, O Come Immanuel*. This hymn has its origins in the series of “O antiphons” (*O sapientia, O radix Jesse*, and several others) that were chanted as early as the 8th century at Vespers on the days leading up to Christmas—each one invoking an aspect of Jesus. In 1851, an English clergyman, **John Mason Neale**, adapted these ancient texts as an English poem, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and it was then set to the melody of a 15th-century plainchant hymn, *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*. Rutter’s arrangement is straightforward and effective, beginning with an unadorned version of the hymn in its beautiful simplicity.

In 1717 **George Friderick Handel** (1685-1759) moved to England to compose and produce opera. For nearly two decades, Handel was the most successful impresario in England, but by the 1730s, Handel’s Italian opera had gone out of fashion, and he turned increasingly to the English oratorio. His oratorios—dramatic renderings of Biblical stories familiar to his English audiences—were enormously successful, and their popularity endured and grew long after Handel’s death. *Messiah*, composed in 1741 is, of course, Handel’s most enduring “hit,” but it is somewhat unusual among his oratorios in that his text is a pastiche of direct quotes from the St. James version of the Bible. The chorus *For Unto Us a Child is Born* is drawn from Part I, a series of texts from the New Testament on Christ’s birth, and Old Testament prophecies—in this case a passage from the Book of Isaiah. Handel was never shy about recycling his own music, and in this case, borrowed nearly of the chorus’s music from an earlier secular cantata. The striking

statements of “Wonderful” and “Counselor” were created anew for this chorus, however.

Though **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) spent most of career at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, he seems to have spent some of the happiest years of his life at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Bach served as *Kapellmeister* at Cöthen from 1717 until he left for Leipzig. Much of his composition at Cöthen was instrumental: chamber and orchestra, including most of the famous “Brandenburgs” and his orchestral suites. The prince maintained a small, but very skilled orchestra, including several fine soloists. The *Concerto in C minor for Oboe and Violin, BWV 1060R* was among the works written for the Cöthen orchestra. The violin part could have been intended for any one of a number of violinists at the court and the oboe part was probably written for Bach’s colleague Johann Ludwig Rose, who doubled as oboist in the orchestra and as the Prince’s private fencing instructor! No score for the concerto survives, but in about 1736, Bach rearranged the piece as a concerto for two harpsicords (BWV 1060). This version was intended for use by Bach’s *Collegium musicum* in Leipzig, a group of amateur and professional players that Bach directed throughout the 1730s. The editors of the critical edition of Bach’s works used this keyboard version of the concerto to reconstruct the original version heard at this concert. Bach’s lyrical second movement (*Adagio*) is spacious enough to allow the two soloists to fully express an elegant theme. Their gracefully interweaving lines are set above a muted string background, until a short cadenza at the end.

Pietro Yon (1886-1943) was an organist and church composer. Born in Italy, Yon emigrated to New York City in 1907, where he held a series of prestigious posts, eventually serving as organist at St. Patrick’s cathedral from 1927 until his death. Yon was admired as a virtuoso performer, and composed dozens of works for the organ. His catalog of works also includes an oratorio, nearly two dozen masses, and many smaller choral and keyboard pieces, but his best-known composition by far is the Christmas song *Gesù Bambino*, composed in 1917. It is heard here in an arrangement for children’s choir and mezzo-soprano soloist. The next work is a feature for the younger voices of the Madison Youth Choirs. **Mack Wilberg** (b.1955), director of the famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir, wrote his *One December Bright and Clear* in 2001 for treble-voice choir. This work, a setting of words by David Warner, is a bright, folk-like melody that breaks joyfully into a round and then into full harmony.

The hymn *How Great Thou Art* was originally written in Swedish in 1885, as *O store Gud* (*O Great God*) by Carl Boberg, and it was soon paired with a traditional

Swedish melody. The familiar English lyrics were penned in 1949 by an English missionary, Stuart K. Hine. This grand arrangement by Dan Forrest begins with a forceful choral introduction before the tune enters, working its way to richly-harmonized final verse.

One of the great ironies in the career of **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958) is that this composer—a professed atheist for much of his life who later drifted into what his wife described as a “cheerful agnosticism”—seems so much to have embodied modern English sacred music. Beginning with his edition of *The English Hymnal* (1906), he composed a huge body of hymn tunes, anthems, Christmas carols, and larger sacred works. In his *Magnificat*, he turned to one of the most traditional of liturgical texts, one of the Biblical canticles (Luke 1: 46-55), sung here in English. This prayer, in the voice of Mary, is her response to the Annunciation that she had conceived a child by the Holy Spirit. The *Magnificat* was sung during the Vespers (Evensong) service in both the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Vaughan Williams’s *Magnificat* was composed for the mezzo-soprano Astra Desmond in 1932, and is among the most innovative settings of this text. He was careful to place a note in the score that his version “is not intended for liturgical use”—recognizing that both the spirit and the form of this work made it unsuitable for the staid ritual of the church. He wrote to his friend Gustav Holst that this was an effort to “lift the words out of the smug atmosphere which had settled on them after being sung at evening service for so long.” Here we have not merely a prayer, but a dramatic scene with three characters. While the soloist sings the canticle, a chorus of women plays the role of the Angel of the Annunciation, inserting new Biblical text. A third character appears in the guise of a solo flute, described by Vaughan Williams as “the disembodied visiting spirit”—that is, the spirit that enters Mary’s womb. The choral music of the Angel is ethereal throughout, while the flute’s line is unabashedly sensuous. Mary’s part is operatic in both its style and in its breadth of emotion, from her ecstatic opening phrase to the power—and even warlike anger—of the line “He hath shewed strength with his arm.” After a great moment of choral rapture on “and of his Kingdom there shall be no end,” the ending is quiet and understated, with a passionate duet between the soloist and flute, and a hushed prayer by the chorus.

Though **Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904) has most often been represented in Overture Hall by his orchestral works, he was also a prolific and sensitive choral composer throughout his career. Some of his choral works—particularly his great settings of Latin sacred texts: the *Stabat Mater*, *Te Deum*, *Requiem*, and the *Mass in D Major*—were tremendously popular in their time, and remain in the choral repertoire today. The *Mass in D Major* is his only surviving setting of the Latin

Mass: he wrote and discarded a pair of masses as a young man, while still studying at the Prague Organ School, but the *Mass in D Major* was a mature work written by an accomplished and, by then, world-famous composer. Dvořák composed it in 1887 at the request of a wealthy Czech architect and patron, Josef Hlávka, for the consecration of a private chapel on Hlávka's estate. This initial version was a small-scale work that reflected the resources Hlávka could provide: soloists, chorus, and organ. Dvořák's London publisher Novello, published the work, but Novello almost immediately asked for a larger version. The version heard here, with orchestral accompaniment was completed in 1893, and was premiered in London on March 11 of that year. The choral *Gloria* movement heard here sets the standard Latin text from the Mass. It begins with a—well—*glorious* choral fanfare on the ecstatic opening words. Dvořák's setting heightens the changing meaning of the text, with a fugue leading to a more prayerful middle section with a simple organ accompaniment. This gradually leads to more exalted music and a rousing fugal coda on the words *Cum sancto spiritu*.

As always, we return to **Handel's *Messiah*** for the finale to our first half: the concluding *Hallelujah* chorus from Part II. This chorus, undoubtedly the single most famous work by Handel, has been a sensation since the first performance of *Messiah* in Dublin in 1742. 50 years later, while on tour in England, Joseph Haydn heard a festival performance of *Messiah* in May of 1791, and was profoundly moved: bursting into tears during the *Hallelujah* chorus. (The experience was a primary inspiration for his own great oratorio, *The Creation*, of 1798.) The chorus is heard today in contexts that Handel—tireless self-promoter though he was—never dreamed of: movies, TV ads and sitcoms, and in cover versions in styles ranging from gospel and jazz to rock, punk, and rap. The music is in no danger of becoming a mere cliché, however: it remains true to Handel's original intent. Following the first performance of *Messiah* in London, the composer remarked: “My Lord, I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better.”

Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) completed *The Snow Maiden* (*Snegorouchka*) in 1881—one of innumerable Romantic operas based upon fairy tales. It retells the story from Russian folklore—by way of a popular 1873 play—of the love of the young fairy princess, the Snow Maiden, who has been raised by mortals, for a young man of her village. This kind of fairy tale rarely ends “happily ever after,” and this one is no exception, as both the Snow Maiden and her lover die in the end. However, though it is a tragedy, *The Snow Maiden* includes some of Rimsky-Korsakov's finest operatic writing, and it apparently remained one his personal favorites among his own works. There is nothing tragic about the opera's

Dance of the Tumblers, which opens our second half. This energetic and bumptious music opens Act III of the opera, where the villagers are throwing a wild party in celebration of the visiting Tsar.

John Rutter is celebrated as both a choral conductor and as a composer of choral works, from small anthems to settings of the *Gloria*, *Magnificat*, and *Requiem*. Rutter has explained that Christmas music has “...always occupied a special place in my affections, ever since I sang in my first Christmas Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols as a nervous ten-year-old boy soprano. For me, and I suspect for most of the other members of the Highgate Junior School Choir, it was the high point of our singing year, diligently rehearsed and eagerly anticipated for weeks beforehand. Later, my voice changed and I turned from singing to composition, but I never forgot those early Highgate carol services.” His *Angel Tidings*, published in 1969, was based upon a Moravian carol, though the words are Rutter’s own. This is a bright and joyful song of celebration over the birth of Jesus.

The hymn *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* was written in 1758 by the British pastor Robert Robinson. In the United States, this hymn was paired with an anonymous tune known as *Nettleton*. This had first appeared in 1813 in a “shape-note” collection titled *Wyeth’s Repository of Sacred Music*. (Shape-note music, in which noteheads are printed in different shapes corresponding to solfege syllables, was a distinctly American tradition created in the late 18th century. Like *Nettleton*, many of these tunes have a rustic, sturdy beauty.) This arrangement by Mack Wilberg opens simply with an *a capella* verse by the women that replicates the simple spirit of the original, moving gradually towards a lushly-orchestrated conclusion.

Our next two works are Christmas songs in Spanish, in arrangements created especially for this concert by local composer Scott Gendel. *Los peces en el río*—a familiar favorite in the Spanish-speaking world—is an anonymous song from Spain. It is a villancico, a form from the Middle Ages, and the song itself is ancient, possibly dating from as early as the 13th century. Its verses describe the beauty and gentleness of the Virgin Mary and the poverty of her baby boy, but its refrain is a joyful reminder that the entire earth celebrated the birth of the Baby Jesus, even the fish in the river. The line “Beben y beben y vuelven a bebe” (They drink and drink, and drink again) is probably meant to evoke an image of the fish chattering excitedly to one another. According to Gendel, Adriana Zabala, for whom this arrangement was created, describes this song as a kind of “anti-*Silent Night*.” That is, that the birth of Jesus is not met by quiet and calm but by noisy joy! *A la nanita nana* was arranged as a duet for both of our vocal soloists. This

song was published in 1904 by the Spanish songwriter **José Ramón Gomis** (1856-1939). It was written as a tender lullaby, with the kind of soothing, murmuring refrain heard in lullabies of every culture. Gendel injects a gentle dance feel into this setting, reflecting, as he says, the “swaying and dancing of a mother rocking a child.”

We continue with features for our vocal soloists. The *Sound of Music* was the eighth and final collaboration of composer **Richard Rodgers** and lyricist **Oscar Hammerstein II**. Beginning with *Oklahoma!* in 1943, they created a series of phenomenally successful musicals that ruled the Broadway stage, most of them becoming equally successful Hollywood movies. *The Sound of Music*, a fictionalized version of the story of the von Trapp Family singers, was a smash hit on Broadway when it opened in 1959, running for some 1443 performances. The 1965 movie version was every bit as big a hit, becoming one of the highest-grossing films of all time. *My Favorite Things* is feature for Maria, the high-spirited governess of the von Trapp children—sung by Mary Martin on Broadway and by Julie Andrews on film. It is a quirky list of those things that she thinks about to cheer herself up whenever it’s needed. *Winter Wonderland* was one of many cheerful holiday songs that came out of the Great Depression. It was a 1934 collaboration by lyricist **Richard Smith** and composer **Felix Bernard**, and was a No.2 hit that year for the Guy Lombardo orchestra. The song, with its cozy, sentimental imagery of snowmen and cold winter walks—and warming by the fire afterwards—had tremendous staying power and was a hit for both Perry Como and the Andrews Sisters in the 1940s. Since then, it’s never left the list of holiday standards.

Let There Be Peace on Earth (And Let It Begin With Me) was written by the husband-wife team of **Sy Miller** and **Jill Jackson**, as they were at a weeklong retreat on a California mountaintop. Miller later recalled: “One summer evening in 1955, a group of 180 teenagers of all races and religions, meeting at a workshop high in the California mountains locked arms, formed a circle and sang a song of peace. They felt that singing the song, with its simple basic sentiment— ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me,’ helped to create a climate for world peace and understanding. When they came down from the mountain, these inspired young people brought the song with them and started sharing it...” This inspirational song has developed an association with the Christmas season, but its appeal and intent are much wider—it became, for example a widely-heard anthem of peace amidst the anger and sadness following the 9/11 attacks.

Once again this year, we are privileged to welcome the Mount Zion Gospel Choir and its directors Leotha and Tamera Stanley, presenting gospel songs for the season arranged for these concerts by **Leotha Stanley**. Mt. Zion opens with a new gospel arrangement of ***Do You Hear What I Hear?*** This holiday standard was written in 1962 by composer **Noel Regney** and his wife, lyricist **Gloria Shayne Baker** wrote the holiday standard *Do You Hear What I Hear?* in 1962 and it became a huge hit for Bing Crosby in 1963, selling over a million records. Though usually heard as a sentimental song to the Baby Jesus, Regney later said “I am amazed that people can think they know the song, and not know it is a prayer for peace.” It was written in October 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when nuclear war seemed imminent. Contrary to their usual practice, Regney wrote the lyric, and his wife wrote the melody. The result was a song that they found so moving that they couldn’t bear to sing it at first. The final stanza, with its “Pray for peace, people everywhere!” makes this as relevant in 2022 as it was in 1962. The Mount Zion group then sings a Stanley original, ***The Spirit of Christmas is Love***, which was introduced at these concerts in 2014. Our finale, sung by every voice on stage, is a newly-written song by Stanley, ***Christmas Bells: The Message They Ring***.

And then, friends, it’s *your* turn to sing...

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