

**Quincy Symphony Chorus Program Notes**  
**November 5, 2016**  
**Compiled by Dr. Carol Mathieson**

*Fanfare for a Festival* was commissioned by and dedicated to the Festival Chorus of the Southwest Chicago Suburban Music Festival in 1960. Composer Ron Nelson grew up in Joliet, IL and studied at Eastman before going to France and returning to a distinguished career at Brown University in Rhode Island. Leonard Slatkin called him “the quintessential American composer;” and in setting this patriotic Walter A. Rodby text as a vocal fanfare, he certainly captures the optimistic American spirit.

*The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass* extends an ancient impulse to praise the Holy using the language but singing outside the liturgy of the rites of the Church. Inklings of this impulse come to us from 14<sup>th</sup> century musical treatments of the Ordinary (repeated every service) of the Mass stretched in time beyond function by Machaut. It is best recognized by the musical world as the concert mass, which, in the words of a spiritual song, draws us in the Spirit’s tether in language ancient and modern without entering the realm of the sacramental.

Minnesota composer Carol Barnett, known nationally for her opera and choral composition and for her longtime professional association with the Dale Warland Singers as well as Phillip Brunelle’s VocalEssence Ensemble Singers, collaborated with poet Marisha Chamberlain to extend the embrace of the concert mass beyond the faithful congregation to a far-reaching Creation. And just as Machaut incorporated the engaging sonorities of the popular song set *Donkey Tales* in his Ars Nova sacred works, Carol Barnett reached out to bluegrass as a musical voice of the people. In fact, *The World Beloved* was commissioned by the celebrated bluegrass ensemble Monroe Crossing, who made the first recording of it with VocalEssence.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out that although the central purpose of the Mass is the Eucharist (communion), there are other parts with important purposes. In *The World Beloved*, many of the words of the Ordinary are present in ancient form although some are extended to describe a broader creation. As in the Collect, the opening is a prayer through which “the character of the celebration finds expression,” and all texts move toward the Rite of Peace, “by which the Church entreats peace and unity...for the whole human family,” and all gathered affirm the blessedness of mutual charity.

*Passacaglia of Praise* combines the disparate elements of Baroque ostinato and American Gospel song to craft a Lenten anthem that brings out the best of both forms. A *passacaglia* is a structural element consisting of a melodic line in triple meter, usually descending, often chromatic, that repeats incessantly (thus its genre name of ostinato--obstinate) and generates the harmony implications for the entire composition. Composed or found melodies that change chords the same way as the ostinato-implied harmonies generally get more attention than the underlying passacaglia to which they’re added; and in this case, the melody composed to words by Fanny Crosby allow the Queen of Gospel Song’s simple but heartfelt words of conviction a clear path to listening ears.

Fanny Crosby was a proud descendent of New England Puritan colonists; but, she stood at the forefront of an American pietistic movement to soften their severe Calvinism with a more hopeful promise of salvation as expressed in her more than 9,000 gospel song lyrics. Losing her sight in early childhood, Crosby received an excellent education in a school for the blind and spent much of her life teaching and advocating for such academies. She was the first woman ever to speak to the US Senate, where she read her patriotic poem in favor of education for the blind. She also worked tirelessly in home missionary work in New York City slums with immigrants and the urban poor. Composer Craig Courtney, pianist and vocal coach at the Satzbürg Mozarteum, acknowledges the power of both of these disparate forms he has called to a transcendent collaboration...“beyond time and space--praise rooted in eternity.”

*The Dodger*, according to research done for a tribute to composer Aaron Copland by The United States Army Field Band’s Soldiers’ Chorus, is “a political satire which emerged during the 1884 presidential campaigns of Grover Cleveland and his rival, James G. Blaine.... The song targets not only politicians, but other authority figures as well. Although Copland’s setting is limited to stanzas satirizing political candidates, preachers, and overconfident men with amorous intent, other verses address doctors, lawyers, merchants and farmers.” The QSC gentlemen remind us that some things never change.

*Prayers from the Ark* comes to us from a French poetess in turmoil, an Anglo-Indian translator in thrall, and a Welsh composer in tune with the nuance of British sensibility, if not of French. Carmen Bernos de Gasztold grew up a troubled child in a troubled household in France but on the German border. Pressed into service to the rising Nazi party, she had a physical and nervous breakdown as WWII drew to a close, sending her to a convent for a recovery that included therapeutic poetry creation for healing. With her French gift for irony in the face of inconceivable cruelty, she lamented the willingness of humankind to tread upon everyone else to achieve a goal, whether that goal was nefarious or noble. Her only remaining hope for peace became sensitivity to prayers of the lowly.

And what is more lowly than the beasts over which humankind has dominion? British scholar linguist Rumer Godden, who had grown up in India but found herself in France at the end of the War, read de Gasztold's poetry and sought out the reclusive poetess for permission to translate it into English. Although French and English are cousins, French has nuances that are language specific and don't translate well through the Saxon shift. Godden worked conscientiously to capture the essence of the poetess's linguistic wit. Comprehending that de Gasztold's animals were not Disney-esque anthropomorphisms, she wrote: "Carmen De Gasztold has seen too much of the seamy side of life to be a sentimental animal lover--ironically, she has little use for pets. In her world... there is an economy and sense... that is typically French; it is the truthfulness of the prayers, especially as it reflects on us, unthinking humans, that causes pain." Noah is overworked but faithful, the bird is unassuming but joyful, the cat is proud but realistic, the mouse seeks safety and rest, the raven is worldly and selfish, the dove is simple and selfless. Adding yet another dimension, Ivor R. Davis brings a lushness of Welsh choral tradition to the musical setting of *Prayers from the Ark* that sometimes lifts and sometimes subsumes the elegance of delicate French phrasing.

*Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal* brings jaunty American shape-note singing into refined choral performance through a sensitive arrangement by long-time Robert Shaw collaborator Alice Parker. Although she was Julliard trained, Parker responded to the joyful earnestness of unlettered folk who gathered for 3 hours a night 2 weeks at a time in a rural barn to learn spiritual songs using shapes for notes of the scale: fa-so-la singing, they called it, and simplified solfeggio it was, indeed.

*I Bought Me a Cat* is a children's song that helps with memory recall but also allows an outlet for making funny noises without being shushed. Aaron Copland composed an art song accompaniment for it in his sets of *Old American Songs*, and Irving Fine arranged Copland's version for chorus. The gusto QSC brings to the animal noises is their own.

*O Shout and Sing!* is a general anthem of praise to the Lord of Creation. It crafts complex rhythms for voices and instruments according to English text inflection. Kentucky composers Anna Laura Page and Jean Anne Shafferman are church musicians and editors for Alfred Publishing Company.

*Frostiana* began in 1958 as a commission to celebrate Amherst, Massachusetts' 200<sup>th</sup> year of incorporation and grew to be one of the most beloved suites in 20<sup>th</sup> century American choral music. Celebrated poet Robert Frost had lived many years in Amherst, so the town chose one of his poems to be set for the commemoration. Randall Thompson had been at the forefront of expanding American choral music beyond the confines of the church service and into community choruses, for which he composed voluminously. His advocacy of a liberal arts approach to music in the university curriculum and his friendship with Frost made him the natural choice to set the poem. However, he hated the poem choice. He would sign on only if he could choose, himself...he chose 7. *Girl's Garden* smiles wryly at good intentions, realizing that if you sow a garden higgledy-piggledy, you may not recognize your harvest. *Choose Something* asks a star to speak wisdom to the human condition; but when the star only declares that it exists, Frost recommends it as a steadfast guide to hold course when both mind and world are in turmoil.