

QUINCY SYMPHONY CHORUS
March 17, 2018
Program Notes, Compiled by Dr. Carol Mathieson

Kidnapped from his Roman-British family when he was 16, Saint Patrick toiled as a slave in Ireland for 6 years until he escaped on a ship he had learned of in a dream. In another vision, the enslaved people of Ireland begged him to return and bring them the hope of Christianity. He did, using symbols such as the shamrock to explain the Trinity and diatribe such as his *Epistola* to protest cruel treatment of the Irish. In the same way, Ireland's bardic ballads of hauntingly beautiful story music combined with bitter protest and longing for both home and a glorious past to characterize the songs of the Celtic people... but with a great dose of Irish wit from eyes that twinkle and toes that tap, too.

In *Three Irish Folk Songs*, American composer Craig Courtney fulfilled his duty to bring songs in English to his Austrian church choir in the Salzburg Mozarteum by combining traditional tunes that also served multiple functions. In the 1798 Irish Rebellion, the British outlawed the wearing of shamrocks in caubeens (hats), calling the practice a symbol of protest...which it was. *The Wearing of the Green* is an understandably anonymous protest ballad about that edict. *Down by the Salley Gardens* is William Butler Yeats' 1889 attempt to reconstruct from 3 lines an old Sligo peasant woman's folk song of regret at love not taken in the *saileach* (willow withy) gardens. *The Rakes of Mallow* is a rousing marching song about rogues from a town in County Cork; but in America, it serves as the fight song for Notre Dame, and in 19th century southern India, it wound its way into a Carnatic hymn to Meenakshi, who was, ironically, the goddess of those who had to deal with impossible children and husbands.

The Bonny Young Irish Boy represents an entire body of transplanted tradition: the Newfoundland ballad, or "Newfie song." Based on a vibrant Irish tradition (one entire dock in St. John's, Newfoundland was dedicated to ships arriving from Ireland in the 19th century), Newfie songs are usually 4-part male sea shanties. Alabama composer Timothy Paul Banks has arranged this one for the ladies.

Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye comes from the English music hall, although it has a partial pedigree in the folk tradition as well. Originally composed in 1867 as part of the noir humor of denial of which the Medieval danse macabre is perhaps best known example, it tells of a soldier who returns from the wars to the girl he had jilted. She catalogs the wounds he has received but takes him back anyway. Very soon, however, the song became a powerful anti-war statement. It had a different tune in the music halls, but it fit and became associated with American Civil War bandmaster Patrick Gilmore's more warlike tune *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, which in turn resembled the 1630's English ballad *The Three Ravens*.

Riversong demonstrates delightfully that the Irish melody mold is as long-lasting as the Irish dedication to freedom. American West Coast composer Roger Emerson, who charmed children with his film music to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, composed this celebration of things Celtic for the gentlemen in TTBB.

A Gaelic Blessing combines the ancient with the contemporary in renowned English composer and Cambridge Singers conductor John Rutter's original setting of the text from an ancient Gaelic rune.

In *Irish Psalm*, Clemson composer and choral director Daniel Rash sets the Hundredth Psalm--"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord"--with snatches of the Irish jig *The Joy of My Life*, adds a fiddle and other traditional instruments, and celebrates the glorious past and promising future of that Celtic culture Saint Patrick fought for and Jonathan Swift proclaimed when he wrote: "Yes, Ireland will be for ever more!"

Letters from Ireland sets the saga of tenderness, tribulation, and trans-Atlantic flight that characterized the Irish experience of the 18th and 19th centuries. Composer Mark Brymer, who began his music studies at Millikin and now enjoys an international reputation, alternates letters and diary entries of the time with traditional songs and dance tunes of the same theme.

The first letter, dated 1819, describes the beauties of the countryside and is underscored with the rollicking tune known to Irish sports fans as *Molly Malone* and to American school children as *Cockles and Mussels*. The folksong *The Cliffs of Doneen* echoes that love of the land. The next letter, from 1845, suggests that traveling the beautiful countryside on foot wearies both sole and soul. The underscore by legendary harper O'Carolan reminds us that Irish bards did just that, while the follow up song *The Rocky Road to Dublin* twists in turns that show the value the Irish place on virtuosity in singing, harp, and fiddle. The Irish have personal standards, too, as the next letter from 1830 makes clear. It's all very well to sing *Molly Malone*, but do not screech!

Dancing played an important role in Irish life as a backdrop for courting or socializing in general, as the next letter from 1812 suggests. Fiddles, pipes, or pennywhistles played hornpipes, reels, and jigs for Irish dancing characterized by fancy footwork but straight down arms...reputedly to allow room for everyone to join in. There's wildness, too, as we hear in *Lanigan's Ball*. And after the dancing comes swapping tall tales and toasting them with whiskey. High jinks and highwaymen feature prominently in *The Wild Rover* and *Whiskey in the Jar*.

But for all its beauty, Ireland could not always support its people. Famine and land policies drove many to leave for better prospects in North America, as the next letter from 1818 makes clear. Uilleann pipe and pennywhistle turn the mood from laughter to longing for the land left behind in *Skibbereen*. Some viewed the journey as opportunity, as in *Muirsheen Durkin* where the prospect is California gold. Letters from 1783 and 1789 tell of the backbreaking work that lay before those emigrants in the Americas, though *Paddy Works on the Railway* reminds us that even work songs have a story to tell and a gandy dancer trips light on his feet as he lays the rails.

The final letter comes from satirist extraordinaire Jonathan Swift in 1716 in which he acknowledges cruelty from famine and overlords with equal sadness but greater irony than Saint Patrick; but like the ancient patron, he salutes the steadfastness of his people. *The Wearing of the Green* then sings jaunty defiance against anyone who challenges the shamrock and Irish freedom.