

Program Notes – Heavenly Bodies

Humans have found endless inspiration in the heavens: the stars, the moon, the sun, the planets. We've created countless mythologies and works of art, we've created spacecraft to explore their mysteries. Perhaps you've heard it said that when we look up at the stars we are looking back in time. Though light travels quickly, the distance in space is vast. When we look at objects that are so very far away, the light that is hitting us now will have started from the object a long time ago. In the heavens there are endless possibilities: we see our past and our future, and we look up to be steadied and guided by their timelessness. Tonight, we offer a concert of music that explores the beauty and wonder of these celestial bodies.

Stephen Paulus's "Daybreak!" from his song cycle *The Earth Sings* is based on an anonymous text from the Mudbara tribe of Indigenous Australians. Here, the Sun is imagined as a matriarch who offers her guidance by lighting the land and warming her people, and comforts with outstretched arms. The first half of the piece introduces three core melodies, and after the Sun dazzles into full ascendance on "She shines!", the choir sings these core melodies first in unison and then divides them up to sing simultaneously, as the people warmed by the Sun praise her light while moving about their new day.

In "Ave Maris Stella", composer Eva Ugalde draws upon different musical styles to set this Latin hymn text from the 8th century, "Hail, star of the sea, Nurturing Mother of God." She portrays the ancient and reverent through the Gregorian-style chant and hymn-like chorale that open the piece, and shifts into a celebratory mood through odd-meter dance-like rhythms. At the end of the piece, the meter transitions into a 3-beat pattern as the Holy Trinity is invoked.

Jonathan Pieslak sets Sabina Păuța Pieslak's Romanian text Scânteii Solare (Solar Flares) with playful verve. As the light of the stars and the sun play games on the melting snow of mountain peaks, so does the music: alternately shortening and elongating the phrases to create a challenging tangle of words and rhythm. Contrasting sections of lulling, legato melody evoke the rolling waves of the sea and the sweet singing of Sirens: "Crește marea, valuri cu spumă/O sirenă le cântă dulce."

Christine Donkin's "The Dawn is Not Distant" opens with the piano acting as a pointillist painter, dropping notes of sound like distant twinkling stars. Voices enter with contrasting smooth, lyrical phrases like a lullaby that gently urges the listener: "Suspice caelum et numera stellas/Look at the heavens, and count the stars."

The text for "Moon Goddess" is over four thousand years old. It comes to us from En-Hedu-Anna (born ca. 2300 B.C.), who was a powerful Sumerian priestess, poet, and astronomer. Her name is one of the first women whose name is known to history, and she is the earliest known author whose work has been preserved. She was the daughter of King Sargon of Agade, who ruled over an empire that spanned Mesopotamia and parts of modern Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. *The Exaltation of Inanna* is a collection of En-Hedu-

Anna's hymns, and her written work is a personal testament to her devotion as a religious leader that also reflects her political importance as the daughter of the king. Amid her devotionals to Inanna, En-Hedu-Anna also writes in the first person to record her experience being expelled and later re-instated from the temple and city of Ur amid political turmoil involving her family. In this poem, Inanna is imagined as a terrifying, sublime warrior: a goddess who will defend her worshippers from their enemies. Jocelyn Hagen's musical realization of the text evokes the unrelenting warrior goddess through aggressive, percussive piano *ostinati* (a persistent, repeated rhythmic pattern), while also depicting a sense of the lofty, beloved divine through dreamy, chant-like legato melody.

Flight is a multi-movement choral work by Jocelyn Hagen that was commissioned by Phil Hettema for Vox Femina's 20th Anniversary season. The texts by Janet Windeler Ryan ("Sky Song") and Julia Klatt Singer ("Come Spring" and "This Sky Falls") are varied depictions of the act of taking flight, breaking free, seeking renewal. "This Sky Falls" is a ballad with the groove of flight achieved, basking in the freedom of a glorious, sustained glide through the sky and the way the magnificent vista alights within our bodies and under our skin.

"The Sky and the Dawn and the Sun" was originally arranged by Graham and Downes for the Irish musical ensemble Celtic Woman. It opens with a call to awaken – voices as if coming from a distance trade a lilting tune as the night turns to dawn and we arise to a celebration of bells and violins. The song gives way to a lively fiddle solo and Irish dance as we greet the rising of the sun.

In "Stars", Ēriks Ešēvalds sets the haunting words of poet Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) with ethereal vocal harmony and shimmering accompaniment from tuned glasses of water. Each section of singers was assigned a pitch, and their glasses are filled with water to the point where they produce a precise pitch when played with a wet fingertip.

"Sure on this Shining Night" by Morten Lauridsen tells of that spectacular time of night when the stars cast shadows all around, and day finds peaceful renewal through the darkness of night. A warm, beautiful legato motif -- "this shining night" – returns throughout, capping off the ends of phrases that grow throughout the piece before falling back into hushed quietness, as the moon and nighttime stars cycle through their phases.

"Sing Wearing the Sky" sets excerpts of poetry by 14th century poet Lalla, who was a mystic from the Kashmir region of India. She wrote a number of devotional poems that explore the experience of learning based on sensory interaction between the body and its environment. In this piece, Jake Runestad incorporates extended vocal techniques, including overtone singing, and a strong forward momentum and energy influenced by dance.

Philip E. Silvey's "Morning Moon" celebrates the early dawn, the moment when the glow of the moon melts away into the gradually brightening light of the sun. The accompaniment sets up a pace of constant motion: the world awakening, people rising to

meet their busy days. The vocal texture begins in unison, and slowly it becomes richer and richer in harmony as the Light bursts forth.

“The Sun Won’t Stop” by Holly Near and Steve Wood has a jazzy bounce and a moody message: the sun will rise and fall as always, and the moments in our days all too quickly turn into memories. It is a reminder to pause and listen to loved ones, and to pass on our stories before too many days and too many sunrises roll past us.

We close with Jacques Brel’s “If We Only Have Love.” It is a simple ballad with a repeated melody, and lyrics that are infused with a profundity of hope, and the promise of what human beings can achieve when motivated by love: “Then with nothing at all, but the little we are, we’ll have conquered all time, all space, the sun, and the stars.”