

Harmonia Chamber Singers
Lost in the Stars

Music that transcends time and space

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Program notes by Michael Harris

19th century musicologist Karl Proske described Tomás Luis de Victoria's sacred choral music as "warmth and life, sweetness and tenderness, smoothest flow of the most intricate and strict compositions, a festive grandeur and majestic dignity, all combined in this priestly Spaniard, a constellation, which from out the starry firmament of the past sheds a wondrous radiance upon our time." It makes sense then that Victoria had a great fondness for Marian hymns which pictured Mary in heavenly skyward settings, as *Ave Maris Stella* calls her the *Star of the Sea*. Victoria composed two versions of **Regina caeli lactare** (Queen of heaven, rejoice) – the first published in 1572 for five voices [Soprano-Alto 1 & 2-Tenor-Bass] and the second in 1576 for 8 voice double choir [Sop. 1a-Sop. 1b-Alto1-Tenor 1 and Sop. 2-Alto 2-Tenor 2-Bass]. In both settings, the opening gestures of many phrases were derived from the original Gregorian chant melody for the hymn. Victoria scholar Eugene Cramer observes that in the few prayers that Victoria set twice, there are musical ideas that carried over from one piece to the other, such as the ascending motive on the word *resurrexit* (has risen). The double choir version is especially engaging in its alternating of duple and triple meter, as when Choir One's *resurrexit* in a stately four is overtaken by Choir Two's *resurrexit* in a brisk three.

It's become a modern truism that *Life begins at 40*, and in the case of Cecilia McDowall's professional life as a composer, that's precisely what happened. After musical studies at the University of Edinburgh and at Trinity College, McDowall waited to pursue composition until her children were teenagers – thus, the lion's share of her long list of works were produced in the last 25 years. Her webpage says of the 2004 **Ave Regina** that it's "a hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary... the first of a group of three Latin motets (*Ave Maria* and *Regina Caeli*) all specially commissioned for the Canterbury Chamber Choir by Janet and Douglas MacKay in memory of their parents. It's a gentle and lyrical response to the 'Queen of the Heavens, from whom the light cometh into the world'." One of the harmonic points of interest is how the piece begins in F major, but in first inversion, not in the more stable root position. The A in the bass allows for a smooth modulation to A major in the second section. The motet alternates between these two tonal areas, concluding with the inverted F major, enriched by a tritone, leaving the piece unresolved on the final chord.

The text of Max Reger's 1899 choral song **Das Sternlein** is Matthias Claudius' poem *Christiane*, which was published under the title *The Vanished Star* in the folk poetry anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (1805-08). The poem's narrator speaks of a favorite star that he looked for every evening ('had great joy, and thanked God for it), but 'the little star has dis-appeared and now I can't find it anymore'. The lost star is a symbol for Claudius' personal

loss. On July 2, 1796, Claudius' second daughter Christiane died of typhus at the age of 20. Reger's setting of the poem has the feeling of a simple folk song, but with enough flexibility to express the pathos underneath the outwardly cheerful melody. At first glance, it looks like a strophic form, but each stanza is harmonized in a slightly different way. It's interesting to note that in 1898, Reger set the poem for four-part male choir, using the same basic melodic material, but the part writing is not a duplicate of the mixed choir setting. Claudius' tragically vanished star contrasts starkly with John Keat's optimistic and famously steadfast *Bright Star*.

It seems that children have been wondering at the twinkling stars for millennia, but only to the familiar strains of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* since the mid-19th century. The tune, first published in 1764, originally was linked to the pastoral poem *La confidence naïve* whose opening verse says "Ah, shall I tell you, Mama,/What causes my torment?/Since I saw Silvandre/Look at me tenderly,/My heart says every moment:/Can one live without a lover?" This love song was parodied in the nursery rhyme "Ah, vous dirais-je, Maman," now saying "Oh, shall I tell you, Mummy,/What is tormenting me?/Daddy wants me to reason/Like a grown-up person./Me, I say that sweets/Are worth more than reasoning." Mozart wrote a charming set of piano variations on this tune in 1778. The starry-eyed words that we all know and love appeared in the 1806 *Rhymes for the Nursery* by English poet Jane Taylor, but not until 1838 was it linked to its immortal tune in the songbook *The Singing Master*. Of his ethereal arrangement of **Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star**, Nashville-based composer Dan Elder writes: "The vastness and wonder of this setting may help us to see certain questions once again from a child's eyes, and yet also hear the wisdom of a star's reply. From such a perspective, this timeless mystery can be both questioned and answered by the music."

Caroline Mallonee's website says that this Buffalo-based composer is "inspired by scientific phenomena, visual art and musical puzzles." It shouldn't surprise us that her fascination with stars should manifest itself in her music – witness her large-scale experimental vocal work *Episodes for a Star-Drenched Night*. That interest also led her to two poems from Carl Sandburg's 1920 collection *Smoke and Steel: Pencils* (used for the mixed choir piece *Look for Us Again*) and *Stars, Songs, Faces* for the 2001 S-A-T-B choral anthem **Gather the Stars**. In the latter verse, Sandburg looks at stars as transitory objects that can't be possessed or kept. "Gather the stars... and then...let the stars and songs go...Loosen your hands and say goodbye." Mallonee's setting is nearly all homophonic to make the poet's words as clear as possible. The most prominent melodic interval is the rising perfect fourth, often balanced by the descending 4th in other voices. On the climactic phrase "Let the faces and years go," the soprano line has five ascending 4ths in row, leading to a forte high A flat. The last phrase "Loosen your hands..." is suddenly softer, but still built on that obsessive perfect fourth!

Oxford University Press promotes Bob Chilcott's jewel-like **Give me your Stars to Hold** as "an expressive setting of Sara Teasdale's poem *Peace*, with lush rich harmonies and a soft dynamic palette—poignant and peaceful, and perfect for choirs who enjoy refining blend and ensemble." *Peace* appeared in Teasdale's 1915 poetry volume *Rivers to the Sea*, which literary critic Carol Schoen believes shows Teasdale's "move toward poetic and emotional maturity." The book's sequence of poems is a love story that "traces the growth of love, the lover's joy in their passion, a separation, and the end of that love." *Peace* tells of "the sense of

fulfillment that comes from loving and being loved.” The narrator is akin to a shimmering pool while the beloved is a vivid deepening sky. The peace of the poem is musicalized by the gently undulating harmonies centered around G major, and the melodic B-G motive in the soprano part. This melodic 3rd idea relates to the modulation in the middle section to B flat major, a minor 3rd higher, finally sneaking back to G major for the fulfilling resolution on “Give me your stars to hold.”

Jean Sibelius’ *Finlandia* has come to be Finland’s unofficial national anthem, but its history has many intricate layers of format and meaning. Sibelius originally composed it as the orchestral tone poem *Finland Awakens*, the final movement of the 1899 suite *Press Celebration Music*, patriotically protesting the 1899 February Manifesto that permitted Russia to overrule the laws of the Duchy of Finland. Sibelius later used the famous hymn-like theme for his 1927 *Masonic Ritual Music*. During World War II, poet Veikko Kostenniemi wrote his *Ode to Finland’s Freedom* to Sibelius’ beloved melody. Outside of Finland, the *Finlandia* tune began to infiltrate hymnbooks in the 1930s, as with *Be Thou My Soul*, Jane Borthwith’s translation of the 17th century poem by Katherina von Schlegel, inspired by Psalm 46. In 1934, Hawaiian poet Lloyd Stone published *This Is My Song* in the song folio *Sing a Tune*, as an anthem that expresses pride in one’s homeland while respecting the hopes of other nations. In 2019, Blake Morgan, 1st tenor of the vocal ensemble VOCES8, made a harmonically fresh arrangement of **This Is My Song**, adding his own third verse that amplifies the humanist and universalist sentiments of Stone’s lyric. One of the felicities of Morgan’s arrangement occurs on his line “So let us raise this melody together,” when on the word raise the music rises to the final key of C-flat major—an aural masterstroke!

Composers of the North European nations seem to have a strong fascination for the wonders of the night sky, none more so than the Latvian Ēriks Ešēvalds, who has garnered plaudits for his compositions about the aurora borealis, a display of celestial colored lights in the Arctic region caused by solar winds disturbing the magnetosphere, altering the trajectory of charged particles in the sky – works like the choral *Northern Lights* (2012), the orchestral *Visions of Arctic Night* (2012) and the multimedia choral symphony *Nordic Lights* (2015). Ešēvalds’ website sums up the 2014 **The Heavens’ Flock** as “a celestial meditation, an American commission for Ethan Sperry and the Portland State Chamber Choir. The words are by Paulann Petersen, the Poet Laureate of the state of Oregon. This is a simpler vision than that of *Northern Lights*, but its single paragraph is glowing in its diatonic certainty; the poem’s blaze may be small, but it is bright and it is beautiful.” Petersen sees the stars above us as flocks of sheep, while we below are lost shepherds who can only tend our poor man-made fires, whose glowing embers are portrayed in the soaring wordless vocalise of the final measures.

Another Nordic fellow spirit with a heavenward gaze is composer Ola Gjeilo, who crafted his own choral tribute to **Northern Lights** in 2008. He uses the erotically charged love language of the *Song of Solomon* to capture the feeling of awe of one experiencing the aurora borealis. Gjeilo comments that “*Northern Lights* is my most Norwegian production in years, composed in an attic outside of Oslo at Christmas time in 2007; it’s one of the few works I have written in Norway since I moved to New York in 2001.... Most of all, this piece and its text is about beauty. About a ‘terrible’, powerful beauty, although the music is quite serene on the

surface. Looking out from the attic window that Christmas in Oslo, over a wintry lake under the stars, I was thinking about how this ‘terrible’ beauty is so profoundly reflected in the northern lights.... I have only seen [it] once or twice in my life. It is one of the most beautiful natural phenomena I’ve ever witnessed, and it has such a powerful, electric quality that must have been both mesmerizing and terrifying to people in the past, when no one knew what it was and when much superstition was attached to these experiences.”

Lost in the Stars is a 1949 musical play adapted from the novel *Cry the Beloved Country* by South African author Alan Paton. Set in mid-20th century apartheid South Africa, it’s the story of the Rev. Stephen Kumalo, a black Anglican priest whose son Absolom kills a white man during a robbery and is sentenced to hang. This tragedy brings Rev. Kumalo to a crisis of faith, expressed in the title song that ends Act One. The song originally was written by Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson for an abandoned 1939 show called *Ulysses Africanus* that was going to star Paul Robeson. Weill and Anderson salvaged **Lost in the Stars** and three other songs from *Ulysses* for the new project. The song tells a fable about God holding “all the stars in the palm of His hand,” and Rev. Kumalo in his time of crisis muses “Sometimes it seems maybe God’s gone away, / Forgetting the promise that we heard him say.” The novelist Alan Paton disliked these lines, feeling that they were un-Christian and an invitation to despair. Nevertheless, the musical was highly praised in its 1949 Broadway production and *Lost in the Stars* became one of Weill’s most frequently performed standards.

Frank Sinatra was one of the notable interpreters of *Lost in the Stars* (two recordings), but his most reliable song hits of the 1950s were penned by Jimmy van Heusen and lyricist Sammy Cahn, including the Oscar-winning *High Hopes*, *All the Way*, and *Call Me Irresponsible*, as well as *The Tender Trap*, *The Second Time Around*, and *My Kind of Town*. Van Heusen and Cahn frequently were commissioned to write the title song for Sinatra’s concept albums. **Come Fly with Me** is a case in point, a 1958 Capital Records release that was a musical trip around the world—from *April in Paris* to *On the Road to Mandalay*. Van Heusen surely composed *Come Fly with Me* with enthusiasm, since he himself was an avid pilot; during World War II, he was a test pilot for the Lockheed Corporation. Arranger Kevin Keller has been singing barbershop harmony since 1978 and *Come Fly with Me* is among his 400+ vocal charts. He advises barbershoppers: “The swing feel is critical to executing this exciting arrangement, so keep the eighth notes laid-back, relaxed and locked-in. You’ll notice the suggested dynamics, but don’t be afraid to experiment by adding some of your own. Give yourself somewhere to go in the Tag and ramp up to that last pay-off chord to put your performance over the top!”

A YouTube comment from @quintbromley2112 reads: “Bowie was one in a million, and now he is up there with those bright, twinkling stars, beaming down in rays of light/sound forever.” Appraised by Joe Tayson as David Bowie’s magnum opus, **Life on Mars** started out as Bowie’s answer to the Sinatra standard *My Way*. In 1968, Bowie wrote an English lyric for a French chanson titled *Comme d’habitude*, which was rejected by the publishers in favor of Paul Anka’s now-iconic lyric *My Way*. Bowie recalled, “That made me angry for so long... eventually I thought, ‘I can write something as big as that, and I’ll write something a bit like that.’” Indeed, the opening bars of *Life on Mars* begin with the first chords of *My Way*! In his study *The Words and Music of David Bowie*, James Perone (who received his PhD at UB!) remarks on the many

Bowie songs that portray society's outcasts and outsiders: "In *Life on Mars* Bowie paints the movie theater as an escape for a girl who is at odds with her parents and wanders through town in search of some sort of brief escape from reality." Philip Lawson's arrangement contrasts the verses with the tenor singing of the girl's real-life travails (surrounded by roseate doo-wop harmonies) with the refrain's cinematic montage of images invoked by rich five-part homophonic chords. The song was a highlight of Bowie's 1971 LP *Hunky Dory*, recorded while Bowie was refining the concept for his new performing persona: Ziggy Stardust, likened by some to an androgynous alien – perhaps from Mars??

It might seem odd to place William Dawson in our pop star category, with his reputation resting on his masterful arrangements of black spirituals and his acclaimed 1934 *Negro Folk Symphony*. Beside leading the Tuskegee Institute Choir from 1931 to 1958, Dawson also played trombone and bass fiddle with such luminaries of the Kansas City and Chicago jazz scenes as Louis Armstrong and Earl 'Fatha' Hines. Dawson's prowess as a jazzman greatly affected the way he would treat the spiritual in his classic choral arrangements. In his 1955 essay *Interpretation of the Religious Folksongs of the American Negro*, Dawson recommends this basic principle: "Keep the tempo; do not upset it with spasmodic ritardandi and accelerandi... 'Losing' the tempo is irritating to the Negro... The singer or conductor should strive for a regular, even tempo with elastic rhythms coming forth in large, flowing waves; otherwise, the singing will be rigid and out of character." The kinetic rhythms of **Ain'-a that Good News!** exemplify that approach, and this exuberant declaration of faith never fails to thrill listeners. Dawson sums up: "The religious folk songs of the American Negro...express the outlet of suppressed emotions and religious fervor; they are the reflections of a deep spiritual experience. The creators... seem to have had the spirit of God in their hearts."