

# QUINCY SYMPHONY CHORUS

December 10, 2011

## PROGRAM NOTES for SELECTED WORKS

Compiled by Dr. Lavern Wagner

### **O Magnum Mysterium.....Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**

“O magnum mysterium” is one of *Quatre Motets pour le Temps de Noël* (Four Motets for the Christmas Season) which Poulenc composed in 1951-1952. These settings of Latin verses are enriched by the composer’s characteristic lyricism and suavity of harmonic invention to evoke both the serenity and the jubilation of Christmastide. *O magnum mysterium* (O great mystery), which Poulenc composed in April 1952 at his country retreat in Notzay, a tiny village in the Loire Valley, uses the text of the Fourth Responsory from the Third Nocturne of Matins, the liturgical office that precedes the Midnight Mass of Christmas Eve, and begins the magnificent cycle of worship that marks the birth of Christ in the Roman Catholic calendar.

Translation of the text: O how great the mystery, and how ineffable the covenant, that simple beasts behold the Christ-child as a babe, new-born and lying in a manger stall. O blessed Virgin, hallow’d is thy womb that it could hold the flesh and blood of Christ our Lord.

### **Fantasia on Christmas Carols .....Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)**

Ralph Vaughan Williams was fascinated by English folk music throughout his life. As early as 1903 he began to collect, arrange, and publish English folk tunes from various parts of the country. He cataloged some 800 folk tunes, making him a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology. His own compositions were heavily influenced both by the English folk music of common people and by music of the late Renaissance English masters such as Thomas Tallis and William Byrd.

His 1912 *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* is an eclectic assemblage based on material which Vaughan Williams collected himself. Four carols make prominent appearances in the work: 1) “The truth sent from above,” words and tune from Herefordshire; 2) “Come all you worthy gentlemen,” words and tune from Somerset; 3) “On Christmas night,” words and tune from Sussex; 4) “There is a fountain,” tune only from Herefordshire.

In the performance the chorus members are required to sing in four different manners: 1) Singing the words; 2) Singing with closed lips; 3) Singing “Ah”; 4) Singing with half-closed lips, i.e. with a short “u” sound as in the word “but”. Listen for the innovative vocal sounds used by Vaughan Williams.

### **Messiah.....George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)**

Born in Halle, Saxony, by 1703 Handel was in Hamburg as a member of the opera orchestra. After 1706 he spent three years traveling in Europe, especially Italy, where he learned the prevailing opera style, then back to Germany as Kapellmeister at Hanover. In 1711 he visited England, soon settling there permanently. Handel had absorbed the Italian style thoroughly, and in England he satisfied the demand for operas in this style. However, these operas in a foreign language, with absurd plots, posturing soloists, and improbable characters such as high-level noble personages, suffered a severe blow in 1728. The production of the *Beggars Opera* in which the characters such as Mack the Knife were distinctly of the street-smart class, quickly overtook the Italian opera in British popularity. It took Handel some time and several monetary failures to realize that Italian opera in England had become passé.

Handel was a practical man. He turned to a musical genre which did not need the expensive and temperamental foreign prima donna singers, used no costumes, and did not require the elaborate staging of the opera house. He turned to the oratorio. It was performed in the language of the people--English, and was typically presented in concert halls and churches. The style of music was much the same, but the musical emphasis was on the choruses and not on the elaborate solo vocal line. *Israel in Egypt* (1740) was a Handel masterpiece, and very successful with the public. The British people empathized with the Israelites as they overcame the proud Egyptians. In the Israelites the public saw England conquering her enemies and rivals,

whether they were the Spanish Armada, or the Dutch shipping fleet. Handel had struck the correct British political stance with his oratorios.

When Handel received the request to write an oratorio for performance in Dublin, Ireland, he feverishly went to work and in 21 days turned out *Messiah*. The notes flew out of his pen, and their wind-blown, slanting character on his manuscript graphically suggests the haste at which they appeared. Handel himself was emotionally affected by his own music. After composing the Hallelujah chorus it is said that Handel's servant found him with tears streaming from his eyes, and the master exclaimed, "I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself."

Before its first performance in Dublin in December 1741, Handel invited everyone to the final rehearsal. The ensuing network publicity assured a successful premiere for the oratorio. At the first performance in London, King George II was so moved by the Hallelujah chorus he spontaneously stood up in his box, establishing the custom which prevails today.

While the first performance of *Messiah* had a small orchestra and limited singers, the oratorio soon became so popular everyone wanted to sing its choruses. Since the complete work is quite extensive and requires considerable time to present, it has become common practice to perform selected favorite portions of *Messiah*.

**In The Bleak Midwinter ..... Gustav Holst (1874-1934)**

This work was originally composed as an anthem in 1905. Holst is best known for his orchestral and choral extravaganza, *The Planets*. For the text of "In the Bleak Midwinter" Holst chose a poem by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), the preeminent woman Victorian poet, whose fervent faith is reflected in the text. She wrote these lyrics in response to a request from *Scribner's Monthly* for a Christmas poem. Analysis of the verses of the text: 1) Physical circumstances of the incarnation in Bethlehem; 2) Contrasts Christ's first and second coming; 3) Christ's birth amid simple surroundings in a humble stable, watched by beasts of burden; 4) Contrast between the corporeal angels attendant at Christ's birth and Mary's ability to render Jesus physical affection; 5) Introspection on a personal gift to the baby Jesus—giving him your heart.

Holst also did a congregational hymn-tune setting, of this text, titled "Cranham," which was written for *The English Hymnal* of 1906. It has become one of the best-loved hymns of the Anglican Church.

**Silent Night ..... Franz Gruber (1787-1863); arr. Otis Gruber (1893-1968)**

The story of Silent Night is fairly well-known and loved. The music was composed on December 24, 1818 at the behest of Joseph Mohr, assistant priest at St. Nikolaus, Oberndorf, Austria--a small village near Salzburg. Fr. Mohr had written the text two years earlier. It was first performed that Christmas Eve at the midnight Mass, accompanied by a guitar because the organ was inoperable. By the 1830's it had become known as a Tyrolean folksong. *Stille Nacht* has been translated into a host of different languages.

Otis Gruber was the choir director at Salem Church, 9<sup>th</sup> and State, Quincy, during the 1950's-1960's. The great-grandson of Franz Gruber, he was born in Clayton, IL, not far from Quincy. He composed several published anthems of church music. Otis Gruber gave his *Silent Night* arrangement a subtitle: "A Carol Fantasia." It opens with the men singing the closing phrase of the hymn, followed by a medium voice solo, man or woman. The pitch level now raises from B-flat to D-flat for the three-part women's chorus. Back in the key of B-flat, the men begin an imitative section on the opening phrase of the hymn. Together, all voices grow gradually softer and slower to the close.