

Program Notes

The past three decades have been a fruitful period for American choral music. Today's program includes works written between 1973 and 2009, half of them in the twenty-first century. The first group of pieces, while very different from one another, seems to be fairly labeled "Romantic". The sonorities are often lush, and chordal writing seems more important than counterpoint. After intermission we move to seven folk melodies, arranged and harmonized in complex ways. These works have been chosen for two reasons: the arrangements are challenging and rewarding, and the tunes themselves are terrific. Each of the ten composers heard today is American by birth or "adoption". All but one is alive and actively composing.

We open with Dominick Argento's **Dover Beach Revisited**, a work commissioned by the Yale Glee Club in 2004. Yale's music director, Jeffrey Douma, supplied the following biographical material when he edited the score for publication. Considered to be America's leading composer of lyric opera, Dominick Argento has written thirteen operas; most have been performed in both Europe and the U.S. The majority of his music is vocal. All of it, instrumental and vocal, displays a natural dramatic impulse. In a predominantly tonal context, his music freely combines tonality, atonality, and 12-tone writing. In 1975 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his song cycle "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf."

Dominick Argento chose the title "Dover Beach Revisited" to distinguish his new choral setting of Matthew Arnold's poem from the early setting for solo voice by Samuel Barber. Finding that Arnold's text struck a "strong, responsive chord" within him, Argento has produced a setting that is both highly expressive and painstakingly dedicated to the character and cadence of Arnold's words. Alternating between subtle chromaticism and choral unison passages, and accompanied by spare yet evocative writing for the piano, the music suggests the grandeur of the waves as effectively as the cerebral inner voice of the poet, contemplating the mysteries of human misery and love. The English poet and critic, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) used the image of the waves' retreat from the shore as a symbol of man's loss of religious faith.

In March 2011 the NAS chamber chorus sang a cycle by Morten Lauridsen called Mid-Winter Songs. We now sing the first piece of another cycle of his called **Fire-Songs**. This challenging a cappella choral cycle based on Italian Renaissance poems has been featured at major choral festivals around the world. Lauridsen writes: The choral masterpieces of the High Renaissance, especially the sacred works of Josquin and Palestrina, and the secular madrigals of Monteverdi and Gesualdo, provided the inspiration for my own Madrigali. Italian love poems of that era have constituted a rich lyric source for many composers, and while reading them I became increasingly intrigued by the symbolic imagery of flames, burning, and fire that recurred. I decided to compose an intensely dramatic a cappella cycle based on Renaissance poems employing this motif while blending stylistic musical features of the period within a contemporary compositional idiom. Lauridsen has achieved a remarkable position in the choral world; it can be summed up by the fact that he has now overtaken Randall Thompson as America's most frequently performed choral composer. Several of his individual works are the all-time best selling choral octavos published by Theodore Presser. His music is recorded on more than 100 compact discs, and sung all over the world.

Born in Washington and raised in Portland, Oregon in a family that had immigrated from Denmark, Lauridsen lives in California and, in summers, on a remote island off the coast of Washington State. He has been professor of composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music for more than 30 years. There, he begins each of his lectures by reading a poem. From 1994 to 2001 he was composer-in-residence with the Los Angeles Master Chorale. He was named American Choral Master by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2006, and in 2007 was given the National Medal of the Arts in a White House ceremony.

Written in 2009, Mark Kilstofte's **To Music** is the most recent composition on our program, and is the first of a series of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) settings planned by the composer. Kilstofte has written orchestral and chamber music, but his vocal and choral music is especially successful, benefiting from his own years of vocal study, and has been performed by such groups

as the Dale Warland Singers, San Francisco Choral Artists, and Amadeus Choir. He won the 2002-03 Prix de Rome, the Aaron Copland award, an ASCAP award, and fellowships from the Macdowell Colony and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Kilstofte writes, "To Music emphasizes stasis, timelessness, the infinite... I became captivated by the notion of music being in us and of us, yet beyond us." His direction to singers is "frozen in time, as if in amber."

While Rilke's poem To Music is complex and philosophical, **Fern Hill** by Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) is pictorial, full of familiar, heart-warming images. NAS recently sang a choral-orchestral version of Fern Hill by John Corigliano. The one we sing today is by Fenno Heath, written in 1978 for the Yale Glee Club. Since the University had begun admitting women in 1970, it is for mixed voices. Of the four verses, the third is given to a baritone soloist. Fenno Heath conducted the Yale Glee Club from 1953 to 1992. During this long association he composed many works for voices, both a long list of arrangements of folk songs and spirituals, principally for men's voices, and original works such as Fern Hill.

New Amsterdam Singers is familiar with the works of Eric Whitacre, having sung his Lux Aurumque, Hebrew Love Songs, and Leonardo Dreams in the past ten years. Whitacre has had a meteoric rise in the choral world, particularly since his first recording, The Music of Eric Whitacre, was named one of the top ten classical albums by American Record Guide in 1997. His early musical experiences were not with classical music, but in college he was influenced by composers from Monteverdi to Arvo Pärt, from the Beatles to Sting. Whitacre received his MM in classical composition from The Juilliard School, where he studied with John Corigliano. He has won awards and commissions and opportunities to guest conduct all over the USA. In the spring of 2011 he conducted an evening in Avery Fisher Hall for which participants had been invited to audition on his website. His "virtual choir" experiments have been a phenomenon on YouTube, drawing submissions from individual singers from 58 countries. With a **Lily in Your Hand** was composed in 1992 to a poem by Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936) as translated by Jerome Rothenberg. The original Spanish title of the poem is Curva. The piece incorporates flowing melodies over a rhythmic background of "la-la"s which imitate guitar strumming and flamenco-type chord progressions. The Spanish flavor is also evident in the alternation of 6/8 and 3/4 meters.