CLMS Dedication Program - Notes

As a conductor, when you have almost three years to consider a single concert program, you might have a tendency to overthink it. Believe me, I did. The program was still in flux even just last month, when I added at least two new selections (I'll let you speculate about which two pieces those are, and I'm hoping it isn't that obvious). There were so many directions in which we could go, but in the end, it became clear: this is a dedication of our program – to what is it that we are dedicated?

Tonight's concert is entitled "upon this rock…" and is split into two large sections: those encompassing Heaven, and those encompassing Earth. This is not unlike the balance that we find in our day-to-day, with the choirs' responsibilities being frequently divided among the liturgical and curricular needs of the University. One day, a dear and valued member of one of our choirs quipped that they'd like to "do less Jesus songs," to which I'm sure I replied with some quick and clever retort that elicited laughter and we carried on with rehearsal. Yet, in the back of my head I was thinking that I could make a case for every single one of these choral selections that you'll hear tonight as being Jesus songs. Sacred or secular, our everyday encounters with the divine might be partially hidden, as one of the lyrics from tonight's concert says: "often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise." How to we allow that to shine forth in us?

The opening thirty-second-long jolt that is Maurice Durufle's *Tu es Petrus*, paraphrasing Matthew's Gospel, reminds us that though we're congregating here in Connelly Chapel this evening, this "rock" is less tangible than we think. Randall Thompson's setting of Robert Herrick's *The Best of Rooms* gives us some additional context to the Evangelists narrative as well. With a nod to our heritage, and fodder for some of the finest music ever written, we turn to the Mass Ordinary with Haydn's charming *Missa Brevis Sancti Johannes de Deo*.

It is nicknamed the "Little Organ Mass" for its much-featured setting of the *Benedictus* which (following a Classical era convention) features an extended vocal solo, which is, in this case, accompanied by an elaborate organ part. This is not only an opportunity to feature our new Chapel Organ, Opus 2800 (by Austin Organs, Inc.) but our new voice faculty member, GRAMMY award winning singer Rebecca Myers, who is also featured in Mozart's famed *Laudate Dominum.* These works bookend two accounts of God occurring in nature; as shade, shelter, and sustenance (*Christ the Appletree)*; and as the kindly countenance of someone cared-for (*The Rune of Hospitality*).

The love and compassion that Christ professes permeates every aspect of our life, and it is that thread that binds us together as a choral family of all backgrounds, faiths, and beliefs. It becomes obvious that the heart of the matter is certainly an elaboration of His example, in its many forms: either in searching (*Sfogava con le stelle*); in reflecting *(For Thy Sweet Love);* in healing (Healing Heart); and of course, in remembering. I'd be remiss to not mention the people of Ukraine, a country in which I spent two blissful weeks this past summer while studying the symphonies of Johannes Brahms. It feels like, in many ways, we are remembering them and so many others for such unfortunate and distressing reasons. I hope we find some lighthearted yet meaningful reassurance in Craig Hella Johnson's mash-up of two popular songs with an unmistakable message.

Finally, I draw your attention to a very important piece of music that not only closes our program, but will become a mainstay with the choirs, and hopefully the entire University. The choral programs at many schools within the United States have something of a song that is carried through every generation – a program *alma mater*, if you will. For that piece, we have chosen American composer

Nathaniel Dett's setting of *Ave Maria.* This choice is poignant for two reasons: first, that this time-honored prayer of the church, relying on our Blessed Mother's intercession, remains essential to our mission, and second, that this work is by a black composer among a predominantly white institution.

It is my hope that this will become a tradition among the choirs and will allow us to welcome back alumni of years past to join us to sing at the end of each concert, and that (in both instances) it inspires us to dig into our past, and to seek out our future.

Dr. Ryan M. Mullaney

Gaudeamus 2021 – Notes

Longing [for something] seems to be acute these days, particularly at the hands of a years-long global pandemic. We long for our friends and family; for human contact; for an evening at the pub; a handshake; FOR NORMALCY. Certainly, gathering once again for *Gaudeamus* in Connelly Chapel is a milestone in that journey.

Yet, I wonder how acute this sentiment is, exactly? The adage has always been that "the grass is always greener on the other side," right? I'd posit that we spend our entire lives in a state of longing, a sentiment that is corroborated by, among others, the Church herself. From penitential to triumphant, and even the commonplace, we are provided seasons in which to focus our gaze, and in this cycle, there are attainable goals for which we strive – milestones for the habitual, but no less meaningful in their own rite.

Tonight, our program focuses on a journey from desolation toward salvation and utilizes the opening words of Isaiah 45:8 as a recurring theme: "Pour down, O Heavens from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness." Following each iteration of this refrain, there is a verse that elaborates upon various facets of the longing that this simple phrase encompasses. You'll also notice special musical treatment that highlights a specific word within each verse forming the basis of the grouping of pieces to follow – a way to focus our gaze!

Advent is also something of a journey, and throughout these weeks we are met with increasing clarity. Can you imagine encountering John the Baptist for the first time, unkempt as he was, eating locusts and yelling "Prepare the way of the Lord?" His journey was not so different from our present one – and his message is about perspective that we gain later, another prevalent theme in tonight's concert. The strains of Christmastide we find throughout the program are (for now) tempered by pleas of *Kyrie Eleison.* You'll also notice two distinctly different musical settings of the text "A Spotless Rose." Even from above, the symmetrically woven pedals of this flower are seen differently by each individual, just as this text is conceived here by two different composers, and received by us.

Speaking of perspective(s), once asked how he could conduct the same music night after night, the late Robert Shaw (Assistant Conductor and Chorus Master of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra), said "I conduct for two people in the audience--the person who is hearing this music for the first time, and the person who is hearing it for the last time." Let this evening's music be a milestone in our longing, and as good as it is to be here, we must not remain.

We're grateful that you've chosen to come on the journey with us this evening.

Dr. Ryan M. Mullaney