

West Village Chorale Spring Concert 2017



American Voices

Songs of Americana

Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal

Traditional
arr. by Alice Parker (b. 1925)

Oh, Shenandoah

American Folk Tune
arr. by Alf Houkom (b. 1935)

Songs of Journeying

The Road Not Taken

Randall Thompson (1899–1984)

Pilgrims' Hymn

Stephen Paulus (1949–2014)

Remember, O Thou Man

arr. by Abbie Betinis (b. 1980)

Songs of Awakening

O Nata Lux

Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943)

Cloudburst

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)

Songs of Departure

Sure on This Shining Night

Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

*Good-night (*world premiere*)

Thomas J. Peters (b. 1987)

The Promise of Living

Aaron Copland (1900–1990)

Songs of the Spirit

By and By

Traditional Spiritual
arr. by Carol Barnett (b. 1949)

Total Praise

Richard Smallwood (b. 1948),
arr. by Patrick Barrett and Doreen Rao (b. 1950)

The Battle of Jericho

Traditional Spiritual
arr. by Moses Hogan (1957–2003)

Songs of Hope

Agnus Dei (The Peace of Wild Things)

Michael Conley (b. 1970)

Make Our Garden Grow

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)
arr. by Robert Page (1937–2016)

The West Village Chorale has long been proudly dedicated to performing the work of American composers. Today's program features an eclectic assortment of many familiar and less-known American choral works, including several works by living composers and the premiere of a work commissioned for the West Village Chorale.

Songs of Americana

Sacred Harp (commonly identified with shape-note) music emerged out of the early 19th century as a teaching device for community- and school-based singing. This tradition is regularly characterized by block harmonies and pentatonic melodies (five-note scales often associated with Eastern or folk songs), and has survived as a living art form through the continuation of Sacred Harp "singings" or "conventions," in which large groups of people congregate—seated in a hollow square—and lead each other in informal, ebullient performances. **Hark, I Hear the Harps Eternal** comes from the 1878 shape-note book *Olive Leaf*. Alice Parker's exhilarating arrangement of this melody perfectly captures the ardent nature of the genre, frequently featuring unison solo textures and vigorously articulated rhythms. While she takes some innovative liberties with the original tune, she cleverly preserves the pentatonic harmonies and the paired melodies shared by sopranos and tenors.

Oh, Shenandoah is a widely known and much beloved folk song, most commonly associated with its eponymous geographic region in Virginia and West Virginia. Possibly originating with French voyageurs traveling down the Missouri River, it has since become a staple within the standard American folk tradition. Alf Houkom's lush setting perfectly captures the flowing melodies and lyric nostalgia of the song, setting each of four verses with a different character and texture. Beginning with a chorale-like setting for all four parts for the first verse, he then writes for the unison tenor section accompanied wordlessly by the rest of the ensemble, followed by a solo soprano in the third verse and then a rapturous final verse for the whole ensemble.

Songs of Journeying

Randall Thompson's name is practically synonymous with American choral music of the mid-20th century. His output includes extended sacred works, a setting of texts by Thomas Jefferson, numerous a cappella motets, and his beloved *Frostiana*, a collection of seven settings of Robert Frost poems for choir and piano. The opening song in this cycle, **The Road Not Taken**, elegantly portrays Frost's famous words, beginning with a gently rising and falling unison line for all four voices. Gradually, the music broadens into a four-part texture with independent commentary from the piano. At the epiphanic moment when the poet realizes his choice has "made all the difference," Thompson modulates to the parallel major and increases the tempo, thus embodying this revelation with a delightful and striking musical shift.

Minnesota-based composer Stephen Paulus was renowned for his mellifluous vocal writing and for his poignant yet optimistic harmonic language. **Pilgrims' Hymn**, a chorus excerpted from Paulus's opera *The Three Hermits* (adapted from Tolstoy's short story), is set entirely in a chorale-like texture that repeats for both verses, evocative of traditional hymnody. The music builds slowly from the simple opening chords to a radiant climax at the phrases depicting God's "unceasing love" and "endless . . . grace."

Fellow Minnesotan composer Abbie Betinis is quickly becoming an influential voice in contemporary American choral music. Her style is diverse and eclectic, often balancing Middle Eastern and Asian influences with American shape-note singing and traditional hymnody.

Remember, O Thou Man is Betinis's arrangement of an Elizabethan-era "suffering ballad" by Thomas Ravenscroft. Her setting is lush and expressive, capturing the individual emotions and affects of each verse, moving from mournful remembrance to exuberant joy and finally to reverent wonder.

Songs of Awakening

Arguably one of the most recognizable and often-performed choral voices of the 21st century, Morten Lauridsen exemplifies the neo-Romantic American aesthetic that has influenced an entire generation of young composers. Characterized by tone clusters, slow-moving diatonic harmonies, and sweeping melodies, works by composers like Lauridsen, Whitacre, and Runestad have blended popular and classical idioms in their choral expression. **O nata lux** is the central (and only unaccompanied) movement from Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna*, a cantata for choir and orchestra.

Eric Whitacre burst onto the choral scene in the 1990s as a young composer who wrote transcendently beautiful and luminescent choral music. Like Lauridsen's, his music features cluster chords and lush pandiatonic harmonies. However, he also frequently employs experimental or nonmusical techniques, such as 17th-century *trillos* (as featured in "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine") and improvisatory elements. One of his earliest choral works is **Cloudburst**, an expressive setting of Octavio Paz's "El cántaro roto." It is a vocal tour de force, equal parts madrigal, tone poem, and soundscape. The first half of the piece sets the poem fairly traditionally, introducing the recurring descending motif on "*la lluvia*" (the rain) and aleatoric passages with speechlike repetitions of short phrases. The second half of the piece is the cloudburst, which utilizes sonic effects created by finger snaps, hand claps, and percussion to create the illusion of a rainstorm.

Songs of Departure

One of the most eclectic and well-known American composers of the 20th century was **Samuel Barber**, whose operas, art songs, instrumental works, and choral music have all taken a prominent place in the concert repertory. He famously adapted some of his most beloved pieces from one genre for another, resulting in the choral arrangements of his *Adagio for Strings* (itself a rearrangement of his String Quartet, Op. 11) and **Sure on This Shining Night**. The original art song (from *Four Songs*, Op. 13) sets James Agee's melancholic and reverent text simply yet poignantly, with a gentle interplay between the soloist and the piano. Barber's choral arrangement develops this relationship further, maintaining the solo line in the soprano part but relocating the original canon in the piano to the tenors and altos, while allowing the expressive dynamic capabilities of the human voice to enhance the drama of the original setting.

Of **Good-Night**, a new piece commissioned by the West Village Chorale, composer Thomas Peters writes:

The tonality of “Good-Night” comes from the Raga Rageshri. A raga is a mode in Indian music with unique intervallic patterns, key phrases, and embellishments. I first heard the Raga Rageshri in a presentation last November, and I was immediately entranced by its beauty. Although ragas are typically used in improvisation, I wanted to write a choral piece using the scales, phrases, and moods of the Raga Rageshri. This particular raga is associated with romance, humor, peace, and nighttime. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem perfectly captures the spirit of this Raga Rageshri.

Perhaps no American composer has had more impact on the American musical “sound” than Aaron Copland. His most famous works, including *Appalachian Spring* and *Fanfare for the Common Man*, seem to effortlessly portray the sprawling landscapes and rich cultural heritage of the United States, and have influenced countless younger composers in film and concert music. His 1954 opera *The Tender Land* similarly depicts the American heartland, and the finale of Act I, **The Promise of Living**, captures a moment celebrating the harvest and all the blessings from the land.

Songs of the Spirit

No concert of American choral music would be complete without acknowledging the profound influence of the spiritual on nearly every musical genre. At once mournful, celebratory, prayerful, and galvanizing, the spiritual was an entirely oral tradition that transcended geography and circumstance. Countless composers and arrangers have transcribed and adapted spirituals for concert performance, not as a means of improving but rather as a way to make them more accessible to a wider audience. Carol Barnett’s arrangement of **By and By** is almost a “fantasia” on the spiritual, and in her words it “joyfully overflows the bounds of key and time signatures,” as if to symbolize the path to freedom.

Richard Smallwood has had an acclaimed career as a gospel musician and producer, and his singing group has been nominated for multiple Grammy Awards. **Total Praise** is his powerful setting of Psalm 121. Smallwood uses extreme restraint and suspense building toward the climax of the work, finally arriving at a luminous sequence of “Amens” that bring each voice part into the upper limits of its register, lifting the choir’s collective voices “to the hills.”

In his tragically short life, Moses Hogan transcribed and arranged over 70 spirituals. His publications are marked by a firm mastery of form and harmony, and frequently by their unrelenting virtuosity. **The Battle of Jericho** is one of Moses Hogan’s most popular arrangements, describing the first battle of the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan (as depicted in the Book of Joshua). In this narrative, the walls of Jericho fell after the Israelite army marched around the city blowing their trumpets.

Songs of Hope

The West Village Chorale enjoyed fifteen years of leadership under Michael Conley, a gifted conductor, composer, and arranger. In 2009, Conley completed the first edition of his *Appalachian Requiem*, an hour-long work for choir and orchestra that laments not the death of a human, but rather the gradual destruction of land and culture through irresponsible industrial practices, namely mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia. The work is not a requiem in the liturgical sense, but

rather (like the requiems of Brahms and, to a different extent, Britten) a collection of texts that mirrors the traditional format of a requiem mass. Over the course of six larger movements, Conley delicately weaves together over a dozen settings of poems and arrangements of shape-note tunes, at once memorializing and giving new birth to the musical and cultural heritage of a region in peril. The movement titled **Agnus Dei (The Peace of Wild Things)** is a setting of the 1968 poem by Wendell Berry, a text that well might have been written yesterday, whose message of hope in the face of utter despair bears repeating.

If Aaron Copland was the most iconic composer of a generation, his contemporary Leonard Bernstein was certainly the most iconic musician. His legacy as a brilliant conductor, composer, pianist, teacher, and author resonated around the globe, and his influence on American musical life is undeniable. In 1956, before writing his more successful *West Side Story*, Bernstein wrote the operetta *Candide*, based on Voltaire's novella of the same name. The closing chorus, **Make Our Garden Grow**, is a sincere moment in an otherwise mostly satirical work, expressing indefatigable optimism in the power of the human spirit.

—Colin Britt