

# *Harmony of Two Cultures*

*PROGRAM NOTES* by Emily Kaster

## Harmony of the West

We open our concert with a song of joy. Benjamin Britten's *Jubilate Deo* features a lively text, complemented with an energetic and bouncy organ accompaniment. Britten, a product of the English choral tradition, is often known as a practical composer, whose music demonstrates an insight into what choirs enjoy singing. His opus includes a wide variety of music representing a broad spectrum of genres, ages, and ability. Perhaps best known for his operas, he is established as one of the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century composers in this genre. Britten's other works range from orchestral to choral, solo vocal (many of which were composed for muse and partner, tenor Peter Pears), chamber and instrumental, as well as film music. Britten also took a great interest in writing music for children and amateur performers, and paid meticulous attention to detail in his compositions so that his intents might be replicated in every performance.

In this centenary of his birth, we sing *Jubilate Deo*, a piece that was composed relatively late in his career (1961). It was created as a companion piece to an earlier work, the *Te Deum* from 1934. The attention he gave to text and word stress makes for an exciting piece. The bright opening section, as well as the brilliant "amen" with which the work closes, bookend a contemplative, reflective section, all featuring harmonic language that ranks Britten as a modern composer who references the past while using new, dissonant 20<sup>th</sup> century sounds.

From the dissonant counterpoint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we settle into the classical harmonies of Mozart. The *Missa Brevis in D (KV 194)* was thought to have been composed in 1774 while Mozart, age 18, was employed as a court musician in Salzburg. Possibly intended for ordinary liturgical use at the Salzburg cathedral, the lack of orchestral preludes, and the brevity and conclusion of the composition most likely met the satisfaction of the Archbishop. It calls for 4 part chorus with 4 soloists, strings without viola and organ continuo. The Latin Mass consists of five "Ordinary" movements: Kyrie ("Lord, have mercy"-traditionally sung in Greek), Gloria ("Glory to God in the highest"), Credo ("I believe in one God"), the Nicene Creed, Sanctus ("Holy, Holy, Holy"), the second part of which, beginning with the word "Benedictus" ("Blessed is he") is set by Mozart as a short solo vocal quartet with the two violin parts creating the impression of a sextet, and Agnus Dei ("Lamb of God"), ending with the words "Dona Nobis Pacem", give us peace.

## Love is the Harmony of the World

Singing Mozart's Requiem was a life-altering experience for contemporary composer Eric Whitacre. Growing up in Reno, Nevada, Whitacre was an intermittent piano student, marching band musician, and later rock-star wanna-be. His life as a composer, conductor and lecturer, however, is the one that has earned him Grammy Award winning status and caused him to be called "the hottest thing in choral music."

When Whitacre enrolled at the University of Nevada, he could not read music, and singing in the college choir changed his life. He composed his first concert work, *Go, Lovely, Rose* at the age of 21. He then went on to The Juilliard School, earning his Master of Music degree studying with Pulitzer Prize and Oscar-winning composer, John Corigliano. While Whitacre is probably best known for his choral works, he has composed for wind ensemble, solo voice (particularly for soprano and wife, Hila Plitmann), musical theatre, film, and television. His “Virtual Choir” projects have brought together individual voices from around the globe into an online choir.

No matter the genre, Whitacre’s music incorporates contemporary sounds, using pan-diatonic clusters usually arranged in successive increasing or decreasing density. This technique means that while he uses the pitches of a diatonic scale (as opposed to the chromatic scale), without the limitation of functional tonality, creating dissonant combinations with no single pitch necessarily sounding like the “home-tone.” His use of rhythm, such as that in the piano introduction of the first song *Temuna* (A picture), often involves mixed, complex, and/or compound meters, and a trademark technique is the use of aleatoric and indeterminate sections, which gives the music an element of chance left up to the performers.

The *Five Hebrew Love Songs* are glimpses of intimate moments shared between Whitacre and girl-friend-at-the-time Plitmann. After meeting at Juilliard, the pair became inseparable, and were invited by friend and violinist Friedemann Eichhorn to give a concert with him in his home city of Speyer, Germany in 1996. For this band of traveling musicians, “Friedy” asked Eric to compose a set of troubadour songs for piano, violin, and soprano. Eric asked Hila (who was born and raised in Jerusalem) to write a few ‘postcards’ in her native Hebrew, which Eric then set to music. Out of this original setting, which we perform tonight, five different settings have emerged, yet each still captures the intimacy and power of new, young love.

*Kalá kallá*, the second song, means “light bride,” a pun Eric came up with when first being taught Hebrew. The bell sounds at the beginning of number 4, *Éyze shéleg!* (What snow! - randomly melting in a trademark aleatoric section) are the exact pitches that awoke the couple each morning in Germany as they rang from a nearby cathedral.

### Harmony of the East

The second half of our program interweaves traditional instrumental music of the **ZiZhu Ensemble** with contemporary choral arrangements of Chinese folk tunes. Composer Chen Yi’s *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs* guides us on our sonic journey from West to East. Dr. Chen’s compositions blend Chinese and Western traditions in a way that transcends cultural and musical boundaries. Born in Guangzhou in 1953, Chen began violin and piano at age 3. When the Cultural Revolution overtook China in the 1960’s, she continued music studies, dampening the piano with a blanket and playing violin with a mute attached. When sent to the countryside for two years of forced labor, she brought her violin along. A positive aspect of this experience was the wider knowledge she gained of the life and music of her motherland and its people. At 17, she returned home and served as concertmaster and composer with the Beijing Opera Troupe, and began her research of Chinese music and Western Chinese music theory.

When the school system was restored in 1977, Chen enrolled in Beijing Central Conservatory, studying composition and violin, later becoming the first woman in China to receive a master's degree in composition (June 1986). Chen soon moved to the United States and in 1993 received a D.M.A., with distinction, from Columbia University, studying under Chou Wen-chung and Mario Davidovsky. She currently is professor of composition at the University of Missouri Kansas City Conservatory.

While studying in Beijing, Chen learned to sing hundreds of Chinese folk songs, collected from more than twenty provinces and fifty ethnic groups. For Chen, folk songs were a mirror into daily life, reflecting "the people's thoughts, sentiments, local customs, and manners." She continues that the songs are, "sung in regional dialects, using the idioms of everyday speech with their particular intonations, accents, and cadences." She notes that the correlation between the tonal dialects and the music distinguished regional folk songs from one another. When Chen became Composer-in Residence for the Women's Philharmonic and Chanticleer, she introduced the choral ensemble to *A Set of Chinese Folk Songs*. The entire set includes three volumes of ten songs, taken from eight provinces and five ethnic groups.

The first setting, *Fengyang Song*, references the flower drum song and dance pieces popularized in the streets of Anhui Province. In the old days, with heavy feudal exploitation and the continual flooding of the Huaiho River, the people living by the river were forced to flee from their homeland. Some sang and danced in the streets for a living. A woman would beat the drum, a man the gong, while performers sang and danced. The lyrics typically told of the sufferings of the refugees. In this setting, the alto, tenor, and bass sections mimic the sounds of the drums and gongs, while the sopranos plaintively sing, ending with the sounds of the "performance" fading in the distance.

*The Flowing Stream*, a Yunnan Love Song, expresses a young girl's thoughts about her distant lover, as she mourns, "My Sweetheart! Don't you hear my cry?" The sopranos wail her longing, ringing high and low over great distances, to which the tenors, as her sweetheart, respond, as he too thinks of his love in the clear, moonlight night. In contrast to lover's longing, we are yanked into a group of questioning children with *Guessing*, a reference to children's playful antiphonal singing and pestering curiosity. The various styles are meant to leave the listener with an idea of the differences and beauty of Chinese folk music.

The traditional Chinese instruments shared this evening include the erhu, the dizi. The erhu is a two-stringed bowed musical instrument that has been in the Western world referred to as the "Chinese violin." Often used as a solo instrument, it is featured in traditional and contemporary music arrangements. The gaohu is a string instrument that actually developed from the erhu. The dizi is a transverse flute that is widely used in many genres of Chinese music, including folk, opera, and modern orchestral music. The dizi has a history of popularity with common people because of its simplicity and easy of transport. Most dizi are made of bamboo, which explains why oftentimes the instrument is referred to as a Chinese bamboo flute.

Our journey ends with the whimsical *I am Flying* by Chia-Ming Chien and Nan-Chang Chien. Both were born in China; Chia-Ming later spent time in San Francisco and Nan-Chang studied in Germany, and both live in Taiwan today. The words tell of a magical world tour, freely traveling by the Golden Gate bridge, the Statue of Liberty and Central Park, across the Atlantic to Neuschwanstein and Hohenschwangau castles in Germany. The repetition of the four-part chorale references the German

tradition, while the energized choir bops around in flight, sprinkling the audience with a sonic meteor storm.