

MUSIC DIRECTOR'S PROGRAM NOTES

Selecting the music for this concert was a joy. The theme of angels, Seraphim being the highest order of angels, gave me a lens through which to explore our identity in a new and fun way, to take a look back as well as forward.

I knew that we had to perform Rheinberger's *Abendlied*. It has been a chorus favorite since we sang it at our second concert in fall 1998. It is the perfect "first piece," especially when sung from the back or a gallery/balcony. Rheinberger beautifully sets the text, from the biblical "road to Emmaus" story in Luke, as an invitation to "abide" - to stay and rest at the end of the day.

We first performed Tchaikovsky's *Song of the Cherubim* from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom in our program on Russian icons. Cherubim are the second order of angels, just below Seraphim. And, what bass section doesn't love to sing the Russian Orthodox repertoire?

Michael Burgo was a founding member of Seraphim and sang with the group for many years. His *Song of the Seraphim* is based on a text from Isaiah 6, where Isaiah describes his vision of God seated on the throne, with "Seraphim stationed above." This piece was written for our fifth anniversary and performed again for our tenth.

One of my favorite composers and a great supporter of Seraphim, James Woodman, has contributed several pieces to the Seraphim repertoire. *Psalms 96* was commissioned for our tenth anniversary in 2007. It sets Mary Sidney Herbert's (1561-1621) wonderful poetic translation of the text.

Stanford's *Te Deum* setting sits alongside a few others we have done over the years - by Howells, Britten, Douglas Major, and a particularly interesting one by Ellen Oak that involved djembe drums and Gregorian chant! For this occasion, I felt the Stanford in B-flat was properly celebratory, and of course very English.

The planning for this concert began with Britten's *The Company of Heaven*. This work is "all angels, all the time," and really has it all: drama, celebration, stunning texts from scripture and poets like Rossini and Blake, and ancient hymns.

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was an English composer, conductor, and pianist, and a prominent figure in 20th-century music. Born in Lowestoft, England, he began composing at the age of five and attended the Royal College of Music in London. Following graduation, he took a job with the BBC's film unit, writing nearly 40 scores for the theatre, cinema, and radio.

The BBC's Religious Affairs department commissioned *The Company of Heaven* in 1937, when Britten was 23. Britten's music was meant to accompany a radio program marking Michaelmas, a feast day named after the archangel Michael who, according to

scripture, hurled Lucifer out of Heaven. The texts for *The Company of Heaven* include writings about angels with sources ranging from the Bible to contemporary poetry.

Though the program was mostly spoken, Britten set selected texts to music and composed two purely instrumental movements for this work. He dramatized the battle between Michael and Lucifer in his theatrical movement "War in Heaven," which features *sprechstimme* (half-spoken, half-sung) from the lower voices, along with an ominous organ part and aggressive percussion. "A Thousand Gleaming Fires," a setting of a poem by Emily Brontë, was specifically written to be performed by tenor Peter Pears, a member of the BBC Singers. This was the first of many pieces Britten would write for Pears, who eventually became his life-long partner. The final piece of the cantata, "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones," draws on the hymn of the same name, one well-known to Anglican church-goers.

Although there was discussion of publishing the piece or reworking it for concert performance, this did not happen in Britten's lifetime. The first concert performance of the complete work was given at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1989, over 50 years after the original radio program.

Jennifer Lester, Music Director
The Seraphim Singers
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