

## Melodia Spring 2024

### A Tapestry of Song

#### Concert Program Notes

With “**A Tapestry of Song**,” Melodia closes its 21st season by exploring themes of connection with something greater than ourselves, of the hopes and dreams we have for the next generation, and of travel — within this world and beyond. The rich, contrasting textures of the instruments — piano, organ, harp, and cello — intertwine with our voices to weave this tapestry.

One thread running through this program is an expansive, joyful, transcendent view of humanity, our connection with each other, and our relation with the divine. Beneath this repertoire thrums the spirit of Walt Whitman, whose approach to spirituality was a major influence on both Kahlil Gibran and Gustav Holst. Like the narrator in Whitman's “Song of Myself,” who invites readers on a journey, “My left hand hooking you round the waist, / My right hand pointing,” Melodia invites you to join us as we travel by boat with a fleeing Scottish prince; through the sky in a cosmic chariot; down to the sea, swept along by the rushing waters; and through lands of woe, yearning for a haven free of sickness, toil, and danger.

We open our concert with Josef Gabriel Rheinberger's “**Mass in A Major**,” which premiered at the 1881 Christmas Eve Mass at the Allerheiligen-Hofkirche in Munich. The Mass is emblematic of Rheinberger's affinity for liturgical music, his aptitude for vocal and choral writing, and his excellent ear for counterpoint. Graceful homophonic phrases and a strategic use of unison and “conversational” text-setting clearly communicate the wordier sung prayers of the Latin Mass, especially the Credo. This is in contrast to the more complex polyphonic moments, particularly in the Kyrie and Agnus Dei, where the music communicates the emotional subtext of the prayers being sung. The organ supports and surrounds the choir throughout the Mass, without overpowering or clouding its sound, while the cello anchors and augments it. The end result is far greater than the sum of its parts: an elegant expression of the intention of each prayer, unfolding in an almost story-like arc across the larger structure of the work.

Gustav Holst, the composer of “**Hymns from the Rig Veda**,” was not the only British composer looking to ancient Indian texts for inspiration in 1908. But where Holst's contemporaries filled their “India-inspired” compositions with Orientalist stereotypes while simultaneously sneering at 20<sup>th</sup>-century Indian culture, Holst approached contemporary Indian music with a deep and respectful interest. He sought out Indian musicians, pored over Indian scales, and studied Sanskrit in an effort to heed the rhythms and melodic nuances of the canonical Hindu texts. He set the hymns with harp to approximate the sound of the *tambura*, an Indian lute. And he largely eschewed hackneyed Orientalist cadences, instead exploring whole-tone scales, Dorian mode, homophony, asymmetrical ostinatos, and other features inspired by actual Indian music. This earnest engagement with Indian music and literature yielded compositions that were disparaged by some of his English peers but have been embraced by some contemporary South Asian choirs, most recently in a 2017 concert series by the Bangalore School of Music.

“**Hymn to the Dawn**” pays reverent homage to Ushas, the Vedic goddess of the dawn in Hinduism who, traveling in her golden chariot in the sky, gently ushers all living things over the threshold from night to

day. The cascading Dorian melody of “**Hymn to the Waters**” evokes the constant motion of the water cycle, as rain falls and cuts channels across the earth to the ocean. This hymn references Indra, the thunderbolt-wielding god of rain, and Varuna, the god of oceans and sky who upholds the laws of the cosmos. “**Hymn to Vena**” paints an ecstatic, iridescent scene of the sun traveling through the misty sky and “hurling light to the farthest region.” Analysts disagree over whether the Rig Veda’s Vena is best understood as a sun god, a moon god, or the personification of the rainbow, but Holst makes clear in his translation and setting that he is imagining a radiant sun god. Holst’s final movement, “**Hymn of the Travellers**,” juxtaposes a sense of yearning faith that safety and homecoming are possible with stark images of a perilous journey threatened by robbers and foes. The hymn appeals to a mighty power to “feed us and inspire us” and “lead us past pursuers unto meadows fair.”

An instrumental interlude comes next: “**Nocturne in E-flat, Opus 21**” by Marcel Lucien Tournier, a virtuosic harpist who was equally gifted (and known) as a composer. His compositional output unsurprisingly centered around the harp, though he also wrote for various flavors of chamber ensemble and piano, with the occasional orchestral piece. This nocturne, published in 1930, is a seminal example of Tournier’s compositional voice, which blends the idioms of the Romantic and Impressionist styles. The contrapuntal exchanges between cello and harp explore the striking contrasts and surprising similarities between the textures of the two (the one perhaps spikier, the other more rounded) while fully exploiting the wide tonal ranges of both instruments. The end result is a mellifluous, elegant piece — a varied soundscape which draws in the listener and creates a sense of ease and peace.

Our next piece, “**Your Children**,” is the world premiere of a piece by composer Emily Mason, the winner of Melodia's 2024 Women Composers' Commissioning Competition. “Your Children” is a new setting of Lebanese American writer Kahlil Gibran's poem "On Children" from his 1923 book *The Prophet*. “On Children” asserts the inherent dignity of children and their right to self-determination. The role of parents, the poem tells us, is to care for children as they grow and then to let go, to send them forth into the ever-changing world. In picturing the divine as an archer, children as the arrows, and parents as the bow, the poem confronts us with the truth that none of us can travel with our children to the future they will inhabit: it is a journey we must trust them to make without us. Mason’s setting treats this theme with a sweet and solemn grandeur, passing the melodic line back and forth among the voices to create a continual motion of separation and reconvergence, as moments of stirring harmony alternate with a simply stated melody that gives Gibran’s words space to resonate.

“**Skye Boat Song**” began its life as a Scottish air in the 1700s called “The Cuckoo in the Grove” about a man who complains to a bird about his love life. In the 1880s, Englishman Sir Harold Boulton wrote new lyrics to the tune, recounting the story of “Bonnie Prince Charlie’s” escape from Scotland to the Isle of Skye following the failure of his Jacobite uprising in 1745. This version is arranged by Bob Chilcott.

Next is a setting by Reginald Unterseher of the classic American folk song “**Wayfarin’ Stranger**.” The origins of this haunting and plaintive tune are, like so many others, contested and ultimately unknown. The melody has been linked to various Scottish and Irish tunes, to the German hymn “A Guest on Earth I Wander,” and to songs from Black American spiritual tradition. For a brief time after the Civil War, it was known as “The Libby Prison Hymn” after a dying Union soldier scratched the lyrics into the wall of his cell. The song is an arresting combination of lament and exultation, with the singer asserting that their

troubles on earth are temporary and that such joy awaits them in the next world that they have no fear of death. “Wayfarin’ Stranger” remains immensely popular today—it’s hard to think of a modern folk artist who has not covered it—with its enduring ability to resonate with those going through challenging times.

The final piece in our program, “**Jubilee**,” brings a playful modern sensibility and a sense of pageantry to folk themes and melodies. A lively tempo, mixed meter, and a few theatrical flourishes animate a simple, whimsical text adapted from traditional Appalachian songs, resulting in an upbeat, exciting piece with irresistible momentum. “Jubilee” is composed by Sally Lamb McCune, a composer and educator based in upstate New York. McCune's 2012 piece “Questions About Angels” was commissioned and performed by Melodia.

The future is uncertain, as it has always been. But as long as people gather to make art together for the sheer joy of it, we can still hope that, as Whitman wrote, "the strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung."

Notes by Alana Price, Hilary Baboukis, Katherine Lascoutx, and Rebecca Hart