

“FIRE & LIGHT” PROGRAM NOTES

BY DEBORAH JENKINS TESKE

The dramatic oratorios of George Frideric Handel (1685 - 1759) are among the highest achievements of musical drama ever written.

Composed over the course of his lifetime, these are epic tales of brutality and passion, betrayal and revenge. The libretti are drawn largely from biblical sources or Greek antiquity and are populated by larger-than-life characters: heroes, warriors, gods and goddesses. But the essence of each story, and the true measure of

Handel’s genius as a dramatist, is deeply human. The characters are plagued by confusion and despair. In their suffering they look beyond earthly existence, turning to higher powers to seek hope and consolation. The role of the chorus in Handel’s works is vital, often giving voice to opposing points of view. In *Theodora* the chorus portrays both the Roman army and the early Christians, and in *Samson*, both the Israelites and the Philistines. When not participating directly in the drama, the chorus comments on the action in the manner of a Greek chorus, offering a moral observation or reflecting on the plight of the characters. This is nowhere more poignant than in the assertion—in the penultimate chorus from *Semele*—that “all our boasted fire is lost in smoke.” *Semele* is consumed by fire, a fate resulting from her own vanity. *Samson* is betrayed by the woman he loves, and is tortured and imprisoned. *Deborah* and *Theodora* both wage mighty battles against oppression and injustice. In the end, though, there is light in the darkness. There is redemption for these characters in the form of salvation or transformation, or both.

The second part of today’s program reflects on these same themes, not in theatrical context, but through deep introspection. Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943) composed *Lux Aeterna* in 1997, the year his mother died. It is, in his own words, “a quiet meditation about illumination.” A look at the composer’s own life story gives a glimpse into the heart of this beautiful work.

When Lauridsen was 18 years old he joined the Forest Service as a member of a firefighting crew. Music was at that time an avocation for him. He subsequently spent a summer living in a fire lookout tower in Gifford Pinchot National Forest in southern Washington. In the 2011 film *Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen*, he describes his 10 weeks there surrounded “by beauty beyond description.” When he came down from the tower he poured himself into music, spending his early professional years living on a shoestring, hocking his various musical instruments at pawn shops. He attributes his eventual success to perseverance and dedication. He moved to Waldron Island in the



Pacific Northwest with some pencils and an 1890 Steinway piano which was, he says, “full of termites and perpetually out of tune.” These were the tools of his trade. He lives there still, claiming a profound connection to his physical place in the world. As he confronted his grief over his mother’s death, *Lux Aeterna* was directly inspired by his observations of light filtered through the trees and reflected on the water.

Lauridsen’s compositional style draws on the ancient sounds of chant and Renaissance polyphony. His vocal writing flows with the rhythm of the text; the phrasing breathes in ways that feel natural and inevitable to the singer. There is a familiarity about his music, but also a freshness. His characteristic harmonic dissonances grip the ear in a continual ebb and flow of tension and release. *Lux Aeterna* is scored for SATB chorus and chamber orchestra. The five movements are based on various references to light found in sacred Latin texts. The words of the Requiem Mass open and close the work. A lush a cappella setting of *O Nata Lux* (“O light born of light”) is the centerpiece. The second movement, the hymn *In Te, Domine, Speravi* is a gentle plea for mercy. In the fourth movement, *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, the words “light” and “grief” are given equal importance in the setting, underscoring their inseparable nature. In this movement Lauridsen makes effective use of unison singing, powerful in its straightforward immediacy.

Handel’s oratorios and Lauridsen’s *Lux Aeterna* may be separated by 250 years, but what unites them is more interesting and important. Lauridsen speaks of “having something in you that looks around and sees what is bigger than all of us.” This music, like all great art, seeks to express the human journey. Handel often concluded a work with a jubilant *alleluia*. Lauridsen chooses to do the same here. His final *alleluia* and *amen* are nothing short of ecstatic expressions of hope and the attainment of peace of mind. In the end there is perhaps nothing else to be said.

On behalf of the Colorado Springs Chorale, I thank you for joining us on the journey.

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Artistic Director

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