The 2005 Raymond Brock Commission: 
Nocturnes

by Milburn Price

Author's note: Because the composition of Nocturnes was still in progress at the publication deadline for this article, I was able to see only the final movement ("Sure on This Shining Night") in its entirety.

Over the past ten years, Morten Lauridsen has become one of America's most frequently performed composers of choral music. His four choral cycles (Les Chansons des Roses, Mid-Winter Songs, Madrigali: Six "FireSongs" on Renaissance Italian Poems, and Lux Aeterna), and his unaccompanied motets on sacred texts are featured regularly in concert by choral ensembles around the world. Three of his choral works issued in octavo format—"O Magnum Mysterium," "Dirait-on" (from Les Chansons des Roses), and "O Nata Lux" (from Lux Aeterna)—have become the three all-time best selling octavos distributed by Theodore Presser, in business since 1783.

A variety of distinguished choral ensembles, including the Robert Shaw Singers and the Dale Warland Singers, as well as the San Francisco, Cleveland, and Dallas Symphony Choruses, have recorded Lauridsen's works on more than one hundred CDs. A CD of his compositions titled Lux Aeterna, recorded by the Los Angeles Master Chorale under the direction of Paul Salamunovich, received a nomination for a Grammy award in 1998.


In recent years, Lauridsen has spent the summer months at his beach cabin on a remote island off the northwest coast of Washington state. Regarding this place and its relationship to his compositions, he says: "This is a place of pristine beauty and serenity, an abiding calmness and oneness with nature. The Lux Aeterna, the O Magnum Mysterium, and other works were finished there on an old, fifty-dollar piano, and musical ideas were often generated on long walks on the beach or through the forest."

Since 1967, Lauridsen has taught composition at the University of Southern California, including a period of time as chair of the department of composition at USC's Thornton School of Music from 1990-2002. He was composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale from 1994-2001. Given the focus of his career in the Los Angeles area, it is fitting that he was invited to write the Raymond Brock Commission for the 2005 ACDA National Convention in Los Angeles.

For the Brock Commission, Lauridsen chose to write a three-movement work titled Nocturnes, for SATB chorus and piano. The cycle sets three poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda, and James Agee, each addressing some aspect of the common theme of "Night." It is not surprising that poetry drawn from diverse sources provides the texts for Nocturnes. An article about Lauridsen's Lux Aeterna that appeared in the February 2003 issue of the Choral Journal included comments by the composer regarding his love for poetry:

My passion second to music is poetry. I read and study it constantly—every day. It is a fundamental part of my life. I have profound admiration for poets who seek deeper meanings and truths and are able to express themselves elegantly through the written word. Consequently, it has been a natural development for me as a composer to wed these two passions and to set texts to music.

The opening movement of the cycle is "Sa Nuit d'Été" ("Its Summer Night"), which sets a text by Rilke. Of this section, Lauridsen says, "Rilke's impassioned 'Sa Nuit d'Été' will be
sung in French supported by dense, colorful harmonies in both the choral and piano parts. The composer provided the following text translation:

"Its Summer Night"

If, with my burning hands, I could melt the body surrounding your lover's heart, ah! how the night would become translucent, taking it for a late star, which, from the first moments of the world, was forever lost, and which begins its course with its blonde light, trying to reach out towards its first night, its night, its summer night.

Rainer Maria Rilke
translated from the French by Byron Adams

Lauridsen's setting of Pablo Neruda's "Soneto de la Noche" ["Sonnet of the Night"], from the "Noche" section of the poet's Cien Sonetos de Amor, is the second, and middle, movement of the cycle. The composer says that this text "has long been my favorite love poem and speaks eloquently of an everlasting, eternal love that conquers death while reaffirming life. My a cappella setting in the original Spanish of this gorgeous poem is predominantly quiet, serene and folk-like in its simplicity." He says further that his approach to this text utilizes "direct harmonies accompanying long, lyrical vocal lines." Following is a translation of the Neruda text:

"Sonnet of the Night"

When I die, I want your hands upon my eyes: I want the light and the wheat of your beloved hands to pass their freshness over me one more time: I want to feel the gentleness that changed my destiny.

I want you to live while I wait for you, asleep, I want your ears to still hear the wind, I want you to smell the scent of the sea we both loved, and to continue walking on the sand we walked on.

I want all that I love to keep on living, and you whom I loved and sang above all things to keep flowering into full bloom, so that you can touch all that my love provides you, so that my shadow may pass over your hair, so that all may know the reason for my song.

Text by Pablo Neruda
translated from the Spanish by Nicholas Lauridsen

Lauridsen concludes the cycle with his setting of James Agee's "Sure on This Shining Night," a text he considers to be "wondrous, mystical." He describes his treatment of the poem as "a lyric choral song, again with piano." Following is the text of Agee's work:

"Sure on This Shining Night"

Sure on this shining night, Of starmade shadows round, Kindness must watch for me This side the ground.
The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.

Sure on this shining night
I weep for wonder
Wandering far alone
Of shadows on the stars.

Poem copyright 1968 by The James Agee Trust. Used by permission.

The major part of Lauridsen's setting exudes a luminous tranquility, with graceful vocal lines supported by an undulating, often-arpeggiated piano accompaniment. The serenity is interrupted momentarily at the end of an extended B section (within a formal structure of A A1 B A2), when thickened vocal and piano textures combine with heightened dynamic intensity to create a dramatic climax, which quickly subsides to the piece's prevailing tranquility in anticipation of the final statement of the principal theme.

Extensive use is made of unison singing involving paired voice parts (TB and SA) in the first two sections, making the fuller texture at the conclusion of the B section all the more effective. Tonality is securely anchored in D major, with occasional non-harmonic tones and ninth
The major part of Lauridsen's setting exudes a luminous tranquility, with graceful vocal lines supported by an undulating, often-arpeggiated piano accompaniment. Chords enriching harmonic interest. The composer's attention to textual nuance is always evident.

It is likely that "Sure on This Shining Night" will take its place alongside other choral favorites by Morten Lauridsen that are performed frequently. Its accessibility of range and overall musical demands will enable it to be performed by good high school choirs. Yet, its exquisite musicality and its sensitive setting of the James Agee text will make it a gratifying vehicle for college and professional choral ensembles. The Donald Brinegar Singers will give the premiere performance of Nocturnes at the 2005 ACDA National Convention, with the composer at the piano. Nocturnes is the most recent in a series of distinguished compositions that have been commissioned for ACDA National and Divisional Conventions through the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Endowment Trust, established in 1991 after Raymond Brock's death. Brock served ACDA as Director of Development and Administrative Assistant from 1987-91. It was during his term of service as Director of Development that the ACDA Endowment Trust was established. The purpose of the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Endowment Trust, as stated in its founding documents, is "to commission new choral compositions from the world's foremost contemporary composers."

The list of composers who have crafted new works as the result of a Raymond Brock commission is impressive, and some of the commissioned works have already found a place in what might be considered "standard" choral repertoire for advanced choirs.

NOTES

1 "Morten Lauridsen: Straight from the Heart," Faber Music Web site <http://www.fabermusic.co.uk>.
2 Timothy W. Sharp, "Morten Lauridsen's Lux Aeterna—A Conductor's Considerations," Choral Journal, Vol. 43, No. 7 (February 2003), 17-33. These comments were made during Lauridsen's pre-concert lecture at the premiere performance of Lux Aeterna, April 13, 1997, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, CA.
3 Ibid., p. 19.
4 E-mail correspondence from the composer dated October 9, 2004.
5 Ibid.
6 E-mail correspondence from the composer dated October 18, 2004.
7 E-mail correspondence from the composer dated October 9, 2004.

Compositions Created as the Result of a Brock Commission:

1991 (Brock Memorial Service) — "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" by Theron Kirk
1993 (National Convention) — "A Time to Dance" by Carlisle Floyd
1994 (Division Conventions) — "Sing a Mighty Song" by Daniel Gawthrop
1995 (National Convention) — "Alleluia for the Waters" by Daniel Pinkham
1995 (National Convention) — "Fanfare—ACDA" by John Ferguson
1996 (Division Conventions) — "That I Shall Never Look upon Thee More"
   by James Q. Mulholland
1997 (National Convention) — "Jacob's Prayer" by Gian Carlo Menotti
1997 (National Convention) — "God Be with Us" by Stephen Paulus
1998 (Division Conventions) — "A Psalm Trilogy" by Samuel Adler
1999 (National Convention) — "The God of Glory Thunders" by Adolphus Hailstork
1999 (National Convention) — "I Thank You God" by Owyneth Walker
2000 (Division Conventions) — "The Circles of Our Lives" by David Brunner
2001 (National Convention) — "Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine" by Eric Whitacre
2002 (Division Conventions) — "Psalm 36" by Richard Nance
2003 (National Convention) — "Memorial" by Rene Clausen
2004 (Division Conventions) — "We Beheld Once Again the Stars" by Z. Randall Stroope