# PRAYER

The Songs of Morten Lauridsen



Jeremy Huw Williams, Baritone | Paula Fan, Piano

Caryl Hughes, Soprano

John Reynolds, Clarinet and Peter Esswood, Violoncello on poems by Neruda, Giora, Rilke, Agee, Witt, Moss and Lorca plus

O Magnum Mysterium

# PRAYER The Songs of Morten Lauridsen

1. O Magnum Mysterium - 5:33

#### A Winter Come

(Howard Moss)

- 2. When Frost Moves Fast 2:09
- 3. As Birds Come Nearer 2:19
- 4. The Racing Waterfall 0:53
  - 5. A Child Lay Down 2:09
- 6. Who Reads by Starlight 0:49
  - 7. And What of Love 3:10
    - Ya eres mía 5:40
       (Now You Are Mine)
       (Pablo Neruda)

#### **Cuatro Canciones**

(Federico García Lorca)

- 9. Claro de reloj (Pause of the Clock) 3:04 10. Noche (Night) - 0:57
- 11. La luna asoma (The Moon Rising) 2:54 12. Despedida (Farewell) - 3:54

13. **Dirait-on** - 4:37 (So They Say)

(Rainer Maria Rilke)

#### A Backyard Universe

(Harold Witt)

14. Girl - 2:20

15. Three - 3:57

16. Boy - 2:11

#### 17. Where Have The Actors Gone - 5:15

(Morten Lauridsen)

#### Two Songs on American Poems

(Dana Gioia, James Agee)

18. Prayer - 5:10

19. Sure on this Shining Night - 5:05

# Morten Lauridsen

Morten Lauridsen has achieved such fame and popularity for his choral music that he ranks as one of the world's most widely performed living composers. Less well known, however, is Lauridsen's small but distinguished body of art songs. These works span his entire career and display the more intimate aspects of his genius for vocal music.

The distinguishing feature of Lauridsen's vocal music—whether for chorus, individual voice, or duet—has been his mastery of the long lyric line. One hears this quality immediately in his celebrated melodic songs, such as "Dirait-on," but it is equally present in his atonal works, such as his Cuatro Canciones based on poems by García Lorca. Whatever the compositional method, there is always a direct and fluent physicality about Lauridsen's writing, an unabashed sense of the expressive power of human voice.

Another defining quality of Lauridsen's work is its explicitly poetic nature. All art songs, by definition, provide musical settings for pre-existing poems, but Lauridsen's songs seem especially "poetic" in their effect. The composer has been drawn to texts of powerful (though often indirect) emotion. There are no narrative songs or dramatic scenes in his vocal oeuvre. His characteristic mode is lyric in the true literary sense—deep subjective evocations of a single moment.

Whether expressing joy or wonder, sorrow or erotic exultation, Lauridsen's signature works seem to make time stop. Here one reaches again for a literary term, specifically "the sublime," which the ancient Greek critic Longinus defined as the artistic mode of heightened consciousness, emotional intensity, and spiritual awe that produces a sense of ecstasy. Recapturing the sublime is central to Lauridsen's aesthetic enterprise. His compositions often move to induce and sustain a sense of rapture in both the performer and listener—creating the impression that the singer and song have merged in a moment of timeless transcendence.

Rapture is not a common goal for contemporary American classical music, which is so often self-conscious and intellectual in its approach. Nor is timelessness a quality much appreciated by music critics deeply invested in stylistic novelty and theories of historical development. Lauridsen is an anomalous figure in contemporary music, not so much a contrarian as an outsider whose goals differ in fundamental ways from those of his academic or metropolitan peers.

Lauridsen's immense popularity does not originate in some generic return to tonality. A great deal of forgettable tonal music has appeared in recent decades. Lauridsen's salient individuality grows from something deeper than any stylistic orientation. It is not tonality but his tone—serious, direct, and sincere—that imbues his music with such tangible authenticity. His aesthetic is radical and unironic—a return not to romanticism but to the ancient human purposes of song. To chant is to enchant, to transcend quotidian reality and experience the ecstasy of our existence. For this reason, Lauridsen has been called a mystical composer.

The songs on this disk span half a century of artistic development from the composer's first cycle, **A Backyard Universe** (1965), to the recent vocal duet of Pablo Neruda's "**Ya eres mía"** (2016). Lauridsen is almost exclusively a vocal composer. His creative process is so painstakingly slow that he has a relatively small catalogue for someone so influential. Hearing the songs and duets gathered on this disk, one can follow the phases of his musical and artistic evolution.

Lauridsen's career is unusual, though it reflects the complicated struggle of classical composers in his generation to find a viable contemporary idiom in the post-modern period. As a graduate student at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, the young Lauridsen began composing in the mid-century tonal idiom of Britten and Copland. This early style achieved a sort of perfection in his Howard Moss song cycle, **A Winter Come** (1967). The composer, however, soon experienced a creative crisis. In the early 1970s he faced a series of personal and artistic problems that made composition difficult. During that decade he composed only two songs and a few other works.

It is impossible to understand Lauridsen's later achievement without recognizing the bitter weight of those years. When Lauridsen finally returned fully to music, he was a different composer. He had also undergone a furious burst of experimentation, turning first to atonality and serial procedures and then to a highly chromatic and contrapuntal tonality. In the process he underwent a metamorphosis from a fine academic composer into something sui generis.

Gradually a new sensibility emerged— the magisterial late lyric style of **Les Chanson des Roses** (1993), **O Magnum Mysterium** (1994), and **Lux Aeterna** (1997).

The public reception of Lauridsen's late lyric style is a provocative fact of recent musical history. Within a decade his compositions became central to the international choral repertory—an unusual phenomenon for a previously little known composer in his fifties. Audiences and musicians immediately recognized something both singular and important in his work, something critics have not yet adequately described.

Lauridsen has created a distinctly personal style that reaches back through modernism into Renaissance and Romantic music (with touches of both jazz and the "Great American Songbook"). His music feels simultaneously contemporary and deeply rooted in the traditions of Western vocal music. He integrates these diverse elements into a unified personal style—an utterly different approach from the allusive post-modernist idioms in which the past is so often employed within ironic quotation marks. Meanwhile Lauridsen's signature harmonies, fluent counterpoint, and concise compositional methods allowed him to do something even more radical—to rehabilitate the expressive power of melody. His late lyric style has created a new musical idiom—much imitated but never quite equaled— that has broadened and renewed the possibilities of contemporary classical vocal music.

# Notes on the Songs

# 1. O Magnum Mysterium (Solo voice version: 1999)

This solo voice and piano version of Lauridsen's radiant 1994 choral work is not a transcription of the original motet. The composer has added a piano accompaniment and introduction to the "a cappella" original. Revised for solo voice, the work acquires the quiet intensity of a private prayer rather than the communal meditation of the original motet. The medieval Latin text, which serves as a responsorial chant in Christmas matins, celebrates the birth of Jesus from the Virgin

Mary, marveling that the great mystery of the Incarnation was first witnessed by the animals around the manger. This version of *O Magnum Mysterium* was premiered in 1999 by Jama Laurent accompanied by the composer.

#### 2. A Winter Come (1967): Text by Howard Moss

This song cycle based on a poem by Howard Moss represented Lauridsen's early breakthrough piece. Begun while the composer was still studying with Ingolf Dahll at University of Southern California, A Winter Come was premiered by soprano Rose Taylor and pianist Ralph Grierson in Los Angeles in 1968. The cycle sets a lyric elegy by Moss written in ten symmetrical and delicately beautiful stanzas. Lauridsen's original version included settings of all ten sections. Although the work won a young composer's competition, Lauridsen grew dissatisfied. With the relentless perfectionism that has come to characterize his creative process, he eventually cut four songs to focus and unify the cycle. (One song was cut just as the score was going to press—to the consternation of his publisher.) Already evident in this youthful cycle is the composer's determination to achieve lyrical intensity without losing formal concentration. The entire cycle takes just over ten minutes to perform, and the individual songs unfold with a notable sense of economy—not a note seems wasted. The sections are each distinct, but the cycle's overall effect is unified just as in Howard Moss's exquisite meditation on love and loss.

# 3. "Ya eres mía" (2016): Spanish text by Pablo Neruda

Lauridsen has written some of his finest songs as duets, a form which allows him to display his mastery of vocal counterpoint in the intimate dimensions of art song. In this recent work, the composer once again sets a sonnet by Pablo Neruda, who had earlier provided one of the texts for Nocturnes (2005). Neruda's poem is a visionary celebration of erotic union, a hymn in the tradition of the mystical sexuality central to Spanish-language poetry. Lauridsen expands the poem by giving the woman a voice equal to the male speaker of the original text. The poem's emotional power is not simply doubled but deepened. The romantic merging of the two selves is now embodied in the form of the duet. The careful control of Lauridsen's early songs has gradually relaxed in his later works which has become more overtly emotional, and never more so than in the ecstatic lyricism of his Neruda settings.

# 4. Cuatro Canciones (1983): Spanish Texts by Federico García Lorca

This song cycle based on four poems by Federico García Lorca represents Lauridsen's only atonal vocal work. The four short nocturnal poems create an atmosphere of dark introspection and anxiety, which the composer portrays by expanding the accompaniment to include clarinet and cello. Each song creates its own thematic cell that the composer develops according to serial procedures. The three instrumentalists provide color and commentary to the singer, and each movement ends with a different instrument as the cycle moves toward its gently lyric finale. Cuatro Canciones was commissioned by the Yoav Chamber Ensemble and premiered at the Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles in 1983.

### 5. "Dirait-on" (1996): French Text by Rainer Maria Rilke

"Dirait-on" is the final section of the 1993 choral song cycle, Les Chanson des Roses, which Lauridsen arranged for mixed duet three years later. This stunning song sets the elegant French verse of Rainer Maria Rilke, who stopped writing in his native German after the completion of his modernist masterpieces, The Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus. Conceived as an homage to the French chanson populaire (or folksong), "Dirait-on" demonstrates Lauridsen's extraordinary melodic gift. The reason why a particular melody possesses the power to enchant remains a critical mystery, but there are a few observations to be made about "Dirait-on" that apply to some of Lauridsen's other work. The song takes a simple melodic theme and then develops it into two long, lyrical lines working in counterpoint. The piano accompaniment is essentially a series of arpeggios—reminiscent of Italian bel canto in its minimalism—which put the full expressive weight on the two voices and their ecstatic conversation. Although made of simple elements, the finished song is subtle, sophisticated, and classically concise, though its emotional impact is enormous and its theme unforgettable.

## 6. A Backyard Universe (1965): Texts by Harold Witt

These three songs about childhood are Lauridsen's earliest surviving vocal works and the first of his eight cycles (five for chorus, three for solo voice). Lauridsen, a serious reader of poetry

even in his student days, discovered the work of Harold Witt (1923-1995), a neglected but gifted California poet. Choosing these three lusciously playful descriptions of the author's children, Lauridsen composed a small cycle celebrating the innocence and exuberance of youth. The songs were first sketched out in a music theory class and written for the tenor Delton Shilling, who was also a student in the course. The piano part is virtuosic, and the long vocal lines are full of word painting to match Witt's fanciful language. A Backyard Universe was premiered by Shilling and pianist Cinda Goold Redman in 1965. The cycle remained unpublished for nearly half a century because the composer had not secured the rights to the texts. In the meantime the poet died, and his publisher had vanished. Forty-five years after the premiere, Lauridsen succeeded in reaching the executor of the estate. The woman who answered his phone call proved to be the dancing child in "Girl."

# 7. "Where Have the Actors Gone" (1976): Lyrics by Morten Lauridsen

"Where Have the Actors Gone" is a unique work in the Lauridsen canon. It is the only song the composer has written to his own lyrics. The musical style also differs from his other works; it is a soulful homage to the Broadway ballad. This "enduring, rich legacy of quintessentially American music," Lauridsen claims, has influenced all of his vocal compositions, but "Where Have the Actors Gone" is the only time he worked overtly in the genre. There is nonetheless an underlying classical structure in this 32-bar rounded binary ballad: it unfolds in the form of a passacaglia. "Where Have the Actors Gone" was premiered by jazz vocalist Sunny Wilkinson in 1976 at the Improv Theater in Los Angeles. The lyrics are not literal but allegorical. The "actors" in the song are lovers parting ways. The song provides a fascinating glimpse of what Lauridsen might have done had he become a jazz or theatrical composer.

# 8. Two Songs on American Poems (2011): Texts by Dana Gioia and James Agee

The history of this pair of vocal duets exemplifies Lauridsen's restless creative process, which is driven by deep perfectionism. In the particular case of "Prayer," which is based on one of my

poems, I was able to view the process quite closely as the song moved through three distinct versions

When the composer first told me in 2010 that he intended to set "Prayer" to music, I was honored but also slightly surprised that he had chosen such a complex and elusive poem. "Prayer" is an elegy or more precisely a benediction for my first son, who died at four months, but the poem never overtly states its subject matter or occasion. The personal emotions are communicated only indirectly through the imagery. Lauridsen's first version of "Prayer" in 2011 was a solo song premiered by baritone Rod Gilfry with the composer at the piano. Shortly thereafter, however, Lauridsen developed the thematic material into a longer and more elaborate choral version. This work achieved such immediate popularity that I was surprised two years later when Lauridsen announced he wanted to create another version of "Prayer" to pair with his duet setting of James Agee's "Sure on this Shining Night" (adapted from his 2005 choral cycle Nocturnes). The mixed duet version of "Prayer" represented a reconceptualization of the original poem, which was now sung by two voices, male and female, embodying the grieving parents. The indirect treatment of the original poem had not been changed, but the subtext had now been literally dramatized in the two voices. Each version of "Prayer" was different, but the last, in my opinion, was the most powerful.

James Agee's text for "Sure on this Shining Night" describes a quiet moment of communion with a starry summer sky. "All is healed," the narrator comments as he weeps "for wonder." Lauridsen's luminous setting has become one of his signature works and inspired the title of Michael Stillwater's prize-wining documentary film. Shining Night (2012).

The duet version of "Prayer" was premiered by Carin and Rod Gilfry, who also premiered the duet arrangement of "Sure on this Shining Night." The two songs are performed without pause with the first serving as prelude to the second.

#### Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia is the California Poet Laureate as well as the former Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. The author of five books of poetry and three opera libretti, Gioia won the American Book Award in 2001. He holds the Judge Widney Chair in Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California. For information on Mr. Gioia; www.danagioia.com

# Text Translations

#### O Magnum Mysterium

O great mystery, and wondrous sacrament, that animals should see the Lord, new-born, lying in their manger! Blessed is the virgin whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia.

## Ya eres mía (Now You Are Mine - Pablo Neruda)

Now you are mine. Rest with your dream inside my dream. Love, sorrow, labor now must sleep as well. The night revolves on its invisible wheels And joined to me you are as pure as sleeping amber.

No one else, my love, will ever sleep in my dreams. You go, we go together through the waters of time. No one else will journey through the shadows with me, Only you, eternall yalive, eternal sun, eternal moon.

Your hands unfold their delicate grip, Their gentle gestures falling aimlessly, Your eyes close on themselves like two gray wings,

While I follow the waters you bear which bear me away: The night, the world, and the wind unfold their destiny, No longer with you, I am nothing but your dream. — Dana Gioia

#### Cuatro Canciones (Federico García Lorca)

#### Claro de reloj (Pause of the Clock)

I sat down in a space of time. It was a backwater of silence, a white silence, a formidable ring wherein the stars collided with twelve floating black numerals. — Stanley Read

#### Noche (Night)

Candle, lamp, lantern and firefly. The constellation of the dart.

Little windows of gold trembling, and upon cross rocking in the dawn.

Candle, lamp, lantern, firefly. — Jamie De Angulo

#### La luna asoma (The Moon Rising)

When the moon rises, the bells hang silent, and impenetrable footpaths appear. When the moon rises, the sea covers the land, and the heart feels like an island of infinity. Nobody eats oranges under a full moon. One must eat fruit that is green and cold. When the moon rises, moon of a hundred equal faces, the silver coinage sobs in the pocket.

- Lysander Kemp

#### Despedida (Farewell)

If I die, leave the balcony open.

The little boy is eating oranges. (From my balcony I can see him.)

The reaper is harvesting the wheat. (From my balcony I can hear him.)

If I die, leave the balcony open. — W.S. Merwin

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#### Dirait-on (So They Say - Rainer Maria Rilke)

Abandon surrounding abandon, tenderness touching tenderness...
Your oneness endlessly caresses itself, so they say;
self-caressing through its own clear reflection.
Thus you invent the theme of Narcissus fulfilled.

Due to the limited space in the CD booklet the remaining poems originally in English are posted at mortenlauridsen.net and listeners are encouraged to read them there. ML

# Biographies

#### Morten Lauridsen



The music of American composer Morten Lauridsen occupies a permanent place in the standard vocal repertoire of the twenty-first century. His eight vocal cycles, instrumental works, art songs and series of motets (including O Magnum Mysterium) are performed throughout the world and have been recorded on over two hundred CDs, including several that received Grammy nominations.

Mr. Lauridsen (b. 1943) served as Composer-in-Residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale from 1995-2001 and is Distinguished Professor

of Composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music and Honorary Artistic President of INTERKULTUR/World Choir Games. An award-winning documentary by Michael Stillwater, Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen, was released in 2012.

A native of the Pacific Northwest, Lauridsen worked as a Forest Service firefighter and lookout (on an isolated tower near Mt. St. Helens) before traveling to Los Angeles to study composition at USC. He now divides his time between Los Angeles and his summer cabin on a remote island off the northern coast of Washington state.

In 2006 Morten Lauridsen was designated an "American Choral Master" by the National Endowment for the Arts and in 2007 he received the National Medal of Arts from the President in a White House ceremony, "for his composition of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide." The National Medal of Arts is the highest award given to artists and arts patrons by the United States government.

#### Jeremy Huw Williams



Welsh baritone Jeremy Huw Williams studied at St John's College, Cambridge, at the National Opera Studio, and with April Cantelo. He made his debut with Welsh National Opera as Guglielmo (Così fan tutte) and has since appeared in more than sixty operatic roles. He has given performances at major venues in North and South America, Australia, Hong Kong, and most European countries.

Williams has given recitals at the Wigmore Hall and Purcell Room, and at many major music festivals. He has appeared as a soloist with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales at the Royal Festival Hall, the City of

Birmingham Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall, the Halle at the Bridgewater Hall, the Philharmonia at St David's Hall, the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall during the BBC Proms, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra at the Philharmonic Hall, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at City Halls, the BBC Philharmonic, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Ulster Orchestra, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra at the Three Choirs Festival, and the BBC Concert Orchestra for BBC Radio 2. He frequently records for BBC Radio 3 (in recital, and with the BBC NOW, CBSO, BBC SO, BBC SSO, BBC Philharmonic and BBC CO), and has made thirty commercial recordings, including ten solo discs of songs.

As a principal singer with Welsh National Opera, Williams appeared at the opening night of the Wales Millennium Centre, and received the inaugural Sir Geraint Evans Award from the Welsh Music Guild. He was awarded an honorary fellowship by Glyndwr University in 2009 for services to music in Wales, and received the honorary degree of Doctor of Music from the University of Aberdeen in 2011.



#### Paula Fan

Pianist Paula Fan has appeared as soloist and chamber musician on five continents. As the first accompanist-coach to be invited to an emerging China, she performed in the earliest concerts of Western chamber music and art song to be heard there for decades. She has recorded twenty albums and has broadcast for the BBC, National Public Radio, Radio Television China, and international stations from Bosnia to Australia. As one of the first recipients of the doctorate in collaborative piano, she has

lectured on the subject worldwide. She served on the faculties of the University of Arizona School of Music and the Eastman School of Music, and performed as Principal Keyboard with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra for many seasons.

A committed Earthwatch volunteer, Fan is passionate about bridging the gap between the scientific and musical worlds. She is a founding member of the Solar Storytellers, a solar powered piano trio that has performed on the National Mall in Washington DC, and at the venerable Aspen Science Center. Currently, she is Regents' Professor Emerita of Music, and the first Senior Fellow of the interdisciplinary Confluencenter for Creative Inquiry at the University of Arizona, where she develops collaborative musical presentations with scholars from the sciences, fine arts, and the humanities.



# Caryl Hughes

Soprano Caryl Hughes comes from Aberdaron, North Wales and trained at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She subsequently attended the Cardiff International Academy of Voice.

She has performed in concert with Bryn Terfel (Raymond Gubbay Ltd) and has released a disc of Britten's Cαbαret Songs with Malcolm Martineau, having performed them at the Aix-en-Provence and Aldeburgh Festivals.

Operatic roles include Cherubino/Le nozze di Figaro for Diva Opera, Olga/Eugene Onegin and First Nymph/Rusalka for Grange Park Opera, Maria/West Side Story and Cosette/Les Miserables for Pimlico Opera, Cenerentola and Varvara/Καίχα Καθαπονα for Scottish Opera, Teti/Le nozze di Teti e di Peleo and Orlovsky/Die Fledermaus for WNO, Cenerentola/La Cenerentola for Iford Arts, Rita/Fantastic Mr Fox, Tiny/Paul Bunyan and Papagena/The Magic Flute for the Olivier Award-winning English Touring Opera and Flora for Jonathan Dove's The Enchanted Pig with the Young Vic/The Opera Group.

Future work includes Mercedes to Katherine Jenkins' Carmen at the Llangollen International Festival, and Dorabella / Così fan tutte with Diva Opera.

#### John Reynolds



John Reyolds studied at the Royal College of Music with Dame Thea King and Colin Bradbury, gaining awards there, and at the Royal Overseas League Competition. He played for many BBC orchestras whilst becoming Principal Clarinet for Sir Roger Norrington's Kent Opera. Always keen to diversify, Reynolds taught at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, became Director of Woodwind Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, then Head of Woodwind at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. Reynolds conducted Wind Orchestras at all three Colleges, Huddersfield University, and Chethams School of Music. He has worked

for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music for 36 years, as an examiner, trainer, moderator, syllabus consultant, and presenter, and recently recorded 88 pieces for their most recent syllabus CDs. He lives in South Wales, UK, with wife Kate, and their two children Matthew and Emily.

#### Peter Esswood



Peter Esswood studied at the Royal College of Music with Anthony Pini and upon graduating was appointed to the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and subsequently the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He has performed throughout the world with many eminent chamber musicians and conductors and appeared on BBC Television recording incidental music for television and radio. He was Conductor-in-Residence for the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Junior Department and Professor of Orchestral Training at the Royal College of Music Junior Department and until 2012 Head of Strings at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff.

Esswood is a diploma examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music and has adjudicated at many prestigious festivals including BBC Young Musician, Pro Corda and the Hong Kong Chamber Music Festival. He is Joint Artistic Director of the Lower Machen Festival and Director of the Welsh Chamber Players.

Morten Lauridsen extends special thanks to the following for their assistance in producing this recording:

Dana Gioia, California Poet Laureate, for his friendship, program notes and "Prayer"; Elizabeth Graddy, Debbie Jones and Sharon Vang of the University of Southern California; the Parish Church of St Catwg, Pentyrch; Hywel Wigley and Luca Gribaudo of Acapela Studio; Chris Minney and Melonie Walter of Tif & Gif Creative Design; Photographer Peter Lauridsen; Mike Wolsted of Encore Productions; and all the distinguished artists featured on the album.

All the music on this recording is published by peermusic classical (New York/Hamburg) and the scores are available at halleonard.com (Faber Music in the UK).

Further information about Mr. Lauridsen is at mortenlauridsen.net.