

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE CHOIRS

Spring Concert, April 25, 2025

Program Notes

La blanche neige (from *Sept Chansons*)

French composer Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) published his *Sept Chansons* in 1936. Though among his earliest choral works, these seven short songs reveal an artist whose style was already well-formed: they are characterized by short (sometimes even abrupt) vocal phrases, frequent exchanges of notes between voice parts, and a tendency to remain grounded in triadic harmony, despite occasional added tones and quirky cadential moments. “La blanche neige” is an equally quirky poem by Guillaume Apollinaire featuring surreal images of angels dressed as police officers and chefs, among other things. This short *chanson* establishes the unique choral style Poulenc employed in many of his later and better-known works, including his “serious” sacred motets for Christmas and Lent.

There is an old belief (from *Songs of Farewell*)

Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848–1918) is known for paving the way for a long list of British composers who enjoyed massive renown throughout the 20th century and beyond—Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ethel Smyth, and Benjamin Britten, to name just a few. His many contributions to the world of vocal music include the hymn *Jerusalem* and *I was glad*, the latter heard at multiple royal coronations over the last 125 years. But Parry’s intimate works for a cappella choir are just as rich and masterful as his bombastic anthems, and some of the most stunning of these are the beautiful *Songs of Farewell*, composed in his final years.

“There is an old belief” sets poetry by the Scottish author John Gibson Lockhart (1794–1854) describing a serene world beyond our own. Parry’s setting is deeply layered with exquisite counterpoint, creating a texture that is simultaneously very busy and somehow also evocative of the calmness of the text.

Morir, non può il mio cuore

Italian Renaissance composer Maddalena Casulana (1544–1590) published *Morir, non può il mio cuore* as part of her first book of madrigals—likely the first collection of its type to be published by a woman. In her dedication to her patron, Isabella de Medici, Casulana said she wished to show the world “the futile error of men who believe themselves patrons of

the high gifts of intellect, which according to them cannot also be held in the same way by women.”

Morir is expertly crafted. The four voice parts weave in and out of a contrapuntal texture, at times declaiming the text simultaneously for added effect. The second half of the piece features music that seems to rise continuously, building up tension with chromatic ascending lines before collapsing and beginning the process again.

Õhtul

The tradition of choral music in Estonia is virtually unmatched in any other country; group singing was even built into the founding of the modern nation of Estonia thanks to the efforts of the Singing Revolution of the late 1980s to build public support in the push for independence from the Soviet Union. Pärt Uusberg (b. 1986) is among the leading artists in Estonia’s choral music landscape today. As a conductor throughout the Baltics and beyond, as the founder of the prominent Estonian chamber choir Head Õöd, Vend, and as a composer, Uusberg’s voice has helped to shape Estonia’s choral sound in numerous ways.

Uusberg’s *Õhtul* sets a wistful, melancholy poem by Estonian poet Ernst Enno (1875–1934). The imagery of the poem—a little bird, a small flower, forest trees—quietly evokes a still Baltic landscape while only hinting at the emotions of the unnamed speaker. Uusberg’s musical setting begins delicately as well, eventually opening up into a more sweeping and even cinematic sound.

i will wade out

e e cummings’ (1894–1962) poem *i will wade out* is vibrant, active, and enigmatically sensual. The energetic verbs used throughout the poem—dashing, leaping, taking—build to a triumphant and determined conclusion: *I will rise / After a thousand years / lipping / flowers / And set my teeth in the silver of the moon.*

Fraser Weist (b. 1968) captures the motion of cummings’ poem adeptly in his musical setting of the same name. The piece begins with a gently churning tenor/bass foundation, adds soaring lines by the sopranos and altos, and then transforms into an angular groove including body percussion. Coinciding with the final lines of the poem, the piece arrives at a gently reassured conclusion before the opening material makes one final appearance.

I'll be seeing you

The Great American Songbook tune *I'll be seeing you* was written by Sammy Fain and Irving Kahal in the late 1930s and appeared in both a Broadway musical and a film in the years immediately following. Though it's been recorded by beloved singers including Bing Crosby, Brenda Lee, and Frank Sinatra, many find the iconic version of the song to be Billie Holiday's recording from 1944.

Du: nouvelle prière bouddhique

I composed this piece because I wanted to write a “requiem” that believes in rebirth and can be sung to non-human creatures. It is about pan-Vedic temporality, repetition and infinity (*dpal be'u*), immense size of numbers, manifestation, reincarnation (*Wiederkunft-Samsara*), contingency and eternity, “fontanelles of the new-borns” and “the ossification of *Homo Duplex*”, “Mount Meru in a mustard seed”, $8 \cdot 10^{-18}$ seconds of impermanence, and obstacle-less.

-Yixin Cui '25

Ring Out, Wild Bells (from *The Passing of the Year*)

The Passing of the Year, composed in 2000, sets seven texts by poets including William Blake and Emily Dickinson. Jonathan Dove (b. 1959) charts the passage of the seasons across a year through the course of the piece, from the first buds of springtime to the sweltering heat of summer and the decay of autumn. Dove dedicated the piece to the memory of his mother, and the final movement, “Ring Out, Wild Bells,” is a panoramic setting in praise of rebirth and rejuvenation on poetry by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Sharply rhythmic piano lines undergird a dense double-chorus texture that alternates between sweeping melodies and bell-like calls.

Verleih uns Frieden

In a lifetime of just 38 years, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) made contributions to the world of music almost too numerous to count—his works include small-scale piano miniatures and chamber music up to large choral-symphonic pieces and a great deal in between. *Verleih uns Frieden* is on the smaller scale compared with many of these other pieces, written in 1831 for chorus and orchestra, although commonly performed with piano instead.

Verleih sets Martin Luther's German paraphrase of the Latin chant *Da pacem, Domine*. Mendelssohn's choice of text reflects his family's conversion from Judaism to Lutheranism as well as his personal interest in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach—the younger composer famously staged influential performances of some of Bach's major works during his lifetime. *Verleih*'s dense instrumental introduction, its highlighting of a melody—first on its own in the lower voices, then in the upper voices with a lower-voice countermelody, and finally in a four-part hymn-like texture—also evokes the works of Bach while remaining distinctly Mendelssohnian. In the context of our program, we hope the text's call for peace also suggests a feeling of arriving safely home.

Resignation

The music of Florence Price (1887–1953) is fortunately enjoying a long-overdue renaissance throughout the United States as choirs and orchestras have rediscovered her deeply moving musical language. As a Black woman attempting to forge a career as a composer in the early 20th century, Price faced seemingly overwhelming professional and personal obstacles. Still, she experienced significant, if short-lived, success—Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her first symphony in 1933, making her the first Black woman to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra in the U.S. Unfortunately, though, much of her music was lost until the last two decades.

Resignation is a musical setting of a text written by the composer. The text is direct and wrenched by a sense of injustice and hardship, and any moments of optimism feel fleeting and hard-won. Throughout the piece, the sopranos carry the melody, set in two nearly-identical verses. The lower voices support with harmony that is equally evocative and which shifts in subtle but important ways between the two halves of the piece.

Meet Me Here (from *Considering Matthew Shepard*)

Craig Hella Johnson's (b. 1962) fusion oratorio *Considering Matthew Shepard* explores the life, tragic murder, and legacy of the title figure, a young gay man in Wyoming in the 1990s who was the victim of a horrific hate crime. The piece draws on many different textual and musical influences to weave a deeply moving story that leaves space for contemplation, remembering, and, ultimately, hope. *Meet Me Here* is one of the last movements in the longer work, what Johnson describes as "a pivotal movement which takes a first step from a difficult story and asks the question 'where do I go from here?'"

The piece is styled as a folk-like hymn, building from a solo voice to a huge crowd of singers. It is an invitation to all, a call to, as Johnson says, "be open to meeting at a place

which may seem difficult or painful and to be open to discovering the healing and joy which can be experienced when we lay down the ‘ancestral sorrow’ we may have been carrying for generations and open ourselves to finding the healing together, excluding no one.”

On My Journey Home

The Sacred Harp tradition is one of the United States’ earliest choral practices. Popular in the American South in the 19th century, Sacred Harp songs are known for being especially direct in their expression. *On My Journey Home* is a contemporary arrangement of a tune from the Sacred Harp tradition. It was inspired by a frontier camp meeting in which a religious fervor overcame many of those gathered. The result is a continuous crescendo and mounting energy from the first measures of the piece to the last.

Faith, Hope, Fear

Faith, Hope, Fear is a new piece—jointly commissioned by the Swarthmore Choirs and the choral program at Haverford/Bryn Mawr Colleges—with collaboration at its heart. The piece is unique in that it was collaboratively written by two composers, Arianne Abela and Colin Britt. Abela and Britt direct the choirs at Amherst and Mount Holyoke Colleges, respectively, bringing the total number of liberal arts institutions connected with the project up to five! In the process of learning and preparing the piece, we’ve also partnered with singers from the Community College of Philadelphia (who join us this evening) and the Montgomery County Community College (who will join Haverford/Bryn Mawr for their performance on Sunday). We’ve been fortunate to work with the composers on two occasions this the year, both while the piece was in progress and again just weeks ago.

Faith, Hope, Fear is inspired by poetry by the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi, a translation of whose text appears at both the beginning and the end of the piece. In between, the contemporary poet Ruthie Prillaman conceived of three separate texts to explore the central elements of faith, hope, and fear from Rumi’s original poetry.

The piece begins with a gentle prologue, sung by a small group of singers, before shifting to an ethereal, atmospheric setting of Prillaman’s poem *Hope is a house*. The combined forces join for the menacing *Fear is a fire* before the reassuring close of the piece, *Faith is a path*.

It has been a pleasure to prepare this piece for its world premiere performances this weekend, and we are deeply grateful to our guests from the Community College of Philadelphia, our partners at Haverford/Bryn Mawr, the poet, and the composers for their work and collaborative spirit!