

PROGRAM NOTE – *Sing Our Way Home*

The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.

- Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

The concept of home both physically and spiritually is an immensely power-filled and seemingly innate part of the human experience. Today's concert, *Sing Our Way Home*, explores this theme through choral music which speaks of travel, parable, longing, arrival, and celebration.

The first portion of the program consists of four songs which explore the theme of being away from home. *The Road Not Taken* by Randall Thompson (1899-1984) is a setting of Robert Frost's most famed poem of the same title. The piece, the first chorus from Thompson's suite *Frostiana*, mirrors the four stanzas of the poem quite simply with four statements of a hauntingly beautiful minor melody. *Geographical Fugue* is an *avant-garde* composition for speaking chorus by the Austrian composer Ernst Toch (1887-1964). The piece is a true fugue for four voices created from speaking various geographical locales in intricate rhythms. This piece is Toch's most popular today even though he dismissed the piece as an insignificant diversion. *The Road Home* by Stephen Paulus (1949-2014) is a jewel of modern-American choral writing. The piece utilizes the American folk tune "Prospect" which is found in the shape-note book *The Southern Harmony* of 1835. The simple three-fold repetition of the tune is paired with three original verses from the poet Michael Dennis Brown, a close collaborator of Paulus. The marriage of tune and text creates a timeless statement regarding a longing for home. *The Road to Freedom* is an arrangement by Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947) of the American folk tune *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, a "map song" for escaped slaves traveling north via the Underground Railroad. The "drinkin' gourd" is code for the big dipper constellation which contains the North Star. By following this and other geographical markers mentioned in the song, slaves could make their way north to freedom.

The centerpiece of the concert is *The Prodigal*, a work composed in 2016 by Mack Wilberg (b. 1955), music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. This single-movement musical drama is based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. In this parable a son asks his father for his share of his inheritance and then leaves home. This son then squanders the inheritance with his new debaucherous living-style. After working in the fields and feeding pigs, he returns home humbled, hungry, and penitent. To his surprise, his father welcomes him with the finest gifts and a festive banquet. In this work, Wilberg utilizes the modern style of the spiritual minimalists such as Arvo Pärt and John Tavener. These influences can be seen in the use of repeated motifs, pedal points, modal harmonies, and transparent textures. The chorus narrates the parable in two-part chant-like melodies in contrary motion while also participating in the action of the tale through more robust musical episodes. The orchestra colorfully provides interludes which paint the evolving emotions through the development of the works' unifying musical motif, a rising sequence of melodic thirds heard from the very beginning of the work.

Following the intermission, two pieces explore being at home in the celebration of music. *The Awakening* is a choral rhapsody by Joseph M. Martin (b. 1959) which begins in a dreamlike state describing a silent land with no music. The central section features commands to "Awake!" from this dream state while the sopranos overlay a melodious "Soli Deo Gloria." The final section is a celebration of music and its power to fill emptiness and spread joy. *Birthdays Round Numbers* is a concert suite of seven rounds by the American composer Kirke Mechem (b. 1925). Many of the rounds started as birthday presents for

Mechem's friends and stem from his love of penning witty texts and canons. The rounds are in various different styles highlighted by equally witty piano accompaniments. Each round celebrates a different decade of life with the final round, *Is seventy old?*, concluding with the instruction to shout, "World, here I come! I just got started."

The final section of the concert celebrates home as a heavenly, spiritual destination. *Saints Bound for Heaven* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* are masterful arrangements of American folk-tunes by Alice Parker (b. 1925) and Robert Shaw (1916-1999). The first, *Saints Bound for Heaven*, is a tune by the famed shape note singing master William "Singing Billy" Walker who included this melody in the tune book *The Southern Harmony*. *Swing Low* is an African-American Spiritual which draws parallels between the slave longing for freedom and the Prophet Elijah being taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (II Kings 2:11). The concert closes with a gospel piece by Byron J. Smith (b. 1960), *Shout Glory!* The piece features the juxtaposition of a walking bassline set against syncopated rhythms, a typical trait of the gospel style. The piece also features a "gospel break" where each voice of the choir takes a turn adding their own melody until a rich and complex texture is achieved over a rhythmic and harmony vamp.

-notes by Dr. John P. Rakes