

umeri

DRAKE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI CHOIR

Aimee Beckmann-Collier, conductor

# BEAUTIFUL, TRUTHFUL, & GOOD

featuring music by Vaughan Williams,  
Finzi, Paulus, and Runestad

Sunday, October 15

3:00 pm

Sheslow Auditorium

Drake University



# Notes from ABC and Umeri

A well-worn mantra of sorts in the Drake choral program, as experienced by members of the alumni choir as students and continuing to the present, is a focus on the privilege of doing something beautiful, truthful, and good together on a regular basis. Rehearsals, in particular, as well as performances, are seen as opportunities to create beauty, to reflect on truths, and to commit to the common good. Collaborative singing, which marries texts and music, demands selflessness, empathy, and trust, and is among life's most humane experiences. Standing shoulder to shoulder, aware of the very breath of other human beings, while singing of thoughts and experiences that unite us across space and time, and then sharing those thoughts and experiences with a wider circle of listeners is a privilege and responsibility. It springs out of vulnerability and triumphs in unity.

In a broken world and a cynical time, creating and sharing something beautiful, truthful, and good through choral singing is a high calling. Cynicism is easy – and intellectually bankrupt. The harder thing is to have faith in someone and something, and to hope. The texts and musical settings you'll hear this afternoon speak of beauty, pain, poverty, power, challenge, joy, failure, renewal, love. They speak of the introspection that can lead to transcendence, to humanizing in a culture in which dehumanization seems to have precedence, to meaning making in an environment that often seems without purpose, to the act of "singing ourselves sane," (Richard Rohr, from the Center for Action and Contemplation, June 30, 2023).

Several singers reflected on the meaning of "beautiful, truthful, and good" in the context of their work in Umeri. Here are their thoughts.

## **Kayleigh Koester, Umeri alto, 2013 Drake graduate**

"Beauty is the harvest of presence."

So begins David Whyte's essay on the topic. I love this essay and each time I read it, the opening line settles on my heart as a deep truth. Not the kind of truth verified with facts and figures, but the type of truth that

comes from our lived experiences— the truths we each know in the memory of our bodies and our shared histories, the truth that resonates with our soul.

Yet in this “harvest of presence”, I am also aware of how too many of my days are full of noise and distraction, how wholly the task of simply maintaining the current state of things dominates the day. I yearn to be the best version of myself, to be true and good, and yet we all inhabit a world bound by professional and social expectations, a world enslaved to hideous systems of inequity and structural disadvantage.

Later in his essay Whyte writes that “beauty is an achieved state of both deep attention and self-forgetting.” He reminds me that harvesting the beautiful, truthful, and good is an intentional process that is as much about unlearning and letting go of the noise as it is attuning to that which remains.

This program invites us to do this, even if only for the hour that we share here together. Dip your fingers in the cool waters of your childhood, delight in the bounty of nature. Celebrate the transcendent power of love and artistic expression. Confess new faith, declare to your beloved that they are the source of your joy. Remember the power of love to overcome all else.

Umeri is a unique ensemble for many reasons. While we share a common connection through our individual time in the Drake Choral Program, the singers on stage span several decades in age and most of us no longer spend the majority of our time making music. So, I offer my final words to those standing with me in the choir today: Umeri, there is something truthful about our differences, something beautiful in earnest effort, and something tremendously good about creating with people you love and then sharing it with others.

May you also enjoy what we offer.

See pages 14 - 16 for reflections from other Umeri members.



# BEAUTIFUL, TRUTHFUL, & GOOD

Serenade to Music

Ralph Vaughan Williams

(1872-1958)

My Spirit Sang All Day

Gerald Finzi

Clear and Gentle Stream

(1901-1956)

*from Seven Poems by Robert Bridges, Op.17*

Give Me Hunger

Jake Runestad

(b. 1986)

Sero te amavi

Kurt Knecht

(b. 1971)

Conciliation

Thomas McKenney

(b. 1938)

Afternoon on a Hill

Stephen Paulus

(1949-2014)

# Program Notes and Translations

## **Serenade to Music – Vaughan Williams (text by William Shakespeare)**

In January 1938 Sir Henry Wood, a renowned English conductor, asked Ralph Vaughan Williams, one of Britain's most renowned composers, to write a work to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his debut as a conductor. Sir Henry's desire was to have Vaughan Williams create "a choral work that can be used at any time and for any occasion," rather than as a specific tribute to him. He suggested that it might include music for sixteen singers with whom he had worked throughout his career. The result was what is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful settings of Shakespearean text. But more importantly, it represents a watershed moment both in Vaughan Williams' compositional and personal life.

The years immediately preceding the composition of *Serenade to Music* were challenging for Vaughan Williams. Three friends, Frederick Delius, Edward Elgar, and Gustav Holst, all renowned composers and important influences in his compositional life, died in 1934. In that year and the next, Vaughan Williams experienced bouts of debilitating illness. A happier experience took place in 1935, when the composer was given the Order of Merit, a personal gift of the sovereign and an award of great worth, but not without the burden of expectation. In that same year, Vaughan Williams wrote his *Symphony No. 4 in F Minor*, a work that Vaughan Williams scholar and Drake music professor Dr. Eric Saylor describes as "completely unexpected." Its modernist style (sometimes described as "violently discordant") was groundbreaking and was followed, in 1936, by his *Dona nobis pacem*, a cantata in which Vaughan Williams made a passionate plea for peace, setting poems of Walt Whitman, a political speech, sections of the Bible, and a text from the Mass. In 1936 George V died and his son, Edward VIII, ascended the throne, but abdicated within the year to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson, an American divorcee, which triggered a time of great unease in England. George V's reign saw the rise of socialism, communism, fascism, Irish republicanism, and the Indian independence movement, all of which radically changed the political landscape of the British Empire.

In addition to all of these pressures and disturbances, Vaughan Williams was grappling with the physical diminishment of his beloved wife,

Adaline, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and who was becoming increasingly infirm. His growing acclaim, which created anxiety about his ability to continue to produce music of similar high quality, as well as political events in Great Britain and Europe, added to his grief at losing his friends and his concern for Adaline, left Vaughan Williams feeling "tired and dried up," as Dr. Saylor noted in his recent presentation to Umeri about the composer and *Serenade to Music*. When Sir Henry Wood asked Vaughan Williams to write a piece to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his conducting debut, the composer had little energy or enthusiasm to bring to the project.

And then the unthinkable happened. In 1938 Vaughan Williams met and fell in love with Ursula Wood, whom he would marry in 1953, after the 1951 death of Adaline. This relationship seemed to have unblocked the composer, with Ursula acting as a muse for the somewhat overwhelmed and much older man. As Dr. Saylor noted, *Serenade to Music* can be seen as a deeply personal statement for Vaughan Williams and an indication of his movement from "darkness and a look into the abyss," to light. Music was the most important thing in Vaughan Williams' life and Shakespeare's text, which speaks of both music and its absence, resonated with him to an astonishing degree.

*Serenade to Music* was premiered at Royal Albert Hall on October 5, 1938. Rachmaninoff, who played in the first half of the concert, was in the audience for the second half and was so overcome by the beauty of the music that he wept. Leonard Bernstein included *Serenade to Music* on his program for the New York Philharmonic's concert for the opening of Avery Fisher Hall in 1962. The work exists in several versions, including one for chorus, orchestra, and four solo singers, rather than the original sixteen; solo violin and orchestra; and orchestra only. The version you'll hear today is a transcription made expressly for Umeri for string quartet, harp, piano, chorus, and soloists by Dr. William P. Dougherty, the Ellis and Nelle Levitt Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Theory and Composition at Drake University.

Vaughan Williams chose Lorenzo's speech to Jessica from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene I, which takes place in Portia's garden.

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!  
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music  
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night  
Become the touches of sweet harmony.

Look how the floor of heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:  
There's not the smallest orb that thou behold'st  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims;  
Such harmony is in immortal souls;  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.  
Come, ho! and wake Diana with a hymn!  
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,  
And draw her home with music.

I am never merry when I hear sweet music.  
The reason is, your spirits are attentive –  
The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night  
And his affections dark as Erebus:  
Let no such man be trusted.

Music! hark!  
It is your music of the house.  
Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.  
Silence bestows that virtue on it  
How many things by season season'd are  
To their right praise and true perfection!  
Peace, ho! the moon sleeps with Endymion  
And would not be awak'd. Soft stillness and the night  
Become the touches of sweet harmony.

### **My Spirit Sang All Day/Clear and Gentle Stream – Gerald Finzi (texts by Robert Bridges)**

Finzi, one of twentieth-century Britain's most distinguished vocal and choral composers, was a friend of Vaughan Williams and Holst, and counted Vaughan Williams as his mentor during the early years of his career. *My Spirit Sang All Day*, an ecstatic expression of beauty and joy, is the best known of Finzi's song cycle of seven pieces on texts by Robert Bridges, Britain's poetry laureate from 1913 to 1930. By contrast, *Clear and Gentle Stream*, a nostalgic reflection on youth and place, is seldom performed.

### **My Spirit Sang All Day**

My spirit sang all day  
O my joy.  
Nothing my tongue could say,  
Only My joy!

My heart an echo caught-  
O my joy  
And spake,  
Tell me thy thought,  
Hide not thy joy.

My eyes can peer around,  
O my joy  
What beauty hast thou found?  
Shew us thy joy.

My jealous ears grew whist;  
O my joy  
Music from heaven is't,  
Sent for our joy?

She also came and heard;  
O my joy,  
What, said she, is this word?  
What is thy joy?

And I replied,  
O see, O my joy,  
'Tis thee, I cried, 'tis thee:  
Thou art my joy.

### **Clear and Gentle Stream**

Clear and gentle stream!  
Known and loved so long,  
That hast heard the song  
And the idle dream  
Of my boyish day;  
While I once again  
Down thy margin stray,  
In the selfsame strain  
Still my voice is spent,  
With my old lament  
And my idle dream,  
Clear and gentle stream!

Where my old seat was  
Here again I sit,  
Where the long boughs knit  
Over stream and grass  
A translucent eaves:  
Where back eddies play  
Shipwreck with the leaves,  
And the proud swans stray,  
Sailing one by one  
Out of stream and sun,  
And the fish lie cool  
In their chosen pool.

Many an afternoon  
Of the summer day  
Dreaming here I lay;  
And I know how soon,  
Idly at its hour,  
First the deep bell hums  
From the minster tower,  
And then evening comes,  
Creeping up the glade,  
With her lengthening shade,  
And the tardy boon  
Of her brightening moon.

Clear and gentle stream!  
Ere again I go  
Where thou dost not flow,  
Well does it beseem  
Thee to hear again  
Once my youthful song,  
That familiar strain  
Silent now so long:  
Be as I content  
With my old lament  
And my idle dream,  
7 Clear and gentle stream.



**Give Me Hunger – Jake Runestad**  
**(text by Carl Sandburg)**

Runestad, a Minnesota composer, studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Kevin Puts at the Peabody Conservatory, as well as acclaimed composer Libby Larsen. American Public Media has dubbed him a “choral rock star” and his compositions have been sung by acclaimed ensembles around the world. Runestad wrote this piece on commission by a consortium of collegiate choirs including Michigan State University, Iowa State University, Millikin University, Texas Tech University, and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The piece gives voice to the human experience of suffering and the attempt to hope in the face of cynicism, as well as the power of love and beauty to break the “long loneliness.”

Give me hunger,  
O you gods that sit and give  
The world its orders.  
Give me hunger, pain and want,  
Shut me out with shame and failure  
From your doors of gold and fame,  
Give me your shabbiest, weariest hunger!

But leave me a little love  
A voice to speak to me in the day end,  
A hand to touch me in the dark room  
Breaking the long loneliness.  
In the dusk of day-shapes  
Blurring the sunset,  
One little wandering, western star  
Thrust out from the changing shores of shadow.  
Let me go to the window,  
Watch the day-shapes of dusk  
And wait and know the coming  
Of a little love.



## **Sero te amavi – Kurt Knecht** **(text by Augustine of Hippo, 350-430 CE)**

St. Augustine of Hippo, whose *Confessions* (written in 397-398) is considered to be the first example of autobiography in the Western world, reflected in this text from that work on the nature of time, causality, and free will. In this text, perhaps the most famous excerpt from *Confessions*, he speaks of his understanding of the divine, which he calls Beauty, and reflects on his long journey to understanding goodness and truth.

Kurt Knecht, who earned a doctorate in composition and organ performance at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is an eclectic composer and performer for artists as diverse as Smokey Robinson, the Kansas City Chorale, and various American orchestras. He is the organist at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Kansas City and the co-founder of MusicSpoke, a company creating the world's largest marketplace for artist-owned sheet music.

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!  
You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for  
you.

In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created.  
You were with me, but I was not with you.

Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would  
have not been at all.

You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness.

You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness.

You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you.

I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.

You touched me, and I burned for your peace.

## **Conciliation – Thomas McKenney** **(text by Patrick Overton)**

Dr. McKenney, professor emeritus of theory and composition at the University of Missouri-Columbia, headed the electronic music studio during his career at Missouri. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, he was named Distinguished Composer of the Year in 1970 by the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA). His setting of the Overton text was written for the University Singers and premiered by that ensemble, Dr. David Rayl, conductor.

The poet, Patrick Overton, Ph.D., is the director of the Front Porch Institute, dedicated to creating resources for community arts and community cultural development. The Institute takes its name from Overton's 1997 book, *Rebuilding the Front Porch of America: Essays on the Art of Community Making*. He currently serves as Poet-in-Residence for the Missouri Parks Association's Poets in the Parks Program. His text for the McKenney piece comes from the Epilogue of his larger work, *The Seed of Eden*, which gained widespread recognition after his appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show.

I have learned...

The singleness of a blade of grass  
is no less profound than the complex structure of the universe –  
that the soft caress of a summer's evening breeze  
may be the closest we ever come  
to touching the face of God;

The song the sparrow sings  
is as much a message from the heavens  
as are all the words of all the prophets –  
and the world would be a wiser and happier place  
if we could learn to sing the song Earthmaker sings  
each night before we sleep;

I have learned:

when we come to the edge of all the light we have  
and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown  
we must believe one of two things will happen:  
there will be something for us to stand upon  
or, we will be taught how to fly.

### **Afternoon on a Hill – Stephen Paulus (text by Edna St. Vincent Millay)**

Stephen Paulus, a Minnesota composer who wrote more than 400 pieces in a wide variety of genres including opera, solo vocal and instrumental, jazz, symphonic, and choral music, wrote this piece on commission for the National Federation of Music Clubs for their 2006 national conference. Paulus' signature use of quartal harmonies, kaleidoscopic modulations, and rapidly changing meters give this piece a sense of tremendous energy and optimism.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. The poem *Afternoon on a Hill* appeared as part of her first poetry collection, *Renascence and Other Poems*, published in 1917, the year she graduated from Vassar College. Unconventional and independent-minded, she became a prominent member of the American literary scene from the 1920's through the 1940's, promoting poetry by giving public readings throughout the country. This poem considers one of Millay's most frequent subjects, rejuvenation through observation of nature. Her reflection speaks of sustainability, selflessness, awareness, and a commitment to cherishing the experience instead of attempting to possess a material object.

I will be the gladdest thing  
Under the sun!  
I will touch a hundred flowers  
And not pick one.

I will look at cliffs and clouds  
With quiet eyes,  
Watch the wind blow down the grass,  
And the grass rise.

And when lights begin to show  
Up from the town,  
I will mark which must be mine,  
And then start down!

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DRAKE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI CHOIR

## **Soprano**

Anna Gebhardt  
Heather Nails  
Katelyn Mardis  
Gabbi Sarcone  
Kelly Schnackenberg  
Elizabeth Watson

## **Alto**

Samantha Clement  
Mary Craven Bartemes  
Amy Deist  
Sarah Florian  
Greta Hammond  
Mary Honeyman-  
Speichinger  
Kayleigh Koester  
Emma Ksiazak  
Kristina Libbey  
Maggie Parker

## **Tenor**

Trevor Bridge  
Tom Florian  
Justin Scheel  
Tanner Smith

## **Bass**

Jacob Fross  
Ian Ksiazak  
Daniel Minnie  
Thomas Riordan  
Kyle Roeder  
Ben Schultz  
Bryn Start

## **Serenade to Music Players**

John Helmich, violin  
Tracy Finkelshteyn, violin  
Neelee Lee, viola  
George Work, cello  
Kristin Maahs, harp  
Susan Ihnen, piano

# Support

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Betsy White, Drake University



## **Other reflections on “beautiful, truthful, and good.”**

*(Continued from page 2)*

### **Elizabeth Watson, Umeri soprano, 2020 Drake graduate**

Choral music can take a variety of shapes and forms, allowing singers and audiences to feel a wide range of thoughts and emotions. There are pieces that are loud, dramatic, and powerful, some that are delicate and pensive, and everything in between. While the music we perform varies greatly, for choral singers, there is always a sense of unity, purpose, and the idea that we are doing something beyond ourselves when we sing together.

In collegiate choir rehearsals, Dr. ABC often mentioned the idea of creating something beautiful, truthful, and good. I’ve noticed that, in some way, these three elements exist in every rehearsal and performance. The idea of a group of singers coming together, dedicating their entire focus to create music together, is inherently beautiful. There are so few times when our bodies and minds are fully dialed in on one sole purpose, and it’s even rarer that a whole roomful of people are doing that together. While the notes and rhythms might not be perfect every time, the act itself is beautiful and good.

In rehearsals we intentionally delve beyond the music and look into the context and meaning of what we are singing about. In knowing that, and allowing it to shape our response to the text and music, we are being truthful to the piece and those who created it. We are being honest and open with ourselves and the audience. Singing is a vulnerable art, as you are taking a part of yourself that is uniquely yours and sharing it with others. In that vulnerability, we are able to create something special together, find meaning, share stories, and ultimately engage in something that is beautiful, truthful, and good for ourselves and for all who listen.

### **Katelyn Mardis, Umeri soprano, 2022 Drake graduate**

To do something beautiful, truthful, and good in the context of choral singing requires singers to go against the grain of society, one that promotes “fending for yourself” above all else. Singing in a choir is by



nature a selfless act. In order to truly sing together, you must sacrifice your own desires to serve the collective sound.

From my perspective, to do something beautiful, truthful, and good in choral singing is to commit your authentic self fully to the purpose of the piece. This requires immense vulnerability in sharing your voice and interpretations, which is an act of truthfulness. It requires diligence and empathy to understand the composer's purpose in writing the piece. That, to me, is an act of goodness. Finally, although the piece may not necessarily sound beautiful to some listeners, underneath the sound, singers need to trust one another and remain dedicated to the process to produce an effective product. In my opinion, trust, and dedication are two of the best qualities someone can have, so to utilize those when singing with one another, despite living in a post-2020 world where these traits seem to dwindle daily, that is the pinnacle of beauty.

I feel blessed to be in community with people who enjoy singing. But more than that, I feel blessed to be with people who care about doing something beautiful, truthful, and good because it provides a stable place each week for us to rediscover the best parts of humanity with one another.

### **Ben Schultz, Umeri baritone, 2019 Drake graduate**

We hope the sound the choir makes is beautiful, but the beauty of music goes much deeper than voices. I believe the beauty comes from the hearts and minds of the choir joining from their various walks of life, coming together and creating something larger than the individuals involved; something that would not be possible without selfless dedication to a shared mission.

We've been encouraged to "find the subtext" when singing, and I believe this helps each member to perform truthfully. When choir members discover what a piece means to them, in the context of the composer's intention (what we often call "singing the composer's intention through the lens of your own life"), we are more true to the music and text and create a more meaningful experience for each other and the audience. We always strive to be true to the intent of a piece, but in rehearsing and performing with an intimate connection to the music, we are also true to ourselves.

Goodness with regard to choral singing seems straightforward because choral music focuses on many "good" themes like love, passion, beauty, and positive human characteristics. But my interpretation of the real "good" of music is connection. Each choir consists of vastly different people who come together selflessly to create something to share. Each audience is a group of people who likely will never be assembled again but come together for a short time, stepping aside from their daily lives and opening themselves to music. Each concert is a mutual sharing of appreciation of ideas and emotions. This connection feels less common in an increasingly polarized world, which makes what we do together even more "good."

When I was a student singing in Drake Choir, Dr. ABC challenged us to come "drop it at the door," that is, to leave distractions in order to focus unreservedly on the process of making music. At first, I didn't think much of that idea, but now, when I reflect on the times I have been able to be most truly present to create and enjoy music, I realize that letting go has enabled me to most fully experience beauty, truth, and goodness. Coming together as performers and listeners, we can open ourselves to experience something beautiful, truthful, and good together, creating the connection we seek to restore in the world.

## **Umeri's next performance**

Sunday, December 17

3:00 pm

*The Lessons, Carols, and Reflections of Christmas*

St. Ambrose Cathedral

In a collaboration with *The Saint John's Bible*, the first handwritten and hand-illuminated Bible produced by a Benedictine community in over 500 years, Umeri will provide you with a vivid and deeply meaningful visual and aural experience of Christmas. The images from *The Saint John's Bible* have been seen by visitors to many of the most famous art museums and historic sites in the United States and around the world. Their beauty is stunning and the opportunity to participate in an immersive visual experience to complement music, readings, and commissioned reflections makes this event one not to be missed as you celebrate the holiday season. There is no admission charge for this performance.

You are invited to a pre-concert presentation about *The Saint John's Bible* ([saintjohnsbible.org](http://saintjohnsbible.org)) at the Diocese of Des Moines Pastoral Center (601 Grand Avenue, just south of St. Ambrose Cathedral) at 1:30 on December 17. Given by Dr. Michael Rubbelke, faculty member at the Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, this presentation will focus on the amazing story of the genesis of this artistic work, as well as the process of its creation.

