

On *Prayer*, and the Arts Songs of Morten Lauridsen: A Conversation

Composer Morten Lauridsen should need no introduction to most *Fanfare* readers. One of the foremost composers in America today, he has produced a body of choral works which are highly acclaimed and often performed; which have won him, as one of many awards, the National Medal of Arts in 2007. Descriptions of his music most often include words like *radiant, inspiring, uplifting, inspirational, sublime*, and even at that do not do justice to the effect they have on audiences and performers around the world. His is the name that I most often invoke in reviews when I refer to the new renaissance in choral music, not because his style is backward looking, but because it encompasses the same transcendent approach to music that was core to the great works of that earlier period.

Choral music makes up the greater part of Lauridsen's *oeuvre*, but there are a few other works: a symphony, a fanfare for brass sextet, a sonata for trumpet and piano, and a set of theme and variations for piano. It is the choral music, though, that has been his life's work, and it is that which has brought him fame. Closely allied to it, however, often reworked from or a source for a choral work, is a small body of solo vocal works. These—unfairly—have not gotten the same attention as the works for groups of voices, even though they carry the same exquisite sense of emotions perfectly captured. It is to those works that his newest CD, a complete collection of his solo vocal works, is dedicated and that is the occasion for this interview. *Prayer* is the title of the CD, a limited edition release available exclusively through the distributor of his sheet music, Hal Leonard. It features baritone Jeremy Huw Williams and Paula Fan on piano. They are joined by soprano Caryl Hughes for the duets.

The recording was presented to me as a project especially close to the composer's heart. The fact that he produced this release himself, rather than entrusting it to someone else, seems to underscore its importance. So I began our email interview by asking what led to his decision to self-produce, and how the project and recording came about.

His answer returned quickly. "I met the noted Welsh opera star Jeremy Huw Williams in Wales during a concert tour of my music conducted by Paul Mealor. Jeremy and his distinguished accompanist Paula Fan began programming my songs on their concert tours throughout the world, many of which had already been recorded by various artists on numerous CDs over the years. Jeremy suggested doing an all-Lauridsen recording, to have nearly all my songs composed over my entire career together on one disc and one that would include several premiere recordings. He interested a well-known recording label in undertaking the project. I asked to see Jeremy's contract with the label prior to his signing and found the label's compensation to the performers and the publisher totally unacceptable. I therefore decided to personally underwrite the entire recording so that it would be in the hands of the artists."

I was, of course, very curious as to which label that might be, but he diplomatically ignored my hinted interest in the identity of the label and went on to describe the release and how it was produced.

"The limited edition recording that resulted was a collaborative effort involving the performing artists, the composer, and California Poet Laureate Dana Gioia, who wrote the extensive program notes. I worked closely with the artists during their recording sessions and was involved with all aspects of the program and booklet design. The songs

are very diverse in musical approach, ranging from direct to abstract—always in response to all aspects of the textual content—and in a variety of languages on texts by esteemed poets whose words resonated deeply with me. The collection will broaden the knowledge of my work among those that are only familiar with my choral compositions.”

It was with those choral compositions that I was most familiar as well, but his art songs were not unknown to me. There is an earlier CD, *Northwest Journey*, a wonderful 2000 release on the RCM label, which included many of the solo vocal works written up to that time. The relatively small number of works, the flawless technique they all display, and some comments remembered from earlier reading led me to make a comparison: “You are, like Ravel, a fastidious craftsman, polishing a work until it is perfect. Or so I have read. So I am not surprised that your whole solo *oeuvre* fits onto one CD.”

Lauridsen had his own ideas regarding comparisons and influences. “In the top echelon of composers I have admired over the years are those who demonstrated the ability to write an elegant and unforgettable lyric line. Not only the great art song composers of the past such as Schubert, Brahms, and Schumann—Copland, Barber, Rorem, Britten, and Bolcom to name a few more recent ones—but also the great composers for the Broadway stage: Kern, Porter, Rodgers, etc. I grew up with this music, and my esteem for these gifted composers has never lessened.”

So was that what prompted him to rework certain of his choral pieces for solo voices? Or was this a result of commissions or requests, or some other personal need or inspiration? “There are long lyric lines in most of my music, and those found in certain works that were originally conceived for chorus lent themselves readily to versions for solo voice and/or mixed duet—*Sure on this Shining Night*, *Dirait-on*, *O Magnum Mysterium*—and two works originally composed for solo voice or mixed duet—*Prayer* and *Ya eres mía*—in turn lent themselves to choral versions later. I am very fond of the four mixed duets on the *Prayer* recording; a man and a woman singing to each other on elegant poetry of Rilke, Gioia, Neruda, and Agee. It was my idea to compose various versions of these works, and it has been rewarding to find that solo singers have embraced them now as part of their repertory.”

In *Prayer*, Williams, Hughes, and Fan include three works that otherwise appear unavailable commercially: two recent works, *Ya eres mía* in the version for two solo voices and *Two Songs on American Poems*, as well as *A Backyard Universe*, his earliest work here, written over 50 years ago. What was his response to revisiting this early student work, written in 1965? Does he love all of his musical children equally? “In order to have a complete collection of my songs written over my career, it was important to include my first cycle on poems by Harold Witt, written about his young children. I look back on that work from across the decades with a special fondness, as it was an important early stepping-stone in writing for the voice. There is a certain raw exuberance in the work in both the vocal and piano writing. As a teacher, I have always been interested in examining composers’ early works to see how they began and how they then developed.”

His early interest in art songs, involving another cycle written just two years later, provides a further interesting connection to his choral works.

“Thirty years ago I approached peermusic in New York City as a possible publisher for

my art songs. Peer has had a strong commitment to song publishing over many years—they were one of the three publishers of the Ives 114 Songs, for example—and I very much admired a publisher brave enough to value and support this rarified genre that generates very little income for either publisher or composers.

“Among the pieces I left with peer following the meeting in New York was my song cycle on poems by Howard Moss, *A Winter Come*. About that same time, peer had employed the noted vocalist and teacher of art song at Juilliard, Paul Sperry, to go through the existing peer catalog and select songs for an upcoming peer anthology of American art song. Peer threw my handwritten manuscript of *A Winter Come* into the pile of songs Paul was to peruse. Peer shortly afterward received a call from Paul, saying, ‘Who is this guy? The songs from *A Winter Come* are marvelous.’ Two of the songs were then included in the peer anthology, and one of the highlights in my life was to see that anthology in the window of Patelson’s sheet music store next to Carnegie Hall, with my songs included among those of Ives, Rorem, and others.

“I told Todd Vunderink, director of peermusic classical, with whom I have worked closely for over three decades now, that I would be submitting choral works as well in the future. He remarked that peer did not have an extensive choral catalog, but would be willing to consider any submissions.

“After the premiere of the *Madrigali: Six ‘FireSongs’ on Italian Renaissance Poems*, I sent the score to Todd, saying it was a very challenging *a cappella* piece in Italian that only the finest choirs would tackle. A couple of weeks later he called and said that peer had reviewed the piece and had two comments: They loved the cycle and, although they had no idea if it would generate much income because of its length and difficulty, they were not about to see this work in some other publisher’s catalog. I told him that this was the kind of publisher to which I wanted to commit my works.

“The *Madrigali* has been a steady seller for 30 years and has numerous recordings. Premier choral conductors such as Dale Warland, Eric Ericson, and Donald Neuen immediately programmed the work upon publication. Peermusic thereafter became the publisher of *O Magnum Mysterium*—one of six Latin *a cappella* motets—*Les Chansons des Roses*, *Lux Aeterna*, *Nocturnes*, etc., etc.: all of my choral music for the past three decades. It all started with peer’s commitment to my songs. It is gratifying for me to know that the immense worldwide sales of these works provides peermusic financial support for publishing the far more rarified genre of art song.”

The support from peermusic which Lauridsen describes is the sort of relationship that most composers can only dream of, and is a noteworthy testimony to the quality of his music, choral and vocal. And there is a marvelous irony that the publisher’s commitment started with the songs. No doubt they look back at *that* decision with great pleasure. Much as I admire the vocal settings of works that were originally for chorus, I had to say that I was a little surprised by the decision to recast *O Magnum Mysterium* for solo voice, for instance, *because* of the long line, the mostly restrained dynamic with a huge climax, and an almost two-octave range. Hard enough for a good soprano—or tenor—section, those qualities demand a soloist of singular ability. That was why I presumed that, just as many of the composer’s choral works were the result of close relationships with outstanding choirs, especially the Los Angeles Master Chorale, so might the solo works be with vocalists. I asked if any of his solo vocal works been commissioned, or are there

any other singers who have been strong advocates that he would care to name. “The solo version of *O Magnum Mysterium* is constantly performed around the world, accompanied by either piano or organ. Soprano Jane Thorngren did the premiere recording on my *Northwest Journey* CD, which also includes Sunny Wilkinson and Shelly Berg’s fabulous performance of my theater song *Where Have the Actors Gone*. I have worked closely in the past few years with my colleague at the USC Thornton School of Music, Rod Gilfry, who premiered my solo voice setting of Dana Gioia’s *Prayer* and, along with Rod’s daughter Carin, my mixed duet versions of that work and *Sure on this Shining Night*.”

That theater song is a particularly interesting part of Lauridsen’s body of work, an apparent outlier among songs that seemed to me more influenced by the music of the church and the recital hall than the musical stage. I listened again to *Where Have the Actors Gone*, in Williams and Fan’s new recording, and in that very different recording the composer mentioned above with Wilkinson and Berg. It is that earlier recording, in fact, that makes a connection for me to Stephen Sondheim and his show *Follies*. Lauridsen’s song, written in 1976, suggests that he could have been equally successful in that genre. I wondered if, in the 40 years since, he had considered the possibility of pursuing that style further, even to the point of writing a work for the musical stage. He first offered a different perspective on some of his works. “As you could hear from the mixed duet version of the Neruda [*Ya eres mía*], it is another in my series of songs that have roots in songs from the Broadway theater stage: *Sure on this Shining Night*, *Where Have the Actors Gone*—the performance by jazz artists Sunny Wilkinson and Shelly Berg is exceptional—*Prayer*, even *Dirait-on* to a certain extent. All of these story-songs have long, lyric lines. This is a song about a relationship ending, written as an allegory of a play coming to a close. It’s actually one of my personal favorites. It is a tightly-knit passacaglia over a modulating sequence in standard rounded binary form.” I wasn’t missing the parallel; much of *Follies* uses the same type of metaphor. “I have considered writing a work for the musical stage,” he continued, “which will probably happen in the next life.”

Next life or no, I will try to be there for the opening of that musical, if at all possible. The mention of *Dirait-on* in the context of a theater piece reminded me of a particular issue I wanted to raise. I had described it in my introductory email as a “pet peeve” regarding recorded performances of that work, and Lauridsen responded immediately to that idea.

“Your peeve with various recordings of *Dirait-on* are probably the same as mine, having to do with tempo flexibility, musical approach, style of performance, etc. I find many conductors are clueless in such matters, also reflected in performances of *O Magnum Mysterium*, *Sure on this Shining Night*, *Lux Aeterna*, etc.”

He went on to suggest a performance standard: “Wonderful performances of these and others of my works are featured on Michael Stillwater’s award-winning documentary, *Shining Night - A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen*. Information on that film is at mortenlauridsen.net.”

It is a marvelous film, as I found out later, but pleased because I had an opportunity that I had not anticipated, and exhibiting more bravery than good sense, I pursued the subject without having viewed it.

“*Dirait-on*,” I observed, “is one of your most popular pieces, and I have found that it is the one work that is most likely to bring recognition among those who are not choral music fans. Yet it is part, and really the culmination of, a beautifully wrought cycle of songs on texts by Rilke. I have complained in the past that when the piece is performed alone, that it is too often sentimentalized, seemingly on the quality of the melody rather than a perception of the text and its context. I am also put off when I hear performances and recordings of the full song cycle where the ending is similarly *over-milked*. This does not seem to happen in recordings in which you participate as pianist.

“I hear some world-weary bitterness in this piece, the rose as metaphor for the object of a failed romantic love, almost like a song that Edith Piaf would have sung. And yet, a version of this piece for two solo voices, without the cycle, suggests I may have misread your intention. Would you care to comment?”

Lauridsen’s response was succinct: “There is no bitterness at all in *Dirait-on*. I conceived it as a *chanson populaire*, or French folksong, about a rose being a bit narcissistic through self-caressing. It is a light piece and should be sung simply and directly with much *tempi rubato*. It was the first of the *Rose Songs* cycle composed, the rest coming later. The initial song in that cycle is based on fragments of melodies that are revealed in full later in the work.”

Fair enough. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes a rose is just a rose. Too bad, as I was rather taken with that Edith Piaf “connection,” not least because of the coincidence of the title of her theme-song, *La Vie en rose*. And Rilke leaves so much to the reader.

Of course, susceptibility to a range of interpretations is a hallmark of the best poetry, and Morten Lauridsen is well known for the quality of the texts that he sets. I asked what happens, as he is reading poetry, which makes one particular poem or poet stand out, besides the adaptability to that long line that he prefers.

“I initially respond viscerally to poems,” he replied, “and then explore all facets of the poem and the poet in deciding whether to set to text to music or not. I have chosen poems by Neruda, Gioia, Graves, Lorca, Moss, Rilke, Witt, Agee, and Italian Renaissance poets, as well as numerous sacred texts in both English and Latin. I choose my musical materials—harmonies, melodies, form, rhythm, stylistic approach, etc.—to complement the content, style, era of creation, language, etc. of the poet. This is why there are such diverse musical approaches and contrasts among the cycles, from the atonal and highly colorful and gestural *Cuatro Canciones*, to the Renaissance-based *Lux Aeterna*, to the passionate *Madrigali* and *Mid-Winter Songs*, to the gentle and more impressionistic *Chansons*, etc.”

There *are* many styles, but much of the impression I have of Lauridsen’s music centers around a certain numinous quality found in his music. In fact, on the composer’s web site and in the film, musicologist Nick Strimple is quoted as saying that he is, among American composers, unique in being what might be called a mystic. It is a wonderful quote. There are other composers to whom that descriptor has been attached—Arvo Pärt, Olivier Messiaen, and Paweł Łukaszewski come to mind—whose mysticism arises from deeply held religious convictions. I asked if he thought this descriptor of his music is apt, and if so, from where his sense of the transcendent arises.

He avoided the question at first: “Regarding the concept of my being a ‘mystical’ composer, I will leave that to others to decide.”

Others, of course, *have* decided that, which is why I was asking. Not only does Strimple say that, but Dana Gioia uses that descriptor, as well, in the notes to *Prayer*. I am inclined to agree, as well, though I am suspicious of labels. Regardless of the label itself, there does seem to be a transcendent quality to Lauridsen’s music that appeals to many listeners and musicians. Some of it, I presume, comes from the choice of text, and much from the way that he uses line and harmony. I felt sure, however, that there was more than the mechanics of composition and the style that he had developed over the years that accounts for that way of expressing himself. In fact, many have been suggested over the years: life events, a particular faith, his retreat on Waldron Island, his time alone in that fire tower near Mount St. Helens.

Like all such questions, this had been asked of him before: “On Christmas day in 1999, I was interviewed on Scott Simon’s nationally broadcast radio program and he asked, ‘What is there about this music that goes so deeply inside of us?’ My answer was that I did not know, that creative artists are sometimes able, through their art, to get to that place that is beyond words that cannot be explained. Certain of my works, especially the sacred Latin settings, seem to have been able to transcend to that place, possibly through a combination of the deep effect the texts had on me and the pristine beauty and quietness in the place of composition on a remote island in a rustic waterfront cabin by candlelight on a 50-dollar spinet piano. I was able to reach very deeply inside in this environment with those texts.”

In this CD’s program notes, Gioia describes the arrival at that current, ecstatic/sensuous style—my term—through a severe crisis of some sort. I asked if he would be willing to say something about that crisis and how it brought about the changes that we hear in his more recent, and most famous, music.

“Parts of the 1970s and 80s were trying times for me, involving personal relationships and other things, and the music of that period reflected that. There is *Angst* in much of this music: the *Mid-Winter Songs on Poems of Robert Graves*, the *Madrigali: Six ‘FireSongs’ on Italian Renaissance Poems*, the jazz/cabaret song *Where Have the Actors Gone*, the *Cuarto Canciones on Poems by Lorca*, my *Symphony I*, the thorny *Variations for Piano*, etc.”

Gioia describes this change of style as a metamorphic process, bringing Lauridsen eventually to a unique style and place as a composer. Being quite taken, as well, with some of his earlier music—the atonal Lorca settings included here, for instance—I had to ask: If the right text presented itself, could he imagine himself returning to an earlier style, or evolving to something very different than what he is doing now? And what would that involve, did he imagine?

“One can see how closely my musical approach is connected to the texts of my music; the Graves cycle, for example consists of five movements, all with the *Winter* theme, but that cycle is also a reflection on Graves’s relationship with two women in his life. The opening *Lament for Pasiphaë* is dramatic and full of musical edges of all kinds—rhythm, harmony, dynamics, etc.—because he had been left by his long time mistress, Laura

Riding. In the poem of the second movement, Graves depersonalizes her, turning her into ice, and the music is crystalline and spare. But then he finds love again in the person of Beryl Hodge, and the music warms up and the edges and *Angst* disappear. In the fourth poem, Graves finds himself ‘once more a poet again’ and ‘finds no winter anywhere to see,’ and the music is light and playful, reflecting his joy and delight. The last movement is a prayer to keep his heart from being broken again, and the music is quiet and direct until a recap of the opening dramatic gestures from the first movement, reminding us all that, as much as we can pray for happiness, there is the possibility that it could be fleeting. That theme of the temporal fragility of joy runs through much of Grave’s poetry, due in large part to his experience in World War I. It is crucial for choral conductors, when preparing a work, to explore in depth all aspects of the text and of the poet first, and then see how the music relates to the words.

“After a period of reflection following the *Madrigali*, I composed the lighter cycle *Les Chansons des Roses* on delightful French poems by Rilke in 1993. The following year I was appointed composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale conducted by Paul Salamunovich. Paul was an expert on Gregorian chant and the sacred Latin liturgy, having been choir director at a Catholic church for decades. I composed music for him that reflected his expertise, starting with *O Magnum Mysterium* and then the *Lux Aeterna* and *Ave Maria*. His Grammy-nominated recording of these works and others remains iconic in the choral world. The music here reflects characteristics and procedures of chant and High Renaissance sacred music, especially as we see in the music of Josquin.

“The musical materials of the three primary movements of the *Nocturnes*, each reflecting poems related to night in French, Spanish, and English by Rilke, Neruda, and Agee, relate intimately to the poetic content, language, style, time of authorship, etc. My more recent, atonal *Canticle/O vos omnes* for solo clarinet—with multiphonics—women’s choir, and chimes belongs to my series of abstract works. A future composition project may include *Madrigali, Book II*.”

So, perhaps the development of style is not so linear. But there are those other influences, so beautifully presented in the film *Shining Night*. Waldron Island is a sanctuary that allows Lauridsen to come in touch with the sublime: the sea, the sea light and air, the sand of the beach, the special land and people. I originally thought, when I had read about Waldron Island and the earlier job for the Forest Service in a remote fire tower, that it was the seclusion that fed his art; that gave him the chance to compose. That isn’t all of it, though. As the film makes clear, he is not a hermit, even there.

“I am not a hermit at all,” he wrote back. “I simply do my best work while alone for periods of time. It is the quietness and pristine beauty of Waldron Island that opens a special creative window for me.”

He mentions in the film that he first connected with the island as a small boy.

“I started going to Waldron while in grade school. It was a sanctuary for me and an escape from a terribly abusive father. My younger brother eventually drank himself to death as a result of the abuse.”

I asked if he sees his music, then—at least some of it—as a balm to the wounds of living: his and others. And does he feel, at times, as if he is a conduit to something bigger than

himself?

His answer to another self-perception question was characteristically muted: “Judging from the large amount of mail I constantly receive from listeners, I know that certain works of mine serve as a balm to others, especially my setting of Dana Gioia’s *Prayer*, the *Lux Aeterna*, and *O Magnum Mysterium*. And I do feel that, perhaps, I am a conduit in some way.”

Clearly, there are a lot of people who find this so, to the point that he was recognized for “composition of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power, and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide” when President Bush presented him with the National Medal of Arts in 2007.

“The National Medal of Arts was a huge surprise; I was only the eighth classical composer to be so honored. Copland, Carter, and Bolcom are among the others. It was amazing to receive it along with Andrew Wyeth, Les Paul, and five others in a White House ceremony. And I think it was a real recognition of the importance of choral music in the fabric of American culture.”

At 73, Lauridsen continues to compose, and teach, and support those who perform his music. His teaching at USC, in particular, requires that he spend some significant time in Los Angeles. Does that creative fire sometimes alight in the city as well as on the island? “My teaching schedule at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music allows certain days for creative work, so I have been able to do that as well as fulfill my responsibilities at the university, including chairing the department of composition for a dozen years and founding the Advanced Film Scoring Program. And my home in the Hollywood Hills is situated apart from the bustle of the city, so I am able to compose there as well.”

While we were corresponding, he attended a performance that included the choral version of *Ya eres mía*. Listening to the recording he kindly provided me, I could not help thinking how fortunate he has been in colleagues and relationships. These include the many years at USC, both as student and on the faculty, plus the residency with the Los Angeles Master Chorale, and his relationship with the superb choral conductors who have led that ensemble, as well as Suzi Digby and The Golden Bridge vocal ensemble in the new live recording, and many more. He has commented on how the association with Paul Salamunovich resulted in some of the chant- and liturgically-inspired works. I asked how this quality of music-making has influenced other of his works over the years, and how some of those relationships, like the residency, came about.

“The premiere of the choral version of *Ya eres mía*, with The Golden Bridge vocal consort conducted by Suzi Digby in Beverly Hills, was absolutely wonderful in all ways. Suzi is a brilliant conductor, a legend in Britain, and the choir she has formed in Los Angeles contains top-notch singers. I think this Neruda setting will become one of my most performed works.

“Members of the Los Angeles Master Chorale board of directors attended the choral/orchestral premiere of my *Mid-Winter Songs on Poems by Robert Graves* by the Pasadena Chamber Orchestra and Chorus in 1983 and brought the work to the attention of the LAMC conductor, Roger Wagner. He and the Chorale performed it at the Dorothy

Chandler Pavilion in 1985, as did his successor, John Currie, in 1990. Members of the board also became aware of the CD recording of my choral cycles by Oregon's chamber chorus Choral Cross-Ties, and the board president, Marshall Rutter, then commissioned my *O Magnum Mysterium* as a gift for his wife, Terry Knowles. It was the first piece of mine in my role as the Chorale's composer-in-residence, premiered by the Chorale in December of 1994."

There were still many questions, and time and space were running out. What lies ahead as far as composing and teaching? Are there interesting projects on the horizon that he can discuss? And is he, if I might presume, thinking at all about retirement from teaching, so that he can devote even more time to reading, contemplating, and composition?

"I will be retiring from the USC Thornton School of Music at the end of the spring semester, 2017. It will mark exactly 50 years of teaching college classes there. But I will continue to do university residencies around the world—I've done more than 100 so far—and choral festivals in my role as honorary artistic president of INTERKULTUR/World Choir Games, as well as attending screenings of the *Shining Night* film. I plan on moving to my home in the San Juan Islands of Washington State to continue composing, traveling, and experiencing this magical part of the planet."

And one last, slightly impertinent, question: How important is it to him that his music outlive him?

"I do want my music to last." He replied. "And I think some of it will."

I think his legions of admirers, musicians and audience, have no doubts about that.

LAURIDSEN *O Magnum Mysterium. A Winter Come. Ya eres mía. 4 Canciones. Dirait-on. A Backyard Universe. Where Have The Actors Gone 2 Songs on American Poems* • Jeremy Huw Williams (bar); Caryl Hughes (sop); Peter Esswood (vc); John Reynolds (cl); Paula Fan (pn) • COWITZ BAY 3599 (61:24)

Interview with Ronald Grames

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