

# “THUNDERSTRUCK” BY ART

The Interdisciplinary and Interpretive  
Contexts of Morten Lauridsen’s  
*O magnum mysterium*

JAMES ARTHUR BOND



*Zurbarán, Francisco de, Spanish, 1598–1664, Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose, 1633, Oil on Canvas, 24-1/2 x 43-1/8 in. (62.2 x 109.5 cm.) The Norton Simon Foundation Reprinted with Permission.*

**M**orten Lauridsen's unaccompanied motet, *O magnum mysterium* (1994), one of the best-known works of the choral repertoire, inspires the listener with its lean, direct rendering of the Responsory from the Christmas Day Matins. Lauridsen's setting is incomparably sublime in the joyful, contemplative depiction of a major religious event—the birth of Jesus Christ, and the role of the Virgin Mary in his Incarnation. Lauridsen composed the motet from not only his knowledge of earlier settings but also his openness to interdisciplinary and interpretive contexts. As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the December 1994 premiere draws near, the motet remains striking for the way it creatively expresses a traditional choral form in a modern yet accessible musical idiom. Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium* grounds the listener in the expansive and meditative possibilities of choral music in the chant and Renaissance traditions, prospects that can be enhanced by exploring the rich interdisciplinary and interpretive contexts of the piece.

### **Aesthetic Inquiry and the Creative Process**

When he composed the motet in 1994, Lauridsen made regular visits to the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, where he encountered oil paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664). When he first saw Zurbarán's 1633 masterpiece, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose* (see opposite page), he was “thunderstruck” by it: he experienced a powerful “visceral reaction” that fascinated him.<sup>1</sup> Lauridsen recognized that when anyone views Zurbarán's still life closely, it “knocks you off your feet: you go before this painting, and you can't even talk—you are just brought to your knees.” He especially noticed that despite the apparent simplicity of the painting, it inexplicably makes “a huge, profound, spiritual statement in the most economical and understated way.”<sup>2</sup> Rare among Zurbarán's other works as the artist's only signed and dated still life, it served as a dynamic “visual model” as Lauridsen composed *O magnum mysterium*. The painting illuminated Lauridsen's intention: “to use the most direct materials to create a profound effect” within the listener.<sup>3</sup>

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When one studies Zurbarán's still life, it becomes apparent why this painting inspired Lauridsen. A work from the seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque, Zurbarán's still life is remarkable in not only its rarity but also its certainty of execution—the form serving the subject matter and atmosphere so perfectly that it all but disappears into the rich dark background. One is left with the objects themselves, as if they tangibly exist but timelessly, suspended before the viewer for some unfathomable purpose.

So much of Zurbarán's art conveys what Jonathan Brown has characterized as a “sense of immediacy.”<sup>4</sup> In the still life, this quality can be observed in the naturalistic, intricate depiction of ordinary objects on a table. But these objects are balanced perfectly by formations of triangular sight lines. They are also organized into three groups, which are configured in an unbending linear line: on the far left of the painting, a silver plate of citrons, the fruit positioned symmetrically and piled “pyramidally”;<sup>5</sup> in the center, a round tan basket “abundantly filled” by oranges, with some attached leaves and blossoms overhanging the circumference; on the far right, a second plate holding a pale pink rose, the cut end of its arched thornless stem balanced precariously on the table, with a small portion of “unfurled” petals resting on the left edge of the plate;<sup>6</sup> in the center of that plate, a two-handled ceramic cup of presumably water, the cup filled almost to the brim.<sup>7</sup> These objects are bathed in light from the left, illumination that creates a chiaroscuro pattern of light, shadow, and reflection.<sup>8</sup> All these elements create a slight shimmering effect, which suggests that the objects gently float before the viewer.

Odile Delenda's assessment of Zurbarán's oeuvre suggests how this particular painting works. The combination of a simple depiction of the ordinary within an atmosphere of meditative “silence” culminates in a mysterious transformation of the tangible: Zurbarán has “transmuted this scrupulous naturalism and sanctified the everyday.”<sup>9</sup> As Cees Nooteboom has put it, Zurbarán's still life gently calls forth an “unapproachable tranquility



*Morten Lauridsen interpreting his music at a choir concert, May 20, 2018, St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, La Jolla, CA, Photo by Ernst F. Tonsing, Ph.D.*

emanating from things-in-themselves,” a feeling Lauridsen recognized in the overall “atmosphere of deep contemplation.”<sup>10</sup>

One interpretation of Zurbarán's adroit depiction of these objects centers on their function as religious iconography. Ernst F. Tonsing interprets the tripartite linear organization as a compelling reference to the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> Julián Gállego has noted specific devotional associations: the citrons may be interpreted as a “paschal fruit,” indicative of the new life associated with Easter; the oranges, leaves, and blossoms connote fer-

tility and “chastity”; the pink rose suggests “divine love”; the cup of water, “purity.”<sup>12</sup>

These religious connotations intrigued Lauridsen as he set the Responsory. Whenever he engages with a work of art, he immerses himself in research and continues to question it, activities that enrich his inner life and spark his creativity. To understand art requires “peeling [it] back like an onion,” so that the “deeper meanings” are revealed. Lauridsen realized that from those few items on the table—“very simple stuff”—Zurbarán had created “great meaning.” His working question thus became: “How can I do that in the same way musically?” Pursuing that question proved challenging, because Lauridsen had to keep “stripping away” from the musical material that emerged “to get down to the nitty-gritty,” so that he could create “a direct statement using the most direct material possible,” just as Zurbarán had done.<sup>13</sup>

He continued to study the painting as he composed. Lauridsen noticed the “understated” nature of the still life in the “muted colors.” He interpreted the table as “an altar” and the objects as devout “offerings” to the Virgin Mary: the cup of water connoting her “purity”; the rose representing Mary herself; the oranges, blossoms, and citrons expressing the divine renewal of life.<sup>14</sup> The still life provides a balanced portrayal of the objects within the constraints of a “shallow,” sparsely rendered interior, ultimately yielding what Santiago Alcolea I Gil has described as “an impressively monumental quality.”<sup>15</sup> Lauridsen likewise has observed that Zurbarán's master-



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the celestial quality of *O magnum mysterium*: the layers of meaning are revealed by re-imagining it in Lauridsen’s interdisciplinary dialogue between painting and music.

Just as Zurbarán had imbued the simple, linearly arranged objects with an exquisite pattern of light, shadow, and reflection, so did Lauridsen interpolate the predominantly consonant harmony of primary chords with judicious placement of added tones and secondary chords, thus delicately tinging it with an elusively modern sound. To initiate the conclusion of the A section in m. 16, for example, Lauridsen employed a minor submediant chord in root position, which is sustained on the third beat with a *fermata*, and reiterated and intensified on the fourth beat with an added ninth—a C<sup>#</sup>—in the alto line. Contributing intensity to the rich sound of the chord, the C<sup>#</sup> then resolves upward to D in m. 17, as the harmony returns to primary chords in first inversion (Figure 2).<sup>24</sup> By keeping the harmonic language direct and uncomplicated, but lightly leavening that language with added tones and a secondary chord, Lauridsen conveys simultaneously a feeling of “joy and elation” and a sense of ethereal mystery.<sup>25</sup>

## Interweaving the Text and the Music

The gossamer effect Lauridsen created harmonically is reinforced temporally with another technique from Gregorian chant, the “elasticity” of the line—an

ever-present undulation of “push forward” and “fall back” in each phrase, through slight tempo modifications.<sup>26</sup> These changes are calibrated to textual meaning. As David Hiley has argued, in chant all musical interpretation depends upon the Latin text, which was designed for a specific canonical hour; yet the text must also fit the musical requirements of the liturgical season. Text and music are thus critically “interdependent” in chant, an aesthetic principle that Lauridsen consistently espoused.<sup>27</sup>

Nick Strimple has clarified Lauridsen’s incorporation of Gregorian Chant, noting that it hinges on an intricate pacing and shaping of the melodic line. Lauridsen’s music thus becomes “married to the text.”<sup>28</sup> This understanding is crucial to apprehend the layers of meaning that can be expressed through the motet: the elegant interweaving of the text with the contours of the melodic line balances every phrase to contribute to a coherent whole, as Lauridsen wanted to create a work that would fit in the palm of one’s hand.<sup>29</sup> In Lauridsen’s composing of not only this motet but also frequently in his subsequent work, individual melodic motives in the largely conjunct vocal lines create the melody through a harmonious “contrapuntal interplay,” one that works in tandem with the ebb and flow of the tempo.<sup>30</sup>

The perfect alignment of all musical elements illuminates a vital interpretation of the text. The listener can thus apprehend the significance of the Responsory, as

Figure 2. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 16–18.

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each phrase shapes the text for active reflection. One's interpretive agency is similar to the role embraced by the inspired viewer of Zurbarán's still life, who might linger before the painting to assemble an interpretation from the ordered objects. Lauridsen's motet invites the listener to reflect on the meaning created by his careful coordination between the text and the music.

O magnum mysterium,  
et admirabile sacramentum  
ut animalia viderent Dominum  
natum, jacentum in praesepio!  
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera  
meruerunt portare  
Dominum Christum. Alleluia!

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

*O magnum mysterium*, Text and Translation.  
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A close analysis of mm. 1–18 illustrates how Lauridsen's interweaving reveals the interpretive layers of the text. The words of the first musical phrase, "O magnum mysterium" [O great mystery], are rendered with crucial changes in the tempo, first with a *ritardando*, followed by a *fermata* in m. 4 (Figure 1). Functioning more than a mere technical device to slow down the music for variety, this two-step alteration in tempo progressively draws back the forward motion of the chorus, allowing it to linger ever more gently on the last syllable of "mysterium." This use of a "hold back," as conductor Paul Salamunovich described it, emphasizes the awe conveyed by the text and also refers the listener back in time to the incomprehensible, ordinary moment of the divine birth.<sup>32</sup>

Immediately following the expression of that ordinary moment, the second phrase (mm. 5–8)—marked *A tempo*—begins on the subdominant chord to repeat the words "O magnum mysterium." It proceeds forward with continued use of first inversion. However, in contrast from m. 4, when the chorus reaches the end in m. 8, there is no lingering on the last syllable of "mysterium"; instead, the forward motion enables the next words from the text to be subtly "interlaced" with it (Figure 3).<sup>33</sup>

In m. 8–9 three of the vocal lines finish the musical phrase. Elision in the text and the melodic quarter notes accorded to the alto line—and a subtle change from the *pianissimo* of the other lines to *piano*—introduce

Figure 3. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 8–12.

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the subsequent words from the text, “et admirabile sacramentum” [and wondrous sacrament].<sup>34</sup> By overlapping the last two syllables of the word “mysterium” in softer sustained notes in the soprano, tenor, and bass lines, with the words “et admirabile,” the new words are woven delicately into the conclusion of the previous phrase. This interweaving of text and music creates for the listener a continued emphasis on the opening words while simultaneously introducing a new prominence in the present, in the commemoration of the divine birth through the very sacrament that tangibly recalls it—that is, the Eucharist, which would take place immediately after the Matins during the Midnight Mass. The “great mystery” is thus unveiled for the listener in the present moment.<sup>35</sup>

### Designing a “Communal Meditation”

Lauridsen’s depiction of the sacrament hinges on actively harnessing the music to the connotations of the text. But bringing those interpretive prospects forward depends upon the collaboration of a chorus. As Dana Gioia has pointed out, *O magnum mysterium* is a “communal meditation,” one that requires all voices to work together to create a shared expression of devotion.<sup>36</sup> This communal quality befits the chant tradition, and it is a central characteristic of Lauridsen’s motet. In the first half of m. 9, as the tenor and bass lines sustain the har-

mony for the last syllable of “mysterium,” the alto line articulates melodically the last three syllables of “admirabile.” Moreover, a brief change in meter from 4/4 to 3/2 deftly joins the text to quarter notes, as first the altos and then the sopranos paint the words that express the divine mystery of the sacrament.

After a return to 4/4 time, the word painting continues through a purposeful intensification. Two syllables of “admirabile” are drawn out melodically—first, the center syllable “ra,” in mm. 11–12, followed by the initial syllable, “ad,” in mm. 14–15 (Figures 3 and 4). M. 11, for example, begins with a melodic assertion in the alto line to draw out the central syllable “ra.” To add depth Lauridsen has split the alto line in two—the upper line focusing with the soprano line on a sustained note, and the lower alto line moving forward melodically in quarter notes on the central syllable. This latter role is then nimbly traded with the soprano line at the end of m. 11. On beat 4 and subsequently in m. 12, the soprano line concludes this melisma, while the split alto line returns to sustained tones, merging ultimately into a single line in m. 13. The soprano line carries the melody forward and paints another melisma—this time focused on the initial syllable “ad,” of “admirabile.”

Lauridsen’s skillful design of shared melodic responsibility between the alto and soprano lines and innovative repetition through melismas reinforces the sense of the text. As an adjective modifying the noun

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The score is for measures 14 and 15 of Morten Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium*. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are 'ad - - - - - mi -'. The Soprano line has a melisma on 'ad' in measure 14. The Alto line has a melisma on 'mi' in measure 15. The Tenor and Bass lines have sustained notes for 'ad' and 'mi'.

Figure 4. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 14–15.

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“sacramentum,” the word “admirabile” receives considerable emphasis to cultivate an abiding wonderment. Just as the objects in Zurbarán’s painting work in concert to connote the divine renewal of life, so do the shared melodic materials render the music in consummate form, making the sacrament tangibly present and cultivating in the listener a deeper understanding of the text.

The end of the first A section furthers this understanding by foreshadowing liturgical and musical themes and by providing an overarching symmetrical unity. As described previously, on beats three and four of m. 16 (Figure 2), the minor submediant chord in root position stands out harmonically, vivifying the last syllable of “admirabile.” Because the third of the chord is given to the melodic line, it imparts a dark, muted quality.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, on the anacrusis the repeated chord with the added ninth in the alto line not only emphasizes fervently the first syllable of “sacramentum,” it also prefigures thematically the sacrifice of Christ, which is commemorated during Easter and whenever the Eucharist is celebrated. Finally, the added ninth foreshadows the musical treatment of the Virgin Mary in the B section (mm. 37–45).<sup>38</sup> Above all, to provide unity for the entire section, in m. 18 the final syllable of “sacramentum” is held back on the last chord with a *fermata*, which mirrors the earlier lingering on “mysterium” in m. 4 (Figure 1). This mirroring effect connects the two nouns—“mysterium” and “sacramentum”—of the independent clause from the first sentence of the text. Unified through this arc of musical design, the nouns form a feeling of spiritual wholeness and devout certitude.

The second A section (mm. 19–37) expresses the dependent clause of the first sentence, musically subordinating it to the independent clause from the first A section. The dependent clause reads, “ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, jacentum in praesepio!” [that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in



*Morten Lauridsen feeding the birds at his home, San Juan Island, Washington, August 5, 2016. Photo by the author.*

their manger!]. Executed melodically exactly like the previous treatment of “ra” in mm. 11–12, in mm. 29–30 a central syllable—“ma”—of the noun “animalia” is painted melodically, underscoring the astonishing revelation that animals witnessed the divine birth.

The balanced design of the motet becomes even more apparent at this point: although “animalia” receives significant melodic emphasis

through the use of this single melisma, it proportionally receives less emphasis than that accorded to “admirabile” in the first A section, which has two melismas. These proportions make sense in relation to the text: the religious view inculcated grammatically elevates the divine birth and the sacrament above the humble animals who witnessed it; yet that lowly witness contributes to a remarkable revelation—the paradox that the Incarnation and the sacrament both stem from the same humble beginning. By designing his composition to illuminate the text, Lauridsen renders the intangible tangible, bringing forward both the hushed realm of the spirit and the lucidity of understanding for the listener.

### Composing a “Sonic Spotlight”

Making the intangible tangible proved particularly challenging in portraying the Virgin Mary in the B section (mm. 37–45). Lauridsen wanted to portray both the “significance” and the “sorrow” of the Virgin Mary. However, he had to shape the music delicately to maintain the harmonious atmosphere within the context of a musical “palette that is otherwise very direct,” and in the middle of a text that is otherwise filled with “joy and elation.” As he focused on this quandary, he experimented with many potential solutions, which all proved unsatisfactory.<sup>39</sup> One sleepless night an innovative answer finally came to him: the use of a single note of dissonance at the end of the first syllable of “Virgo” to

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commemorate both the Virgin Mary’s role in Christ’s birth and her subsequent grief.<sup>40</sup> The note, an *appoggiatura* G<sup>#</sup> placed strategically in the midst of a word and also in a middle voice—the alto line—creates a distinctive tension. Foreshadowed by the added ninth in m. 16, the *appoggiatura* G<sup>#</sup>—used twice in the B section—is the only note in the entire piece not in the key of D major. The note constitutes a two–three *appoggiatura* with the soprano line, and a nine–eight *appoggiatura* with the bass line.<sup>41</sup>

To prepare for the *appoggiatura*, the tempo and dynamics are adjusted to integrate the melodic line through elision. As three lines sustain the final syllable of “praesepio” in m. 37, the soprano line establishes reverence for the Virgin Mary by articulating “Beata” [Blessed] in repeated quarter notes on A, the inverted root of the dominant. The repetition of this motif in m. 41 and the centering function of the note throughout the B section evoke the feeling of a reciting tone from chant, thus imbuing the entire passage with adoration<sup>42</sup> (Figure 5).

The music returns to *A tempo* in m. 38, and in m. 39 the dissonance occurs. Because Lauridsen placed the dissonance in a minor mediant chord in root position, located it within the rich timbre of the alto line in the middle of “Beata,” and kept the dynamics at *pianissimo*, the dissonance speaks for itself—in an unobtrusive quiet space that honors the Virgin Mary adoringly. This

tranquilly ardent dissonance fits the second and third uses explained by Knud Jeppesen in his historical study: first, dissonance functioning as a “primary phenomenon”—in this case one that contrasts subtly with the overall use of consonance; second, dissonance serving “as a means of poetical expression”—to highlight eloquently the textual content.<sup>43</sup>

After resolving downward from G<sup>#</sup> to F<sup>#</sup> on the second beat of m. 39, and thus contrasting melodically with the earlier C<sup>#</sup> resolution upward to D in m. 17, the Virgin Mary is given further prominence by a hauntingly solemn bridge of minor mediant chords, followed by minor submediant chords.<sup>44</sup> This harmonic bridge is used twice to pay homage to the Virgin Mary’s role in bearing the Christ child. By referencing her again with the *appoggiatura* after the first bridge, and following that repetition with a second deployment of the bridge, a gentle emphasis occurs, so that the listener can be drawn into the dissonance without detracting from the contemplative atmosphere. In Lauridsen’s view, the *appoggiatura* shines a “sonic spotlight” on “Virgo,” illuminating it momentarily from the motet. Imparting a crucial “poignancy,” the *appoggiatura* is “the most important note” in the entire piece, and yet performed *pianissimo* and with the *legato* articulation indicated in the score, it does so in an “understated” way.<sup>45</sup>

Lauridsen’s use of dissonance recalls the startling contrast between the rose and the other objects in Zur-

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The score covers measures 37 to 41. At measure 37, the tempo is marked 'rit.' and dynamics are 'pp'. At measure 38, the tempo changes to 'Tempo primo'. At measure 41, the tempo is marked 'poco rit.'. The lyrics are: 'Be - a - ta Vir - - - go, cu - jus vis - ce - ra me - ru - e - runt, Be - a - ta Vir - - - go, cu - jus vis - ce - ra me - ru - e - runt, Vir - - - go, cu - jus vis - ce - ra me - ru - e - runt, Vir - - - go, cu - jus vis - ce - ra me - ru - e - runt.' The score includes musical notation for each voice part, with the alto line featuring a prominent dissonance (G#) in measure 39.

Figure 5. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 37–41.

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barán's painting. As previously mentioned, Lauridsen views the rose as representing the Virgin Mary.<sup>46</sup> When one analyzes Zurbarán's "focused" portrayal of the rose, it stands out from the other natural objects on the table.<sup>47</sup> Contrasting with the vibrant fecundity of those objects, in its inexplicably stable position the slightly withered rose seems otherworldly.<sup>48</sup> Both Zurbarán's rose and Lauridsen's dissonance are distinctive: they invite a reverent meditation on the Virgin Mary.

## Anticipating Serenity

Out of the mystery, wonder, and sorrow evoked by the first two-thirds of *O magnum misterium* comes the serenity of the final A section (mm. 45–72). In his delineation of the traditional Catholic liturgy, Abbott Prosper Guéranger remarked on the "Mystery" of the "holy season" of Christmas, underscoring that through the liturgy the "splendour of this Mystery" both "dazzles the understanding" and "inundates the heart with joy."<sup>49</sup> The final section embodies this twofold sense of intellectual wonder and irrepressible jubilation. On a grander scale than the unity achieved at the end of the first A section, the final section draws together all preceding musical elements of the first two sections, suffusing the repetition of the first line of text with both a joyful realization and an abiding conviction of whole-

ness.

To prepare for this culmination Lauridsen designed a transition from the second harmonic bridge at the end of the B section. In m. 44–45 the timbre for the minor submediant chord changes through the division of the tenor and bass lines into four parts. Contrasting with the first harmonic bridge, the melodic note in the soprano line is the third of the chord in m. 44, rather than the root and the fifth used in m. 40. The darker timbre in the soprano line coordinates with the alto line, which outlines both the third and fifth of the chord. Both lines thus participate in articulating melodically on a *crescendo* the last two words of the second line of text—"Dominum Christum" [Lord Jesus Christ]<sup>50</sup> (Figure 6).

This rising melodic motion prepares the listener for the ascending *descant* in the upper soprano line—one of two important Renaissance practices that Lauridsen chose for the final section. When he composed the *descant* he imagined it as akin to gospel singing. To give the *descant* a foundation, he placed the upper soprano line against the bass line. He created a "ground" by dividing the bass line into three parts in root position, thus contrasting with his use of *fauxbourdon* earlier. To anchor the final A section further, Lauridsen employed another practice used by medieval and Renaissance composers: he added a pedal point to the bass line, so that the joyfully florid expression of "Alleluia" in the upper soprano

43

45

*molto rit.* *A tempo, poco deliberamente*

S Al - le - lu - - - ia! Al - le -  
- go, por - ta - re Do - mi - num Chris - tum, O mag - num mys -

A - go, por - ta - re Do - mi - num Chris - tum, O mag - num mys -

T - go, por - ta - re Do - mi - num Chris - tum, O mag - num mys -

B - go, por - ta - re Do - mi - num Chris - tum, Al - le - lu - - - ia! Al - le -

Figure 6. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum misterium*, mm. 43–47.

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line would take shape against the sustained word in the bass line.<sup>51</sup> The musical frame created by the bass line and the upper soprano line suffuses joyfully the melodic interplay of the lower soprano, alto, and tenor lines. The triumphantly gospel-like, improvisatory quality can be heard in the way “Alleluia” is repeated, drawn out, and softly shaped in response to the return of the initial melody. This exuberant expression of “Alleluia” is reminiscent of Zurbarán’s canvas, in which the warm light bathes the objects against the dark background.

In the midst of the frame, the middle voices restate the first sentence of the Responso, followed by all vocal lines participating in this task. In m. 63–64 the tenor line reintroduces “Alleluia,” which all voices subsequently assume (Figure 7). This beautifully staggered, layered technique celebrates the communal nature of the Incarnation: the divine dwells with humanity. In m. 71 all four lines come together on the central accented syllable—“lu”—of “Alleluia,” at which point the piece returns to root position chords, with the dynamics diminishing from *pianissimo* to an exquisite *pianississimo* for the final chord in m. 72 (Figure 8).

These last few measures of the piece—rendered with a tempo change to *Meno mosso*, two consecutive uses of a *fermata*, and expressed harmonically with both root position and strategically placed added tones—prepare the listener for a feeling of perfect tranquility in the concluding tonic chord. Significantly, the plagal cadence has an even greater effect, because the added tones and an omitted third in the penultimate chord in m. 71 create an extreme sense of longing for resolution. In m. 72 Lauridsen thus designed the final root position tonic chord to emphasize closure. The bass and tenor lines are divided in two—with a low D2 in the bottom bass line, which is reinforced an octave higher in the bottom tenor line. The third of the triad appears in the upper tenor line, while the upper bass, alto, and soprano lines complete the triad—the upper bass

line on A2, and the alto and soprano lines in unison on a low A3. The last chord concludes with a fading decrescendo. This brilliant writing gives the final chord a warm color of unalterable centeredness, which conveys wholeness and peace.

## Experiencing the Sublime

Grant Gershon has argued that Lauridsen’s music is the work of a composer who possesses a dynamic combination of “clear intellect” and “naturalistic expression,” which yields a seamless integration of all musical

Figure 7. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 63–66.

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Figure 8. Morten Lauridsen, *O magnum mysterium*, mm. 70–72.

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# Interpretive Contexts of Morten Lauridsen's *O magnum mysterium*

elements, with the “left brain and right brain working together.” Analysis of the music will lead to compelling interpretive possibilities. On the other hand, the music also has a “sense of effortless craft” and an “organic” quality, which mean that the “emotional content” is never sacrificed for a merely cerebral musical experience. Gershon believes these two dimensions—“intellectual rigor” and emotional “immediacy”—are one in Lauridsen’s music.<sup>52</sup>

The audience perceived both qualities during the premiere of *O magnum mysterium* at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles on December 18, 1994. Performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale under Paul Salamunovich, the motet astounded the audience. Marshall Rutter, who had commissioned the work in honor of his wife, Terry Knowles, to celebrate their second wedding anniversary, recalls that when he first heard the motet, he noticed a remarkable “shift” in Lauridsen’s compositional voice, one that appealed immediately to the listener through an accessible and “harmonious” sound. As Terry Knowles sat with her husband and Lauridsen, she found the experience “overwhelming.” She recognizes that recent performances of the motet tend to “invite silence,” but at the premiere all were so “astonished” by what they heard, that they “erupted” with surprised reactions and applause at the end—all were “on their feet right away” as “the place exploded.”<sup>53</sup> Composer Paul Nelson, who studied under Lauridsen at the University of Southern California, recalls that he was “too dumbstruck, too awestruck” to perceive how others reacted. Recognizing that what he had heard would have historical importance, he found himself on his feet “clapping like crazy,” with the conviction that *O magnum mysterium* “would be around in two hundred years.”<sup>54</sup> Knowles likewise realized that “something important had happened,” and that the piece was “very powerful,” so much so that she still struggles to put it into words.<sup>55</sup>

Poet Dana Gioia describes Lauridsen’s music as sublime, which he defines as “a special mode of artistic expression” that offers one the “perception of beauty, of form, of existence, at the highest, most dizzying possible levels.” Gioia asserts that Lauridsen’s best music—including *O magnum mysterium*—evokes “the sense of operating at the highest levels of creativity,” and thus brings the listener to “the very limits” of awareness.

It is an experience that leaves the listener “breathless” with the discernment “of beauty” far beyond everyday life.<sup>56</sup>

Lauridsen believes that the motet is the most difficult piece he has ever composed, because of the laborious process of getting every element in place to create a perfect composition—just as Zurbarán had done before him. Although a composer working in the studio can attempt to “envision” the sublime, Lauridsen could not predict ahead of time the effect of the motet in performance—the degree to which “all the colors blend” harmoniously or the response from the listener when “the altos...interact with the tenors in the shaping of a tenuto.” When he heard the music performed in dress rehearsal by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Lauridsen was so stunned by the musicians’ realization of beauty that afterward he sat in his car for what “seemed like a half an hour.” He remembers that he whispered repeatedly to himself variations of an ultimately unanswerable, exclamatory question: “What was that?” It was transcendent; it was transporting; it was all these things. “What’s going on here? What was that? What did I just hear?” It was just so incredibly beautiful. “What was that?”<sup>57</sup>

When a listener is left with such unanswerable questions—with such wonderment—he or she has experienced the sublime. ■

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Morten Lauridsen, interview with the author, Hollywood Hills, CA, February 2, 2016. Soprano Katherine Rose Reaves aided me in the preparation of the interview transcripts.

<sup>2</sup> Morten Lauridsen, *Dialogues*, vol. 1, interview by James Jordan, GIA Publications CD-773, 2008, compact disc.

<sup>3</sup> Morten Lauridsen, “Masterpiece: It’s a Still Life that Runs Deep,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2009, W7; Morten Lauridsen, interview with the author, San Juan

- Island, WA, August 5, 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Jonathan Brown, *The Golden Age of Painting in Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 172.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret Iacono, *Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum* (New York: Frick Collection, 2009), 55.
- <sup>6</sup> Ernst F. Tonsing, e-mail messages to the author, July 26, 2017, and August 2, 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Julián Gállego, “Biography and Critical Analysis,” in *Zurbarán: 1598-1664*, by Julián Gállego and José Gudiol (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 49.
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan Brown notes that one salient feature of Zurbarán’s oeuvre is “the exploitation of dramatic contrasts of darkness and light.” “Francisco de Zurbarán, Master Painter of Seville,” in *Zurbarán: “Jacob and His Twelve Sons,” Paintings from Auckland Castle*, ed. Susan Grace Galassi, Edward Payne, and Mark A. Roglán (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2017), 26.
- <sup>9</sup> Odile Delenda, “The Life and Work of Francisco de Zurbarán,” in *Zurbarán: A New Perspective*, by Odile Delenda, et. al (Madrid: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2015), 29.
- <sup>10</sup> Cees Nooteboom, *Zurbarán: Selected Paintings, 1625-1664* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2011), 20; Morten Lauridsen, “Masterpiece.”
- <sup>11</sup> Ernst F. Tonsing, interview with the author, Thousand Oaks, CA, July 1, 2016.
- <sup>12</sup> Julián Gállego, 49.
- <sup>13</sup> Lauridsen, interview, February 2, 2016.
- <sup>14</sup> Lauridsen, *Dialogues*.
- <sup>15</sup> Museum placard for Francisco de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose*, Pasadena, CA, Norton Simon Museum, accessed January 17, 2016; Santiago Alcolea i Gil, *Zurbarán* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2008), 28.
- <sup>16</sup> Lauridsen, “Masterpiece.”
- <sup>17</sup> Museum placard for Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Francis in Prayer*, Pasadena, CA, Norton Simon Museum, accessed January 17, 2016.
- <sup>18</sup> Lauridsen, interview, February 2, 2016; Lauridsen, *Dialogues*; H. K. Andrews, *An Introduction to the Technique of Palestrina* (London: Novello, 1958), 8.
- <sup>19</sup> Edward Schaefer, “A Reexamination of Palestrina’s Role in the Catholic Reformation,” *Choral Journal* 35, no. 1 (August 1994): 24
- <sup>20</sup> Chester Awles, “Palestrina’s Style: The Art of Balance,” *Choral Journal* 35, no. 1 (August 1994): 14; Chester L. Awles, *A History of Western Choral Music*, vol. 1, *From Medieval Foundations to the Romantic Age* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 103.
- <sup>21</sup> Lauridsen, interview, February 2, 2016.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Scott Chiu, Assistant Professor of English, California Lutheran University, generously assisted me in the preparation of the musical examples.
- <sup>24</sup> Timothy W. Sharp has described Lauridsen’s use of added seconds and fourths in the *Lux aeterna* as “creating an ongoing harmonic energy,” a quality I also see in *O magnum mysterium*. For the concise context of the motet, Lauridsen interspersed the added tones sparingly, to underlie delicately the contemplative atmosphere. “Morten Lauridsen’s *Lux Aeterna*: A Conductor’s Considerations,” *Choral Journal* 43, no. 7 (February 2003): 21.
- <sup>25</sup> Lauridsen, interview, August 5, 2016.
- <sup>26</sup> Lauridsen, *Dialogues*.
- <sup>27</sup> David Hiley, *Gregorian Chant* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 42.
- <sup>28</sup> Nick Strimple, *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century* (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2002), 247.
- <sup>29</sup> As Lauridsen has expressed it, “I felt like I started with a mountain of notes and I had to whittle away to something you could put in your hand, and to where every note, every positioning of a chord, every line, everything ended up as much as I could, with a perfect composition.” *Dialogues*.
- <sup>30</sup> Strimple, 247.
- <sup>31</sup> For the Latin text and translation, Lauridsen used with permission the version from Ron Jeffers, comp., trans., and ed., *Texts and Annotations of Choral Repertoire*, vol. 1, *Sacred Latin Texts* (Corvallis, OR: Earthsongs, 1988), 175.
- <sup>32</sup> Paul Salamunovich, *Dialogues*, vol. 1, interview by James Jordan, GIA Publications CD-773, 2008, compact disc.
- <sup>33</sup> Ernst F. Tonsing, interview with the author, Thousand Oaks, CA, October 21, 2016.
- <sup>34</sup> Wallace L. Dubach, interview with the author, Camarillo, CA, January 9, 2017.
- <sup>35</sup> The simultaneous past and present meanings of “mysterium” result from the central placement of the Responsory in the traditional Christmas Day Matins, which occurs late on Christmas Eve and prepares worshipers for the subsequent Midnight Mass. Situated

in the Second Nocturn—the middle section of the Matins—the Responsory is usually sung immediately after the initial lesson (the fourth lesson of the entire Matins). Traditionally that lesson is a sermon first delivered by Pope St. Leo I (400-461), an oration that describes Christmas as the “birthday” of Christ and also emphasizes the present nature of the birth: “Unto us is born this day a Savior.” Following the Matins is the Midnight Mass, which includes the Eucharist. Tonsing has explained that the “physical birth of Christ is ‘the Word made flesh’ (John 1:14: ‘Et verbum caro factum est’), which is for Catholics precisely what happens when the priest consecrates at the altar.” More to the point, the “consecrated host is the very ‘Body of Christ.’” Tonsing sees the consecrated host as the ultimate “‘magnum mysterium’ of the Mass.” Reimagined in its original liturgical context, then, *O magnum mysterium* would occur at a moment that allows the participant to both reflect on the past event of the divine birth and look forward to the present reality of the Incarnation, as subsequently celebrated in the Eucharist. *The Hours of the Divine Office in English and Latin*, vol. 1, *Advent to Passion Sunday* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1963), 1165-1166; Tonsing, e-mail to author, October 22, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Dana Gioia, “Notes on the Songs,” liner notes for *Prayer: The Songs of Morten Lauridsen* (Jeremy Huw Williams, Paula Fan, Caryl Hughes, et. al), Cowlitz Bay Recordings CD E-3599, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Wyant Morton has emphasized that Lauridsen’s “genius” stems from his ability to employ a “limited harmonic palette” for “very creative and original” purposes. Lauridsen has explained that in *O magnum mysterium*, he purposefully used variants of the minor submediant chord—each configured harmonically to clarify the text. Wyant Morton, interview with the author, California Lutheran University, August 22, 2016; Lauridsen, e-mail messages to the author, December 23 and 24, 2017, and March 2, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Lauridsen has explained that the added ninth—the C# anacrusis—not only “adds color” to the chord and foreshadows the G# appoggiatura in the B section, it also creates an “expressive line” for the altos, an important characteristic of his work, in which he strives to give all vocal lines meaningful contributions to the music. Lauridsen, e-mail to the author, August 18, 2017;

Lauridsen, *Dialogues*.

<sup>39</sup> Lauridsen, *Dialogues*; Lauridsen, interview, August 5, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Lauridsen, interview, August 5, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Lauridsen, e-mail, August 18, 2017; Lauridsen, *Dialogues*.

<sup>42</sup> Lauridsen concurs that this motif is intended to evoke the reciting tone, “a pitch often highlighted in the middle section of Gregorian chants.” E-mail to the author, February 6, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Knud Jeppesen, *The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1946), 94.

<sup>44</sup> Lauridsen, e-mail, August 18, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Lauridsen, interview, August 5, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Lauridsen has expressed this point succinctly: “She is the rose.” *Dialogues*.

<sup>47</sup> Michael A. Brown notes that Zurbarán’s portrayal of a specific object can be so “focused” and “immediate,” that it creates a “powerful connection with the viewer.” “Zurbarán and the Atlantic World” (lecture, St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, La Jolla, CA, May 21, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Kirstin L. Ellsworth, telephone conversation with the author, September 2, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year*, trans. Laurence Shepherd, Vol. 2, *Christmas*, Book I (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1948), 6.

<sup>50</sup> Lauridsen, e-mail to author, December 23, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Lauridsen, interviews, February 2 and August 5, 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Grant Gershon, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, September 20, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Marshall Rutter and Terry Knowles, interview by the author, Pasadena, CA, March 3, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Nelson, interview by the author, Pasadena, CA, June 25, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Terry Knowles, interview, March 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen*, DVD, directed by Michael Stillwater (2012; Santa Fe, NM: Song without Borders, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Lauridsen, interview, February 2, 2016.