



VOX GRATA


ICONIC

TIMELESS WORKS FOR WOMEN'S CHORUS

TUE, MAY 5, 2026 | 7:30
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville

THU, MAY 7, 2026 | 7:30
St. George's Episcopal Church, Nashville

With Guest Artist
RACHEL MILLER, harp



Welcome Remarks

Vox Grata Women's Choir

Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda Gustav Holst
Op. 26, Group III (1874-1934)

1. Hymn to the Dawn

Hear our hymn, O Goddess
Rich in wealth and wisdom
Ever young yet ancient
True to Law Eternal

Wak'ner of the songbirds
Ensign of the Eternal

Draw thou near, O Fair One
In thy radiant Chariot

Bring to her your off'ring;
Humbly bow before her:
Raise your songs of welcome
As she comes in splendour

2. Hymn to the Waters

Flowing from the firmament
Forth to the ocean
Healing all in earth and air
Never halting

Indra, Lord of Heav'n, formed their courses
Indra's mighty laws can never be broken

Cleansing waters flow ye on
Hasten and help us
Lo, in the waters, dwelleth One

Knower of all on earth and sea
Whose dread command no man may shun
Varuna, sovran Lord is He

Onward ye waters onward hie
Cleansing waters flow ye on
Hasten and help us
Dance in the bright beams of the sun
Cleansing waters flow ye on
Obey the ruler of the sky
Who dug the path for you to run

3. Hymn to the Vena (The Sun Rising through the Mist)

Vena comes, born of light
He drives the many-colour'd clouds onward
Here, where the sunlight and the waters mingle
Our songs float up and caress the new-born infant

The child of cloud and mist appeareth on the ridge of
the sky
He shines on the summit of creation
The hosts proclaim the glory of our common Father

He hath come to the bosom of his beloved
Smiling on him

She beareth him to highest heav'n
With yearning heart
On thee we gaze, O gold-wing'd messenger of mighty
gods

Wise men see him in their libations
As the sacrifice mounts to the eternal heights,
mingling with our solemn chant
He stands erect in highest heav'n
Clad in noble raiment, arm'd with shining weapons
Hurling light to the farthest region
Rejoicing in his radiant splendour

4. Hymn to the Travelers

Go thou on before us
Guide us on our way
Mighty One
Make our journey pleasant
Never let us stray
Wonder-worker, hearken
Come in thy splendour; come in thy mighty pow'r

Trample on the wicked
All who would oppose
Mighty One
Drive away the robber;
Drive away our foes
Wonder-worker, hearken
Come in thy splendour; come in thy mighty pow'r

As we journey onward
Songs to thee we raise
Mighty One
Thou didst aid our fathers
Guard us all our days
Wonder-worker, hearken
Come in thy splendour; come in thy mighty pow'r

Feed us and inspire us;
Keep us in thy care
Mighty One
Lead us past pursuers
Unto meadows fair
Wonder-worker, hearken
Come in thy splendour; come in thy mighty pow'r

Four Songs for Women's Choir, Op. 17 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

1. Es tönt ein voller Harfenklang (A full sound of harps is ringing out)

Text by Friedrich Ruperti (1805-1867)
Translation by Mareike Sattler

A full sound of harps is ringing out
fueled by love and longing;
it pierces the heart, deep and with anguish,
and makes the eyes overflow.

O run, my tears, flow down,
o beat, my heart, and tremble!
Love and bliss sank down into the grave,
life is lost to me!

2. Lied von Shakespeare (Song from Shakespeare)

English Text by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
German version by A.W. von Schlegel (1767-1845)

Come away, come away, death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid;
Fly away, fly away breath;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid.
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O, prepare it!
My part of death, no one so true
Did share it.

Not a flower, not a flower sweet
On my black coffin let there be strewn;
Not a friend, not a friend greet
My poor corpse, where my bones shall be thrown:
A thousand, thousand sighs to save,
Lay me, O, where
true lover never find my grave,
To weep there!

3. Der Gärtner (The Gardener)

Text by Josef Karl Benedikt von Eichendorff (1788-1857)
Translation by Mareike Sattler

Wherever I go and look,
in field and forest and dale,
from the hill down to the meadow;
Most beautiful noble lady,
I greet you a thousand times.

In my garden I find
many flowers, fair and beautiful,
many wreaths I'll make from them,
a thousand thoughts I bind into them,
and greetings.

None of them I can offer to her,
she stands too noble and fair,
they will all fade away.
Yet love alone, unequaled, stays
in the heart forever.

I may look cheerful,
and I keep busy with work,
and, even though my heart is bursting into pieces,
I keep on digging as I sing,
and soon I dig my grave

4. Gesang aus Fingal (Song from "Fingal")

From "Fingal: an ancient epic poem" by James Macpherson (1736-1796)
Anonymous German translation

Weep on the rocks of roaring winds,
O maid of Inistore!
Bend thy fair head over the waves,
thou lovelier than the ghost of the hills;
when it moves in a sun-beam, at noon,
over the silence of Morven!

He is fallen, thy youth is low!
pale beneath the sword of Cuthullin!

No more shall valour raise thy love
to match the blood of kings.

Trenar, graceful Trenar died,
O maid of Inistore!
His grey dogs are howling at home!
they see his passing ghost.
His bow is in the hall unstrung.
No sound is in the hall of his hinds!

A Word from Our Concert Beneficiary, Nashville LAUNCHPAD
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Litanies à la Vierge Noire (Litanies to the Black Virgin)

Francis Poulenc
(1899-1963)

Translation:

Lord, have mercy upon us; Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us;
Jesus Christ, hear us, hearken unto us.
God the Father, Creator, have mercy upon us;
God the Son, Redeemer, have mercy upon us;
Holy Trinity, who art the only God, have mercy upon us.
Holy Virgin Mary, pray for us;
Virgin, queen and patroness, whom Zaccheus the publican made us to know and love;
Virgin, to whom Zaccheus or St. Amadour erected this church, pray for us;
Queen of the church which hallowed St. Martial, and where he celebrated his holy mysteries; Queen, near whom
St. Louis knelt, petitioning for the prosperity of France, pray for us;
Queen, to whom Rowland consecrated his sword, pray for us;
Queen, whose banner won the battles, pray for us;
Queen, whose hand delivered the captives, pray for us;
Our Lady whose pilgrimage is enriched with special favors;
Our Lady whom impiety and hate have often wished to destroy;
Our Lady, whom people visit as formerly, pray for us!
Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, forgive us.
Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, hearken unto us.
Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.
Our Lady, pray for us, that we may be worthy of Jesus Christ.

Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen..... Josef Rheinberger
Op. 35 (1839-1901)

Translation:

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart exults in the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow shelter from the storm.
I find a place near your altar, o Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they ever praise you.
The Lord loves mercy and truth,
and to those who walk blameless,
he gives grace and splendor.

ICONIC TIMELESS WORKS

Program Notes

CHORAL HYMNS FROM THE RIG-VEDA OP. 26, GROUP III

English composer Gustav Holst is best known for his orchestral work, "The Planets", however Holst never felt it to be his best work. He was influenced by his studies with English composer, Peter Stanford and his lifelong friendship with the renowned Ralph Vaughan Williams. For a number of years, Holst taught music at an all-girls school in England. He composed in his free time, often laboring for many years over a single composition.

As a young man, Gustav Holst became interested in Hindu mysticism, a fascination that resulted in several major compositions based on translated Sanskrit texts. At one point, Holst actually enrolled in Sanskrit classes so that he could make his own musically suitable translations when necessary. Among the felicitous results of this study were four sets of "Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda," a canonical sacred text of Hinduism. The four sets of choral hymns were composed between 1907 and 1914. We perform the third of these sets tonight. Holst's natural affinity for Eastern philosophy and literature is evident in these sumptuous, magical pieces for treble chorus with harp accompaniment. The first one grabs the listener right away

with a series of rising fifths, each beginning a half-step higher from where the previous one ended, seemingly ascending toward a mystical realm. "Hymn to Vena," the third and most substantial of the set, features Ravelian harmonic sophistication, with fraught, whole-tone-based chords dissolving into sweeter, lusher sonorities, all serving to enhance the sense of wonder. The ethereal harp writing contributes strongly to these rare treasures. All four hymns are quite modal in their construction, conveying the mystery and awe of the universe and its creation.

FOUR SONGS FOR WOMEN'S CHOIR, OP. 17

These four choral songs have the paradoxical distinction of both beginning the excellent line of secular part songs by Brahms and being completely unique within that output. Written for three-part women's chorus throughout (except for a brief four-part a cappella passage in the middle section of No. 4), the choral style does anticipate somewhat that of the later a cappella part songs for mixed chorus. Op. 17, however, is set apart not only by being accompanied, but by the nature of that accompaniment:

the exceedingly romantic combination of two horns and harp. The latter was an instrument to which Brahms would rarely again turn (only in the German Requiem, and in the Nänie, and in none of the symphonies). He remarked that he was not particularly fond of the instrument when it had to go and “make an effect.” In contrast, he always wrote effectively for horns, despite refusing to compose for the new valve instrument. The highly diverse texts lend themselves well to this combination. The harp’s characteristic arpeggios are prominent in Nos. 1 and 3. Both of these songs use the horns sparingly. No. 1 restricts itself to one horn in a very specific role. Nos. 2 and 4 exploit the characteristic natural horn harmonies, known as “horn fifths,” to great effect. In these two songs, the harp is mostly restricted to block chords. The choral writing is relatively simple. Multi-voice counterpoint is kept at a minimum, the three parts singing mostly in block harmonies. The one notable passage of counterpoint is at the end of each verse in No. 3. The songs were among several works for women’s chorus written around this time, including the Ave Maria, the Three Sacred Choruses, the setting of the Psalm 13, and the somewhat later and less substantial Twelve Songs and Romances. These works owe their existence to Brahms’s directorship of the Hamburg Women’s Choir. No. 2 is Brahms’s only setting of Shakespeare (in Schlegel’s translation) other than the unpublished and rather minor Ophelia Songs. No. 3 is a particularly elegant use of simple strophic form. No. 4, of near-epic length and scope, is an extraordinarily powerful ballad, making optimal thematic use of the vocal and instrumental resources.

A word about Ossian, the “author” of No. 4. Supposedly an English translation of ancient Celtic epic poetry, “Ossian” is a 1762 collection manufactured by the Scottish poet James MacPherson. MacPherson’s work had much credibility and popularity in German-speaking countries, and even figures such as Goethe and Herder were fooled by it. Fingal was one of the more popular Ossian “epics.” -- Notes by Kelly Dean Hansen from “Listening Guides to the Works of Johannes Brahms”

LITANIES À LA VIERGE NOIRE

Litanies à la Vierge Noire was composed by Parisian-born Francis Poulenc for treble voices and organ (or orchestra) in 1936. The piece was composed in just one week, during a pilgrimage the composer made to an historic shrine honoring the Virgin Mary in Rocamadour, France. The 10th century shrine and city attracted pilgrims for over nine hundred years. The site, considered a symbol of faith and hope, was ravaged by religious wars but eventually restored during the 17th century. The construction of the Chapel of Our Lady was included in that restoration effort.

Built on a limestone cliff above a large gorge on the River Alzou, the Chapel of Our Lady houses a statue of the Black Virgin dating from the 12th century. Poulenc was inspired to write Litanies at Rocamadour, following the traumatic death of a close friend. The composition marks a turning point in his compositional career as well as a return to his Catholic faith. This piece initiated an outpouring of significant sacred vocal music by the composer, including his Stabat Mater, another manifestation of Marian devotion that was first performed in 1951.

Poulenc’s conversations with Claude Rostand regarding the piece include these remarks: “For just as there is a specifically French music, there is also a specifically French piety, one that rejects austerity, emphasis and sentimentality and that conveys a certain elegance of spirit, a certain decorum and includes in its gestures a sort of familiarity with the sacred.” It was this familiarity that Poulenc was to find in the words he found on the back of a prayer card at Rocamadour and that inspired this piece. The combination of grandeur and humility of the site and the chapel impressed the composer. He wrote: “Clinging in the full sun to a vertiginous crag of rock, Rocamadour is an extraordinarily peaceful place. Preceded by a courtyard, all pink with oleanders in boxes, a rather modest chapel, built half into the rock, contains a miraculous statue of the Virgin, carved, according to legend, in black wood by Saint Amadour, the short-statured Zachaeus of the Gospel, who climbed into a tree in order to see Christ.”

With rare intuition, Poulenc has found exactly the right tone of peasant devotion inspired by the rock chapel of Rocamadour. The sectional form and cyclical structure of the piece serve the text well, while the dissonant “shock” chords evoke emotional turmoil. Several measures of organ precede the first invocation by the voices, sung in humble, chant-like fashion by the sopranos, followed by a brief crescendo on the words “Jesus Christ hear us” by the full choir. This is followed by a series of supplications of varying texture and weight. The piece builds in power and scope as the voices and ever-expanding chords in the organ accompaniment continue to beseech Christ and all the Saints. The text painting is brilliant, displaying the awe and beauty Poulenc felt when entering the shrine. The work is filled with purity of expression and powerful declamation through shifting meters and modal harmonies. The overall construction of the Litanies rests on the dynamic contrasts dictated by the texts. At the climax of the piece, the singers implore Mary for help, recalling her role in other significant moments of French History. The anguish of the appeal was to be prophetic, given France’s imminent fall to the Third Reich in May of 1940. The work ends in an extremely luminous, gentle mood.

WIE LIEBLICH SIND DEINE WOHNUNGEN, OP. 35

Josef Rheinberger was an almost exact contemporary of Brahms, and like his more illustrious countryman, he devoted considerable creative energy to works for chorus, much of it for female-voice ensembles. Rheinberger also had a particular affinity for the timbre of women's voices and a facility for melodic development that, on its face, appears as a simpler version of Brahms' mature style. Warm, shimmering harmonies characterize the writing, but there's more to this music than mere prettiness. While it lacks Brahms' dramatic flair and thematic and developmental sophistication, there's no denying the craftsmanship of the vocal writing and the overall effectiveness of the piece either as a liturgical work or as a concert piece.

Rheinberger wrote his Hymn Op. 35 to the text "Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen" (How lovely are thy dwellings) in 1865, several years before Brahms' famous rendition in the German Requiem, and although there's no real thematic similarity, conceptually the two versions are notable for their respective, and equally effective, musical treatments of the text's ethereal subject matter. You have to admire the tender lyricism of Rheinberger's version, aided by the prominent harp and the simplicity of the four-part vocal writing.

—Notes by David Vernier, Founding Editor-in-Chief
ClassicsToday.com

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