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This recording is dedicated to the memory of Curt Wittig, long-time recording engineer and sound technician for the 21st Century Consort.

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SACRED SONGS

James Primosch

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JAMES PRIMOSCH

(b. 1956)

From a Book of Hours (2001/2006) (17:43)

- ① Du, Nachbar Gott (5:15) ② Mein Leben (3:02)
③ Lösch mir die Augen aus (2:13) ④ Ich lese es heraus (7:16)

Susan Narucki, soprano
Christopher Kendall, conductor
21st Century Consort

Adria Sternstein Foster, flute; Rudy Vrbsky, oboe; Paul Cigan, clarinet;
Gabrielle Finck, horn; Lisa Emenheiser, piano; Glenn Paulson, percussion
Elisabeth Adkins, violin I; Jane Stewart, violin II
Tsuna Sakamoto, viola; Rachel Young, cello; Richard Barber, contrabass

Four Sacred Songs (1989/1990) (14:08)

- ⑤ Jesu Dulcis Memoria (3:11) ⑥ Corde Natus Ex Parentis (2:55)
⑦ Christus Factus Est (3:54) ⑧ O Filii et Filiae (4:07)

Susan Narucki, soprano
Christopher Kendall, conductor
21st Century Consort

Sara Stern, flute; Paul Cigan, clarinet
Susan Robinson, harp; Tom Jones, percussion
Elisabeth Adkins, violin; David Hardy, cello

Notes on first performances

From a Book of Hours was originally composed for soprano and orchestra on a commission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and was premiered by Lisa Saffer and the CSO, conducted by Antonio Pappano in 2002. The version for chamber ensemble was premiered by the forces on this recording in 2006. *Four Sacred Songs* draws on a set of *Three Sacred Songs* commissioned by Town Hall, New York City, and premiered by soprano Christine Schadeberg and pianist Christopher Oldfather in 1989. The complete set in its chamber ensemble version was premiered by Voices of Change, with Ms. Schadeberg, in 1990. *Dark the Star* was composed for the forces on this recording, and premiered in 2008. *Holy the Firm* was originally composed for soprano Dawn Upshaw and pianist Gilbert Kalish on a commission from the Barlow Foundation, and premiered in 1999. The version for chamber ensemble was premiered by the forces on this recording in 2000.

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Reprinted by permission of North Point Press, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC: #8 "Nights like these, my little sister grows" "From a Stormy Night: Eight Leaves with a Title Leaf" from THE BOOK OF IMAGES by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Edward Snow. Translation copyright © 1991 by Edward Snow. "For Hans Carossa" and "Rose, O pure contradiction, delight" from UNCOLLECTED POEMS by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Edward Snow. Translation copyright © 1996 by Edward Snow.



William Sharp, baritone, has made many appearances with the 21st Century Consort. His concerts also include those with Opera Lafayette at Strathmore and at Lincoln Center, The New York Festival of Song at Carnegie Hall, and chamber music at the Caramoor Festival. He

is the winner of several prestigious awards including the Carnegie Hall International Music Competition, The Young Concert Artists International Audition and the Geneva International Music Competition. Also known for his performances of the early music repertoire, he frequently performs as soloist with the Handel & Haydn Society, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, the Bethlehem Bach Festival, the Folger Consort, and the American Bach Soloists. A highly respected recording artist, William Sharp was nominated for a Grammy award (Best Classical Vocal Performance) for his recording featuring songs of American composers on New World Records, and his recording of Leonard Bernstein's final major work, *Arias and Barcarolles*, received a Grammy. Mr. Sharp serves on the Voice Faculty of Peabody Conservatory of Music of Johns Hopkins University.

Dark the Star (2008) (22:08)

- 9 Dark the Star (2:33) 10 Rose (1:29)
11 shadow/Shadow (1:46) 12 Nights Like These (2:37)
13 From Psalm 116 (2:44) 14 Rose (1:30)
15 shadow/Lintel (3:14) 16 Losing Also is Ours (2:44)
17 Dark the Star (3:27)

William Sharp, baritone
Christopher Kendall, conductor
21st Century Consort

Paul Cigan, clarinet; Lisa Emenheiser, piano; Tom Jones, percussion; Rachel Young, cello

Holy the Firm (1999/2000) (22:04)

- 18 "...That Passeth All Understanding" (2:29) 19 Every Day is a God (5:12)
20 The Ladder of Divine Ascent (3:27) 21 Cinder (2:51)
22 Deathbeds (7:59)

Susan Narucki, soprano
Christopher Kendall, conductor
21st Century Consort

Sara Stern, flute; Paul Cigan, clarinet; Susan Robinson, harp; Tom Jones, percussion
Elisabeth Adkins, violin I; Glenn Donnellan, violin II; Daniel Foster, viola
David Hardy, cello; Richard Barber, contrabass

Songs are poems with wings

Susan Stewart

Shapes in air, destined for hearing, poems set to music move in time beyond their silent meters and rhythms on the page. And poems set to music return to the most ancient Western practices of lyric poetry, the expression of a single reciter/singer accompanied by a lyre. James Primosch's settings explore in myriad and deeply historical ways the rich possibilities of the form. Although a poet working alone on the page more often than not can hear the sound of the unfolding lyric, a musical setting opens the poems to many new and vivid possibilities of experience and interpretation.

Consider how the poem now is full of articulated syllables, slowed and speeded phrases, breath and pause and speech on the margins of whispering, laughing, and crying—all joined by an unfolding musical line that takes the poem beyond mere dramatization. To say the poem “comes to life” in music hardly does justice to the ways the work also comes up against the millennia-long project of augmenting the human voice through instruments made of wood, metal, ivory, and bone. The poem is realized in a world of substances and sounds, formed and informed by generations of musical labor, finding its historical manifestation at last in performance and the reproduction of performance. The poem now lives on as not only a record of the poet's work, but also as a composer's score—a new matrix that gives it a double life.

Krzysztof Kiesłowski's 1991 film *The Double Life of Véronique*, portraying two sopranos mysteriously linked through one piece of music, first in the world and then beyond the grave, was a brilliant exploration of the meaning of coincidence in music and human fate. Primosch has woven an analogous theme into his music; it is the insight expressed vividly in the second poem here from Rainer Maria Rilke's *A Book of Hours*:

I am the rest between two notes
which, struck together, sound discordantly
because death's note would claim a higher key.

But in the dark pause, trembling, the notes meet,
harmonious.

And the song continues sweet.

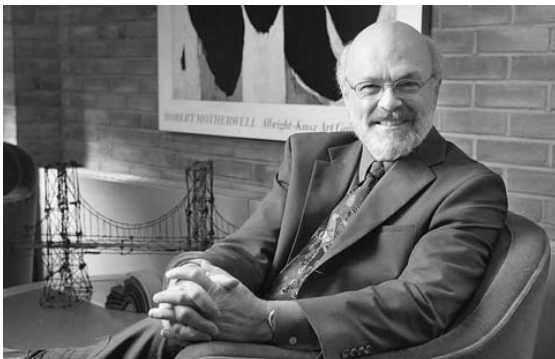
Between individuation, difference, and melodic articulation on the one hand and harmony, coincidence, and resonance on the other, the voice and poem find their living form.

Here the voices are Susan Narucki's crystalline soprano and William Sharp's resonant baritone.

With luminous tone and distinctive artistry, American soprano **Susan Narucki** has earned international acclaim for over two decades. She has appeared with the Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic,



Netherlands Opera, San Francisco Symphony, MET Chamber Ensemble, on the Great Performers Series at Lincoln Center and at Carnegie Hall with conductors such as Boulez, Levine, Salonen, Tilson Thomas, de Leeuw and Knussen. A dedicated advocate of the music of our time, Ms. Narucki has given over one hundred world premieres, and has enjoyed close collaborations with composers including Andriessen, Kurtág, Carter, Dusapin and Crumb. Her extensive discography includes both a Grammy Award and Grammy Nomination for Best Classical Vocal Performance; her recent solo recording, *The Light that is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives* (New World) was selected as Editor's Choice of BBC Music Magazine. Ms. Narucki is a Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego where she directs the ensemble *kallisti*.



Founder and Artistic Director of the 21st Century Consort, **Christopher Kendall** is Dean of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, and formerly Director of the University of Maryland School of Music (1996-2005) and Director of the Music Division and Tanglewood Institute of the Boston University School for the Arts (1993-1996). He was Associate Conductor of the Seattle Symphony (1987-1993). He is also founder and lutenist of the Folger Consort, early music ensemble-in-residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library, with whom he has performed, toured and recorded since 1977. He has guest conducted widely throughout the U.S. in repertoire from the 18th to the 21st century, and his performances as conductor and lutenist can be heard in recordings on the Bridge, Innova, ASV, Centaur, Bard, Delos, CRI, Nonesuch, and Smithsonian Collection labels.

As the unique grains of these voices become more and more vividly defined, the listener also is immersed in the universality of texts whose sources range from the Hebrew Scriptures to the present. Throughout, Primosch is drawn to works that expound upon musical themes. In the Rilke passage above; in St. Bernard's praise of Christ as the most "pleasing" topic to sing about, the most "joyful" subject to hear; in Prudentius's call to angelic praise; and in Denise Levertov's register of "a gratitude" that "had begun to sing in [her]", time is both extended and collapsed.

Levertov asks in her brief lyric "Was there/ some moment/ dividing/ song from no song?" and she implicitly links the creation of light in Genesis to the creation of song. By weaving his cycles together, repeating poems under new circumstances of composition, varying the texture between written prose, spoken utterance, and lyric interlude, Primosch emphasizes this dynamic of silence and sound as well. The song cycle and poetic sequence are moved by powers of beginning, ending, and beginning again. Rilke's allusion to the book of hours, the recurring musical references to bells, chimes and other instruments of time marking, the emphasis upon the Christian god of resurrection, themes of dawn and dying make this collection of songs cohere as a single work of art, one which explores the relation between the present moment and eternity.

What drives a voice to move from speech to song? In Primosch's aural imagination, the answer is a range of intense emotions: a longing for the divine; grief; joy; ecstasy; a desire to praise or give thanks. As much as the composer reaches back to the origins of Western stanzaic rhymed song in Latin medieval hymns, his interest in sacred texts accommodates a paradoxical sense of black humor and reverence in the closing song of *Holy the Firm*, "Deathbeds"—Annie Dillard's often hilarious survey of famous last words. The comic closing turn sends the listener back to the opening lines of the Rilke cycle, where the everyday and the sacred, like tragedy and comedy, are "neighbors."

My own work is represented by four texts here. William Sharp sings "Dark the Star" twice, dramatically emphasizing the ways an echo can be a difference and lending new density to the temporal experience of listening. The semantic echo between the two shadow poems, "shadow/Shadow" and "shadow/Lintel" similarly brings the audience in time across the threshold of the speaker/singer's changing emotional states. And "Cinder," a small lyric I wrote as a section divider for my 1995 book *The Forest*, has, for me, a surprising role in Primosch's sequence of ecstatic songs "Holy the Firm." There its collective "we" provides a reflective space for the strong individual emotions of the four poems that surround it.

These poems are the first of my works that James Primosch set and mark the beginning of our work together. In later years we have explored other ways of composing song cycles by working individually and then, most recently, together from the first phases of our projects. I am struck that these four lyrics share certain qualities that made them nascent songs before the composer worked with them. They each have a vocal clarity and minimal means; they each are strongly felt.

Yet of more significance is the fact that each of these four poems came to me almost fully

formed—an experience that is not typical of my usual process of belaboring individual works over many years. In writing both “Dark the Star” and “Cinder”, I was awakened in the night by a sense a poem was forming and, going to my desk, I finished each work within an hour or two of vivid concentration. I have often been struck by how uncanny it was that James Primosch, not knowing this history, unfailingly chose these poems to set. It leads me to believe that some poems are born to be songs—and will become songs once their composer, too, arrives.

— Susan Stewart's volumes of poetry include *The Forest*, *Columbarium*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Red Rover*. A former MacArthur Fellow, and recipient of an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she is the Avalon Foundation University Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University.

Vocal Music in the 21st Century: Is Anything Sacred?

John Harbison

A point of view, an address to both mind and heart, a passionate conviction – isn't that what we hope for in a piece of music?

What we often get in these times is sophistication, attitude, polish, aggression. But recently, from an unexpected underground, an outlier source – Sacred Music – we are starting to get a reinfusion of meaning, in which the composer and listener inhabit worlds both seen and unseen, in a vocabulary reaching from the oldest to the newest.

The music of James Primosch – immediate and urgent, private and other-worldly – invites us to travel with him into dangerous and beautiful territory, no less than a cosmic conversation – dispute and reconciliation and doubt and accommodation – with our Maker.

Even if we are holding out hope no Maker ever existed, we can't help noticing the appearance, in these pieces, of major issues we can't avoid.

Sacred Music. Lord save us! What a scary sounding category. Orphaned, abandoned, archaic. Once music's principal domain, the composer's main livelihood: think of Josquin and Palestrina saturating their patrons and listeners with sound, while the painters filled the walls of the Sistine Chapel.

Bach was one of the last composers to write sacred music with confidence that it represented majority opinion. The *Matthew Passion* breathes that confidence, in and out. But while Bach was still alive, a secular culture was rendering his aesthetic obsolete. The Mozart *Great Mass in C minor*, Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*, Verdi *Requiem*, Fauré *Requiem* increasingly require shadings, demurrals, and edits to describe the composer's relationships to the text.



Founded in 1975 as the 20th Century Consort, and in residence at the Smithsonian Institution since 1978, the **21st Century Consort** presents an annual concert series in the nation's capital at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The award-winning ensemble's programs are frequently inspired by the museum's exhibitions, featuring music by living composers, including world

premieres, along with major works from the last century. The Consort's artists include members of the National Symphony Orchestra, along with other prominent chamber musicians from Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. For almost forty years, the concerts of the Consort have been professionally recorded. This archive of hundreds of performances was presented for permanent preservation to the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library of the University of Maryland in 2009, and continues to grow annually. Thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, any of these concert recordings with program notes are now accessible - along with news of the Consort and its performances - at 21stcenturyconsort.org

When honoring him with its Goddard Lieberson Fellowship, the American Academy of Arts and Letters noted that "A rare economy of means and a strain of religious mysticism distinguish the music of **James Primosch**... through articulate, transparent textures, he creates a wide range of musical emotion." A student of George Crumb, Richard Wernick, Mario Davidovsky, and John Harbison, his music has been performed by ensembles including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Collage, the New York New Music Ensemble, and the Network for New Music. Dawn Upshaw included a song by Primosch in her Carnegie Hall recital debut. Commissioned works by Primosch have been premiered by the Chicago Symphony, Speculum Musicae, and pianist Lambert Orkis. 14 of his compositions are available on CD. He is presently at work on a song cycle for

soprano and orchestra on texts by Susan Stewart.



The 20th century arrived with confidence that religious art had become an archaism, with occasional rear-guard exceptions – Roualt, Kollwitz, Flannery O’Connor, the later Eliot – only proving the case. But let’s pause for a moment to ponder *Symphony of Psalms*, *Moses and Aaron*, *St. Francis*. Devout, orthodox, inspired masterpieces by composers rooted in their religious traditions. And other great pieces by composers less anchored in that way – Dallapiccola’s *Concerto per la Notte di Natale*, Poulenc’s *Gloria*, Martin’s *Mass for Double Choir*. And within the last few years, Passions of a widely disparate content by Adams, Golijov, Mac-Millan, music by Jonathan Harvey illuminated by his Buddhist faith, programs of music for the Synagogue by Wyner and Adler.

In James Primosch’s music you hear sacred music’s welcome to listeners of every imaginable stamp. He embraces age-old advantages: the composer of sacred music is not on the applause meter. He converses with God, with himself, and with listeners whose mind-set (at least in church) is not evaluative or critical. The envious colleague, the nagging teacher – both have stayed home. The “professionals” are elsewhere.

Who is there? In Primosch’s experience it is people who wish to be reached, touched, persuaded, or given a space to meditate and reflect. At performances of the many motets he has composed for Boston’s Emmanuel Church I have heard members of the congregation tell him that the piece has comforted or calmed or excited or occasioned new thoughts. This is a pastoral function, not something that happens in a tuxedo or tails.

Primosch’s mature style bears the marks of a composer who has learned to come to the point, to speak clearly, thanks to a necessary encounter with his subject matter. Like Jacob, he wrestled with the Angel, lost, and has been made strong. His harmonic palette has been culled to make its signifiers more vivid. He builds it from old acoustic principles— open fifths in the bass register, piled or intersected triads above, ancient modes linked together at chromatic crossing points. The fluent melodies sometimes harken back to plainchant. Grounded though he is in all the latest and most current, the surface of his music has become less “modern,” less local. This makes possible a more radical, pointed kind of emphasis. The music sounds like it intends to be remembered. Motives are felt, rather than just being useful. Quiet static moments are driven home, not just waiting for something to happen.

Because of its vivid, fervent expression, Primosch’s music has been taken up by some of our best performers, like the ones on this CD. They bring a set of four vocal-instrumental pieces (some of which exist also in voice and piano versions).

The first, *From a Book of Hours*, is the closest of these pieces to a song cycle. It is four balanced movements, each carrying forward a dialogue which is also a monologue.

Four Sacred Songs is a set of variations on given tunes, plainchant and folksong, very revealing of Primosch’s melodic sources as a whole.

Dark the Star is a through-composed cantata, the alternation between English and German never

interrupting a continuous flow of verbal and musical discourse.

Holy the Firm is an unusual juxtaposition of disparate music and text, from contemplative ritual (Susan Stewart's "Cinder," a lapidary piece already in high favor as a separate recital piece) to dramatic-operatic scene (Dillard's "Deathbeds").

Somewhere along the line the composer of sacred music is asked a question, by a fan, a critic, a historian. It is a question nowadays asked inadvertently with impertinence, a rough paraphrase being, "Do you really believe this stuff?"

The force of the question reinforces something that the composer already knew, that he is a cultural maverick. The answer, "Yes, as much as that is permitted to me on a given day." At the very least, the composer is suggesting that he chooses to spend his day with such companions as Annie Dillard and John Climacus, and wishes to include us in that sojourn.

- The catalog of distinguished American composer John Harbison includes numerous sacred works, including a Requiem, the motet *Abraham*, which was commissioned for the Papal Concert of Reconciliation, and the cantata *The Flight Into Egypt*, for which he received the 1987 Pulitzer prize. He has conducted Bach cantatas, worked as a jazz pianist, and taught at Tanglewood and MIT.

From a Book of Hours

I.

Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manches mal
in langer Nacht mit hartem Klopfen störe, —
so ists, weil ich dich selten atmen höre
und weiss: Du bist allein im Saal.
Und wenn du etwas brauchst, ist keiner da,
um deinem Tasten einen Trank zu reichen:
ich horche immer. Gib ein kleines Zeichen.
Ich bin ganz nah.

Nur eine schmale Wand is zwischen uns,
durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein:
ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds—
und sie bricht ein

You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night
I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
only because I seldom hear you breathe
and know: you are alone.
And should you need a drink, no one is there
to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,
and by sheer chance; for it would take
merely a call from your lips or from mine
to break it down,

Moment and wish I was at Malvern.

Am I still alive? Do I drag my anchors?

So here it is at last, the distinguished thing!
Is this dying? Is this all? Is this
All that I feared when I prayed against a hard death?
O! I can bear this! I can bear it!
Now I have finished with all earthly business
—High time, too. Yes, yes,
My dear child, now comes death.
Is it come already? Here, here is my end.
Wait a moment. Do you not hear the voices?
And the children's are the loudest! The chariots
And horses! I do not know how this happened.
I can account for it in no way...

Already my foot is in the stirrup. Lift
Me up, lift me right up! Now farewell.
We are over the hill; we shall go better now.

I am coming, Katie! John, it will not
Be long. Supremely happy! Excellent!
My dearest, dearest Liz. We are all going;
We are all going; we are all going.

This is it, chaps. Take me home.
I believe my son, I am going. That's it.
Good-bye—drive on. Cut her loose, Doc.

I'm going, I'm going. At a gallop!
Clear the way. Good-bye, God bless you!
Good-bye, everybody. A general good-night.

— Annie Dillard

IV. Cinder

We needed fire to make
the tongs and tongs to hold
us from the flame; we needed
ash to clean the cloth
and cloth to clean the ash's
stain; we needed stars
to find our way, to make
the light that blurred the stars;
we needed death to mark
an end, an end that time
in time could mend.
Born in love, the consequence—
born of love, the need.
Tell me, ravaged singer,
how the cinder bears the seed.

— Susan Stewart

V. Deathbeds

This is too tight; loosen it a little. I pray
You give me some sack! Bring me last year's apple,
If you can, or any new melon. A dozen cold oysters.
My children! My papers! My book, my unfinished book!

From my present sensations, I should say I was dying
—And I am glad of it. The world is bobbing around.

Do you know the Lord's Prayer? Cover me.
Shut the door. Can't see you any more.
I must go home. I am very forlorn at the present

ganz ohne Lärm und Laut.

Aus deinen Bildern ist sie aufgebaut.

Und deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen.
Und wenn einmal das Licht in mir entbrennt,
mit welchem meine Tiefe dich erkennt,
vergeudet sichs als Glanz auf ihren Rahmen.

Und meine Sinne, welche schnell erlahmen,
sind ohne Heimat und von dir getrennt.

II.

Mein Leben ist nicht diese steile Stunde,
darin du mich so eilen siehst.
Ich bin ein Baum vor meinem Hintergrunde,
ich bin nur einer meiner vielen Munde
und jener, welcher sich am frühesten schliesst.

Ich bin die Ruhe zwischen zweien Tönen,
die sich nur schlecht aneinander gewöhnen:
denn der Ton Tod will sich erhöhn —

Aber im dunklen Intervall versöhnen
sich beide zitternd.

Und das Lied bleibt schön.

III.

Lösch mir die Augen aus: ich kann dich sehn,
wirf mir die Ohren zu: ich kann dich hören,
und ohne Füße kann ich zu dir gehn,
und ohne Mund noch kann ich dich beschwören.
Brich mir die Arme ab, ich fasse dich
mit meinem Herzen wie mit einer Hand,

and that without a sound.

The wall is builded of your images.

They stand before you hiding you like names,
And when the light within me blazes high
that in my inmost soul I know you by,
the radiance is squandered on their frames.

And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,
exiled from you, must go their homeless ways.

No, my life is not this precipitous hour
through which you see me passing at a run.
I stand before my background like a tree.
Of all my many mouths I am but one,
and that which soonest chooses to be dumb.

I am the rest between two notes
which, struck together, sound discordantly,
because death's note would claim a higher key.

But in the dark pause, trembling, the notes meet,
harmonious.

And the song continues sweet.

Put out my eyes, and I can see you still;
slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;
and without any feet can go to you;
and tongueless, I can conjure you at will.
Break off my arms, I shall take hold of you
and grasp you with my heart as with a hand;

halt mir das Herz zu, und mein Hirn wird schlagen,
und wirfst du in mein Hirn den Brand,
so werd ich dich auf meinem Blute tragen.

arrest my heart, my brain will beat as true;
and if you set this brain of mine afire,
upon my blood I then will carry you.

IV.

Ich lese es heraus aus deinem Wort,
aus der Geschichte der Gebärden,
mit welchen deine Hände um das Werden
sich ründeten, begrenzend, warm und weise.
Du sagtest leben laut und sterben leise
und wiederholtest immer wieder: Sein.
Doch vor dem ersten Tode kam der Mord.
Da ging ein Riss durch deine reifen Kreise
und ging ein Schrein
und riss die Stimmen fort,
die eben erst sich sammeln,
um bich zu sagen,
um dich zu tragen,
alles Abgrunds Brücke—

I read it in your word, and learn it from
the history of the gestures of your warm
wise hands, rounding themselves to form
and circumscribe the shapes that are to come.
Aloud you said: to live, and low: to die,
and you repeated tirelessly: to be.
And yet there was no death till murder came.
Then through your perfect circles ran a rent
and a cry tore,
scattering the voices that not long before
had gently blent
to utter you,
to carry you
bridge across the abyss—

Und was sie seither stammelten,
sind Stücke
deines alten Names.

And what they since have stammered
are the fragments only
of your old name.

— texts by Rainer Maria Rilke from *Das Stundenbuch*
translations by Babette Deutsch

Four Sacred Songs

I. Jesu Dulcis Memoria

Jesu dulcis memoria
Dans vera cordis gaudia
Sed super mel et omnia

The memory of sweet Jesus
Gives true joy to the heart,
His presence is sweeter than honey,

I open my eyes. The god lifts from the water. His head fills the bay. He is Puget Sound, the Pacific; his breast rises from pastures; his fingers are firs; islands slide wet down his shoulders. Islands slip blue from his shoulders and glide over the water, the empty lighted water like a stage.

Today's god rises, his long eyes flecked in clouds. He flings his arms, spreading colors; he arches, cupping sky in his belly; he vaults, vaulting and spread, holding all and spread on me like skin.

— Annie Dillard

III. The Ladder of Divine Ascent

I long to know how Jacob saw you fixed above the ladder. That climb, how was it? Tell me, for I long to know. What is the mode, what is the law joining together those steps that the lover has set as an ascent in his heart? I thirst to know the number of those steps, and the time required to climb them. He who discovered Your struggle and Your vision has spoken to us of the guides. But he would not—perhaps he could not—tell us any more.

— John Climacus (7th Century; translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell, adapted by the composer)

Holy the Firm

I. ‘ . . . That Passeth All Understanding’

An awe so quiet
I don't know when it began.

A gratitude
Had begun
to sing in me.

Was there
some moment
dividing
song from no song?

When does dewfall begin?

When does night
fold its arms over our hearts
to cherish them?

When is daybreak?

— Denise Levertov

II. Every Day is a God

Every day is a god, each day is a god, and holiness holds forth in time. I worship each god, I praise each day splintered down, splintered down and wrapped in time like a husk, a husk of many colors spreading, at dawn fast over the mountains split.

I wake in a god. I wake in arms holding my quilt, holding me as best they can inside my quilt.

Someone is kissing me—already. I wake, I cry “Oh,” I rise from the pillow. Why should I open my eyes?

Ejus dulcis praesentia.

Nil canitur suavius
Nil auditur jucundius
Nil cogitatur dulcius
Quam Jesus Dei Filius.

Nec lingua valet dicere
Nec littera ex primere
Expertus potest credere
Quid sit Jesum diligere.

Sis Jesu nostrum gaudium
Qui es futurus praemium
Sit nostra in te gloria
Per cuncta semper saecula. Amen.

— St. Bernard (d. 1153)

II. Corde Natus Ex Parentis

Corde natus ex parentis
Ante mundi exordium,
Alpha et O cognominatus
Ipse fons et clausula
Ominium, quae sunt, fuerunt,
Quaeque post futura sunt.
Saeculorum saeculis.

O beatus partus ille,
Virgo cum puerpera
Edidit nostram salutem
Feta sancto spiritu,

Greater than all things.

Nothing can be sung about that is more pleasing,
Nothing can be heard that is more joyful,
Nothing can be thought of that is sweeter,
Than Jesus, Son of God.

The tongue cannot say it,
The written word cannot describe it,
Only one adept in faith can believe
What it is to love Jesus.

May You be, Jesus, our joy,
You who are to be our prize.
May we glory in You always
Through every age. Amen.

Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the world began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the source, the ending he,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore!

Of that birth forever blessed,
When the virgin, full of grace,
By the Holy Ghost conceiving,
Bore the Savior of our race;

Et puer, redemptor orbis,
Os sacratum protulit.
Saeculorum saeculis.

Psallat altitudo caeli,
Psallant omnes angeli,
Quidquid est virtutis usquam,
Psallat in laudem Dei,
Nulla linguarum silescat,
Vox et omnis consonet.
Saeculorum saeculis.

Tibi, Christe, sit cum patre
Hagioque spiritu
Hymnus, melos, laus perennis,
Gratiarum actio,
Honor, virtus, victoria,
Regnum aeternaliter.
Saeculorum saeculis.

— Prudentius (348-413)

III. Christus Factus Est

Christus factus est pro nobis
Obediens usque ad mortem,
Mortem autem crucis.
Propter quod et Deus
Exaltavit illum
Et dedit illi nomen
Quod est super omne nomen.

— Philippians 2:8-9

And the Babe, the world's redeemer,
First revealed his sacred face,
Evermore and evermore!

O ye heights of heaven adore him;
Angel hosts, his praises sing;
Powers, dominions bow before him,
And extol our God and King;
Let no tongue on earth be silent,
Every voice in concert ring,
Evermore and evermore!

Christ, to thee with God the Father,
And, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving,
And unwearied praises be:
Honor, glory, and dominion,
And eternal victory,
Evermore and evermore!

— John Mason Neale & Henry W. Baker

Christ became obedient
Even unto death,
Death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly
Exalted Him
And gave Him
The name above every other name.

VIII. Losing Also is Ours

Auch noch Verlieren ist *unser*; und selbst das Vergessen
hat noch Gestalt in dem Bleibenden Reich der Verwandlung.
Losgelassenes kreist; und sind wir auch selten die Mitte
einem der Kreise: sie ziehn um uns die heile Figur.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Losing also is *ours*; and even forgetting
has a shape in the permanent realm of mutation.
Things we've let go of circle; and though we are rarely a center
of these circles: they trace around us the unbroken figure.

(Edward Snow)

IX. Dark the star

Dark the star
deep in the well,
bright in the still
and moving water,
still as the night
circling above
the circle of stone
the darkness surrounds.
Dark the wish
made on the star,
a true wish made
on the water's image.

There is no technique in the grass.
There is no technique in the rose.

— Susan Stewart

V. From Psalm 116

Pretiosa in conspectu Domini
Mors sanctorum ejus.

— Psalm 116:15

Precious in the eyes of God is
the death of his faithful one.

VI. Rose

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust
Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel
Lidern.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight
of being no one's sleep under so many
lids.

(Edward Snow)

VII. shadow/ Lintel

I stood before the lintel;
the door swung open then.
Your name was there, and mine,
and the date of every birth—
All was clear as day,
but they could not bring me in.
Beyond another door
and then another, endless
more, yet the distance had
been measured in the dust—
one print stepping after
another and none of them
turning back to us.

— Susan Stewart

IV. O Filii et Filiae

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

O filii et filiae,
Rex coelestis, Rex gloriae,
Morte surrexit hodie. Alleluia.

Et Maria Magdalene
Et Jacobi, et Salome,
Venerunt corpus ungerere. Alleluia.

In albis sedens angelus
Praedixit mulieribus;
In Galilaea est Dominus. Alleluia.

Et Johannes Apostolus
Cucurrit Petro citius
Sepulcrum venit prius. Alleluia.

Discipulis adstantibus,
In medio stetit Christus
Dicens: Pax vobis omnibus. Alleluia.

Ut intellexit Didymus
Quia surrexerat Jesus
Remansit fide dubius. Alleluia.

Quando Thomas Christi latus
Pedes vidit atque manus,
Dixit: Tu es Deus meus. Alleluia.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

O sons and daughters,
The king of heaven, the glorious king,
Rose from the dead this day. Alleluia.

Mary Magdalene,
Mary, the mother of James, and Salome,
went to anoint the body (of Jesus). Alleluia.

An angel all in white
Sat before them and said,
"The Lord has gone to Galilee." Alleluia.

John the Apostle
Ran along with Peter,
Entering the tomb before him. Alleluia.

When the disciples were gathered,
Christ stood in their midst
Saying: "My peace be with all of you." Alleluia.

When Didymus (Thomas) heard
That Jesus had been raised
He remained doubtful. Alleluia.

When Thomas saw Christ's side,
His feet and His hands, he said:
"You are my Lord and my God." Alleluia.

In hoc festo sanctissimo,
Sit laus et jubilatio,
Benedicamus Domino. Alleluia.

On this most holy feast,
Let there be praise and jubilation.
Blessed be the Lord. Alleluia.

De quibus nos humillimas
Devotas atque debitas
Deo dicamus gratias. Alleluia.

Let us now in all humility,
Doing as we ought,
Give thanks to God. Alleluia.

— Jean Tisserand (d. 1494)

Dark the Star

I. Dark the star

Dark the star
deep in the well,
bright in the still
and moving water,
still as the night
circling above
the circle of stone
the darkness surrounds.
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— Rainer Maria Rilke

Rose, oh pure contradiction, delight
of being no one's sleep under so many
lids.

(Edward Snow)

III. shadow/ Shadow

You came upon me like a shadow
and you came into me like a shadow
and there you dwelled within me
and I in you;
we were cast on the black water—
we were cast by the will of the wind
—and drawn across to the darker shore
where no things grow
and the dry leaves gather
and we cannot recognize
the forms of light.

— Susan Stewart

IV. Nights Like These

In solchen Nächten wächst mein Schwesterlein,
das vor mir war und vor mir starb, ganz klein.
Viel solche Nächte waren schon seither:
Sie muß schon schön sein. Bald wird irgendwer
sie frein.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Nights like these, my little sister grows,
who was here and died before me, so small.
Many such nights have passed since then.
She must be beautiful by now. Soon someone
will wed her

(Edward Snow)