

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)

rewind//PLAY//fastforward

Performed October 17, 2009

This evening's concert begins a season-long celebration of American choral music. The concert opens and closes with music of Charles Ives, that most original and enigmatic of American composers, and also includes *Frostiana*, Randall Thompson's superb setting of seven Robert Frost poems. We rewind for a reprise concert performance of David Lang's deeply moving *battle hymns*, premiered last season, and fast forward to a preview of Roberto Sierra's *Missa Latina*, which Mendelssohn Club will present in its Philadelphia premiere in April.

Charles Ives

The uniquely eclectic musical style of Charles Ives (1874-1954) was greatly influenced by his father. George Ives was a cornet player and military bandleader in the Civil War, and had returned to his native Danbury, Connecticut where he continued as a bandleader, conductor of theater orchestras and choir director. He had a keen interest in acoustical effects, once marching two bands across the town green from opposite directions, playing different tunes in different keys to gauge the effect, building a device for playing music in quarter tones, and teaching his son to sing in one key while accompanying him in another. He encouraged Charles to experiment with different musical effects, but also instilled in him a love of traditional hymns and tunes, all of which influenced his later music.



By the time he entered Yale at 20, Ives was a virtuoso organist and an accomplished pianist and composer. He had already written such significant works as his *Variations on America* and *Psalms 67*. He had developed a mature style which included extensive use of dissonance, atonality, chord clusters, polytonality, polyrhythms, and spatial music, all now mainstays of contemporary music, fully realized by Ives decades before they were popularized by composers like Stravinsky. He was poorly matched with his composition professor at Yale, the conservative, European-trained Horatio Parker, who was not amused with such works as Ives' *Fugue in Four Keys*.

Ives had a strong streak of Yankee practicality (he came from a long line of successful businessmen and entrepreneurs) and realized that he was unlikely to earn a living from the kind of music he wanted to write. He entered the insurance business, eventually founding a very successful agency and becoming a nationally recognized expert on tax law. He continued as a part-time organist and choir director until 1902, resigning after the

tepid reception to his cantata *The Celestial Country*. He became what he called a “weekend composer,” continuing an impressive output of ever more exploratory works, which he struggled to get performed. He stopped composing in 1927, after a series of heart attacks. His music finally began to be heard in the 30’s and 40’s, decades after his most productive years, and he responded to the sudden adulation with a certain bitterness. When he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his *Third Symphony* (written in 1908 but not premiered until 1946), he tartly remarked that “prizes are for boys,” and gave the prize money away.

Ives had opposed America’s entry into World War I, but became an ardent supporter of the troops once they were committed to the war. He campaigned successfully for the introduction of low denomination war bonds and wrote patriotic songs like *They Are There*. This rousing song for unison chorus and piano is filled with Ives’ characteristic quirky rhythms, abrupt changes in tonality, and snatches of popular patriotic tunes, including an allusion to an old Civil War favorite, *Tenting on the Old Campground*. Ives updated the lyrics in 1942 after World War II broke out.

Ives originally wrote *Circus Band* as a piano march in 1894, apparently intending to arrange it for 4-part mens’ chorus and theater orchestra. He later arranged it as a solo song which was published in his 1922 *114 Songs*. In the 30’s, his copyist George F. Roberts produced a version for mixed chorus and band under Ives’ supervision. Jonathan Elkus, a music educator, musicologist and Ives expert, used that to create the piano four-hand version that is being performed this evening. There is a high-spirited, college-boy feeling to the text, with its slang and its fixation on the girl in pink and Cleopatra with the golden hair. In the repeat of the last verse, Ives adds another vocal line to the mix, with snatches of popular college songs including the marching song from his own Yale fraternity, DKE. The text for *Serenity* originally came from a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, *The Brewing of Soma*. The last several verses were extracted by English hymnist W. Garrett Horder and published as the hymn *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind* in 1884. Ives set two verses from the hymn version as *Serenity* in 1919. Set for unison chorus and piano, *Serenity* demonstrates Ives’ considerable lyric gifts, with a beautiful vocal line suspended above an accompaniment of two softly alternating chords.

David Lang

David Lang’s *battle hymns* was a joint commission by Mendelssohn Club and the Leah Stein Dance Company. It was premiered in June 2009 in the historic Armory of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry as part of Philadelphia’s Hidden City festival in a performance that was fully choreographed for the chorus and nine professional dancers. The music is being reprised here in concert format.



David Lang is the recipient of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize in Music for *the little match girl passion*, commissioned by Carnegie Hall for the vocal ensemble Theatre of Voices, directed by Paul Hillier. One of America’s most performed and honored composers, his

recent works include *writing on water* for the London Sinfonietta, with libretto and visuals by English filmmaker Peter Greenaway; *the difficulty of crossing a field* – a fully staged opera for the Kronos Quartet; *loud love songs*, a concerto for the percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and the oratorio *Shelter*, with co-composers Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, for the Next Wave Festival of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, staged by Ridge Theater and featuring the Norwegian vocal ensemble Trio Mediaeval. The commercial recording of *the little match girl passion* has recently been released on the Harmonia Mundi label, coupled with his *a cappella* choral works sung by Ars Nova Copenhagen. Lang is also co-founder and co-artistic director of New York's legendary music festival Bang on a Can, which has become one of the country's premier venues for innovative contemporary music and an important training ground for young composers and performers.

David Lang provided the following program notes. "*battle hymns* is a large scale collection of songs about war. Commissioned by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia and Leah Stein Dance Company for a performance in an old armory in Philadelphia, it was intended to be something that would both take from and return something to its environment. Because of the connection to an armory I chose to make a piece out of texts that in some way had something to do with the American Civil War, not to portray the battles or show one side's feelings about the other but to explore feelings that people of that time might have felt. I deliberately avoided texts that were too sentimental, or too dogmatic. I didn't want anyone to get a message about this war, or about war in general. I did however want to see if I could put myself in a position to think contemporaneous thoughts.

"There are five separate pieces. One is a setting of one of the most famous Civil War letters, the Sullivan Ballou letter. It is a heartbreaking letter by an officer to his wife, to be sent home only if he was killed in battle. Of course, it was sent. To keep this text from becoming too overpoweringly emotional I took every phrase from his letter and then alphabetized them, changing the text from a sorrowful narrative to a catalogue of hopes and memories and fears. Another text is a simple statement of Abraham Lincoln's, about why slavery is wrong. Surrounding them are lyrics I have rewritten that are from songs written during the Civil War by Stephen Foster. Two of these Stephen Foster songs know that there's a war going on; I can't help but feel that avoidance of the war in the third, Foster's most famous lyric and song, is a secret attempt by Foster to escape it, acknowledging the importance of the war by avoiding it entirely."

Lang's carefully chosen texts also outline a shift in the way the people thought about the Civil War. The war began with a great deal of popular support and enthusiasm. In the first month, tens of thousands of men enlisted in the state militias that were to form the backbone of the Union army. Like Sullivan Ballou, they were motivated by patriotism and a sense of duty, but there was also a palpable air of excitement and adventure about the whole enterprise. When this volunteer army moved against the Confederate troops at Bull Run, only 35 miles from Washington, large numbers of people rode out from the city to watch the battle from the adjacent hills, spreading out picnic lunches and expecting to enjoy a swift and certain victory. The battle unfolded otherwise. The Union

army was routed and the spectators fled back to Washington in a panic. It was a sobering event, not only because of the defeat but also because of the incredible losses. Nearly one in ten of the troops that had marched out were either killed, wounded or missing in action at the end of the day, including Ballou. Bull Run set a grim precedent, and was followed by a series of inconclusive battles distinguished mostly by the ferocity of the fighting and almost unbelievable carnage. War was no longer an exciting adventure, but a grim and bloody reality.

This change in perception is reflected in Stephen Foster's songs. *I'll Be a Soldier*, written in 1861, presents a very innocent and naïve view of being a soldier. By 1862, when *Was My Brother in the Battle* was written (and from which *Tell me* is taken), the songs now deal with loss and separation and uncertainty, and reference a string of terrible battles.

The music for *battle hymns* is largely organized into individual vocal lines, each with its characteristic rhythm, melody, and sometimes text. Each line by itself is relatively simple harmonically and rhythmically, but the music achieves an amazing complexity as the lines are layered one on top of each other with their contrasting rhythmic patterns. Sometimes the text also serves a structural role, with repeated text in a rhythmic ostinato framing longer vocal lines.

Randall Thompson

Randall Thompson (1899-1984) is probably the most frequently performed choral composer of the 20th century. With a wonderful gift for melody and harmonic structure, and a keen sensitivity to the flow and sense of the text, he produced choral works of exquisite beauty. He was equally well known as an educator. In 1931 he was commissioned by the Association of American Colleges to examine musical education in America. His three-year study resulted in an influential report, *College Music*, which emphasized the importance of a liberal education rather than just mechanical training in music. He held faculty positions at a number of institutions including UC Berkeley, the University of Virginia, Princeton and Harvard, and was director of the Curtis Institute for three years.



Frostiana, subtitled *Seven Country Songs*, was commissioned in 1958 for the 200th anniversary of the incorporation of the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Thompson selected seven poems of Robert Frost, who had lived for a time in Amherst. These included not only some of Frost's best known poems, like *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* and *The Road Not Taken*, but some less known ones as well, like *A Girl's Garden* and *The Telephone*. Taken together, they provide a somewhat nostalgic glimpse of rural New England life. The suite has an interesting arch-like structure: the two outer movements are scored for mixed chorus; movements 2 and 6 are for men's chorus, movements 3 and 5 for women's chorus, and the central movement is actually a dialog between the men's and women's choruses. This was Thompson's deft solution to a logistical problem – the men and women of the amateur festival chorus rehearsed

separately! Thompson originally composed a rather challenging piano accompaniment, orchestrating the work in 1965. *Frostiana* was premiered on October 18, 1959 with the composer conducting and Frost in attendance.

The pairing of Frost and Thompson was an inspired one. There is a deceptive simplicity in Frost's poetry, with its straightforward language and rhyming schemes. Frost finds magic and wonder in even the most commonplace occurrences of life. Thompson responded in kind, providing seven exquisitely crafted movements that perfectly catch the meaning and cadence of the poetry. *Stopping by Woods* and *A Girl's Garden* have folk-tune like melodies, matching the strophic nature of the poetry. *The Telephone* and *Choose Something Like a Star* are more freely composed. Thompson makes use of tone painting, especially in the accompaniment – the heavy tread of steps in *The Road Not Taken*, the birdsong in *Come In*, the gently falling of snowflakes in *Stopping by Woods*, the starlight of the sustained D in the soprano line in *Choose Something Like a Star* – but the effects are subtle so as not to detract from the text. And even though Thompson was a master of polyphonic writing, *Frostiana* is set in a largely homophonic style, again so that the words would not be obscured. Frost was never particularly happy to have his poetry set to music, but at the conclusion of the premiere performance he is reported to have leapt to his feet, applauding and shouting "Sing it again!"

Roberto Sierra

Composer Roberto Sierra is familiar to Philadelphia audiences. He served as composer-in-residence to the Philadelphia Orchestra during the 2000-2001 season and composed the *Concerto for Orchestra* for their centennial. Sierra was born in Puerto Rico and studied at the Conservatorio de Música and University of Puerto Rico, the Royal College of Music and University of London, and the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. He spent three years studying composition with Györgi Ligeti at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg. Sierra has served as Director of Cultural Activities at the University of Puerto Rico, Chancellor of the Conservatorio de Música de Puerto Rico, and since 1992 has been on the faculty of Cornell University. He has also served as composer-in-residence for the Milwaukee Symphony, which has recorded a number of his works. Sierra's music has been commissioned and performed by major orchestras throughout the world. His *Sinfonía No. 4*, premiered just two weeks ago, was the inaugural work from the prestigious Sphinx Consortium, a group of 12 orchestras and organizations including the Philadelphia Orchestra, which seeks to build the repertoire from Black and Latino composers. Mendelssohn Club commissioned Sierra's *Lux aeterna*, which was premiered in 1996.



The *Missa Latina* was commissioned jointly by the National Symphony and the Choral Arts Society of Washington and premiered to great critical acclaim in February, 2006. It has received subsequent performances across the country and has been recorded by the Milwaukee Symphony under Andreas Delfs. The title *Missa Latina* references not only

the Latin mass but also the Latino music and rhythms of Sierra's native Puerto Rico, which figure prominently in the work. Sierra subtitled the mass *Pro Pace*, and intended the *Missa* as a plea for peace in these troubled times. To that end, Sierra added texts from the Proper of the Mass (prayers for a specific Sunday in the liturgical calendar) to the usual mass parts. One of these is the Offertory from which tonight's excerpt is taken. It opens with an *a cappella* setting of a single word, *Sion* – Zion, the City of Peace, and then moves into a syncopated, highly rhythmic setting of text from Psalm 134, *Laudate Dominum* – Praise the Lord. It closes with a joyful *Alleluia*, set to the characteristic 3+3+2 *tresillo* rhythmic pattern that is an organizing principle of much of the *Missa*.
– Michael Moore

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