**NO CHOICE BUT LOVE**

**Program Note**

**By: Roger Pines**

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The music of **Ben Moore** (b. 1960) is championed by many of America’s most outstanding singers. He has created works as varied as the riveting opera *Enemies: A Love Story*; youth operas based on the *Odyssey* and *Robin Hood*; the Van Gogh-based song cycle *Dear Theo*; and captivating comic numbers written for Deborah Voigt and Susan Graham.

Moore’s song cycle *Love Remained* (2011) emerged when LGBTQ+ organizations worldwide were finally realizing that the difficulties confronting gay youth required urgent attention. The first song presents a portion of a 2010 speech by Fort Worth city councilman Joel Burns – not only encouragement to bullied young people that “it gets better,” but also Burns’s own coming out. “He was very brave,” says Moore. “He knew the speech would be broadcast online, but he realized it could make a big difference in the world.” Much of the music is in emotionally raw, confessional recitative, contrasting with the soaring lyricism of passages centered on the all-important words “Hold on.”

In the second song, evangelist Oral Roberts’s grandson, Randy Robert Potts, recalls his late gay uncle. Moore wanted “a tune that would capture the innocence of a boy who adored his Uncle Ronnie.” Unfortunately, Potts’s uncle died by suicide, which happened when Randy was only seven.

For the third song, baritone Michael Kelly, the cycle’s dedicatee and first performer, contributed a poem about coming out to his brother. Writing in a breezy 6/8, Moore’s music supports the image of Kelly and his brother, running on a beach by Diamond Head, Hawaii’s inactive volcano. “In the poem,” says Moore, “Michael mentions that ‘the diamond loomed overhead, jagged and large,’ just as Michael’s secret was looming over him.” The song’s heartbeat-like rhythm is steady, reminding the brothers’ feet were hitting the sand. Michael was thinking, ‘This is the perfect time. I just have to get up the nerve to do it.’” The poem doesn’t include the exact words of Kelly’s coming out, but his brother does utter the sentence that Kelly needs to hear: “I am with you no matter what.”

In Moore’s final song, he excerpts Harvey Milk’s now-legendary “Hope Speech” from 1978, in which Milk proclaims that gay legislators can give young people the hope they need in coming out. Moore’s goal was to create a song with an anthemic quality. “Everything is sung against the tune I wrote into the piano part, which I hope has a grandeur in it. Milk was like the Martin Luther King of the gay-rights movement. I wanted something to honor him, juxtaposed with the passion of the speech.”

*This song cycle discusses content that can be triggering for many, including suicide. If you need someone to talk to or need help with suicidal thoughts, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 1-800-273-8255.*

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Whether composing for the stage, solo voice, keyboard, or orchestra, **Manuel de Falla** (1876-1946) reveled in his uniquely dazzling musical imagination. The Spanish composer enhanced his artistic development immeasurably with a seven-year sojourn in Paris, beginning in his late twenties. Falla’s contact there with Debussy, Dukas, Ravel, and Stravinsky inspired a significant refinement in his style. A closeted gay man, he chose to exile himself to Argentina after the ascendancy of Gen. Francisco Franco’s dictatorship in 1939.

The two Falla songs included on this disc express sentiments that are common to parents everywhere, whether mothers or fathers. The artists performing here use these profoundly moving songs to create a more universal dialogue between parents and their children, and the navigation of the many challenges and heartbreaks they can face in especially troubled times.

In “Preludios” (1900), Falla sets Antonio de Trueba’s mother-daughter dialogue to an utterly straightforward melodic line that is nonetheless enormously affecting emotionally. The evenly paced eight-note movement in the accompaniment of the 1914 song “Oración de la madres que tienen sus hijos en brazos” (“Prayer of the mothers who hold their sons in their arms”) is deceptively soothing, given the desperation of the mother imploring Jesus not to let her son become a soldier. Although a basic plaintiveness dominates here, Falla’s “dolce” markings can add welcome touches of sweetness to the vocalism. Perhaps Falla meant to accentuate the mother’s anxiety by the indicated alternations from “poco rit.” to “a tempo.” The text is by Falla’s compatriot Gregorio Antonio Sierra, an influential publisher, poet, playwright, and theater director during the first half of the twentieth century.

Among the many acclaimed stage works of **Jake Heggie** (b. 1961) are *Moby-Dick, Great Scott, Three Decembers*, and one of the twenty-first century’s most frequently performed operas, *Dead Man Walking*. Countless distinguished recitalists regularly perform Heggie’s nearly 300 songs, to which he recently added two cycles – *Songs for Murdered Sisters* and *INTONATIONS: Songs from the Violins of Hope*.

*Friendly Persuasions: Homage to Poulenc* (2008) uses texts by composer/librettist/songwriter Gene Scheer, highlighting friendships between Poulenc and four close friends. The first song presents a dialogue based on correspondence between Poulenc and harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, as she impatiently awaits the new concerto he’s writing for her. Her urging that he explore his true feelings in his music leads Poulenc to confess his longing for “Richard” (presumably painter Richard Chanlaire, Poulenc’s lover in the late 1920s). Heggie’s scampering piano part deliciously exemplifies the delicacy and precision that marked Landowska’s own playing.

Baritone Pierre Bernac, Poulenc’s recital partner, figures in the next song. This, too, is based on a real-life occurrence. At Christmas time in 1933 (note the “Fa-la-la’s”), Poulenc plays through a new song for Bernac, to a text by their friend Jean Cocteau. When Bernac is unenthusiastic, Poulenc throws the song into the fire! His own recollections of that moment come alive with infectious energy, alternating with some lines written by Cocteau, sung in French – romantic, but with an intriguingly dark tinge.

A young woman of magnificent intellect to whom Poulenc once proposed marriage, Raymonde Linossier died at 32, a blow from which the composer never recovered. In the third song, he laments that his youth was lost with Raymonde’s death, likened to a leaf falling to the ground too soon. Marked by Heggie as a “Valse triste,” the intoxicatingly lovely vocal line proceeds with indeterminate harmony below it – surely indicating Poulenc’s consuming desolation – before the more expansive final stanza where the harmony relaxes, with Poulenc now resigned to living without Raymonde.

Heggie’s concluding song finds Poulenc at home during wartime, playing his own songs for Surrealist poet Paul Eluard, whose friendship Poulenc considered true brotherly love. Although terrified that the Germans have taken over Paris, Poulenc is finally inspired by the “magnetic force” of Eluard’s poetry. Heggie’s accompaniment is heavily chordal, with the singer’s forceful, deeply somber legato moving strikingly, at the last moment, from the long-sustained D – which clashes unnervingly with the final harmony – to the E-flat of the final C minor chord.

In addition to more than 150 songs, **Francis Poulenc** (1899–1963) composed three highly contrasting operas (farce, monodrama, and historical tragedy), while also producing incomparably beautiful choral music and a variety of captivating orchestral works. Although he was frequently troubled by life as a gay man, throughout his career Poulenc remained a central figure in the world of gay writers, composers, and theatrical figures who galvanized the Parisian cultural scene.

Poulenc’s nine-song cycle, *Tel Jour Telle Nuit* (1937) emerged directly from the event cited in the Heggie/Scheer cycle *Friendly Persuasions*: Poulenc destroying the manuscript of a new song when Bernac doesn’t care for it, and then anticipating his new cycle for Bernac by uttering the words, “Tel jour telle nuit” (“As the day, so the night”). Poulenc found suitable texts in nine poems of Paul Eluard, inspired in large part by Eluard’s passion for his second wife. The songs consistently reflect Poulenc’s sensitive response not only to the French language, but also to Bernac’s dulcet *mezza voce*, sculpted phrasing, and cultivated interpretive ability. Particularly challenging are the hypnotically beautiful legato of “Bonne journée” and “Une herbe pauvre,” the precise articulation needed for “Le front comme un drapeau perdu,” the almost frightening vehemence of “Figure de force brûlante et farouche,” and the eloquence of one of Poulenc’s most eloquent love songs, “Nous avons fait la nuit.”

**Dame Ethel Smyth** (1858–1944) triumphed over prevailing skepticism – not to say scorn – regarding female composers. Smyth produced much-admired songs, operas, chamber music, and large-scale orchestral works. The fervency of her commitment to music was matched by the passion of her romantic attachments to numerous other women, and also by her dedication to women’s suffrage, which led on one occasion to her arrest and two months in prison.

Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, a zealous feminist and anti-Fascist activist, contributed the text for Smyth’s “On the Road” (1913). This march-like song presents a call for freedom at any cost – freedom, one assumes, equating here with equal rights for women. Smyth responds to each emphatic line by concentrating much of the time on a particular rhythmic pattern – two eighth notes followed by a quarter note. The composer avoids monotony through the highly varied treatment of that pattern within the melody, which requires blazing conviction and vivid textual projection from the singer and pianist.

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Highly visible among America’s most prominent LGBTQ+ musicians, **Jennifer Higdon** (b. 1962) is enormously prolific as a composer. Her *blue cathedral* is today’s most performed contemporary orchestral work, with more than 600 performances worldwide. Higdon’s first opera, *Cold Mountain*, won the 2016 International Opera Award for Best World Premiere. She holds many prestigious honors, including the Pulitzer Prize, three Grammy Awards, and Northwestern University’s Nemmers Prize.

Higdon took the text of “Lilacs” (2014) from 30 lines of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Walt Whitman’s lengthy free-verse poem previously set by Higdon for baritone and orchestra in 2005. The poem is essentially a pastoral elegy, a form that ennobles a moment of mourning through images from nature but also from rustic rural life. Whitman’s poem appeared in 1865, shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, and mourns the president without actually mentioning his name. In creating her 2005 piece, Higdon commented that “I was moved by all of the stages of grief that Whitman examines in this poem” and struck by “the fact that he captures the extreme range of emotions that we all must face at some point.” The evocation of a greatly loved, lost comrade emerges movingly in “Lilacs,” through impassioned legato phrases shaped across a harmonically unsettled piano part.

The music of **Willie Lee Alexander III** (b. 1992) derives its focus from his experience as a gay Mixed African-Mexican-American man. He strives to tell the stories of Black men in America, through his blending of contemporary styles with his own classical background. As co-composer and consultant, Alexander recently worked on two new operas presented by Kanye West in collaboration with The Sunday Service Collective. He co-created the music for Kim Kardashian’s Skims fashion show for 2020 New York Fashion Week.

The ten lines of text in “Sure on This Shining Night” (2021) present a portion of James Agee’s eleven-verse poem, “Description of Elysium” (1934). The well-known settings by Samuel Barber and Morton Lauridsen drew Alexander to the poem. He imagines “an older man walking through the woods at night and remembering the life he’s lived – both the hardest points and the triumphant ones.” Alexander envisioned he speaker in the poem experiencing the last night of his life, “so the dramatic build-up of colors and harmonies in the beginning lays out, in my mind, what ‘the final battle’ sounds like. Both hopeful and sad.” Then, throughout the text, Alexander allows more colors and rhythms to quickly move “as though they’re memories flying around him as he stands in the moonlight, among the trees. Finally returning to the beginning theme, he’s ready. And as he takes his last breath he looks to the sky and watches the stars. The pianist’s left hand plays a dark looming pedal and the right sounding a simple call that’s played back and forth between two octaves, like a horn from the heavens calling him home.” Given the beauty and eloquence of Alexander’s setting of the Agee poem, one can expect it to earn a place in the repertoire to match the versions of Barber and Lauridsen.

Works by Mexican American transgender composer **Mari Esabel Valverde** (b. 1987) have been commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association, Texas Music Educators Association, Seattle Men’s and Women’s Choruses, and Boston Choral Ensemble. A multilingual singer and music educator, she is also a frequent speaker on social-justice issues and has been a featured composer at the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses Festival.

“To Digte af Tove Ditlevsen” sets two poems by the distinguished Danish writer who – after an exceedingly turbulent life affected by drugs, alcohol, four failed marriages, and troubled mental health – died by suicide at age 58 in 1976. Vallverde calls these poems “brutally honest.” Few poets have described a heart’s myriad responses with more moving simplicity than Ditlevsen in “Så tag mit hjerte” (“Then Take My Heart”). Indicating that the song should be sung “Teneramente” (“Tenderly”), Valverde sensitively sculpts an evenly paced legato, one frequently dotted with carefully gauged leaps in the line. The picture painted in Ditlevsen’s “Mit hjerte er blevet borte” (“My Heart Has Gone Missing”) is devastating: a wall built around the heart of the singer, who is unable to find the heart when the wall comes down. In keeping with the somber text, Valverde marks this music “Freddo, lontano” (“Cool, far away”), choosing a notably restrained tempo and constructing a line of almost exclusively quarter and half notes in F-sharp major – appropriately, a much less “comfortable” key than the first song’s B-flat major.

The exalted stature of **Benjamin Britten** (1913–1976) in twentieth-century music can be confirmed by a body of work exhibiting consistently stupendous originality and technical brilliance. This applies to orchestral and chamber music, but also to songs, choral works, and 16 operas, among them *Peter Grimes, Gloriana, A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *Death in Venice*.

David A. Hoekema writes that Britten’s music speaks to us “in a language that is at the same time earthly and heavenly.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the five Canticles, each deeply spiritual in content but not liturgical. These pieces exploited the myriad expressive possibilities in the singing of tenor Peter Pears, Britten’s life partner. Canticle I, “My beloved is mine” (1947), was a memorial to Dick Sheppard, vicar of London’s St. Martin-in-the-Fields and co-founder of Britain’s oldest secular pacifist organization, Peace Pledge Union (Britten and Pears were members). The text, taken from seventeenth-century poet Francis Quarles’s “A Divine Rapture,’ was inspired by the Old Testament’s *Song of Solomon.* Claire Seymour aptly describes it as “quietly ecstatic,” with “its quality of rapturous ethereality.” The four movements transition seamlessly from barcarolle style to recitative, scherzo, and dignified epilogue. Although the work’s homosexual content has been the subject of debate, it does ultimately seem as close as anything in Britten’s *oeuvre* to a public declaration of his love for Pears.

**Ricky Ian Gordon** (b. 1956) is acknowledged as one of his generation’s foremost composers of art song, musical theater, and opera. Like his colleagues, Ben Moore and Jake Heggie, Gordon maintains working relationships with many of today’s most celebrated singers. During the 2021-22 season, two of his operas premiered in New York within a month of each other: *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* and *Intimate Apparel.* Other acclaimed works range from the opera *The Grapes of Wrath* to the musical *My Life with Albertine* and the song cycle *Genius Child*.

Gordon noted in an interview for *The Journal of Singing* that “poetry is the deepest way I order my universe…when I set poems to music, it’s almost like I’m healing a rift in myself.” Writing for soprano Harolyn Blackwell in *Genius Child* (1993), the composer sought out poems by the greatest literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes. The cycle’s ten songs exhibit a riveting emotional spectrum, from profound sadness to pure delight. “Prayer,” the seventh song, offers a brief but penetrating text. Within a vocal line built on descending eighth-note pairs, the poet asks God some very basic questions, the most important being simply, “Which way to go?” In complete contrast is “Joy,” with the poet savoring the sight of a girl “driving the butcher’s cart in the arms of the butcher boy.” Here the virtuosic piano part unites captivatingly with a vigorous vocal line that exudes positiveness, and with the piece’s excitement enhanced throughout by frequent changes in meter.

Eric Ferring and Madeline Slettedahl’s CD closes with its title track. The tenor commissioned “No Choice but Love” from **Ben Moore** in 2021, when Ferring sent the composer a poem by a fellow tenor, Jamaican American Terrence Chin-Loy, a close friend of both Ferring and Slettedahl. Immediately attracted to the poem, Moore first did an oral reading for Chin-Loy to confirm that his own interpretation connected completely with the poet’s intention. Moore saw that Chin-Loy was strongly rebuking “everything that is designed to beat down gay people, and the feeling that LGBTQ+ love is somehow unnatural. Like every other gay person I’ve ever met, I was given negative messages when I was young. It’s a process to fully accept yourself and see that what we are *is* natural. Nor is it a choice – it’s based in love.”

Embracing the life-enhancing characteristic of the poem, Moore worked to give the song “a cosmic feel, including augmented chords with an ethereal quality, especially at the beginning and the end, where I was trying to create a spaciousness of sound, evoking something universal and mythic.” The poem is, to a degree, a stream-of-consciousness progression starting with the opening line, “In the beginning, there was love, and by its touch the universe unfolded.” At one point, says Moore, “the speaker reflects on the people who came before and made our current freedoms possible. ‘We have no choice but *love*’ – Terrence celebrates that this hugely positive truth is how the world is *meant* to be.”

*Roger Pines has written for seven major recording labels, including program notes for such distinguished artists as Reneé Fleming, Anna Netrebko, Joyce DiDonato, Cecilia Bartoli, Juan Diego Flórez, and Jonas Kaufmann. Pines lectures widely on operatic topics, contributes writing to opera-related publications internationally, and has appeared annually on the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts’ Opera Quiz since 2006. He is a faculty member of the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University.*