

# Columbia Pro Cantare

## Program Notes: Excerpts

### *An American Mix: Shipley to Schickele*

1 May 2004

#### **Concerto for Piano and Chorus, *The Twelve Months***

In 1961 I...began to think about the idea of composing a piece for piano and chorus in which the piano, not the chorus, was the main focus of attention – a piece in which the chorus accompanied the piano rather than the other way around. I never lost interest in the idea, but ... the right opportunity didn't come along for years.

Through an informal poll among my friends I have found out that I am not the only person who regards Labor Day as the real New Year's Day; this feeling is perhaps especially strong among people who are associated with the academic or concert/theatrical world. So when I decided to make the concerto a calendar, I thought I'd start off with September; but then I thought about how September not only feels like the beginning of the year, but after languid August, it feels like jumping into an icy river; things start happening fast, and any serene meditative feelings let over from the summer quickly become a memory.

So the concerto starts with August, a quiet, flowing, wordless prologue. The second movement, Fall, uses three texts: the anonymous *Thirty Days Hath September*, a couple of verses from the October section of Thomas Tusser's sixteenth-century rhyming farm calendar; and for November, fragments of three poems: Thomas Moore's *Odes of Anacreon*, Shelly's *Autumn*, *A Dirge*, and William Cullen Bryant's *Death of the Flowers*.

One of my fondest memories of my teenage years in Fargo, North Dakota is Christmas caroling, so the third movement, Winter, begins with a carol – the music is original and the text is adapted from a nineteenth-century hymn called *The Wondrous Birth* by E.U. Edel; January and February, the dead of winter, are represented by a sad solo passage for the piano and a setting of Thomas Campion's *Now Winter Nights Enlarge*, which enumerates the social forms of conviviality which could counteract the hostile environment outside.

Spring begins with a story March cadenza; a brief interlude in which the chorus sings nothing but "April" leads to a setting of several lyrics from medieval Norman love songs translated by John Addington Symonds. The last movement, Summer, consists of some celebratory bell music by the piano for June, and a wordless epilogue for July that is even more contemplative than the opening movement of the concert.

The work was completed on August 26, 1987; the first performance took place on November 3, 1987, with Robin McCabe and the Choir of the West conducted by Richard Sparks. *Notes by Peter Schickele*

## **Amazing Grace**

The best known of the Sacred Harp shaped notes hymns is *Amazing Grace*, a song so widespread and historically important that PBS's Bill Moyers once devoted a full hour documentary on it alone. The words to it were penned by a London man named John Newton (1725-1807), a young sailor who followed his seagoing father, and served in the Royal Navy. However, he soon became involved in working on ships that transported slaves to the New World, an experience that would haunt him in later years. In 1748, after his ship almost went down in a storm, he experienced a religious conversion; he soon left the sea, and by 1758 had decided to become a preacher around Liverpool. By 1780 his reputation had grown to where he was named vicar of a major church in London. He also began to write hymns - some 280 of them - and in a book in 1779 published the first stanzas of what would become Amazing Grace under the title *Faith's Review and Expectation*. It was well-received, and by 1789 had made its first appearance in print in America.

These early versions of the hymn, though, did not use the melody familiar to everyone today. That melody was common in early America under the name "New Britain" or sometimes titles like "Harmony Grove" and oddly, "Amazing Grace." The authorship of the melody is lost to history, but we do know that the adapting of Newton's text to the "new Britain" melody occurred in 1855; a colorful song leader and evangelist named William Wlaker ("Singing Billy") put it in his widely used songbook *Southern Harmony*. From there it quickly became a part of hundreds of church repertoires.

The song got into an even broader range of popular culture when it became a favorite of the folk revival movement in the 1960s. It appeared in the popular film *Alice's Restaurant* and as a hit single by folk singer Judy Collins. Then, in 1972, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards made a recording of it featuring bagpipes, and it became a surprise hit, both in England and the United States. The recording helped establish a tradition of pipers playing it at political or military funerals, and at the services for policemen killed in the line of duty. The song was heard often at memorials for victims in the days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

## **Lady Margaret**

This ballad appears in *Percy's Reliques* (1765). It was a broadside or stall ballad from the late seventeenth century. Percy states that the ballad is much older than the broadside edition, because it was quoted in *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, dated 1611. Listed by Francis Child as Ballad #74, *Fair Margaret and*

*Sweet William*, this song is a rather macabre tale of love, jealousy, death and the supernatural, that is widely dispersed in America. The tune here is the variant twelve found by Cecil Sharp in the Appalachian Mountains. The last two verses are clearly related to Barbara Allen. Another Sharp variant is *Fair Margaret and Sweet William*. Charles Frazier's novel *Cold Mountain* is filled with musical references that create an historical context for the Civil War setting. Pages 253-254 contain a moving rendering of Sara's singing of this ballad as a lullaby for her baby.

Plot: Margaret learns that her lover is to be wed. After the wedding, she (or her ghost) visits the wedding chamber and asks the husband if he is happy with his wife. He says that he would prefer her. But when he calls at Margaret's home, she is dead.

Lady Margaret was standing in her own room door,  
A-combing her long yellow hair.  
When who did she spy but Sweet William and his bride,  
As to the churchyard they drew near.

The day passed away and night comin' on,  
And most of the men were asleep.  
Lady Margaret appeared all dressed in white,  
And standing at his bed feet.

She said "How do you like your bed?  
And how do you like your sheet?  
And how do you like your fair young bride  
That's lying in your arms asleep."

He said, "Very well do I like my bed,  
Much better do I like my sheet.  
But best of all that fair young girl,  
That's standing at my bed feet."

Then, once he kissed her lily-white hand,  
Twice he kissed her cheek.  
Three times he kissed her cold frosty lips,  
And fell into her arms asleep.

Well, the night passed away, the day came on,  
And into the morning light.  
Sweet William said I'm troubled in my head,  
By the dream that I dreamed last night.

Such dreams, such dreams as these,  
I know they mean no good.  
For I dreamed that my bower was full of red swine,  
And my bride's bed full of blood.

He asked is Lady Margaret in her room,  
Or is she out in the hall.

But Lady Margaret lay in a cold black coffin,  
With her faced turned to the wall.

### **Pretty Polly** - From Appalachian Suite, arranged by Jared Denhard

**Background:** In 1726, in Gosport, England the body of a young pregnant woman was found. It quickly comes to light that her boyfriend, a ship's carpenter, is the culprit. Long before tabloids and 24 hour news channels people still hungered for the gossip on gruesome crime. Back then, the medium of choice for recounting lurid tales was the broadsheet. A broadsheet was a single piece of paper, printed with the details of a newsworthy event set to rhyme. At a time when few people could read, the poetic structure made it easier to remember the story and the sad tale of Polly was an instant hit with the local women, who perhaps saw it as a good cautionary tale to warn their headstrong daughters and friends away from unapproved relationships.

A young woman, having learned the song from her mother takes it to heart and marries a young man bound for a Virginia colony. she loves the tune of Pretty Polly, but in light of the fact that she is on a strange continent where no one knows her or the story she 'cleans it up' by changing the lyrics to skirt news of Polly's pregnancy. The song became a hit in Virginia and the song was passed on orally, the lyrics changing several times in the process.

**Notes:** Pretty Polly is a classic, maybe "the" classic Appalachian murder ballad, which was by far the most popular kind of song in the southern Appalachians, most of them grisly variants of old English ballads. There is argument over whether the Appalachian versions are actually the "true" versions, preserved in amber as it were by Scots and English settlers (as Cecil Sharp and Maude Karples propose), or if they are vulgar imitations of the more nuanced, sophisticated English version. The main difference seems to be that in the English version, the victim returns as a ghost for some kind of revenge, or at least shock, while in the American version, when you kill someone, they stay dead. *Notes by Jared Denhard*

O Polly, pretty Polly, come away with me,  
O Polly, pretty Polly, come away with me,  
Before we get married some pleasure to see.

Oh Willie, oh Willie, I'm scaird of your ways  
I'm afraid you will lead my poor body astray.

Pretty Polly, pretty Polly, you're guessing just right  
I dug on your grave the last part of last night.

She threw her arms around him and trembled with fear  
How can you kill the poor girl that loves you so dear.

He stabbed her to the heart and her heart's blood did flow,  
And into the grave pretty Polly did go.

Then he threw a little dirt over her and started for home  
Leaving no one behind but the wild birds to mourn.

## **Shenandoah**

Old Sailor men, who have heard this capstan shanty ringing across strange anchorages in the far ports of the world, agree that it is the finest of them all. The melody has the roll and surge and freedom of a tall ship sweeping along before a trade wind. The sonorous succession of long vowels and soft and liquid consonants blend perfectly with the romantic air. The lines are a call from the homeland to the sailor wandering far out across the seas, a call not from a sweetheart, a house, or even a town, but from the land itself, its rivers and its familiar and loved hills.

It is quite likely that no one will ever know exactly where or how the song was made. Captain Whall, who compiled one of the earliest and best of shanty collections, says that it may be a voyageur or Missouri river boatman's song. Sometimes the song tells of a trader who courts the brown daughter of an Indian chief named Shenandoah. Old-time cavalry officers roar out a lusty version of their own contriving which adds certain bawdy detail to the story. Yet the main life of the song was lived under sail in the days of squarerigged ships, when the men were leaning hard on the capstan bars and tramping the anchor up from the bottom.

### ***Notes about a few of our featured artists:***

Composer, musician, author, satirist – **PETER SCHICKELE**, is internationally recognized as one of the most versatile artists in the field of music. His works, now well in excess of 100 for symphony orchestras, choral groups, chamber ensembles, voice, movies and television, have given him "a leading role in the ever-more-prominent school of American composers who unselfconsciously blend all levels of American music." (John Rockwell, *The New York Times*). His commissions are numerous and varied, ranging from works for the National Symphony, the Saint Louis Symphony, The Minnesota Opera, The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, The Audubon and Lark String Quartets, the Minnesota Orchestral Association, and many other such organizations to compositions for distinguished instrumentalists and singers. Peter Schickele arranged one of the musical segments for the Disney animated feature film, *Fantasia 2000*. He also created the musical score for the film version of Maurice Sendak's children's classic *Where the Wild Things Are*, issued on videocassette along with another Sendak classic *In The Night Kitchen* (Weston Woods), which Mr. Schickele narrates. Among his ongoing projects is a weekly, syndicated radio program, *Schickele Mix*, which has been heard nationwide over Public Radio International since January 1992 and which won ASCAP's prestigious

Deems Taylor Award. As a lecturer, he has appeared in cities coast to coast; the Smithsonian Institution presented him in a series of four integrated lectures in 1997.

**ROSIE SHIPLEY** grew up in urban Baltimore, Maryland, surrounded by traditional Irish music and dance and in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, home of the famous Cape Breton-style of Scottish traditional fiddle playing. Rosie had her first violin lesson at age three and, when she was eight, began to learn traditional tunes from fiddler Brendan Mulvihill. Rosie spent years nurturing her talent at the weekly sessions at J. Patrick's pub and working with Navan-native Peter Fitzgerald. Along with her brothers, Rosie spent a portion of her teenaged summers in Cape Breton at the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts where she studied with Sandy MacIntyre and Ryan MacNeill. Today, she plays fiddle and piano and teaches students young and old at her popular music studio in Baltimore.

Rosie tours with Irish singer/multi-instrumentalist Gerry O'Beirne and with Washington, D.C.-based singer/guitar player Lisa Moscatiello.

Celtic harper, storyteller, highland piper and trombonist **JARED DENHARD** is currently a member of the Celtic rock band O'Malley's March, the medieval jazz group Keltia, and the early music ensemble Boar's Head Consort. He is a visiting artist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's educational outreach program. A popular performer at Celtic, classical, and jazz events in the Mid Atlantic region, Jared has performed as soloist on the highland bagpipes with the Delaware Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Municipal Band, and the Lexington Brass Quintet. Jared is also an active composer whose works have been performed and recorded by the United States Air Force Band, the Kinetics Dance Theater, the London Portable Harp Company and the Annapolis Brass Quintet. He has produced and released six CDs of his original compositions, as well as numerous traditional pieces. Jared is a graduate of the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland. He and his wife Heather live in Columbia, Maryland with their seven children.

**Lexington Brass Quintet** (Bog Suggs and Leigh Bender, trumpets, Alan White, horn, Jared Denhard, trombone, Ed Goldstein, tuba) has been around for a long time. If we say exactly how long we'll feel really old. One of the greatest accomplishments of the LBQ's illustrious career has been the uncanny ability to avoid overexposure (until now, of course). Each member of the group is a well known performer with a legendary reputation on his or her instrument. As frequent guests on area concert series and momentous ceremonial occasions, the LBQ always arrives with a unique mix of imaginative programming, flashy performance, and ferocious appetite.