



**O Rising Dawn**  
**Opus 7, Loren Pontén, director**  
**St. James Cathedral, Seattle**

**Program Details**

The season from Advent to Christmas abounds in great music. Carols are the jewels of the season, but the texts of the Magnificat and the Advent antiphons that herald Christmastide have also inspired composers since the Middle Ages. Christmas itself is the culmination of a unique period of reflection and resolution; its poetic imagery is suffused with ideas of awakening, of moving from darkness into light. The prophecies foretelling a messiah are first proclaimed at Advent. Next, the Annunciation of Mary and her hymn of praise, the Magnificat, give the first tangible evidence of the fulfillment of Advent's promise. Finally, the pastoral felicities of the Bethlehem manger fulfill the Old Testament prophecies. This is the "rising dawn," and the ancient progression from darkness to light has determined the shape of this recording, with John Muehleisen's The Great "O" Antiphons and Gerald Finzi's Magnificat centering the selections.

The Advent hymn *Veni, veni Emmanuel*, with its powerful imagery of the rose rising from the root of Jesse, inspired Hugo Distler and Zoltán Kodály to embellish the plainsong with evocative harmonies. Distler's are sumptuous and plangent, while Kodály's are austere and reverential, honoring the Gregorian heritage of the tune. Egil Hovland's The Glory of the Father also has its origin in chant, which admirably enhances the meditative character of the words from the Gospel of John. The seventeenth-century text "My Soul, There Is a Countrie" echoes a deep longing for peace through "the Rose that cannot wither" in this sweet and hopeful setting by C. H. H. Parry, written near the end of his life.

John Muehleisen's The Great "O" Antiphons (commissioned and given first performances by Opus 7) is a work of major dimensions. The Latin chants are from the Roman Catholic Office of Vespers for the last seven days before Christmas (December 17 – 23). Each antiphon precedes and follows the singing of the Magnificat. The texts are a series of salutations to the coming Messiah, each beginning with the vocative "O." (The verses of the familiar Advent hymn O come, O come Emmanuel are a succinct compilation of all seven antiphons.) In Muehleisen's work, each chant is followed by a full choral setting of the English translation. Without obviously borrowing from the chant, Muehleisen has achieved a remarkable unity of expression, which bonds his own postmodern harmonic style with the urgency and gravity of the old tunes. His spacious phrasing and choral dynamics were inspired by the resonant acoustic of Seattle's St. James Cathedral.

We feel the exuberance of Mary's spirit in the first arching melodies of Gerald Finzi's Magnificat. The marriage of organ and voices is crucial to the expression of joy Finzi found in the text. Like his compatriots Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett, Finzi always went to the heart of the text for his inspiration. There is an electrifying moment on the first repetition of the opening phrase, when the organ thunders through a massive arpeggio to underline the fervor of the words. The quiet benediction is as gentle as a Pre-Raphaelite Madonna.

The remaining songs view the Christ Child in the manger. Traditional carols have embellished the simple stable with visions of angels and the starlight of the Magi's beacon. In the same way that Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts portray the Nativity through the eyes of his century, so do composers of our own time take the old tunes and, using the harmonies of our century, bring a refreshing feeling of today to such beloved carols as "Silent Night" and "Once in Royal David's City." In the same spirit, we feel the hush of expectation fulfilled in Britten's "A Boy was Born," and the nostalgia for Christmas past in Charles Ives's simple Christmas Carol.

Some poets and composers look beyond the warmth and beauty of the manger scene. Lajos Bárdos's haunting Hungarian tune and John Tavener's sometimes alarming harmonies join Herbert Howells's beloved "Sing Lullaby" in subtly forecasting a life destined for pain. But Finzi's chanticleer, the herald of the rising dawn, awakens the world on Christmas morning with his vibrant anthem All This Night, even as Peter Wishart's "Alleluya, a new work is come on hand" welcomed us to this celebration of the glorious music of the season.