

James Arthur Bond
Associate Professor of English
California Lutheran University
Copyright © James Arthur Bond 2014

Cultivating the Intuitive, Discerning, and Interpretive Ear: Teaching Notes for the Music of Composer Morten Lauridsen

“Classical music . . . has a lot to do with education. I’m always saddened to hear people say, ‘I don’t know anything about it, so it’s not for me.’ Well, you don’t need to know anything about it. I’m not going to . . . tell you that knowledge doesn’t increase anticipation and enjoyment, ultimately. –But only to feel, and to allow yourself to feel. And if you can do that—which, of course, everybody can do that—then classical music is probably the richest form of music in terms of renewed pleasure and surprises of what you can find. It is demanding: it is not something that necessarily brings instant gratification, and it requires investment on the part of the listener. You can’t sit there completely passive and expect it to wash over you You get a lot more out of it, depending on what you put into it . . . [Classical music] helps you see not just the way things are, but the way things could be.

–Pianist Héléne Grimaud, from the documentary film Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037.

“All great composers of the past spent most of their time studying. Feeling alone won’t do the job.”

–George Gershwin.

“If we are to find joy and meaning in life in the midst of affliction of all sorts, we go to music—especially.”

–Morten Lauridsen, Shining Night.

“For those of you who have an inner song to share, be that song in the form of poetry, or dance, or music, sculpture, or singing. –To fulfill that calling is not an easy task, and [I want] for you to persevere. And by doing so, you will change lives.”

–Morten Lauridsen, Shining Night.

A Brief Interpretive Comment on the Music of Morten Lauridsen

In his book Choral Music in the Twentieth Century, conductor and music historian Nick Strimple has identified Morten Lauridsen as one of the very few American composers who may be described as a “mystic.” Strimple notes that Lauridsen’s music has a striking accessibility, so much so that Lauridsen’s well-honed compositions often radiate “an illusive and indefinable ingredient” that lingers in the listener’s ear, suggesting that “all the questions have been

answered" (247). Regardless of the listener's specific religious or spiritual beliefs, many of Lauridsen's best-known pieces tend to emphasize themes of light, healing, and wholeness—powerful ideas that connect easily with any listener who wishes to chart and to reflect carefully on one's inner emotional and spiritual journey.

In his magisterial compositions based on sacred texts, such as the pristine motet O Magnum Mysterium (1994) and the non-liturgical requiem Lux Aeterna (1997), Lauridsen's music contributes to a profound feeling of serenity in the listener. Lean, harmonious, lyrical choral lines are strategically variegated by the use of dissonance, suspensions, and canons; the pleasing choral lines are also gently interpolated by rippling cascades of sound, suggestive of flowing water or waves on a shoreline. Drawing from historical musical practices based on the time and culture of each text he sets to music, Lauridsen carefully integrates all of these compositional elements to create merging contours of symmetrical order, which ultimately lead to a satisfying musical, textual, and emotional unity. In his secular works such as the playful song cycle Les Chansons des Roses (1993), the quiet beauty of the Nocturnes (2005, 2008), the fiery Italian renaissance pieces that constitute Madrigali (1987), and the introspective meditations on relationships found in the Mid-Winter Songs (1983), Lauridsen pays close attention to the poetic text, along with the cultural and historical circumstances of the poet. Lauridsen carefully draws from all of these factors in crafting musical compositions that reanimate the past, bringing that past into the present through unique musical works for the listener's own pleasure, interpretation, and ultimately, self-reflection.

For our purposes in the first-year seminar, Lauridsen's music serves as a powerful example through which we and our students can cultivate careful observation (in this case, listening), probing analysis, and broader interpretation. We can also use Lauridsen's music to suggest to students that academic study should ideally serve not merely functional ends, but also to foster one's heart, mind, and spirit—the “whole person” that a small comprehensive university encourages students to cultivate. Lauridsen's life and work also speak to our task of exploring and discovering purpose. This theme is expressed in at least two or three places in the film Shining Night. For example, toward the end of the film Lauridsen eloquently speaks about his desire to craft music that will reach people and assist them in finding meaning in their lives. We can use the craft and power of Lauridsen's music to engage our students in learning about their various tasks at the university: **to cultivate skills of observation, analysis, and synthesis (interpretation); to explore meaning and purpose** through their academic studies, co-curricular activities, and their personal choices; and to engage in all that they do **for the larger purpose of nurturing the whole person.**

Teaching Ideas and Materials

1. Using CLU's Letter to Our First-Year Students. Each year the FYE program composes a letter, which our provost signs and sends with the relevant reading materials to each

student. The letter is intended to welcome students, and to invite them to actively engage in the common reading, especially by giving them some questions for further reflection.

The common reading for this year focuses on **music**, rather than on a book. We thus want to remind ourselves and our students **to continue to access the common reading actively through multiple modalities**, including **clips of recorded music**, the **film**, the **composer's website**, live **performance**, **printed literary and sacred texts**, and the **still photographs** found in the booklet Morten Lauridsen's Waldron Island Reflections. The letter for this year thus directed students to the composer's website, as well as to several YouTube clips of Lauridsen's music. The letter also included a total of four clusters of questions, any of which could be useful for structuring one or more class discussions about the book. Using a question or two from this letter would honor the work we have asked our students to complete before they begin their first year. Here is the copy of the letter, which was sent to students in mid-June:

June 12, 2014

Welcome to California Lutheran University!

As part of joining the Cal Lutheran community, all first-year students are asked to participate in a common reading. In past years we have always chosen a book, but for this fall our common reading will be the **Music of Composer Morten Lauridsen**. A 2007 recipient of the National Medal of Arts, Lauridsen is Distinguished Professor of Composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music. You will have an opportunity to meet the composer and to hear selections of his music performed by CLU students and faculty during the fall semester.

To prepare for your work in the first-year seminar, we'd like you to read and reflect on the enclosed booklet before you arrive on campus in August. Entitled Morten Lauridsen's Waldron Island Reflections, the booklet includes images and transcript excerpts from a documentary film we will watch together in the fall. **In addition to reading the booklet carefully, we also want you to view the following website links, which will provide you with an introduction to Lauridsen's music:**

<http://mortenlauridsen.net/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icp4bNb7TDI>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT-Mh_a4H1c

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7tJcRIopKU>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkIDNnZ9pMk&feature=kp>

Your seminar leaders have posed some questions for you to think about, as you read the booklet, look at the photographs, and view the website links:

- As discussed in the booklet, Morten Lauridsen spends considerable time each year on a remote island in the Pacific Northwest. He has said that his home and studio on that island provide him with the necessary solitude for reflection, study, and the creative process of composing, and that Waldron Island gives him not only a “deeper well of creativity,” but also a “surer sense of self.” For the remainder of the year, he resides at his home in the Hollywood Hills, and from there he commutes to work with his students and colleagues at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. What places are important to you, your family, and/or your closest friends? What role does each place play in your life or their lives? When you think about your upcoming four years at Cal Lutheran, what roles do you imagine your new college home will play in your life?

- Morten Lauridsen is regarded as one of the best classical choral composers of our time. As you listen to the website links to performances of his music, what are some of the musical characteristics that you notice? How does the music make you feel, and what associations or memories does it bring up for you?

- One specific portion of Morten Lauridsen's website provides a reprint of an article previously printed in the Wall Street Journal: <http://mortenlauridsen.net/articles.html>. What does the article suggest about the interdisciplinary nature of learning? What kinds of academic, artistic, musical, and/or athletic experiences have inspired you in your own learning or achievement? How have these experiences informed other areas of your life? How would you like your academic and campus experiences at Cal Lutheran to influence your life journey?

- The Cal Lutheran community emphasizes the importance of exploring purpose or vocation during your college years. What do the booklet and the website links tell us about Lauridsen's sense of purpose or vocation? In what ways do you see him reflecting not merely on his professional life, but also on his inner life or journey? What ideas about discovering your own purpose are brought to mind by these reflections?

Prior to your arrival on campus, please be sure to read the booklet, view the website links, and reflect on these questions, so that you will be well prepared to share your thoughts about Morten Lauridsen and his music. We look forward to your arrival in late August, when you will join the California Lutheran University community.

Best wishes,

Leanne Neilson
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

2. Class Activity: Close Listening and Reading of Musical, Literary, and Sacred Texts.

Although Lauridsen's music constitutes some of the most accessible contemporary classical music, many students will not have had much exposure to it, nor to classical music in general. Because of the limited place music education now occupies in American schools, unless students pursued the study of music actively, most will not have participated in any systematic investigation of music as a mode of artistic and intellectual inquiry. In fact, music may seem to be only about immediate and personal feelings for them, and specifically, only in relation to the music with which they are familiar through popular culture. Above all, the seemingly nebulous character of music itself—that is, music is **most directly perceived fleetingly in time**—will provide a fascinating challenge for beginning the larger process of enculturating our students into the life of the university.

In fact, Lauridsen's music can serve as a useful model for just the kind of interdisciplinary inquiry that a small, comprehensive university like Cal Lutheran seeks to cultivate. Lauridsen's work has been created in response to cultural, literary, sacred, secular, musical, social, and even environmental factors. As alluded to in the opening remarks of these notes, for example, portions of Lauridsen's works reflect the specific features of the environment where he has often completed them—Waldron Island, located off the coast of the state of Washington, where Lauridsen could hear the ebb and flow of waves as he finished his compositions on his 1890 Steinway piano. Similarly, when he sets music to a sacred text with a long history, as he has done with O Magnum Mysterium, he attempts to pay attention to some of the distinct qualities of the sacred text that form part of its history in the religious world, and uses those qualities in making specific compositional choices.

Finally, when he sets music to literary texts,— as he does in his composition of the various Nocturnes (2005, 2008), as well as in Les Chansons des Roses (1993)—Lauridsen pays careful attention to the social, cultural, and linguistic situation of the poet, and crafts the musical material to resonate with that situation. He has pointed out, for example, that the popular “Dirait-on” from the rose song cycle is based on a chord that has a distinctively French sound, one that is reminiscent of French composers such as Debussy or Ravel, who were composing music during the early twentieth century—years which overlapped with the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's sojourn in a Swiss village, which culminated in the completion of over 400 poems in French (Lauridsen, Evoking Sound Dialogues).

==> **We can train ourselves and our students to listen carefully for the distinctive qualities that make up Lauridsen's music, but to do this successfully, we must have a plan to systematically engage all of us in the enterprise.** I recommend the following method to help students sharpen their listening skills and to inquire more deeply into how Lauridsen's music works and what it means:

- a. **Preliminary Listening Assignment**. Prior to the class meeting in which you and your students will be discussing the music, assign a few relevant sound clips of Lauridsen's music (most are readily available on YouTube). You may

find it helpful to ask them to listen to more than one clip of the same piece, or to a few clips of related pieces. Provide them with some links, so that they can quickly attend to the task of listening.

- b. **Written Response.** You may wish to ask students to write a short paragraph response to their listening of the music, and to bring that response with them to class.
 - A simple prompt to give your students: "Listen to the following clips of movements from Lauridsen's O Magnum Mysterium, even if you have already listened to it. Then write a short one- or two-paragraph response, in which you discuss how the music makes you feel, and any specific features of the music or the words that you notice. Please word-process your response, and bring that with you to class."
- c. Set aside at least 20-30 minutes for listening and discussion of a specific piece; a well-run discussion of a single piece of music could easily take most or all of one class period.
- d. Model careful listening by actively listening with your students during the class. Listening to something as a group can be powerful, because it allows people to compare their immediate impressions of the music, and it also gives them time to compare the specific musical and textual details that each listener has noticed, and to thus probe more deeply as to what those details may mean, and how they work in the musical composition.
- e. One listening/reading/discussion pattern with which to experiment:
 - *Listen through the selection once, with the printed text in hand.
 - *Discuss the students' initial impressions, including what they noticed when they listened to the work outside of class.
 - *Have yourself or one or more students read aloud the literary or sacred text to which the music is set. Ask students to follow along in the printed version of the text (see example text handouts in #3, #4, and #5 below). Ask them to read with a pen in hand, so that they can mark details that seem important to them in the text. --A useful technique is to underline or circle intriguing words, striking images, or key turns of phrase.
- f. Discuss the text of the piece.
- g. Listen to the clip of the performed music again. At this point, if it hasn't already come up in discussion, try to give them one specific musical detail for which they can listen (see suggestions for specific music selections below).
- h. Conclude with a brief discussion of what they now hear in the piece, and their associations with it. If it seems productive and you haven't already assigned a writing assignment, you could ask them to post a brief interpretive response to the Blackboard discussion board after class.

==> Many other approaches are possible. I've often found, for instance, that three segments of listening to a short piece can yield far more than just one or two. Rule-of-Thumb: Gauge what you do on how the students respond, and modify your approach based on what emerges in the discussion.

3. Background Material and Interdisciplinary Discussion Ideas for *O Magnum Mysterium*.

The sacred motet *O Magnum Mysterium* is probably Morten Lauridsen's best-known piece, as it is frequently performed in churches and at community choral concerts during the Christmas season, and was even performed at Ground Zero after 9/11 by a choir from Maine (*Shining Night*). I first heard the piece on a fine Telarc CD, *A Robert Shaw Christmas: Angels on High* (1997), given to me by a close friend, who had heard the piece live at a choral concert. My friend was struck by Lauridsen's beautifully placid rendering of this text from the Christmas Matins, partly because my friend knew that it had been set by many other composers (Byrd, Victoria, Gabrieli, Palestrina, and Poulenc, for example). Lauridsen's setting is fresh, original, and incomparably sublime in its depiction of a major religious event--the birth of Christ, and the role of the Virgin Mary in his birth.

Lauridsen has explained that he composed the work as a commission for the president of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. Lauridsen began with what seemed like a "mountain of notes" and gradually "whittled it down" (Lauridsen *Evoking Sound Dialogues*). Although it is a short piece and it appears almost effortless when it is executed well by a choir, Lauridsen has remarked that out of all of his compositions, it was the most difficult one for him to write. He "lost a lot of sleep" laboring over every detail of the piece, and by the time he finished it for the December 1994 performance in Los Angeles, he felt "skinned alive" (*Evoking Sound Dialogues*).

O Magnum Mysterium contains a calculated and sparing use of complexity beneath its otherwise placid surface. Lauridsen composed the piece specifically by using techniques from the Renaissance, especially by the use of chords that are "floated" in the first inversion ("Morten Lauridsen" 76). What this means for the ear of the average listener, then, is that much of the piece appears to float or shimmer aurally, much as the pewter plate holding the chalice and rose on the right-hand side of the table in Zurbarán's painting appears to float or shimmer. And because most of the piece is composed in direct, simple harmonies and melodies, the startling contrast of the G-sharp on the word "Virgo" renders the piece even more sublime in its musical representation. The root position of the chords is strategically saved for the "Alleluia" portion in the middle of the score, thus creating a subtle feeling of certitude, during and just after the use of the dissonance of the G-sharp (see more about this dissonance in letter c below).

In the letter to our new students, we asked them to view a clip of *O Magnum Mysterium*, and we also asked them to read a short article about Lauridsen's inspiration for the piece, part of which was from a still life painting by Francisco de Zurbarán at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (see page 4 above). For a class activity, I recommend the following:

a. Preparation:

*Ask the students to reread the online article prior to class, and to take a few notes:

<http://mortenlauridsen.net/articles.html>

*I would also ask students to visit the Norton Simon Museum website, so that they can read about the painting from an art history perspective:

http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.php?id=F.1972.06.P

*Ask students to listen to one or two recordings of O Magnum Mysterium. I've included one of the links we gave students in the letter, followed by an even better version by the Dale Warland Singers (which is also the one featured in Shining Night):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkIDNnZ9pMk&feature=kp>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=289pDILID0M>

b. During the class session:

*Run your discussion by improvising from my general listening suggestions in #2 above.

*Introduce the term interdisciplinary inquiry, and be sure to make the case that this is a faculty we want to foster at Cal Lutheran. --That is, we want the various disciplines to inform one another, and we want to engage in conversations across the false divides created by disciplines, political regimes, and belief systems. Incorporate some discussion of the painting into your discussion, and invite students to share brief accounts of experiences they have had when learning or knowledge from one area has informed another aspect of their lives (see our letter to the students, page 4 above).

***Take the time to listen to the piece with the students, and ask them to listen specifically, with text in hand, for the G-sharp in the alto line, the note that Morten Lauridsen has identified in his essay as "the most important note in the piece."**

c. Use the text of the piece on the following page to assist with listening, and ask students to mark the word "Virgo," so that they can listen carefully for the G-sharp. As most motets do, O Magnum Mysterium employs considerable repetition of lines, as it draws from the use of chant, in which a single line of text serves as a centerpiece for meditation or reflection. The crucial G-sharp occurs approximately halfway through the piece, in measure 39, and again in repetition in measure 43 (two measures out of a total of 72 for the piece). It appears in the last portion of the sustained first syllable of "Vir-go"--usually rendered directly on the "r."

Musically, the G-sharp is the only note in the entire piece that is outside of the main key of D Major. The use of the G-sharp thus creates a startling dissonance (a clashing, non-harmonious sound), which emphasizes the mixture of sacrifice and sorrow ultimately experienced by the Virgin Mary. --That is, in the traditional Christmas story, Mary not only gives her son to humankind, but she also later experiences sorrow when her son is killed (Lauridsen Evoking Sound Dialogues). Students in your class who are Catholic or from a strong liturgical tradition, may be

able to enrich the discussion by relating their perspective on the Virgin Mary.

- d. The first line of text is of even greater importance than the second one, as it introduces the central paradox of the Christmas story. Both lines merit careful discussion.

O Magnum Mysterium

by Morten Lauridsen

Text from the
Christmas Matins

O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum
ut animalia viderent Dominum
natum, jacentum in praeseptio!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Christum. Alleluia!

O great mystery,
and wondrous sacrament,
that animals should see the newborn
Lord, Lying in their manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear the
Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

4. Background Material and Discussion Ideas for *Les Chansons des Roses*. If you attended our spring workshop, you are already well-acquainted with some of my ideas for engaging in a close listening and discussion of Les Chansons des Roses in general, and particularly of "Contre Qui, Rose," the enchantingly beautiful second movement. I'll repeat some of this information in these notes.

As Morten Lauridsen has compellingly explained in Evoking Sound Dialogues, Les Chansons des Roses was the result of a commission by a choral group called Choral Cross-Ties, which was based in Portland, Oregon, and directed by its founder, Bruce Browne. The group originally commissioned Lauridsen to compose a single piece for a concert. Lauridsen was surprised by the commission but delighted to do it, since he grew up in Portland. At about the same time he received this commission, he had stumbled across an elegant English translation of over four hundred French poems written by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, published by Graywolf Press. As he thumbed through this translation, he found twenty-four poems about roses, and, as he considered what to write for this choral group in Portland, setting one of Rilke's playful rose poems to music seemed especially important, because Portland is known as the "City of Roses," and is famous for its Rose festival in Washington Park each year. Choosing harmonic and melodic materials and techniques that were reminiscent of early twentieth-century French music (the time period and language in which Rilke composed the poems), Lauridsen composed first what ended up being the last piece in the song cycle, "Dirait-on" (Lauridsen Evoking Sound Dialogues).

In the letter to our students, we asked them to listen to Lauridsen's informative explanation of his composition process of "Dirait-on." **Prior to discussing the song cycle in class, please ask your students to view this interesting YouTube clip again:**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oT-Mh_a4H1c

As Lauridsen has remarked "Dirait-on" is in the style of a French folk song. It teases or even scolds a rose for being so self-absorbed, so narcissistic, and yet at the same time, the poem is also about "self worth," in its celebration of what a rose is--how it exists, its form, its distinctive way of being in the world (Evoking Sound Dialogues).

When Lauridsen had finished this first (but ultimately, last!) piece, he then stumbled across another rose poem, that he simply could not resist setting to music, "Contre Qui, Rose"--"Against Whom, Rose," which became the second piece in the cycle. This particular piece uses a number of half cadences, unresolved suspensions, and appoggiaturas--devices that keep things suspended in the air, without resolving things musically to completion. When I first listened to this movement, I found myself falsely completing these various suspensions in my mind, partly because this is what our ears are typically used to hearing--the resolution of chords to a kind of finality or completeness.

The genius of Lauridsen's composition of "Contre Qui, Rose" resides in the way he uses this lack of resolution to punctuate the various unanswerable questions posed to the fickle, noncommittal, self-absorbed rose. It is as if Rilke is asking--as is Lauridsen through his music--"Why, Rose,

why? "Why all of these thorns? Why this resistance? Why have you rejected the love that suitors have offered to you, and in turn pricked them with your thorns? What does this protect you from? Why such an extreme defense against those who might love you?" In the words of Rilke's poem, we see just these kinds of questions, put to the rose, one after the other, with no answers provided.

And indeed, in human friendships and love relationships, such questions are seldom successfully or fully answered, partly because as human beings, understanding and knowing our hearts is an ongoing, tricky project, one which takes a lifetime and more to complete. As Lauridsen has put it, we have all experienced occasions in which our love or offers of friendship have been rejected. A close reading of Rilke's text and careful listening to the music, should help students hear these unresolved questions--in both poetry and music. Practice yourself listening to the piece before class, so that you can point out those moments in which our ears want to resolve the suspensions--in which we expect a chord to go downward to resolve, but it is instead left up in the air. Ultimately, as Lauridsen has remarked, this piece of music is about "yearning" and "longing"--yearning and longing for that which can never be obtained (Evoking Sound Dialogues). Here are some useful clips for both you and your students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhUmzpNgv-8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rB5vwYCg04>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBZuGpagBpg>

Les Chansons des Roses

Song Cycle by Composer

Morten Lauridsen

Text from Les Roses, by Poet

Rainer Maria Rilke

I. En Une Seule Fleur

C'est pourtant nous qui t'avons proposé
de remplir ton calice
Enchantée de cet artifice,
ton abondance l'avait osé.

Tu étais assez riche, pour devenir cent
fois toi-même en une seule fleur;

c'est l'état de celui qui aime . . .
Mais tu n'as pas pensé ailleurs.

II. Contre Qui, Rose

Contre qui, rose
avez-vous adopté
ces épines?
Votre joie trop fine
vous a-t-elle forcée
de devenir cette chose
armée?

Mais de qui vous protège
cette arme exagérée?
Combien d'ennemis vous ai-je
enlevés
qui ne la craignaient point?
Au contraire, d'été en automne,

vous blessez les soins
qu'on vous donne.

I. In a Single Flower

It is we, perhaps, who proposed
that you replenish your bloom.
Enchanted by this charade,
your abundance dared.

You were rich enough to fulfill
yourself a hundred times over in a
single flower;
such is the state of one who loves . . .
But you never did think otherwise.

II. Against Whom, Rose

Against whom, rose,
have you assumed
these thorns?
Is it your too fragile joy
that forced you
to become this
armed thing?

But from whom does it protect you,
this exaggerated defense?
How many enemies have I
lifted from you
who did not fear it at all?
On the contrary, from summer to
autumn
you wound the affection
that is given you.

III. De Ton Rêve Trop Plein

De ton rêve trop plein,
fleur en dedans nombreuse,
mouillée comme une pleureuse,
tu te penches sur le matin.

Tes douces forces qui dorment,

dans un désir incertain,
développent ces tendres formes
entre joues et seins.

IV. La Rose Complète

J'ai une telle conscience de ton
être, rose complète,
que mon consentement te confond
avec mon coeur en fête.

Je te respire comme si tu étais,
rose, toute la vie,
et je me sens l'ami parfait
d'une telle amie.

V. Dirait-on

Abandon entouré d'abandon,
tendresse touchant aux tendresses . . .
C'est ton intérieur qui sans cesse
se caresse, dirait-on;

III. Overflowing with Your Dream

Overflowing with your dream,
flower filled with flowers,
wet as one who weeps,
you bow to the morning.

Your sweet powers which still are
sleeping
in misty desire,
unfold these tender forms
joining cheeks and breasts.

IV. The Perfect Rose

I have such awareness of your
being, perfect rose,
that my will unites you
with my heart in celebration.

I breathe you in, rose, as if you were
all of life,
and I feel the perfect friend
of a perfect friend.

So They Say

Abandon surrounding abandon,
tenderness touching tenderness . . .
Your oneness endlessly
caresses itself, so they say;

5. Background Material and Discussion Ideas for "Sure on this Shining Night". "Sure on this Shining Night," one of Morten Lauridsen's most accessible choral works, comes from his Nocturnes (2005, 2008), a group of short, quiet, wonderfully melodic pieces, each one of which is based on the text of a different poet. "Sure on this Shining Night" uses a middle section of a longer lyric from the work of American writer James Agee (1909-1955). The poetic text comes from Agee's only book of poetry published during his lifetime, Permit Me Voyage (1934). The lines that Lauridsen has set to music come from Agee's beautiful lyrical poem, in which the speaker's "rapturous" musings as he or she looks up at the night sky, lead to feelings of oneness with nature (Adams 5).

As Lauridsen has emphasized when he has spoken or written about it, the poem is unabashedly pantheistic. The careful listener and reader discerns pantheism in the speaker's identification of the "starmade shadows round," and in the apparent location of kindness within the embrace of nature, suggested by the lines, "Kindness must watch for me / This side the ground." Although the lyric is uplifting in its suggestion of healing, health, and wholeness (all alluded to in the second stanza), the poem ends with a kind of gentle wistfulness or hopeful yearning, as the speaker mentions that he or she "weep[s] for wonder" and engages in "Wandering far alone / Of shadows on the stars." It is a poem that is thus both rapturous and gently pensive, as the speaker perhaps ponders what the future holds, and, drawing upon his or her general feeling of health and wholeness contained in the earth, "weep[s] for wonder" while gazing at the night sky. It is a poignant lyric, that any human with even just a sliver of a romantic disposition has felt at one time or another on a summer evening. Overall, both the poem and the song, as Lauridsen has remarked, evoke a feeling of unity with nature, as well as the "wondrous awe one has being within nature" (Shining Night).

In setting Agee's beautiful lyric to music, Lauridsen chose to pay homage to the American musical theater, in part because of Agee's American roots, and perhaps also, I would add, because of Agee's eclectic identity as a writer--journalist, poet, novelist, film critic, and social activist and commentator. Lauridsen himself grew up singing in church choirs, and played piano, trumpet, and flügelhorn. He played not only classical music, but also jazz and popular tunes. Early on he thus developed an abiding fondness for the American musical theater, especially the composers of Broadway-- George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter ("Morten Lauridsen" 71). These composers were especially adept at writing a long melodic line, which Lauridsen employs with great appeal and skill in "Sure on this Shining Night."

The piece is so enchantingly beautiful, that I think it will tend to "teach itself," but as I've already discussed, it will aid your discussion if you intersperse listening to the song twice in class, with actual reading and discussion of Agee's text. Doing so will help you "tease out" with your students the feelings of rapture, awe, wonder, unity, and pantheistic joy that the words and music conjure up. There are many fine versions of this piece available online. I will recommend three so that you can assign your students the task of listening to it prior to a class discussion. The first one was included in the letter to our students; the second is a performance by our "sister" school,

Concordia College Choir, Moorhead, MN; and the third one comes from a Dallas-based professional choir called Vox Humana:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icp4bNb7TDI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mwy-EkkOKgI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wio1hcuAAAk>

"Sure on this Shining Night"

from Nocturnes

Song Cycle by Composer

Morten Lauridsen

Text from Permit Me Voyage by Poet

James Agee

Sure on this shining night
Of Starmade shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.

The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.

Sure on this shining night
I weep for wonder
Wandering far alone
Of shadows on the stars.

6. Visual Analysis and Life Writing Activity. In past years I have provided a writing assignment that engages students in analyzing images described in the common reading, alongside a meaningful photograph from their own lives. I am currently revising that assignment for this year, and I will share a draft in the near future.

7. Using the Documentary Film as Text for Classroom Discussion. The documentary film contains much useful information about Morten Lauridsen's music, his sense of calling or purpose as a composer, and his distinctive way of life on Waldron Island. It also details how his work has affected countless musicians and listeners around the world. I thus recommend that you devote at least one class period to discussing the film.

You will probably want your students to bring the booklet Waldron Island Reflections with them to class when you discuss the film, so that they can use it to help them remember some of the images from the film. I also recommend that you require students to come to their scheduled film screening with a small notebook and a pen, and that you also require them to take some notes during the screening, so that they will have something concrete to draw from in class discussion. Extensive notetaking would probably impede their enjoyment of the film, but selective notetaking of some of the most important ideas would be useful.

Prior to the film screening ask your students to keep an eye out for several things:

- *Lauridsen's discussion of how he discovered that music would be his life's work.
- *The composer's thoughts about the craft of music--that is, what it takes to create a piece of music that will move an audience.
- *Morten Lauridsen's understanding of how music can serve as a way to "find joy and meaning in life."
- *Lauridsen's reflections about the importance of Waldron Island.
- *Significant responses by musicians, fellow composers, and friends to his work--what it means to them, and specifically how Lauridsen's music has functioned in his life.

Although most of our students are quite visual, few have the training and experience to view carefully a documentary film, with its slower pace of presentation and non-entertainment focus. **Please prepare them for the film ahead of time, by making some kind of an assignment that requires them to pay attention.**

==> Note: Please do not run a private screening with your own class. We have developed a good working relationship with the director of the film, Michael Stillwater. Because Shining Night is an independent film and is not widely available, we do not have an automatic right to hold multiple classroom screenings of the film. The FYE program is paying a fee for each screening that we offer, and we are asking everyone to honor our agreement with the filmmaker. In addition to the three main screenings in the chapel on Monday evenings, we will offer at least one additional screening on a different evening. Students who can't make any of the screenings always have the

option to view the copy of the film on reserve in Pearson Library.

8. **Suggested Research Assignments.** In the near future, I will provide some additional materials for research assignments. I have two working ideas:
 - a. Revised versions of the fine assignments by Jodie Kocur and David Nelson on ethnic identity and/or family history.
 - b. A new film review and analysis assignment on classical music. (I will be providing a draft of an assignment).
 - ==> We are also open to other suggestions and possibilities: Please share your ideas on our new Blackboard community page.

9. **Resources Available at Pearson Library.** Henri Mondschien has assembled a webpage for the first-year seminar, which includes some useful resources for projects related to Morten Lauridsen's music:
<http://libguides.callutheran.edu/content.php?pid=596449&sid=4918113>

Works Consulted

Adams, Byron. Booklet notes. Morten Lauridsen: Nocturnes. Polyphony, directed by Stephen Layton. CD. Hyperion, 2007.

Agee, James. The Collected Poems of James Agee. Boston: Houghton, 1968.

Grimaud, H el ene, perf. Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037. Dir. Ben Niles

Lauridsen, Morten. "Morten Lauridsen." Composers on Composing for Choir. Ed. Tom Wine. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007.

Lauridsen, Morten, Paul Salamunovich, and James Jordan. Evoking Sound Dialogues: Musical Conversations between Composers and Conductors. Vol. 1. CD set.

Chicago: GIA Publications, 2008.

May, Thomas. Program notes. Tribute to Lauridsen. Concert performance directed by Grant Gershon. Los Angeles Master Chorale. Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, 16 March 2014.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. The Complete French Poems. Translated by A. Poulin, Jr. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1979. 2002.

A Robert Shaw Christmas: Angels on High. The Robert Shaw Chamber Singers, directed by Robert Shaw. CD. Telarc, 1997.

Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen. 2012.

Strimple, Nick. Choral Music in the Twentieth Century. Montclair, NJ: Amadeus, 2002.