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Inspired by Broadway: The American “Story Songs” of Composer Morten Lauridsen

In a recent interview, British choral conductor Suzi Digby credits composer Morten Lauridsen with initiating a “new Golden Age” of choral music. She believes his motet *O Magnum Mysterium* (1994) articulates an innovative “language of music” that is so “beautiful and original,” that audiences throughout the world have been captivated—including those who have experienced performances by Minneapolis-area choirs under conductors such as Dale Warland and Matthew Culloton.

Since the Los Angeles premiere, Lauridsen has continued to compose groundbreaking vocal and choral music, including pieces inspired by the composers and lyricists of the Broadway musical. This paper explores that vital influence on *Sure on this Shining Night* (2005) and *Prayer* (2011), which have brought the poetry of American writers James Agee and Dana Gioia before listeners who might not otherwise reflect upon poetic meaning. Drawing from interviews with the composer—along with scholarship on the musical by Geoffrey Block, Charlotte Greenspan, and Larry Starr—I argue that the poetic text is dynamically illuminated through the impact of the musical on the composer’s inventive use of line, rhythm, and contour. Both songs set lyric poems that convey powerful feelings. The composer enhanced this aesthetic effect by not only rendering the texts as “story songs” reminiscent of the stage, but also blending in jazz and classical motives. Above all, Morten Lauridsen’s quintessential American tunes touch both heart and mind through a fulfilling formal unity, which offers listeners sustenance for everyday life.