

Tuning up new work: Salt Lake Choral Artists presents world premiere of 'One Light'

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Brady Allred's undergraduate major was music theory and composition, yet he's much better known as a choral conductor -- of the University Singers and A Cappella at the University of Utah, and of Salt Lake Choral Artists, a community group.

Though Allred doesn't do much composing these days, he maintains a keen interest in the work of living composers and commissions new works for his groups whenever he can. This week, the Choral Artists will give the world premiere of Florida composer Ray Shattenkirk's "One Light," which Allred commissioned as a companion piece for the concert's other work, Morten Lauridsen's "Lux Aeterna" ("Eternal Light").

Allred's success in performing new works with his choirs is somewhat unusual. Nudging performers and audiences to embrace unfamiliar contemporary music can be a tough sell.

SLCA choir manager Jo Davies, who sings in the group, has performed several new works under Allred's baton. The early process of preparing new piece can be frustrating and discouraging, she said, but SLCA's singers have developed a catch-phrase that helps them persevere: "Trust Brady."

"He always knows what is wonderful," Davies said. "He knows we can do it, and he knows he can teach us and achieve it."

An example was the long process of learning Mark Grey's "Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio," which SLCA performed last spring. "It was not very melodic -- there was a lot of dissonance," Davies said. "He spent months educating the choir, and by the time we sang it, we didn't hear the dissonance. The ear was trained, and it was gorgeous. He is not afraid to do that."

The commission for "One Light" was an outgrowth of Allred's desire to perform "Lux Aeterna." The 1997 work by Californian Lauridsen is an example of a recent composition that has become a favorite with choirs and their audiences. It's notable for its inviting harmonic language, chantlike melodies and warm chamber orchestration.

Allred wanted to round out his program with a piece calling for performance forces similar to those needed for "Lux Aeterna," but didn't find anything suitable. Then he reconnected with Shattenkirk, from whom he had commissioned a piece for the Pittsburgh Bach Choir in the 1990s.

Shattenkirk is best known for pieces that celebrate the natural world and explore humankind's problematic place within it. Light, the subject of "Lux Aeterna," became the theme for a piece based on texts drawn from five world religions: Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

In his program notes for the concert, Shattenkirk writes: "There is a striking similarity in the common focus on the spiritual nature of light as a manifestation of God, of mankind's unity with his Creator and his prophets, and as the embodiment of eternal goodness and heavenly splendor."

Shattenkirk set to work, sending movements as he completed them. Here in Utah, Allred and his singers got to work, too.

"The choir has found that the harmonic language is really beautiful and lush," Allred said of "One Light." "It's nice writing for the voice, with some unique texture and harmony."

The creation of new music can be a shared process between and composer and conductor. In this case, that collaboration went smoothly, Allred said.

"I've had the experience of commissioning a 15-minute piece and getting a 45-minute piece that is impossible to perform," he said. "You have to be careful. I like to give composers their freedom, but I also want to give parameters."

Shattenkirk said he appreciated Allred's involvement. "The conductor helps ground the composer," he said. "What the composer wants is unlimited musical resources, time and money. The conductor deals in reality."

Allred asked for a 30-minute piece that was musically intriguing, but not overwhelmingly difficult -- and that's what he got. He offered minor suggestions along the way, which Shattenkirk accepted with appreciation.

Shattenkirk and Allred hope the result of their efforts will be a piece many choirs will want to sing in the future. Shattenkirk will arrive in Salt Lake City May 11, eager to hear his work for the first time and ready to make any final adjustments during rehearsals.

"It's something I've looked forward to for at least six months," he said. "You never know what to

expect, but with Brady at the helm, everything will turn out right."

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Hear the light

Brady Allred conducts the Salt Lake Choral Artists in Morten Lourdes's "Lux Aeterna" and the world premiere of "One Light," commissioned by the choir from Florida composer Ray Shattenkirk.

When » May 15 at 7:30 p.m.

Where » Libby Gardner Concert Hall, 1375 E. Presidents Circle, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City

Ticket » \$19.75 (\$16 students/seniors), at 801-587-9377 or www.saltlakechoralartists.org