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National Repertoire & Resources



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Musical Moments with Philip Brunelle

by Mary Kay Geston

Introduction by
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Philip Brunelle, along with his son, Tim, have created a video catalog of choral composers and their compositions that have been performed with Brunelle's choirs, VocalEssence and the Plymouth Congregational Church Choir, both located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The project grew out of the choral desert of the Covid-19 pandemic and currently encompasses 330 videos covering 361 composers. This exciting project parallels the mission

and vision of the Repertoire and Resources area of ACDA. I'm honored to introduce the project to you and hope it brings you joy.

One of the many challenges that leaders of community choruses faced when Covid-19 lockdowns began in March 2020 was figuring out how to sustain a connection with their audience members in the absence of live performances. The forced cancellation of concerts nationwide led Philip Brunelle, founder and artistic director of VocalEssence and organistchoirmaster at Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, to conclude that his imperative was "to give people a sense of joy when they were stuck at home."¹ Capturing the interest of viewers meant that the project needed to be musically stimulating and visually engaging; and to help with the latter, Brunelle enlisted his son Tim Brunelle, a marketing professional and videographer, to work with him on the project.

With father as creative director and presenter and son as videog-

rapher, the team set about creating a one-of-a-kind video catalogue of choral composers whose compositions have been performed by VocalEssence or the adult choir at Plymouth Congregational Church over the past fifty-three years. They titled the series *Musical Moments*, and the first video debuted on March 23, 2020, featuring Dominick Argento (1927-2019), an American composer who lived most of his life in Minnesota. To Brunelle, Argento "was just a natural...I had studied with him, I had performed a lot of his music and I commissioned him."² Each individual composer video is eight to ten minutes in length, but in the project's last week the daily videos were expanded to include eight brief composer "snapshots" rather than focusing on a single composer and were lengthened to twelve to fifteen minutes each.

Their initial plan was to make fifty videos, but as the pandemic continued, Brunelle and his son decided to keep going. The completed *Musical Moments* project encompasses a total of 330 videos, of which 320 feature one composer, five feature



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eight composers, four show Brunelle discussing general topics related to choirs, and one is a conversation between Philip and Tim Brunelle about the project. Altogether, the series examines a total of 361 composers. The final episode aired on July 2, 2021. See the table at the end of the article for a sample of composers and their repertoire.

Brunelle and VocalEssence

Brunelle was hired at Plymouth Congregational Church in 1969, the same year he founded VocalEssence. During his tenure, VocalEssence has

commissioned more than 300 choral pieces, and Plymouth Congregational Church has commissioned dozens of new choral anthems. It is no surprise that Brunelle's mission to promote "rarely heard works of the past and outstanding new music"³ parallels VocalEssence's commitment to "championing new music and unearthed forgotten [choral] gems."⁴ The conducting duties in VocalEssence are shared by Brunelle and Associate Artistic Director G. Phillip Shoultz, III. The organization's ensembles include VocalEssence Chorus, a 110-voice volunteer choir; Ensemble Sing-

ers, a thirty-two-voice professional choir; and Singers of This Age, a forty-voice choir comprising high school students from Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Among VocalEssence's learning and engagement programs, three are especially noteworthy: Vintage Voices creates choirs in assisted living and senior centers and is led by conductor Rob Graham, ¡Cantaré! brings Mexican composers into public schools as artists-in-residence, and WITNESS celebrates the "contributions of African Americans to our shared American heritage through concerts, recordings and comprehensive educational programs."⁵

The Videos

The goal of the *Musical Moments* project was to connect with the average listener rather than an academic audience; consequently, the videos are intentionally conversational in tone with Philip seated at a piano keyboard in the Great Hall of Plymouth Congregational Church. Pandemic-imposed restrictions meant keeping the number of people involved in the project to a minimum, so most of the videos feature only Brunelle, although he occasionally invites a professional vocalist to perform an aria or solo segment from a larger work by the featured composer. (See Table 1 for a selected list of composers and repertoire included in the Musical Moments Catalogue.)

Each video begins with Brunelle giving basic background information about a composer and brief commentary about the hallmarks of the composer's style and points of inter-

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Table 1. Selected List of Musical Moments Composers

Composer	Repertoire Selection
Boulanger, Lili (1893-1918, France)	<i>Psalm 24</i> <i>Vieille Prière Bouddhique</i> <i>Psalm 130</i>
Chavez, Carlos (1899-1978, Mexico)	<i>La Paloma Azul</i> (Boosey and Hawkes) <i>Tierra Mojada</i> <i>El Sol</i> (EMI Music Inc)
Daley, Eleanor (b. 1955, Canada)	<i>Love Never Ends</i> (Oxford University Press 9780193805071) <i>Child with the Starry Crayon</i> (Alliance Music Publications AMP 0563) <i>Requiem</i> (Jubilate Music 00-VEI1146)
Dunphy, Melissa (b. 1980, Australia)	<i>What do you think I fought for at Omaha Beach?</i> (Mormolyke Publishing) <i>Halcyon Days</i> (Edition Peters EP68722) <i>Waves of Gallipoli</i> (E.C. Schirmer 8827)
Ginastera, Alberto (1916-1983, Argentina)	<i>Psalm 150</i> (Boosey & Hawkes 9790051307302) <i>Lamentaciones de Jeremias Propheta</i> (Theodore Presser Company PR.352001030) <i>Turbae ad Passionem Gregorianam</i> (Boosey & Hawkes 9790051965809)
Gretchaninov, Alexandre (1864-1956, Russia)	<i>Joyful Light</i> (Orthodox Music Press, Musica Russica Gr021) <i>Our Father</i> (Orthodox Music Press, Musica Russica GR011) <i>Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent</i> (Orthodox Music Press, Musica Russica GR056)
Hairston, Jester (1901-2000, United States)	<i>Amen</i> (Bourne 103496) <i>In Dat Great Fittin' Up Mornin'</i> (Bourne 065166) <i>Crucifixion</i> (Bourne 28616)
Holst, Imogen (1907-1984, England)	<i>A Hymne to Christ</i> (Boosey & Hawkes 6825) <i>Mass in A Minor</i> (Faber d37708) <i>Welcome Joy and Welcome Sorrow</i> (Faber d37716)
Kodaly, Zoltan (1882-1962, Hungary)	<i>Missa Brevis</i> (Boosey & Hawkes M060035432) <i>Pange Lingua</i> (Universal UE7941) <i>Te Deum</i> (Universal UE10849A)

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est in the music to be presented. He then plays some or all of a musical piece to give the listener “a feel for the composer.”⁶ Because Brunelle is a consummate storyteller and is or was acquainted with the project’s many living composers and those of the latter twentieth century who have since died, the videos are often enlivened with personal anecdotes from his experiences with them.

Organization

Brunelle initially thought the project would focus solely on living or mid-to-late-twentieth-century composers of choral music, but

as it grew along with the pandemic timeline, he expanded the time parameter in order to avoid neglecting important or lesser-known composers of the past. The composers in the project represent seven geographic regions that include North America, Europe, Great Britain, Eastern Europe and Baltic, Scandinavia, Central and South America, and Australia. The VocalEssence website groups composers into general categories based on country of origin, time period, gender, and race. If applicable, a composer is cross-referenced in categories titled “Female” and “Black” or in a second or third country if they lived and worked

outside their country of origin. The largest category with 118 names is that of composers from the United States, followed by British and European composers. Of special interest is the “Minnesota” category with twenty-eight composers that Brunelle included in recognition of the flourishing culture of choral composition in his home state.

Once the filming was completed, the effort turned to organizing the material. With assistance from student interns at Saint Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, each video entry was enhanced with a brief biography and photo of the composer, and a list of three of the composer’s

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McLin, Lena (b. 1928, United States)	<i>Can't You Hear Those Freedom Bells Ringing?</i> (Kjos 8763) <i>Glory, Glory Hallelujah</i> (Kjos 5430) <i>Down by the River</i> (Kjos 5913)
Mompou, Federico (1893-1987, Spain)	<i>Song of the Soul</i> [Cantar del alma] (Salabert MC 138A) <i>Ave Maria</i> (Salabert MC 236) <i>Los Improperios</i> (Salabert MC 344)
Respighi, Ottorino (1879-1936, Italy)	<i>Opening Chorus from Lauda per la Natività del Signore</i> (Carus Verlag 10.084) <i>La Primavera</i> (from Trittico Botticelliano) <i>Gloria</i> from Lauda per la Natività del Signore (Carus Verlag 10.084)

choral compositions suggested by Brunelle for further exploration. Electronic links to publishers, composer websites, and other online sources of information were added, as well. To ensure accuracy, Brunelle contacted all of the project's living composers to explain what he was doing, to request a photo, and get approval for their biography. He got responses from all but a few and incorporated changes, if requested. In cases where there is no link to a publisher and a search of Internet resources has been exhausted, Brunelle is willing to help and invites interested persons to contact him.

A Valuable Resource

Though originally intended for a lay audience, the *Musical Moments* videos are a valuable resource for choral professionals, especially those interested in living composers or composers active in the latter half of the twentieth century. Brunelle readily admits that the *Musical Moments* video project would never

have happened if there hadn't been a pandemic. Motivated by a desire to create a temporary source of joy for audiences during a difficult time, this project has become a one-of-a-kind treasure trove of informative and engaging videos about composers and choral repertoire that will serve the choral community for years to come. The videos are available for viewing on the Vocal-Essence website at <https://www.vocalessence.org/category/musical-moments/>. 

Mary Kay Geston is the artistic managing director of the Great River Chorale in Saint Cloud, MN. director@greatriverchorale.org

NOTES

¹ Philip Brunelle, interview by Mary K. Geston, November 20, 2021.

² Ibid.

³ <https://philipbrunelle.org/Bio>

⁴ <https://www.vocalessence.org/what-we-do/our-music/>.

⁵ <https://www.vocalessence.org/what-we-do/learning-and-engagement-programs/witness/>.

⁶ Philip Brunelle, interview by Mary K. Geston, November 20, 2021.

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