Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
Alan Harler, Artistic Director
John French, Associate Conductor

A Feast of Carols

honoring Composer-in-Residence Donald St. Pierre
and featuring guest artist Karen Slack

PROGRAM

★ Watchman, Tell Us of the Night ................... Donald St. Pierre

Mendelssohn Club commission and premiere
Karen Slack, soprano

★ Personent hodie ........................................ Gustav Holst

Shepherd ........................................ Donald St. Pierre

★ While Shepherds Watched ......................... Este’s Psalter, 1592

Billings With Brass .................................. Donald St. Pierre

1. Judea
2. Bethlehem
3. Boston
4. Consolation
5. Jamaica

★ Joy to the World ..................................... arr. Lowell Mason

In the Company of Angels ............................ Donald St. Pierre

Erin Swanson, soprano
Cory O’Niell Walker, tenor

★ Angels We Have Heard on High ................. traditional French

O Holy Night .......................................... Adolphe Adam

Karen Slack, soprano
Vesperæ Solennes de Confessore (selections) ............... W. A. Mozart

1. Dixit Dominus
2. Laudate Dominum
   Karen Slack, soprano
3. Magnificat
   Ashley Elisabeth Alden, soprano
   John Leonard, tenor
   Amber Johnson, alto
   Tim Stopper, bass

Gesù Bambino…………………………………………… Pietro Yon
   Karen Slack, soprano

※ O Come, All Ye Faithful ......................... John Francis Wade

Laudate Dominum

※ The First Nowell .............................. arr. David Willcocks
Mary Had a Baby .............................. arr. William Dawson
   Karen Slack, soprano

A Visit from St. Nicholas .............................. Donald St. Pierre

※ Silent Night ................................. Franz Xaver Gruber

   Alan Harler, conductor
   Mendelssohn Club Chorus
   Michael Stairs, organ
   The Mendelssohn Brass

※ The audience is invited to join in the singing of these carols.

Saturday, December 14, 2013
   5:00 pm
   St. Paul’s Episcopal Church
   Chestnut Hill

The use of recording or photographic equipment during this concert is strictly prohibited. Please turn off audible cell phones and alarms.
Some of the most popular and enduring works written by Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre have been premiered at these holiday concerts in Chestnut Hill. This evening’s concert features a selection of his pieces ranging from the 1996 *Shepherd*, his first composition for Mendelssohn Club, to the premiere of his latest composition, *Watchman, Tell Us of the Night*. And we are delighted to welcome acclaimed soprano and Philadelphia native Karen Slack, who joins longtime favorites Michael Stairs, organ, and the Mendelssohn Brass.

*Watchman, Tell Us of the Night* is an unusual carol in the form of a dialog between the watchman and the traveler. The text was written by the remarkable John Bowring (1792-1872), a self-educated linguist, translator, hymnist, editor, political reformer, diplomat and a disciple of Jeremy Bentham. He claimed to speak over 100 languages and published translations of Russian, medieval Spanish, Hungarian and Czech poetry. *Watchman, Tell Us of the Night* was taken from an 1825 collection of hymns, and the unusual text, with its rather oblique references to the Christmas story, probably reflects Bowring’s Unitarian background. St. Pierre has adapted the familiar melody, George Elvey’s *St. George’s Windsor*, named in honor of the church where he served as organist and choir master for more than 50 years. It opens with a soprano solo singing a rhythmically free version of the hymn tune, which gradually morphs into a soaring descant. The chorus provides a rich, but decidedly non-traditional, harmonization. In keeping with Mendelssohn Club’s tradition of audience engagement, the audience is invited to join in the singing of the third verse.

Often used as a processional, *Personent hodie* is a medieval Latin hymn. It was first published in English in 1853 as an Easter carol, but it has been traditionally sung on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), commemorating the infants killed at Herod’s behest. The service is presided over by a boy “bishop,” with the choir boys displacing the senior clergy from their choir stalls.

There is a simplicity and directness in folk hymns which is both engaging and moving, and St. Pierre has repeatedly turned to this genre as source material. The text for *Shepherd* is a paraphrase of Psalm 23 written by the extraordinarily prolific hymnist Isaac Watts (1674-1748). In the English-speaking world of the 18th century, the only texts deemed suitable for liturgical music were the Psalms and other scriptural passages. These often were poorly suited to singing and sometimes were rather obscure in meaning. Watts’ beautifully poetic and lyrical paraphrases revolutionized the art of hymn writing and quickly achieved a lasting popularity. St. Pierre has taken the melody, based on an American folk hymn, and created long, sinuous vocal lines which interweave with one another in ever-increasing complexity until a unison verse concludes the piece.
Billings with Brass was commissioned and premiered in 2003. William Billings (1746-1800) was one of the most influential composers of his day, widely respected by contemporary musicians and known even in England. His 1770 *New England Psalm Singer* (which was engraved by Paul Revere) was the first collection of original music written by an American. Largely self-taught as a musician (he was a tanner by profession), Billings’ collections of hymns and psalm tunes contained extensive instruction on the theory and practice of church music. He developed a unique musical form called a fuging tune, in which voices enter sequentially in an imitative fashion, somewhat like a fugue. He had a wonderful gift for melody, and his hymns have a straightforward and unaffected style that is quite engaging. St. Pierre has selected five Billings hymns which he has linked together by variations on a common introductory theme. His sensitive and elegant settings match Billings’ music perfectly, underscoring the beautiful melodic lines. The second hymn, *Bethlehem*, is set as a fuging tune. The final hymn, *Judea*, is a setting of *Joy to the World*, Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 98. St. Pierre slyly provides a counter-melody based on American hymnist Lowell Mason’s more familiar hymn tune. Mason held Billings’ music in low regard, but here it forms the principal melody while Mason’s occupies a subservient position.

*In the Company of Angels* was premiered at last year’s holiday concerts. St. Pierre weaves together texts taken from the Gospel of Luke, the familiar carol *Angels We Have Heard on High*, and passages from the great Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell*. Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a distinguished scientist, an internationally renowned authority on geology and metallurgy, and developed a surprisingly accurate view of neuronal structure and function. His life took a surprising turn in his mid-50’s, when he began having dreams and visions that convinced him that he could travel to the spiritual world, visit heaven and hell, and converse with angels and spirits. For Swedenborg, the spiritual world was a physical place, and his angels were not ephemeral beings but had physical bodies, and ate, drank, slept, woke and worked, their main task being protecting men from evil. He wrote voluminously about his spiritual experiences and theology and gained a wide following. While he had no interest in establishing an organized church, after his death a church based on his teachings was founded in England in 1787, and though relatively small, has spread around the world.

St. Pierre uses distinctive settings for the narrative from Luke, the quotations from Swedenborg, and the paraphrases from *Angels We Have Heard on High*. He uses a short fragment of the paraphrase, “angels, we have heard angels” to separate each of the texts, its melody suggesting the contours of the carol tune. The setting of the Swedenborg text is very angular, with wide intervals. The words pour out somewhat breathlessly, as if Swedenborg cannot contain his excitement to describe angels. The carol paraphrases become progressively longer until the music finally segues into the carol itself, and the audi-
ence gets to participate in the performance as they are invited to join in the singing of *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

*O Holy Night* is one of the most beautiful of all Christmas songs. It was written in 1847 by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856) to a text provided by his friend, the poet Placide Cappeau. Adam was the son of a composer and professor at the Paris Conservatoire who tried to discourage his son’s interest in music. Adam studied in secret until his father finally relented and allowed him to enter the Conservatoire. Adam père still set a rather high bar. When Adolphe failed to win the Prix de Rome, taking second place in the competition, his father again tried to dissuade him from a musical career. But Adam’s persistence paid off, and he became a successful composer for the stage, producing 36 operas, operettas and one-act musicals and twelve ballets, opening his own opera house, and eventually becoming a professor of composition at the Conservatoire. The English text for *O Holy Night* is a paraphrase of the original poem by the American writer and influential music critic John Sullivan Dwight.

Mozart composed the *Vesperæ Solennes de Confessore*, K. 339 in 1780 while he was still in the employ of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg. Vespers is the traditional evening service, solemn means that the service would have been sung rather than recited, and confessor is the generic term for a saint in the liturgical calendar. The particular saint is not known, but speculation has fallen on St. Rupert, the patron saint of the Salzburg Cathedral and whose feast day was a public holiday. Mozart’s *Vesperæ* consists of five Psalm settings plus a concluding Magnificat, a canticle of Mary taken from the Gospel of Luke. Each section ends with a doxology. Archbishop Colloredo had imposed strict limits on the scale and duration of service music in an effort to make the music serve the liturgy. While Mozart chafed under the Archbishop’s restrictions, he used the focus and brevity required to produce these wonderfully inventive, jewel-like miniatures. Each setting has its own distinctive flavor. There is a dramatic quality to the music and a close attention to text, and Mozart makes extensive use of a solo soprano and a vocal quartet. There is an operatic feel to the music, probably not surprising since Mozart was concurrently at work on his opera *Idomeneo*, which was premiered with great success only a few months later. Mozart decided that opera was his true calling and finally left the service of the Archbishop for good. The *Vesperæ* was the last work he composed in Salzburg.

The Italian-American Pietro Yon (1886-1943) was known primarily as a virtuoso organist. He held positions at the Vatican and later served as organist and choir director at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York for nearly twenty years. He was familiar to Philadelphia audiences from the premiere of *Concerto Gregoriano* in 1920 on the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ with Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra, a concert which drew an audience of thousands and was covered by *Time* magazine. His most famous
work, the lovely carol Gesù Bambino (1917), resembles an old Italian pastoral carol, with its long melodic line, dotted rhythms and triple meter. It borrows the refrain from O Come, All Ye Faithful, now also transformed into triple meter.

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) was drawn to a career in music through his experiences singing in chorus as an undergraduate at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. He went on to receive his M. M. in composition from Juilliard, were he studied with John Corigliano and David Diamond. Cloudburst, written in 1992 while he was still an undergraduate, received first prize in the 1993 American Choral Directors’ Association Composers of the Future competition and a 2007 Grammy nomination for best choral recording. Lux Aurumque, one of his most frequently performed works, was written in 2001. Whitacre was attracted to what he calls “the genuine, elegant simplicity” of the short poem by Edward Esch. Interestingly, he had it translated from English into Latin, and set the Latin text. It is a soft lullaby, with phrases that repeatedly move from consonance to gentle dissonance, like the rocking of a cradle.

William Dawson (1899-1990) was a distinguished composer whose 1934 Negro Folk Symphony was premiered by Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. But he is best known for his many arrangements of traditional Black spirituals. Mary Had a Baby is a call-and-response spiritual. The text beautifully contrasts the very human element of a woman having a baby with the awesome majesty of the child called “King Jesus” and “Mighty God.”

A Visit from St. Nicholas, better known by its first line ‘Twas the Night Before Christmas, was first published anonymously in a Troy, New York newspaper in 1823. It was instantly popular and was disseminated widely, forming the basis of what has now become our traditional image of Santa Claus, with a sleigh full of toys drawn by reindeer, flying through the sky on Christmas Eve to fill children’s stockings with presents. In 1837 the poem was finally attributed to Clement Moore, a distinguished professor of Hebrew and Greek at Columbia College and New York’s General Theological Seminary, and Moore himself included it in an 1844 anthology of his poetry. There is some scholarly controversy over the authorship; certainly Moore’s other children’s poetry is of a distinctly stern and edifying nature. Regardless of authorship, this wonderfully whimsical poem has enthralled children and adults alike for generations. Composer Donald St. Pierre relates that “the music for A Visit from St. Nicholas was inspired in part by Jolly Old St. Nicholas, the Pachelbel canon of carols.” The two pieces share the same harmonic structure, which St. Pierre weaves into his delightful setting, which captures both the beautiful descriptive elements, the drama, and most of all, the whimsy of the original poem.

– Michael Moore