Andrew Litton and the Minnesota Chorale: Bernstein and Walton

Minnesota Orchestra
Andrew Litton, conductor
Christopher Maltman, baritone | Nick Cecchi, boy soprano
Minnesota Chorale, Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director

Friday, June 1, 2018, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, June 2, 2018, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall

With these concerts we gratefully recognize the Rodney and Barbara Burwell Foundation for a generous contribution to the Minnesota Orchestra’s Investing in Inspiration campaign.

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INTERMISSION

ca. 20'

William Walton  Belshazzar’s Feast

Thus Spake Isaiah
If I Forget Thee
Babylon Was a Great City
In Babylon Belshazzar the King
Praise Ye the God of Gold
Thus in Babylon, the Mighty City
And in That Same Hour
Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength
The Trumpeters and Pipers
Then Sing Aloud to God Our Strength

Christopher Maltman, baritone | Minnesota Chorale

An English translation of the text for Chichester Psalms, as well as the English text for Belshazzar’s Feast, will be projected as surtitles.

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of Classical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Andrew Litton, conductor

Andrew Litton, music director of the New York City Ballet, was the Minnesota Orchestra’s Sommerfest artistic director from 2003 to 2017. He is currently principal guest conductor of the Colorado Symphony, conductor laureate of Britain’s Bournemouth Symphony, music director laureate of Norway’s Bergen Philharmonic and principal guest conductor of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. He was the Dallas Symphony’s music director from 1994 to 2006, leading the ensemble on tours to the BBC Proms and to prestigious venues such as Carnegie Hall, the Berlin Philharmonic and Vienna’s Musikverein. He regularly guest conducts leading orchestras and opera companies around the globe and adds to his discography of more than 130 recordings, which have garnered America’s Grammy Award, France’s Diapason d’Or and other honors. More: musicvinearts.com, andrewlitton.com.

Nick Cecchi, boy soprano

Nick Cecchi, now welcomed for his solo debut with the Minnesota Orchestra, is a 14-year-old from Minneapolis who performs regularly with the Minnesota Boychoir, Greater Twin Cities Youth Symphonies and CAMPO theater. In addition to singing, he enjoys playing piano and acting. His teachers include Dawn Baker and Evelyn Emerson, and he expresses his gratitude to them and to his family, Mark Johnson, Dan Mollick and the singers of the Minnesota Boychoir.

Minnesota Chorale
Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director
Barbara Brooks, accompanist and artistic advisor

The Minnesota Chorale, the Minnesota Orchestra’s principal chorus since 2004, is now in its 23rd season under the leadership of Kathy Saltzman Romey. Founded in 1972, the Chorale is the state’s preeminent symphonic chorus, performing regularly with both this Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Among the Chorale’s initiatives are the acclaimed Bridges program, the Minneapolis Youth Chorus, Men in Music for high-school boys and InChoir for adults. More: mncchorale.org.

Andrew Litton, conductor

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Christopher Maltman, baritone

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Globally renowned for his portrayal of Don Giovanni, he has sung the role in London, Berlin, Munich, Cologne, Salzburg, Amsterdam, Toulouse, San Sebastian, Beijing and Chicago, and this year adds New York and Edinburgh. Increasingly in demand for Verdi roles, he has sung Posa, Simon Boccanegra and Conte di Luna, and will soon add Guy de Montfort, Don Carlo di Vargas, Rigoletto and Germont. He won the Lieder prize at the Cardiff Singer of the World early in his career and has continued to delight audiences with his sensitive and engaging song performances. His vast and varied discography ranging from Purcell to Adès includes John Corigliano’s Grammy award-winning The Ghosts of Versailles with Los Angeles Opera. More: askonasbost.co.uk.

soprano
Jill H. Apple
Kristi Bergland
Ivy S. Bernhardson
Penny Bonsell
Alyssa K. Breeze
Deborah Carbaugh
Katherine Chan
Deborah Croker Treece
Charlotte Currier
Monica deCausmeaker
Deyhra Dennis-Weiss
Janelle Drisdul
Laurel E. Drevlow
Kristin Elliott
Alyssa Ellison
Anika Kilgegaard
Vienna Lewin
Rachel Lonetti
Wendy Lukaszewski
Barbara Temme
Lundervold
Joy MacArthur
Amy Madison
Mary Mann
Shana Marchand
Pamela Marentette
Sommer McInerney
Jessica Melihoff
Merila Narum
Linda Neuman
Kristine Erickson Parker
Elizabeth Pauly
Lynn Pauly
Sara Payne
Elizabeth Pemberton
Shari M. Speer
Polly Strege
Deaven Swainey
Maya Tester
Eryn Tveite
Karen Wasiluk
Heather Worthington

alto
Judy Arnstein
Erin Berg
Kate Biederwolf
Sara Boss
Abby Burdick
Kristi Bergland
Anika Kilgegaard
Vienna Lewin
Rachel Lonetti
Wendy Lukaszewski
Barbara Temme
Lundervold
Joy MacArthur
Amy Madison
Mary Mann
Shana Marchand
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Sara Payne
Elizabeth Pemberton
Shari M. Speer
Polly Strege
Deaven Swainey
Maya Tester
Eryn Tveite
Karen Wasiluk
Heather Worthington

bass
David Adfahl
John Bassett
Peder Bolstad
Jim Bowen
Scott Chamberlain
Steve Cramer
James J. D’Aurora
David Goudwaard-Vaught
Douglas Peter Hanson
John R. Henrik
James Hild
Harrison Hintzschke
Thomas Hollenhorst
Stephen Hughes
Adam Irving
Joe Kastner
Yangming Kou
Jon C. Lahann
Steven W. Landby
Robert J. Magil
Robert Organovic
Nathan Oppedahl
Paul Paddock
Nathan Petersen-Kindem
Anthony Rohr
Seth Russell
Robert Rynkiewicz
Peter Scholtz
Eric Seifert
Chad Shultz
Bob Simon
William B. Smale
Reilly Tillman
Rick Treece
Rick Wagner
Stefan WeiJola

Christopher Maltman, baritone

Christopher Maltman first performed with the Minnesota Orchestra in 2003, singing John Adams’ The Wound-Dresser.
Listeners trying to place Fancy Free in their mind’s ear will break into a big smile as soon as they hear the opening riff, for this is the predecessor music to the better-known On the Town. Fancy Free was Bernstein’s first complete stage work, a collaboration with dancer and choreographer Jerome Robbins. Bernstein was in only his mid-20s, but his career had begun to skyrocket. The ballet, about three sailors on shore leave, was a conscious attempt to perk up morale during the war. Robbins wanted something specifically American and contemporary that would address the reality of wartime, and incorporate popular music and dance. Bernstein obliged, and conducted the ballet’s premiere at the old Metropolitan Opera House on April 18, 1944. Robbins danced one of the three sailors’ roles. The ballet was a smash hit, receiving 163 performances its first year. The scenario, attributed to both Robbins and Bernstein, follows: “With the sound of a juke box, the curtain rises on a street corner with a lamp post, a side street bar, and New York skyscrapers pricked out with a crazy pattern of lights, making a dizzying background. Three sailors explode onto the stage; they are on shore leave in the city and on the prowl for girls. The tale of how they meet first one, then a second girl, and how they fight over them, lose them and in the end take off after still a third, is the story of the ballet.”

Bernstein: Fancy Free
In Bernstein’s best-known ballet, three sailors compete for female attention during a 24-hour shore leave in New York. Tension builds between the characters until the three dance variations—Galop, Waltz and Danzon—when, in the waning hours of their leave, the sailors all vie for the same woman.

Bernstein: Chichester Psalms
This choral masterpiece sets Hebrew text from three Biblical Psalms to chorus, orchestra (sans woodwinds) and a large percussion section that contributes compelling colors. Bernstein himself described the Psalms as “simple and modest” and “tonal and tuneful” in a poem he wrote about the work.

Walton: Belshazzar’s Feast
Walton’s rich and evocative oratorio combines two brass choirs with an oversized orchestra and double chorus, as well as a baritone soloist who takes on the voice of major characters at critical moments in a story that is at moments mysterious and chilling, exultant and brilliant.

“In theatre music at its best”
Fancy Free’s seven movements address the traditional tension in the battle of the sexes. Bernstein’s score successfully blends elements of jazz, folk music, blues and romance—even a fleeting 12-tone passage in the drunken fight scene. The ballet resonated because it dealt with a plausible contemporary situation, without romanticizing it. Bernstein biographer Joan Peyser has written: “His music is theatre music at its best. Never strained, sentimental, or phony, it is hard-edged in its urban sexuality...Aggression is at least one of the ingredients.”

The jazzy syncopations of the sailors’ entrance establish the live-for-the-moment atmosphere, where the pursuit of a good time is the prime objective. Bernstein’s brilliant use of jazz piano, trap-set percussion effects, and muted trumpets combine to evoke the bar. He portraits each of the three sailors in, respectively, the Galop, Waltz and Danzon Variations.

Recognizing Fancy Free’s theatrical potential, Bernstein and Robbins enlisted the assistance of Betty Comden and Adolph Green as librettists, to develop the ballet into a full-length Broadway musical. On the Town opened in December 1944, and was later made into a successful film starring Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Vera Ellen and Ann Miller. Although Bernstein insisted that On the Town was not merely an expansion of Fancy Free, and that the two scores were entirely different, they are clearly related in spirit and style. In fact, anyone who knows and loves West Side Story may even hear the seeds of that brilliant score in this early ballet. The Cuban-inspired Danzon segment of the Three Dance Variations is almost a pre-echo of the Puerto Rican music in the later musical.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo (1 flute also doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbal, cowbell, triangle, woodblocks, piano and strings
Leonard Bernstein

Chichester Psalms

Premiered: July 15, 1965

The Chichester of Leonard Bernstein’s choral masterpiece Chichester Psalms is in west Sussex, near the southeast coast of England. A town of about 25,000, it has a beautiful cathedral with the only separate bell tower of any medieval church in the British Isles. Since the 1960s, the cathedral choirs of Chichester, Winchester and Salisbury have combined forces in a summer music festival.

For the inaugural Southern Cathedrals Festival in 1965, Walter Hussey, the Dean of Chichester Cathedral, contacted the American composer Leonard Bernstein to inquire whether he would accept a commission. Dean Hussey explained that space constraints and a modest budget would not permit a full symphony orchestra. In addition to the combined cathedral choirs, Bernstein would be limited to instrumental resources comprising strings, a brass consort, and possibly piano, organ and percussion. Hussey had written, “I think many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of West Side Story about the music.” Bernstein accommodated with a score that is melodious, jazzy, and—in the spirit of its sacred text—profoundly human.

A Biblical choral masterpiece

A setting of three Biblical Psalms in Hebrew, Chichester Psalms is Bernstein’s most frequently-performed choral composition and is a beloved work in the Bernstein canon. Its exhilarating, mostly tonal themes beckon the listener into the musical web, persuading us that the comparatively unfamiliar sound of Hebrew tongue and the occasionally clangorous passages are absolutely right.

Always sensitive to language, Bernstein colors the Psalm texts with the instincts of a born musician who believes in the meaning of the texts. The first movement draws on Psalms 108 and 100, capitalizing on the fanfare implications of “Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.” The second movement shares the pastoral Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd”) with the bellicose opening of Psalm 2 (“Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?”), while the finale brings resolution (Psalm 131, “I have calmed and quieted my soul”) and Psalm 133’s message of faith, hope and brotherly love.

The results are spectacular, in part because of the unusual scoring. Bernstein preferred an all-male chorus with boys’ voices for the soprano and alto parts; however, he condensed performance by a mixed chorus like the one spotlighted in today’s performance, the Minnesota Chorale. He would not budge, however, on the boy soprano for the second movement solo. The Adonai introducing the 23rd Psalm is a pinnacle of the 20th-century vocal/choral literature. Its strains will resonate in your mind’s ear long after this evening’s performance is over.

Listeners who know and love Bernstein’s stage works—from West Side Story to the quasi-operatic Candide—will recognize his style. There are good reasons for the similarity. In part, it resulted from a suggestion that came with the commission—the aforementioned desire for “a hint of West Side Story.” Vibrant rhythms and a splendid sense of the right sound attend this music. The orchestration is arresting. Foregoing woodwinds altogether, Bernstein relied on brass, strings, voices and especially percussion for his sonic colors. Balancing jaunty spirits with spirituality, he produced a masterpiece in Chichester Psalms.

a bright spot in a difficult year

The first performance of Chichester Psalms took place in New York on July 15, 1965, with the composer conducting the New York Philharmonic in an all-Bernstein concert. Immediately afterward, Bernstein and his family traveled to England, where he oversaw rehearsals for the second performance in Chichester at the Southern Cathedrals Festival on July 31. In a letter to his friend Helen Coates after the English premiere, Bernstein wrote:

“The Psalms went off well, in spite of a shockingly small amount of rehearsal. The choirs [Winchester, Salisbury and Chichester] were a delight! They had everything down pat, but the orchestra was swimming in the open sea. They simply didn’t know it. But somehow the glorious acoustics of Chichester Cathedral cushion everything so that even mistakes sound pretty.”

Bernstein remained fond of this work. It was a bright spot in a year that had otherwise proved frustrating. After six seasons as the New York Philharmonic’s music director, he had taken a sabbatical during the 1964-65 season in order to compose. He intended to complete a musical based on Thornton Wilder’s The Skin of Our Teeth. Plagued by a number of problems, that project foundered and was canceled, causing disappointment and angst to Bernstein and his collaborators. Ever the pragmatist, however, Bernstein recycled much of the music from the discarded musical into the Chichester Psalms.

Instrumentation: four-part mixed chorus and solo boy soprano with orchestra comprising 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, suspended cymbal, bongo drums, rasp, slapstick, tambourine, temple blocks, triangle, wood block, chimes, glockenspiel, xylophone, 2 harps and strings.
Walton initially undertook the project in 1929 at the behest of conductor Edward Clark, director of music at the BBC and husband of the composer Elizabeth Lutyens. Under the BBC’s auspices, Clark commissioned three composers—Walton, Constant Lambert and Victor Hely-Hutchinson—to write a work suitable for radio broadcast. The commission stipulated that the performing forces be limited to small orchestra (no more than 15 players), small chorus and one soloist, so as to fit into a broadcast studio.

Then in his late 20s, Walton was not yet financially self-sufficient. For some years he had resided with the wealthy and cultured Sitwell siblings, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell, in London and Italy. With manuscript paper packed, Walton took off in December 1929 for Venice, where he and Osbert Sitwell talked through possible topics for the commission. Sitwell suggested the Bible’s Writing on the Wall, and persuaded Walton of the inherent drama in the fall of Babylon and its suitability for the project.

Adapting text from the Book of Daniel, Revelations, and Psalms, Osbert Sitwell devised a narrative in three principal parts: the prophecy of Isaiah and the lament of the Jews in captivity; the actual feast with its climactic moment of the handwriting on the wall; and the hymn praising the God of Jacob upon the Jews’ deliverance from their oppressors.

From Venice, Walton and Osbert Sitwell traveled to Amalfi, where the Sitwells customarily spent their winters. There Walton began composing. By the time he returned to England in May 1930, his score, tentatively entitled Nebuchadnezzar, or the Writing on the Wall, had expanded to two soloists with small orchestra and small chorus. By September, it had grown further, now requiring a large orchestra and double chorus. The work, renamed Belshazzar’s Feast, had reached the point where it was impractical for radio broadcast performance, and Walton opted to submit another piece in fulfillment of the BBC commission. The coup de grâce to the giant score purportedly came as a result of an off-the-cuff remark from the conductor Thomas Beecham when Walton first showed him the score. Walton related the story to Peter Lewis of the London Daily Mail in a 1972 interview.

“This is a work,” roared Beecham in his best seigneurial manner, “which shall never be heard. Since it shall never be performed, I advise you to throw in all that you can. Throw in, let’s say, a couple of brass bands for good and useless measure!”

Walton did. He added two brass choirs, each comprising three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba, and placed them on either side of the conductor. Combined with an oversized orchestra and double chorus, the brass choirs brought the performing forces to a head count and stage arrangement nearly identical to that of the Berlioz Requiem. Pagan, outspoken and flamboyant, Walton did. He added two brass choirs, each comprising three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba, and placed them on either side of the conductor. Combined with an oversized orchestra and double chorus, the brass choirs brought the performing forces to a head count and stage arrangement nearly identical to that of the Berlioz Requiem. Pagan, outspoken and flamboyant, Walton related the story to Peter Lewis of the London Daily Mail in a 1972 interview.

Walton’s dissolve dinner party, and its context of Israelite captivity and eventual freedom, also caught the imagination of the English composer William Walton, who composed a mighty oratorio with the feast as its musical centerpiece. Belshazzar’s Feast is one of Walton’s greatest compositions and one of Britain’s 20th-century masterworks, on par with Elgar’s The Dream of Gerontius and Britten’s War Requiem.

a project grows in scope

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The three principal parts of Belshazzar’s Feast unfold without pauses. After the opening prophecy, we hear the lament of the Israelites, culminating in their affirmative belief that Babylon will fall. The second part is the feast itself, during which we learn of Babylon’s riches and her plunder of the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem. King Belshazzar’s entrance catalyzes paens of praise to false gods, which grow progressively more frenzied until the interruption by the handwriting on the wall. After we learn that Belshazzar has been slain that very night, the oratorio concludes with a mighty hymn of praise to the God of Jacob.

Walton uses the baritone soloist in key places to provide transition and to advance the plot, as in the boastful description of Babylon’s riches that launches the second part. The soloist also

William Walton
Born: March 29, 1902, Oldham, Lancashire, England
Died: March 8, 1983, Ischia, Italy

Belshazzar’s Feast
Premiered: October 8, 1931

In the Book of Daniel, Belshazzar, the last King of the Mesopotamian city of Babylon, gives a splendid feast. During the festivities, a mysterious hand inscribes a prophecy of the monarch’s doom on the wall of the banquet room. That same night, Belshazzar is slain. The incident has given rise to one of the most frequently used Biblical phrases in common conversation: “to see the handwriting on the wall.”

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takes on the voice of major characters at critical moments, such as Belshazzar's praise of the false god of gold, and later the voice of the mysterious hand as it inscribes its chilling message on the wall.

The oratorio has a rich and evocative orchestral score, with unusually prominent roles for brass and percussion and a significant amount of a cappella writing for both the chorus and the baritone soloist. A trombone fanfare heralds the opening prophecy of Isaiah (for a cappella men's chorus). A subsequent trumpet fanfare announces King Belshazzar. Walton uses the two brass choirs both antiphonally and stereophonically, at moments of pagan revelry and exultant celebration.

Although the percussion section is not so visibly expanded as the brass, its members work exceptionally hard in Belshazzar's Feast. They are stars in the brilliant double chorus of invocations to heathen gods. As each deity is praised, the orchestra paints its portrait in percussive, metallic colors: the god of gold with gong, tambourine, cymbals and drums in addition to brass, the god of silver with glockenspiel, triangle and saxophone, the god of iron with the anvil, the god of wood with xylophone and woodblocks, and the god of stone with slapsticks.

The climax occurs during the banquet when the debauchery is interrupted by the mysterious hand. A hush falls over the orchestra: silent except for tremolando chords played pianissimo—and sinister, skeletal commentary from the percussion: cymbals, castanets, bass drum and gong. The effect is spine-tingling and fearful, as the spectral hand begins to inscribe its damning assessment of the idolatrous king.

**Instrumentation:** four-part mixed chorus and solo baritone with orchestra comprising 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 3 clarinets (1 doubling E-flat clarinet and 1 doubling bass clarinet), alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, side drum, tenor drum, bass drum, cymbals, anvil, castanets, gong, slapsticks, tambourine, triangle, wood block, glockenspiel, xylophone, 2 harps, piano, organ, 2 brass bands (each comprising 3 trumpets) and strings.

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