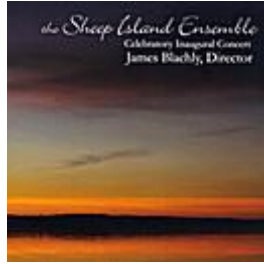


# Mp3 Sheep Island Ensemble - Celebratory Inaugural Concert



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The first commercial release of composer James Blachly, this live recording features exquisite performances from an all-star cast of New York City singers and instrumentalists. All pieces are original compositions by director James Blachly. 13 MP3 Songs in this album (75:42) ! Related styles: CLASSICAL: Contemporary, CLASSICAL: Choral Music People who are interested in Gustav Mahler Benjamin Britten Francis Poulenc should consider this download. Details: The Sheep Island Ensemble was founded in 2008 by James Blachly as a vehicle for the performance of his works and of other contemporary music. The singers form a versatile chamber chorus of fifteen, modeled after the virtuosic a cappella ensembles of the Renaissance, when highly adventurous work for choral ensembles represented the pinnacle of compositional craft. The group takes its name from a tiny island in the Gulf of Maine where there is no running water or electricity, and where time stands still in the experience of deep natural beauty and the gentle light of the Aladdin lamp. It is the intention of the ensemble to perpetuate a similar experience of serenity, beauty, and strength through its musical presentations. Director James Blachly, hailed by Chamber Music America as vigorous and assured, is a composer interested in the intersection of literature, poetry, and composition. Notes on the Program In 2006, in the midst of my compositional residency at St. Michaels Episcopal Church, I encountered a crisis of faith, triggered by a sense of powerlessness and injustice. In my country, in that church, and at my former school, I saw leaders who were not held accountable for their actions, and who in all they did seemed to diminish the great ideals for which their institutions stood. At the same time, I was struggling with my personal relationship with God, which in my early 20s had led me to consider divinity, and which at this point was closer to a complete rejection of Christianity. In reading the Bible from stem to stern, I encountered the

Matthew 10:17 passage, I came not to bring peace, but a sword. I considered the effect of religion in history, and began reading more extensively about the crusades and the history of Jerusalem. I questioned the essential monotheistic paradigm from Abraham onwards: by definition, to identify one group of people as chosen is to identify the others as rejected. My spiritual upbringing was at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where the divinity of God was limitless and was manifested not only in that magnificent building, but in great literature, in great music, and in the revelatory preaching of The Very Reverend James Parks Morton. It was a place where the arts flourished; where thirteen religions could co-worship; where Boutros Boutros Ghali and Madeleine L'Engle gave sermons. My belief in God was great. But my later witnessing of the smallness of human beings when they attain positions of power, the hubris, the corruption, and the single-minded desire to stay in power led me to question all that. And so I turned to the prophets. To the figures who are not afraid to speak the truth in the face of great danger. To those who will not be silenced, despite potential ramifications to their own safety. To those who know the truth, and who speak it loudly. Not Peace, but a Sword is dedicated to our modern prophets, who speak the truth in the face of adversity. The Motet Omnis Pulchritudo of the 16th-century Vatican composer Andreas da Silva has for many years been a great inspiration to me. The modal mixture, the adventurous harmonic implications, yes, but above all, the heroic counterpoint. The writing is rich and full of joy. It soars; it seems to me to be the apex of this triumphant time in choral polyphony. Perfectly shaped, and perfectly satisfying. In setting the 6th century text *Christe, Qui Lux Es*, I wanted to use an ancient model, and naturally turned to the da Silva. This work is not a response, not a 21st century language responding to a 16th century work; rather, it is a parody anthem, taking the first 8 bars of *Omnis Pulchritudo*, and traveling somewhere new. Like the 16th century masterwork, I use five voices, with the quintus singing a cantus firmus. In this case, I chose the antiphon *Rex Pacificus*. In conceiving of a Christ figure in 2005 America, before criticism of the war became acceptable, I found this text relevant. Magnificent King of peace, the entire world awaits your return. Since reading Karen Armstrong, I have had a different concept of peace, which in Shalom implies a fullness of empire, a stasis in socio-economic-political turmoil specifically because the chosen are the ones in power, and are plentiful. Peace, in other words, is imbalance. This motet takes a simpler view. We await the coming of the king of peace. How glorious indeed that would be. Allelulia. *Go, Lovely Rose* was the first work I wrote while studying at Mannes under Robert Cuckson, and Daniel and Benedicte have performed it many times

since 2004. It is dedicated to my great friend, Avia Abramovitz. I've worked several times with Rilke texts, and find them endlessly fascinating. (Another Rilke song received its premiere in March 2009, in North Carolina, with Ensemble Chantarelle. Unlike *Fast*, it is scored for soprano, viola da gamba, and theorbo.) *Und Fast Ein Mdchen Wars* came at a time when my compositional language was shifting, and I found a Bergian, extended harmony world to be the natural home for the dream-like 1920s text. In 2006, I sang at the funeral of William Styron, one of America's great writers. Bill Clinton, Ted Kennedy, and his daughter were among the speakers, and they all mentioned *Darkness Visible*, an account he wrote in the 1980s about his struggle with depression. I had just finished Dantes *Inferno*, and had already conceived of writing a piece that used the last line of Canto XXXIV, *E Quindi Uscimmo a Riveder le Stelle*, when I read his book on depression, and was surprised to see that Styron cites that same line as a metaphor for his experience. That after experiencing Hell, a human being can rise again, and not just survive, but can once again see the stars. The *Piano Miniatures* were written for Bndicte in 2006. They take fragments of previous works and find a new home for them. *Interstice* comes from a transitional theme of an orchestral piece; thus it is derived from the in-between material. I have always loved the liminal space between things; it is where creativity and the sublime reside. The theme is augmented in the bass, and all the other material emerges from in-between the sonorous lower notes. The third work, *Softer*, is about rising, and resolving. The second piece, *Shimmer-Lift*, comes from a long-since discarded sextet, inspired by this Edna St. Vincent Millay poem: Time cannot break the bird's wing from the bird. Bird and wing together Go down, one feather. No thing that ever flew, Not the lark, not you, Can die as others do. One of the great collaborations of recent years has been my work with Nacole Palmer and Molly Quinn, and *Amours of the Deep* is the first in an evening-length song cycle we have planned with texts from Moby Dick. Melville's prose is so rich and poetic that my desire to set it in song caused me to reconsider the art-song paradigm of setting only poetry. The song-cycle will alternate solo songs for Molly and Nacole with several duets. When a whale breaches, flukes, and dives, it leaves behind it a footprint on the ocean floor: a glassy-smooth surface of calm on the oceans turbulent waves. Melville, in a previous passage, describes how whales make love. To the observer above, during this activity the glassy-smooth surface of the water is not only calm, but crystal clear, so that one can look down several hundred feet below the surface and see the two whales cavorting below: the amours of the deep. I wrote this song during a personally turbulent time, and I used that time to reflect on the eternal mildness of joy that we hold within ourselves. I

envision this inner sanctuary as a small kernel of light, located physically below the solar plexus, directly in the center of the body. No matter how savage the storm gets, no matter how awful the inner turmoil of the mind and body may be, there is always , deep down and deep inland there, a sense of peace, calm, and joy. The Missa Brevis in Five Parts has been a long time in coming. Begun in 2002 with the Kyrie, it was finished on January 4th, 2009. It is a mass setting, and the words are familiar enough that I dont have to get into them. I did leave behind 70 of a Credo setting, but that will have to wait for another composition; this one is complete as you hear it tonight. Most of the mass is in five parts (SSATB), with the exception of solos, so the double meaning of a five part mass (the other meaning referred to the five movements: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus/Benedictus, Agnus) is still at least partly intact. I want to thank Robert White for his patience in this commission, which was premiered at this concert.

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