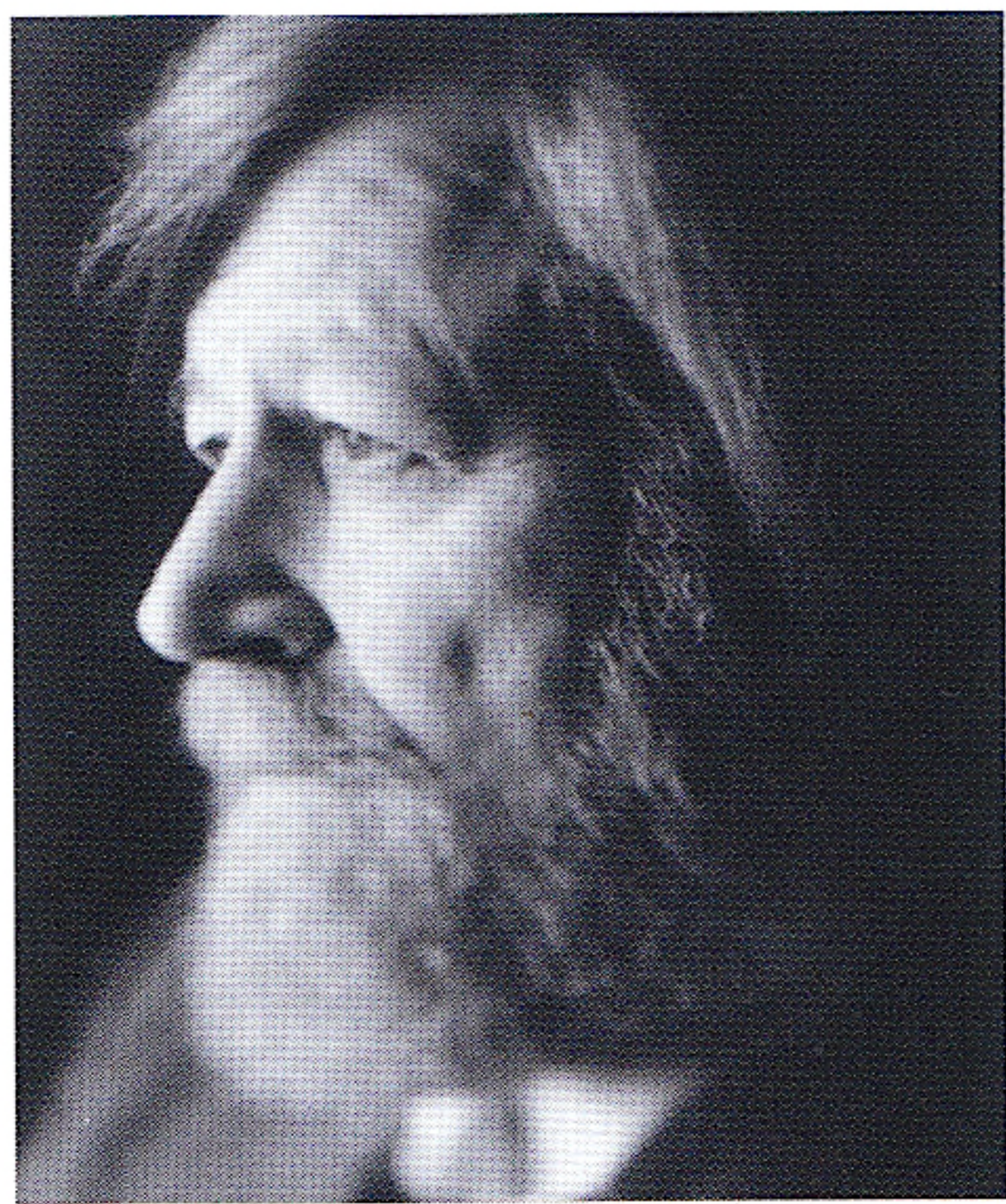


A Conversation with Morten Lauridsen

■ by Margaret Winchell Miller



Composer Morten Lauridsen, chair of the Composition Department at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music since 1990 and composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale from 1994 to 2001, recently spent a week as composer-in-residence on the campus of Houston Baptist University. Margaret Winchell Miller, a member of the Houston

Masterworks Chorus, invited him to discuss his work.

You've heard so many performances of your compositions. How do they differ in interpretation?

The differences in interpretation often lie in the conductor's approach and handling of intricacies and nuances, the shape of the individual line, the many minor elements in this music that add up to the total experience. For example, during my several years as composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale working with Paul Salamunovich, I constantly marveled at the magnificent way he shaped a single phrase. The *Lux Aeterna* was designed, in part, because of Paul's vast experience with Gregorian Chant... Chant is certainly central to the approach to that particular cycle, and a successful conductor of the *Lux* will have a thorough understanding of chant, the liturgy, and the referential basis for the entire cycle — the sacred music of the Renaissance, particularly the works of Josquin and Palestrina — in order to deftly and musically conduct and mold the shape of each musical element. On a larger scale, it's clear that the musical approach to each of my choral cycles is quite different.

The *Mid-Winter Songs* reference a more Neo-Classic approach to complement the style of Graves' poetry; the *Madrigali* reference characteristics of the secular works of Monteverdi, Gesualdo, Marenzio, and others; and *Les Chansons des Roses* allude to the music of Ravel, Debussy, and the *chanson* literature. The successful interpreters of these cycles are those who both understand the text, the language, and intricacies of all the various musical facets, both technical and historical, designed to complement the textual ideas.

Tempo is especially critical. Performances of *Dirait-on* or *O Magnum Mysterium*, for example, that are too slow lose the shape and flow of the overall melodic line. The successful

performances of *Dirait-on* will be by conductors who understand that this setting is in the style of a "chanson populaire," with tempo rubato to give the piece a sense of freedom and abandon characteristic of folk song. *O Magnum Mysterium* is a quiet, contemplative, very personal song, a work of soft, radiant beauty with flowing melodies and counter-melodies that are somehow both suspended in time and anchored deep into our hearts.

How have you been able to embrace the instrument of the human voice?

I don't have much of a voice at all (they would never let me in the Master Chorale as a singer!). But, as I compose, I am constantly singing each individual part to hone the lines so that each voice has a part that is as elegant and gracious for the singer as I can possibly make it. I regularly receive letters from altos, for example, expressing joy for their lyrical lines.

Do you go out looking for works to put to music to inspire the next piece?

Yes. Constantly. I read poetry every day. It's like breathing for me. In all my talks around the country, I encourage my audiences to read poetry. Such a magnificent and enriching source of illumination, insight, elegance, erudition. I'm pleased to tell you that poetry continues to thrive in the hands of numerous gifted writers throughout this country and abroad, including several living on my remote island summer retreat off the northwest coast of Washington state. I simply have profound and abiding respect for poets.

How does silence figure into your life?

Silence itself is a very precious state that is constantly eroding from our lives, and we are simply not doing enough to protect it. We are constantly bombarded by ambient, disruptive noise. Gas leafblowers are a prime and particularly aggravating example of this. The Los Angeles City Council and many other progressive and caring governmental agencies, in their great wisdom, have made the use of such noise- and air-polluting machines illegal (quiet, electric blowers are permitted).

Serenity is an extremely precious commodity, and individual and collective action must be used aggressively to protect it. My island cabin is a silent sanctuary where I am alone with my thoughts, and the welcome natural sounds of the wind, bird-calls and water lapping at the shore. ►