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SING UNTO THE SKY

— FARGO-MOORHEAD —
CHORAL ARTISTS

MICHAEL CULLOTON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

OCTOBER 18, 2025 - 4:00PM

OCTOBER 19, 2025 - 2:00PM

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, MOORHEAD, MN



WWW.FMCHORALARTISTS.ORG

FARGO-MOORHEAD CHORAL ARTISTS

presents

SING UNTO THE SKY

Michael Culloton, Artistic Director

Susan Nagel, Collaborative Pianist

Jane Linde Capistran, violin

Elise Buffat Nelson, cello

Saturday, October 18, 2025 - 4:00pm

Sunday, October 19, 2025 - 2:00pm

Trinity Lutheran Church, Moorhead, MN

Thank you to our generous concert sponsor: Studio FSR

I.

Sing Unto the Sky – Karen Marrolli
Come to the Woods – Jake Runestad

II.

By Night – Elaine Hagenberg
For the Future – Andrew Maxfield
I Thank You God for Most This Amazing Day – Dan Forrest

Brief interval

III.

Sacred Place – Alex Berko

I. Opening Prayer

II. Amidah

III. Shema

IV. Mi Shebeirach

V. Kaddish

VI. Closing Prayer

More information about FMCA can be found on our website: www.fmchoralartists.org

I. Sing Unto the Sky Karen Marrolli

We will walk gently here upon the sacred earth,
and nurture in each growing thing
a song of sweet rebirth,
And like the gentle flowers and grass
from field to mountain high,
We'll bless the sun and cleansing rains
and sing unto the sky.

We can be caretakers of the mother we call home.
We can be guardians of the water that gives life.
We can be still and hear the song of the wind.
We can heal a broken world, and sing unto the sky.
Let us give thanks for all creation.
We can honor every dawn.
We can heal a broken world, and sing unto the sky.
- Karen Marrolli

Sing Unto the Sky was inspired by the wild beauty of High Desert of New Mexico, a place of varied landscapes and little water. The delicate relationship between resources and inhabitants in this area of the world highlights our responsibility to be good stewards of the earth. The music is meant to be a simple theme that builds upon itself continuously throughout the song, perhaps by illustrating both a growing urgency and a growing and varied chorus of voices coming together to give thanks for creation and pledging care for its resources. (KM)

Come to the Woods Jake Runestad

Another glorious day, the air as delicious
to the lungs as nectar to the tongue.
The day was full of sparkling sunshine,
and at the same time enlivened with one of
the most bracing wind storms.
The mountain winds bless the forests with love.
They touch every tree, not one is forgotten.
When the storm began to sound,
I pushed out into the woods to enjoy it.
I should climb one of the trees for a wider look.
The sounds of the storm were glorious with
wild exuberance of light and motion.
Bending and swirling backward and forward, round and
round,
in this wild sea of pines.
The storm-tones died away, and turning toward the east,

I beheld the trees, hushed and tranquil.
The setting sun filled them with amber light, and seemed to say,
“Come to the woods, for here is rest.”
- Taken from writings by John Muir, adapted by the composer.

Famed Scottish-American naturalist and conservationist John Muir had a giddy, child-like excitement for the natural world. After a youth spent in Scotland and Wisconsin, he found himself transformed by his first visit, around age 30, to California's Yosemite Valley. With the vast mountainous landscape and the surreal size of the sequoia and redwood trees, these woods captured him and became his playground, his classroom, and his sanctuary.

Muir was an avid “saunterer” and a profound thinker who would venture into the woods for days with a bit of food and a book of Emerson poetry in hand. Inspired by the beauty of the wilderness and a lifelong love for words, Muir penned a vast collection of eloquent and vivid writings. In one quintessentially Muirian account, he is so fascinated by a storm that he climbs up a tall Douglas Fir to experience it more intensely.

“Come to the Woods” explores Muir's inspirations and the transporting peace found in the natural world. Using a collage of fragments from Muir's writings, the work ventures from the boisterous joy of a “glorious day,” to the quiet whispering of wind, to the rejuvenating power of a storm, to the calming “amber light” when the clouds begin to clear. I hope it captures the self-discovery and sustenance one encounters while exploring the outdoors and its vital importance in our lives. As Muir writes, “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.” (JR)

II. By Night Elaine Hagenberg

Deep in the tarn the mountain a mighty phantom gleamed,
She leaned out into the midnight, and the summer wind went
by,
The scent of the rose on its silken wing and a song its sigh.
And, in depths below, the waters answered some mystic height,
As a star stooped out of the depths above with its lance of light.
And she thought, in the dark and the fragrance,
How vast was the wonder wrought if the sweet world
were but the beauty born in its Maker's thought.
- Harriet Prescott Spofford

When I compose a new piece of music, the original inspiration always arises from the poetry. Each composition begins by carefully studying the words, speaking the rhythms, and

listening for melodies that will help to convey a story. I want singers and audiences alike to see themselves inside the music, guided by the melodies and the text as one. In “By Night,” I imagined a dark and mysterious night beckoning a young woman to experience a thrilling adventure. A galloping accompaniment leads our narrator beyond her familiar walls, while the soaring vocal lines depict her breathless discovery of a bold and beautiful new world. Because nature fills me with joy and peace equally, the contrasting middle section invites listeners into a moment of meditation through the “beauty born in its Maker’s thought.” Our heroine’s excitement cannot be contained, however, and the music rushes forth once more, painting a cinematic scene of wonder and awe. (EH)

For the Future Andrew Maxfield

Planting trees early in spring,
we make a place for birds to sing
in time to come. How do we know?
They are singing here now.

There is no other guarantee
that singing will ever be.

- Wendell Berry (*From New Collected Poems*. 2013.
Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press.)

Thinking of “planting trees” made me think of work songs and field hollers. So I listened to various Smithsonian collections of archival recordings and checked out collections of work songs from the library. It seems like a good work song has a vigorous pulse—maybe the regular clank of a hammer or the stomp of booted feet. So, I decided that I would force this pulse on myself by walking as I composed the melodies. At the time, I was living in Madison, Wisconsin. I would walk from my apartment to the university campus and back, stomping and humming. I probably looked like a crazy person—which is to say that I fit right in in Madison.

Also as I was walking, I was moved by the poem’s question: “How do we know?” It’s a powerful question and brings to my mind questions about faith. I loved the aspirated, heavy “H” sound of “how” and decided I wanted to repeat it many times—which is what inspired the responsorial and canonical sections where the men and women repeatedly ask that question, sometimes in overlapping ways.

Throughout our marriage, I’ve been inspired many times by my wife’s cello playing. She has an intuitive, deep sense of musicality that I admire. She and her sister, a fiddler, grew up playing bluegrass, Celtic, and various types of folk music

together. Inspired by their playing, I decided that the choir would be accompanied by fiddle and folk cello (chiddle?). But since this is new music, not real folk music, it would also have some twists and turns—which you can hear in key changes, some of the vocal textures, and in many of the harmonies, which purposefully come from outside the traditional idioms.

Finally, the poem took on its most powerful meaning for me when I thought about the last couplet: “There is no other guarantee / that singing will ever be.” What a stunner. What a good reminder. How sobering. So, I realized that the music needed to pivot from the simple exuberance of planting trees to reckoning with our roles as caretakers for Creation. It may be true that only God can make a tree, but it’s definitely true that it’s a blessing for us to plant them and live from them. And so the piece ends—or subsides, maybe—with an instrumental riffing on the original melody but, this time, over the choir’s pulsating echoes of those last lines. (AM)

I Thank You God for Most This Amazing Day Dan Forrest

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?
(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)
- E. E. Cummings

- Brief interval -

III. Sacred Place

Alex Berko

I. Opening Prayer

In the dusk of the river, the wind
gone, the leaves grow still—
The beautiful poise of lightness,
The heavy world pushing toward it.
- Wendell Berry

II. Amidah

“How softly these mountain rocks are adorned, and how fine and reassuring the company they keep – their brows in the sky, their feet set in groves and gay emerald meadows, a thousand flowers leaning confidently against their adamant bosses, while birds bees butterflies help the river and waterfalls to stir all the air into music – things frail and fleeting and types of permanence meeting here and blending as if into this glorious mountain temple Nature had gathered her choicest treasures, whether great or small to draw her lovers into close confiding communion with her.”
- John Muir to Teddy Roosevelt (*on preserving Yosemite National Park*)

III. Shema

The earth says have a place, be what that place requires; hear the sound the birds imply and see as deep as ridges go behind each other.

The earth says every summer have a ranch that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape that proclaims a universe - sermon of the hills, hallelujah mountain, highway guided by the way the world is tilted, reduplication of mirage, flat evening: a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind of color that your life is and by listening with the same bowed head that sings draw all things into one song, join the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy way, the rage without met by the wings within that guide you anywhere the wind blows. Listening, I think that's what the earth says.
- William Stafford

IV. Mi Shebeirach

May the source of strength
Who blessed the ones before us
Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing
And let us say Amen

Bless those in need of healing with *r'fuah sh'leimah*
(*complete healing*)
The renewal of body, the renewal of spirit
And let us say Amen
- Old Testament

V. Kaddish

“Let my thoughts come to you, when I am gone, like the afterglow of sunset at the margin of starry silence.”
- Rabindranath Tagore

VI. Closing Prayer

In the dusk of the river, the wind
gone, the leaves grow still—
The beautiful poise of lightness,
The heavy world pushing toward it.

Sacred Place is an ecological service that connects the old with the new, the sacred with the secular, and the individual with their community. The outline of the work is a Jewish service. However, rather than Jewish prayers, the text is made up of various writers and thinkers who speak of the environment as a place of safety, comfort, and beauty. Written for SATB choir, piano, violin, and cello, the six-movement piece is at times a meditation and at times an impassioned prayer for the world we inhabit and share.

I was inspired by my contemporaries to combine the old with the new and bring a piece of my identity and tradition into this work. As a result, rather than using the Christian liturgy, *Sacred Place* is based on the Jewish service. Additionally, while each movement is titled after a different pillar of a Jewish service, none of the text is in Hebrew. Instead, I stitched together the writings of several American environmentalists and poets who have spoken about their relationship with the earth.

“Opening Prayer” and “Closing Prayer” use the same serene Wendall Berry passage from the poem “The Porch Over the River”. “Amidah” (to stand) uses snippets of a letter written by John Muir to Theodore Roosevelt asking him to meet at Yosemite National Park. Muir pleads Roosevelt to “stand” with him in preserving this land. “Shema” (to listen) uses a poem by William Stafford who urges us to listen to what the earth is saying. “Mi Shebeirach” (a prayer for the sick) is the only English

SELECTED TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

translation of the Hebrew prayer in the work. In the Jewish service, the Mi Sheberach is often the emotional peak as it asks for the congregation to pray “for those in need of healing.” I view this movement as a call to action for us as inhabitants of the earth to do our part to heal it. Finally, “Kaddish” (a prayer for the dead) uses a very short line from the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore speaking about the sunset as a metaphor for remembering those who are no longer with us.

The title *Sacred Place* holds many meanings. Each writer that I have chosen views the earth as sacred. They speak of us as inhabitants, as visitors. Without the earth, there is no us. Another dimension is the experience that the listener has while hearing the piece live. It is not a coincidence that a piece framed in a Jewish service was premiered in a Lutheran church. I find it beautiful that the audience will be entering one sacred space with its own history and religious traditions and experiencing elements of another culture’s service. There is a deep unifying power in collective listening that transcends a single person or a single group’s traditions. I am thinking about the concept of the “service” in the broadest sense: coming together to sit, listen, breathe, and understand. The audience is entering a sacred space within themselves, silently resonating with those around them. (AB)



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR & CONDUCTOR

Michael Culloton is in his 14th season as the Artistic Director and Conductor of the Fargo-Moorhead Choral Artists. He is an Associate Professor of Music at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN where he is the Director of Choral Activities, conductor of The Concordia Choir, Artistic Director of the Concordia College Christmas Concerts, and the Paul J. and Eleanor Christiansen Chair of Choral Music. Dr. Culloton teaches vocal music education and church music courses and advises the student chapter of the American Choral Directors Association. He also leads the Concordia Choir Camp, a summer program of Concordia College and the MN All-State Lutheran Choir. Dr. Culloton is the Artistic Director and conductor of the Fargo-Moorhead Choral Artists and conductor of the Trinity Lutheran Church Cathedral Choir.

Prior to this appointment, Dr. Culloton served as the associate director of choirs at Concordia College for eight years, conducting the Chapel Choir, Cantabile, and Kantorei. Before moving to Moorhead, he has was the Artistic Director and conductor of Choral Arts Ensemble and Honors Choirs of Southeast Minnesota, both organizations based in Rochester (Minn.), for eight years. He earned his Bachelor of Music degree from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., where he studied with René Clausen, and his Master of Music degree from the University of Arizona, where he studied with Maurice Skones. Dr. Culloton completed his Doctor of Musical Arts degree through North Dakota State University, where he studied with Jo Ann Miller and Michael Weber.

Dr. Culloton has taught at Luther College and Winona Senior High School and has also served as the assistant and interim conductor of the National Lutheran Choir. He has held church choir positions in Moorhead, MN, Tucson, AZ, and Decorah, IA, and has been music director for nearly a dozen musical theater productions. Along with his twin brother, Dr. Culloton is the co-editor of the *Matthew and Michael Culloton Choral Series* with Santa Barbara Music Publishing, Inc. He has been recognized as the Minnesota ACDA Young Conductor of the Year and has also received the ACDA/VocalEssence Creative Programming Award. He was a featured conductor in *Never Stop Singing*, a documentary about the history of choral music in Minnesota. Dr. Culloton serves as a guest conductor, clinician, and lecturer throughout the country. He lives in Moorhead with his wife Brynn, who works in the Enrollment division at Concordia, and their daughters Eleanor and Miriam.



COLLABORATIVE PIANIST

Susan Nagel lives and works in the Fargo-Moorhead area. She received performance degrees at MSUM and NDSU. Ms. Nagel has worked as a studio and class piano teacher at Concordia College and MSUM. In addition, Susan maintains a private piano teaching studio in her home and adjudicates for various piano-related teachers festivals.

Ms. Nagel is the rehearsal and performance accompanist for the Fargo-Moorhead Choral Artists and regularly collaborates with area college faculty and students in both vocal and instrumental performances. She has worked with the FM Symphony, FM Opera, FM Ballet, and was on the piano faculty of the International Music Camp for 10 years.

FARGO-MOORHEAD CHORAL ARTISTS

HISTORY

The Fargo-Moorhead Choral Artists, founded in 1980 as the F-M Chamber Chorale, performs choral music of all artistic styles and musical periods. The Choral Artists rehearses weekly on Tuesday evenings from September to April. The choir presents three subscription concerts, an annual benefit concert, and sang as part of the Fargo Park District/Minnesota Public Radio Classical Music Festival at Rheault Farm. In addition to these regular concerts, the Choral Artists regularly collaborates with the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra, providing our singers the opportunity to perform major choral/orchestral repertoire.

Michael Culloton is the sixth artistic director and conductor of the Fargo-Moorhead Choral Artists, which has also been led by Mary Kay Geston, Alice Fasman, Jo Ann Miller, Mark Ring and Paul Nesheim. Guest conductors have included René Clausen, Michael Weber, Charlette Moe, Virginia Sublett, and Hilary Apfelstadt.

The Choral Artists were honored to be named the 2016 Arts Organization of the Year by The Arts Partnership. The singers come from many walks of life and are dedicated to performing choral music with artistry and precision to enrich and enhance the artistic communities within Minnesota and North Dakota. They have performed in some of the greatest collegiate ensembles in the country before joining the Choral Artists.

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FMCA enriches the cultural landscape of our communities through a commitment to excellence in choral artistry and programming.

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