

Morten Lauridsen (b.1943)

"The only American composer in history who can be called a mystic, whose probing, serene work contains an elusive and indefinable ingredient which leaves the impression that all the questions have been answered"

-Nick Strimple, musicologist

A National Medal of Arts recipient (2007), he was composer-in-residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale (1994–2001) and was professor of composition at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music for more than 40 years.

From 1993 Lauridsen's music rapidly increased in international popularity, and by century's end he had eclipsed Randall Thompson as the most frequently performed American choral composer. His works have been recorded on more than 200 CDs, five of which have received Grammy Award nominations, including *O Magnum Mysterium*.

He wrote *O Magnum Mysterium* in 1994, on a commission from the Los Angeles Master Chorale. It became one of Lauridsen's signature pieces.

O Magnum Mysterium (O great mystery) text is a Gregorian chant for Christmas. The first theme depicts oxen and donkey next to the manger as first mentioned in Isaiah 1:3. Traditionally, they are related to the nativity of Jesus as a symbol for the mystery of the self-abasement of God in his Incarnation. The text of the second theme is based on the greeting of Elizabeth welcoming Mary when she visited.

O great mystery,
And wonderful sacrament,
That animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the virgin whose womb
Was worthy to bear
The Lord, Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

Lauridsen was inspired by a 1633 painting from the Norton Simon Museum, Zurbarán's *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose* (1633). It has been interpreted as symbolism for the Virgin Mary. "I wanted this piece to resonate immediately and deeply into the core of the listener, to illumine through sound." He worked on the composition for six months and put considerable thinking into a dissonant chord to comment on Mary's sorrow about her son to be killed. Lauridsen said that the work is meant as "a quiet song of profound inner joy with music expressing both the mystery of the Incarnation and Mary's tenderness for her child." See the painting and read the interpretation at nortonsimon.org/art and search Zurbaran.

Sources: Morten Lauridsen website, Wikipedia, *O Magnum Mysterium* sheet music