



advena

liturgies for a broken world

music of Mark Buller

conspirare Craig Hella Johnson

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* Euan Tait, librettist †Leah Lax, librettist

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|-----|--|------|
| 1. | Introit: Fruit of Your Heart * | 3:19 |
| | Mass in Exile † | |
| 2. | I. For Want of Refuge (<i>Miserere</i>)
<i>Simon Barrad, soloist</i> | 5:20 |
| 3. | II. Credo in Exile
<i>Michael Hawes, soloist</i> | 9:38 |
| 4. | III. Peaceable Kingdom Gloria | 5:58 |
| 5. | IV. As Water Flows Away (<i>Prayer for the Government</i>) | 2:18 |
| 6. | V. Mercy (<i>Kyrie</i>) | 4:26 |
| 7. | VI. Earth Sanctus: Body and Blood
<i>Simon Barrad, soloist</i> | 5:26 |
| 8. | VII. When All Else Falls Away (<i>Benedictus</i>)
<i>Michael Hawes, soloist</i> | 4:25 |
| | Requiem in the Light † | |
| 9. | I. Lacrimosa for the Murdered | 8:05 |
| 10. | II. Confutatis: Morning Light | 4:49 |
| 11. | III. Prayer to the Body (<i>Domine Jesu</i>) | 3:12 |
| 12. | IV. No Trumpets: Prayer to the Earth (<i>Dies Irae</i>) | 4:21 |
| 13. | V. Requiem (<i>Agnus Dei</i>) | 1:51 |
| 14. | Communion: A Questioning *
<i>Emily Yocum Black, soloist</i> | 2:42 |

Total Playing Time 65:59

advena: liturgies for a broken world

an introduction

advena, Latin for “stranger” or “foreigner,” evokes multiple layers of meaning—echoing the global pain of migration, displacement, and cultural fracture, but also reflecting a deeper spiritual exile: our growing sense of alienation from ourselves, from one another, and from the natural world. This recording gathers music that dares to dwell in that brokenness while seeking light, connection, and transformation.

***Mass in Exile* ②** and ***Requiem in the Light* ⑨** composed by Mark Buller with librettist Leah Lax, reimagine ancient forms through the lens of our present moment. These liturgies are born of personal reckonings with inherited faith and culture.

Buller’s musical language is vibrant and contemporary, alive with rhythmic clarity, mystical choral textures, and an emotional intensity that feels both intimate and urgent. Lax’s powerful libretto is sharply observant, pointed and deeply compassionate.

Alongside the larger works, two brief companion pieces—***Introit: Fruit of Your Heart* ①** and ***Communion: A Questioning* ⑭**—offer luminous points of entry and reflection. Commissioned by Conspirare with new texts by Euan Tait, these chant-like settings extend the project’s core themes with quiet grace. Using liturgical language in spacious, contemplative ways, they speak beyond traditional religious frames, inviting all listeners into a shared space of wonder, vulnerability, and renewal. These bookend works gently hold the Mass and Requiem, anchoring the whole in a wider human arc.

We find ourselves in a pivotal cultural moment—one that calls for expressions of beauty and truth offered both for inspiration but also as acts of resistance. This collaborative art—Mark Buller’s music and the words of Leah Lax and Euan Tait—creates a space of welcome where we are reminded of our shared humanity, our urgent need for bold truth-telling, and our capacity to heal and grow.

Craig Hella Johnson

PROGRAM NOTES

With *advena: liturgies for a broken world*, Conspirare takes us on a journey of place, being, and universality, and asks questions with breathtaking beauty and expanse. The composer and librettist have “re-cast” the traditional Mass texts for the two larger works, allowing us to engage with these ancient words in a new way.

We open with *Introit: Fruit of Your Heart* ①, which begins with rising questions in the solo guitar until the choir enters in unison with its answer: “From the fruit of your heart I will send many out on their lives...” Despite the reassurance of love, foreshadowing separation is imminent with imagery of the branches of a tree and the employment of full choral harmony just before the final text, “thousands rest in your being, all your days.”

Mass in Exile ② asks us to ponder the myriad ways in which we experience separation and exile. Composer Mark Buller shares:

“*Mass in Exile* was born out of years of frustration and disillusionment coming to a head in 2016, when the people from my fundamentalist background made a choice a full 180 degrees from what they’d taught me as a child - that morality matters in political leadership. Though I had already left that world behind, I was forced to grapple with the ramifications of what happened. What began as anger and bitterness softened into sadness, but through the creation of this work with Leah Lax, including dozens of hours of conversations about our mutual backgrounds in extreme religious sects, that sadness turned into something different. The *Mass* became a vehicle for catharsis, even hope.

I generally shy away from autobiography in my music. I’ll leave the *Heldenlebens* of the world to Richard Strauss. Leah’s text made me confront my former self, but also comfort him -- that four-year-old, unable to sleep because he’s afraid of going to hell. Did he say the right words, in the right order? In the *Mass*, the solo baritone is me. Meanwhile we hear the chorus sing a seductively beautiful “Pray, child, pray” -- beautiful because, as Leah puts it, we do hold these treasured memories on our “dusty shelves,” and the music I grew up singing in the church is still an essential part of my being. The harmonies themselves become more traditionally “churchy,” and I pull out some of the tricks we pianists used to make the preachers’ altar calls that much more effective. That distinct repertoire shaped,

and continues to drive, my soul. And yet that very artistic attractiveness was the very tool which led to its misuse, turning a shepherd's staff into a cudgel.

Mass in Exile is for all of us who left, who wander, who stayed - who discovered that "God is questions. God is nothingness. God is song without words."

In the opening movement, *For Want of Refuge (Miserere)* ②, the exiled are children separated from their parents at the Texas border. As of this writing, many have not been reunited. The choral entrances on the word "Mercy" are cries of the heart, of different voices calling out, coming together over the increasing velocity of the accompanying strings.

Usually a clear statement of faith, instead, *Credo in Exile* ③ questions. The choir sings a chorale on the "Pray child, pray" text, underscored with music that is very reminiscent of a film score. Over this, the soloist questions his path of belief in ever more achingly beautiful words until he stops to contemplate his sins. The music becomes a waltz, the singing stops, and only the instruments continue. The choir returns, unaccompanied, in the old words, and reminds the soloist that he should believe in the liturgical version of the Lord, ending on the repeated word "forgiving." A new Credo closes the movement, first by the baritone soloist, and finally by the entire choir:

God is questions.
God is nothingness.
God is song
without words.

The *Peaceable Kingdom Gloria* ④ also opens with an *incipit*. Usually a trumpeting invocation of the glory of the God, this is a tender anthem to the glory of human love. Lax not only uses quotations from the Biblical *Song of Songs*, she and Buller made a conscious choice to engage and contemplate their own spousal relationships. The result is an open, beautiful tapestry of color, balanced forces, and interplay between accompanied and unaccompanied singing.

The brief, but powerful *As Water Flows Away (prayer for the government)* ⑤, speaks more for the exiled than to the experience of exile itself. Metallic percussion instruments recall prison bars. Sharply bowed strings suggest protest, while the unison choir declaims words of protest. Buller then makes an incredible choral and instrumental transition into the text of water vanishing to close the movement.

A second *Miserere (Kyrie)* ⑥ occurs late in the Mass, this time turned inward. There are only three lines of text meditating on the existence of mercy, the existence of self, and the confluence between them.

The Hebrew word *kadosh* (“holy”), opens *Earth Sanctus: Body and Blood* ⑦. The choral repetitions call to mind the heavenly host as the soloist decries the destruction of the earth. They repeat his words in witness before repeating the opening statements of *kadosh*.

Mass in Exile closes with *When All Else Falls Away (Benedictus)* ⑧. The soloist and choir ask the essential question of how to proceed *in extremis*. Invoking the poet Yehudi Amichai, Lax and Buller bring choir and instruments to a low sustained hum, while a soprano duo reminds us that peace must “come like wildflowers,” because “the field must have it: wildpeace.”

Requiem in the Light is a beautiful companion piece that has resonances with *Mass in Exile*. *Lacrimosa for the Murdered* ⑨ opens with a hum that broadens into the words “My child” and languages representative of past genocides. Wild harmonic shifts portray the angst of the polyglot utterances of the same. At last, the choir sings words that reference those of Jesus at his crucifixion, perhaps the ultimate child murdered by the state.

Expectation and hope suffuse *Confutatis Morning Light* ⑩, a movement often characterized by fear and timorousness. At the end of the choral questions asking, “have I done enough?” Buller offers a violin obbligato to reinforce the answer: light and love are what matters.

Prayer for the Body: Domine Jesu ⑪ begins as a pent-up vessel. As it tips over, one by one the voices pour out, releasing their texts until only the cello is left to play a rhapsodic solo of the longed-for freedom—“my single note/as I wane.”

Instead of a day of wrath, *No Trumpets (Prayer to the Earth): Dies irae* ⑫ is a plea for what we have ruined with our anger and toxicity. Its lilt and gentleness unfold with light scoring and homophonic textures that keep the text present. It proceeds directly into the final movement, *Requiem: Agnus Dei* ⑬. A brilliant musical representation of light, this movement begins in unison and proceeds to open into parts like a sunrise. The very brief text is a callback to the *Mass in Exile*, calling life a “requiem for an unfinished song,” all of which Buller finishes with the most perfect grand and glorious major chord.

The theme of light continues in the concluding work, *Communion: A Questioning* ⑭. A single voice expands into a section of singers, joined eventually into a company of voices and instruments. Buller also employs beautifully evocative word painting on “shame” and “love,” and bathes the last line in both vocal and string halos of sound.

Melissa E. Givens

Introit: Fruit of Your Heart

Text by Euan Tait

From the fruit of your heart
I will send many out on their lives:

They will believe that love is true
Because you have showed them so.

You are a great tree: thousands
Rest in your being, all your days.

Mass In Exile

Text by Leah Lax/ Dramaturgy by Beth Greenberg

I. For Want of Refuge (*Miserere*)

Mercy! They cry mercy.
Have mercy! Hear the cry.
They cry from the deep.
Where, oh where is home?

When the children come home,
When they come, only then,
I am home.

II. Credo in Exile

Pray.
Pray, child. Pray.
I tried, but I was a child.
Pray, child.
My God,
You were my Master, Taskmaster
Pray, child.
Lift your eyes and pray.
Pray you won't fall.

My black deepest well.
My God and my Hell.
Your Eyes ever watching –
I stood on the edge.
Oh, my sins...

The Lord God is merciful, full of grace,
patient, true, and kind.
Forgiving.

They buried me in words without song.
Words they made me love - words without song.
I couldn't see, and always the promise
of indemnity.
Now to find promise
in questions that remain.

God is questions.
God is nothingness.
God is song
without words.

III. Peaceable Kingdom Gloria

Oh, scent my bed with cinnamon,
Taste the honey, drink the wine.
I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.

My desert olive silver and strong
I drink your sweet oil. I lie in your shade.
Our love is flame and fire, fierce as death.
Hold my hand, my love. I hear your song.
Don't fade, my love – I hear your song.

Oh, scent my bed with cinnamon,
Taste the honey, drink the wine.
I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.
Now arise, arise from the desert, and run away.

IV. As Water Flows Away **(prayer for the government)**

Do you think you speak justice?
Do you dare to judge?
May your bullets of greed melt may they fall
as a stolen child who never sees the day.
May you vanish as we vanish,
as water flows away
into the wreck of the world.

V. Mercy (Kyrrie)

If I have no mercy, what am I?
Without your mercy, who am I?
If not now, then *ay-mah- tie**? *Hebrew: *when*
If not now, then when?

VI. Earth Sanctus: Body and Blood

Kadosh* *Hebrew: *holy*
Kadosh
Kadosh

Holy
Holy
Holy

Water.

Oh, sky of breath, oh holy earth,
Where hides our peace, poor broken earth,
Our earth of life, of love, of breath unfinished.
Death.
So holy.
Kadosh.

VII. When All Else Falls Away (*Benedictus*)

Kadosh. Kadosh.

When world and words fall away,
I will follow the question:
How to find mercy

When world and words fall away,
I will follow the question:
How to find mercy
Now to find mercy
How to find mercy
In the wreck of this unfinished song.
Holy.

Let peace be without words.
“Let it come
like wildflowers,
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.”

– poet *Yehudah Amichai*

Requiem in the Light

Text by Leah Lax / Dramaturgy by Beth Greenberg

I. Lacrimosa for the Murdered

Mein kind
Child of mine –
Where did you go?
Where are you
where did you go?

Mama!

Come to me,
my child.

Etsi	<i>Native American (Cherokee)</i>
Mà-má	<i>Yoruba</i>

Mein kind!

May-rik	<i>Armenian</i>
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Ma-meh	<i>Yiddish</i>
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My child!

Etsi	<i>Cherokee</i>
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Mà-má	<i>Yoruba</i>
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May-rik	<i>Armenian</i>
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Ma-meh	<i>Yiddish</i>
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Daike	<i>Romani</i>
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Mak	<i>Khmer</i>
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Ané M	<i>Igbo (Biafra)</i>
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Máma	<i>Kinyarwanda (Tutsi)</i>
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Mein kind, mein kind. *Yiddish*

MOTHER FATHER

why have you forsaken me?

Echoes,

they come from the ground.

They cry from the ground.

The ground hums.

II. Confutatis: Morning Light

Morning light
brings new hope
and a prayer:
Oh, let me make this day
a day!
A start, a breath
and evening comes.
Have I done enough?
Have I loved
enough,
my love?

III. Prayer for the Body (*Domine Jesu*)

Oh, free me
Free me
let me be
to add
my note
my single note
as I wane.

IV. No Trumpets: Prayer to the Earth (*Dies Irae*)

Oh, shattered earth
Dear tired earth
receptacle of our poisons
and our rage:
I will give,
I will try,
I will not yield.
But when I yield,
Please
hold me.
Enfold me.

V. Requiem (*Agnus Dei*)

This life
will be
a requiem
for an
unfinished song.

Communion: A Questioning

Text by Euan Tait

It was never answered
because, in the deep of me,
I knew: it did not need to be.

All my life the fearful
fluttered on the surface
of my soul. All the time,
I did not need the rain

Howling above me, until
I gave the shame to Love.
Love answered softly,
not with rage or Dies Irae,

but with the certainty
not of the certain, not
of safety, but with the risk
of loving and being loved.

BIOGRAPHIES

Craig Hella Johnson, conductor

Craig Hella Johnson is the founding artistic director and conductor of Conspirare. Beloved for crafting thought-provoking musical journeys that create deep connections between performers and listeners, Hella Johnson is also Artistic Partner at the Oregon Bach Festival. Hella Johnson is a celebrated guest conductor of choral and orchestral works, a published composer, arranger, and educator. Hella Johnson is an Artist in Residence at Texas State University, earning the 2022 Presidential Award for Excellence in Scholarly/Creative Activities. Hella Johnson's concert-length composition *Considering Matthew Shepard* was premiered and recorded by Conspirare and continues to have broad national and international reach. Hella Johnson's accomplishments have been recognized with numerous awards and honors. Notably among them, he and Conspirare won a 2015 GRAMMY® for Best Choral Performance. His honors also include Chorus America's Michael Korn Founders Award for Development of the Professional Choral Art, Texas State Musician, the Matthew Shepard Foundation's Dennis Dougherty Award for Community Leadership and most recently, Wartburg College's 2023 Graven Award.

Mark Buller, composer

Mark Buller, a composer based in Houston, writes music which seeks to blend rich lyricism with bold gestures and striking rhythms. His music has been heard in venues around the world, from Carnegie Hall and the Moscow Conservatory to offbeat locations such as the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney and MOVIMENTO in Munich. His orchestral works have been performed by leading orchestras and conductors, and his music for vocal and choral forces has been presented around the world. He has been privileged to write for world-class ensembles and organizations, including the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Houston Grand Opera, Houston Chamber Choir, ROCO (River Oaks Chamber Orchestra), and Apollo Chamber Players. His flexibility as a composer has led to some unique projects and commissions: four operas for Houston Grand Opera with libretti by Charles Anthony Silvestri and Euan Tait (together totaling over 180 performances since 2015); a series of poignant art songs and a major choral work also for HGO, setting words by veterans and by Leah Lax; and eighty short pieces for various forces, entitled *Quarantine Miniatures*, written during the COVID-19 lockdown. Originally from Maryland, Mark studied as a pianist before earning his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Houston, where he studied with Marcus Maroney and Rob Smith. Former teachers also include Dan Forrest and Joan Pinkston. He currently teaches at Houston Community College and runs the precollege composition program at AFA. Mark is a Hermitage Artist Fellow and an AIR Serenbe Seikilos Focus Fellow.

Leah Lax, librettist

Librettist Leah Lax is an author and librettist who often combines the roles. She likes to use oral histories, which were the basis of her Houston Grand Opera oratorio, *The Refuge*, by Christopher Theofanidis, about immigrants and refugees and their journeys to this country. Years later, she wrote a book, *Not From Here: the Song of America*, about creating that opera and discovering the world (Pegasus, 2024). Leah says her memoir, *Uncovered: How I Left Hasidic Life and Finally Came Home*, the first gay memoir ever to come out of the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox world, has taken her on quite a journey. She wrote the libretto for an opera based on *Uncovered* at the request of composer Lori Laitman, (City Lyric Opera/NY, 2023). Working once again with Houston Grand Opera, Leah joined composer Mark Buller to write *Overboard* based on testimonies of survivors of the USS Houston, downed in WWII. *Overboard* has been performed many times. Leah continued to work with Buller and together created *Mass In Exile*, a deeply personal struggle toward a new kind of faith in a broken world, reclaiming a classic form of the faithful – Leah and Buller see themselves as exiles from fundamentalism. At the behest of Conspirare, Leah reached again to classic form to write *Requiem In the Light* with Buller, expressing the daily effort to make our brief lives meaningful in, again, a broken world.

Euan Tait, librettist

Euan Tait is a European of Scots-Welsh heritage, born in a still partly war-shattered Berlin in 1968. He is a librettist whose work is performed and commissioned across the world, as well as a retreat leader. He is a teacher for 14-18 year olds and adults, many of whom are settling in the UK for the first time. He delights in the great mountains, wildlife and rivers near his Gwent home in south east Wales. More information at <https://euantait.com>.

Beth Greenberg, Dramaturg for Requiem in the Light and Mass in Exile

American stage director Beth Greenberg is renowned for her work with the New York City Opera. For the Lincoln Center company she directed *Turandot*, *Tales of Hoffmann*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Tosca*, *Intermezzo*, *La Traviata*, and *La Bohème*.

As dramaturg she's collaborated with composers Tom Cipullo, Anthony Davis, Lori Laitman, Nkeiru Okoye and Huang Ruo, and with librettist Leah Lax. Her dramaturgy work is published by E.C. Schirmer. She is currently the Story Adviser for Cincinnati Opera's new commission *Good Trouble*, to premiere in 2027.

Recent world-premieres she's directed include *This Little Light of Mine - The Story of Fannie Lou Hamer* for Santa Fe Opera and for Opera Colorado, Lori Laitman's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Conspirare

Conspirare is a professional choral organization under the leadership of Artistic Director Craig Hella Johnson. Inspired by the power of music to change lives, this ensemble engages singers from around the world who join voices to deliver world-class, extraordinary live musical experiences and recordings. Their discography includes 16 commercial albums and 20 self-produced live albums. Hella Johnson and Conspirare were awarded a 2015 GRAMMY® for Best Choral Performance for *The Sacred Spirit of Russia* and their recordings have received 11 total nominations. Conspirare has performed throughout the United States and internationally. At home, Conspirare performs a full annual season in Austin where it has received ongoing recognition from local organizations and critics. Conspirare has been the subject of PBS documentaries and was awarded a Texas Medal of Arts and garnered international recognition including the Dutch Edison Award. The group is also committed to lifelong singing through the Symphonic Choir, Conspirare Artist Citizen Choral Collective, and Big Sings.

Conspirare

Craig Hella Johnson, Artistic Director & Conductor

SOPRANO

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Gitanjali Mathur – Austin, TX
Savannah Porter – Brooklyn, NY
Kathlene Ritch – Santa Fe, NM
Tiana Sorenson – Chicago, IL
Emily Yocum Black – Paducah, KY

ALTO

Zerrin Agabigum Martin – Gainesville, FL
Ana Baida – Atlanta, GA
Sarah Brauer – Eugene, OR
Lauren McAllister – Cincinnati, OH
Laura Mercado-Wright – Austin, TX

TENOR

Michael Jones – Los Angeles, CA
Haitham Haidar – Montreal, CA
David Kurtenbach Rivera – San Francisco, CA
Wilson Nichols – New York, NY

BASS

Simon Barrad – San Francisco, CA
Michael Hawes – Pflugerville, TX
Robert Harlan – Austin, TX
Enrico Lagasca – New York, NY
John Proft – Austin, TX

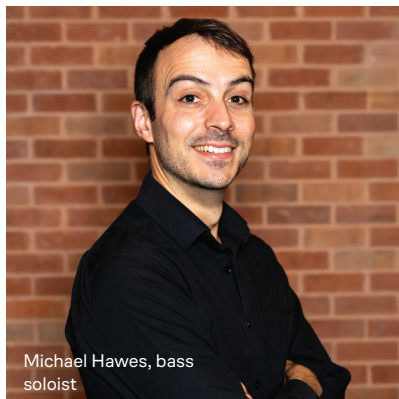
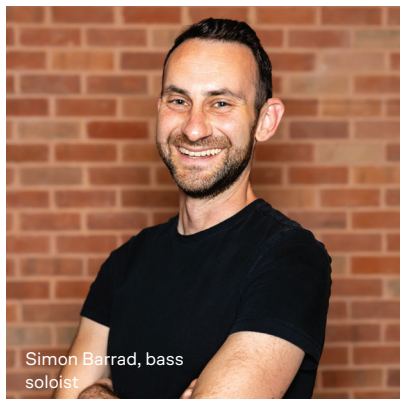
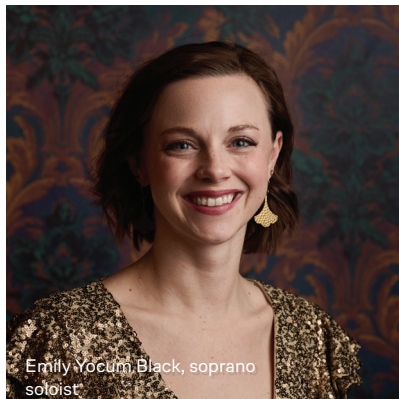
INSTRUMENTALISTS

Patrice Calixte, Violin – Montreal, Quebec
Mariama Alcântara, Violin – Austin, TX
Bruce Williams, Viola – Austin, TX
Douglas Harvey, Cello – Austin, TX
Jessica Valls, Bass – Austin, TX
Marc Garvin, Guitar – Houston, TX
Thomas Burritt, Percussion – Leander, TX
Austin Haller, Rehearsal Pianist – Austin, TX

conspirare







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6 FIRST INVERSION



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