



Chamber Singers Program Notes, Texts, and Translations



SPRING 2026
SOUTHERN VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY
Music Program



Program Notes, Text, and Translations

Since 2019, *Expressions of Faith* has served as a musical space at Southern Virginia University for reflection, reverence, and renewal—inviting performers and listeners alike to consider the ways faith finds voice through choral song. This year’s installment, *Expressions of Faith: In the Need of Prayer*, is offered as part of the SVU Chamber Singers’ 2025–26 concert season, *The Light Within*. Centered on the universal human experience of prayer, this program explores themes of adoration, supplication, and assurance. Prayer is heard here not only as an act of devotion to God, but also as a posture of trust—an acknowledgment of need, a reaching outward, and a willingness to rely on a strength beyond ourselves. Through music drawn from varied traditions and perspectives, this concert invites us into moments of humility, hope, and quiet confidence, reminding us that in prayer, light is often found in the act of turning toward one another and toward the Divine.

THE LORD’S PRAYER, FORMAN

Marianne Forman’s 2023 setting of *The Lord’s Prayer*, for SATB choir with piano accompaniment, offers a lyrical and thoughtfully crafted musical meditation on one of Christianity’s most enduring texts. The work is through-composed, having new musical material for each part of the text thus allowing the music to follow the natural contour and meaning of the prayer rather than repeating fixed sections. Forman employs warm, diatonic harmonies enriched by moments of gentle chromatic color, supporting the text with clarity and expressive depth. The music is both refreshing and evocative.

The piano accompaniment functions both as harmonic foundation and expressive partner, shaping the pacing and emotional trajectory of the piece. Textural contrast—ranging from homophonic choral writing, in which all voice parts move together rhythmically but at different pitches, to more expansive harmonic passages—highlights key phrases of the prayer, while careful attention to dynamic shaping and voice leading fosters a unified, resonant ensemble sound. The setting concludes with a calm yet affirming sense of resolution, inviting both singers and listeners into a space of reverence, reflection, and trust.

Program note by Dr. Benjamin Gaughran

I. Assurance

PRAISE TO THE LORD, THE ALMIGHTY, ANDERSON

This piece was formally known as the hymn tune *Lose Den Herren* and originally composed by Neander. Anderson creates a choral arrangement that gives a familiar hymn a modern and expressive tone. Although this piece may be simple, it has lush and rich choral harmonies with a creative and flowing piano accompaniment that is refreshing and creates a whole new contemporary look on a traditional sacred piece.

GEISTLICHES LIED, BRAHMS

Geistliches Lied ("Sacred Song") by Brahms was composed in 1856. Being one of Brahms most intimate works, the piece sets a poem from the 17th-century by Paul Flemming which centers around trust in God and the acceptance of life's trials. The flowing tempo and harmonic textures evoke an atmosphere of serenity, which mirrors the text message of faith through balance.

Let nought afflict thee with grief;
Be calm, as God ordains,
And so may my will be contented.

Why take thought for the morrow?
The one God who gives thee
What is thine watches over all.

All in thy doings be steadfast
And true. What God decrees
Is best, and this it is acknowledged.

Anonymous

Program notes by Tatum Wiley

THE WORD WAS GOD, POWELL

Rosephanye Powell is a professor, singer, conductor, and composer of a broad catalogue of choral works, sacred and secular. *The Word Was God* is not an African American spiritual but is written in a style that nods to the genre. Its text is based on the opening of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. Powell wrote this particular composition early in her compositional career for the concert choir of Philander Smith College during her time teaching there.

To the ear this piece is restless, incessantly in motion; the ever-changing scenes of sound that Powell illustrates are equally adventurous and enlightening. Powell has said that she begins her compositional process by "immersing [herself] in the text, repeating and memorizing the text." Listening to the repetition of these verses set to music is a similarly immersive experience. This setting of the text, discussing the nature of God, is an expression that illuminates God's entirety.

PRAISE HIS HOLY NAME, HAMPTON

Kieth Hampton is a composer of Gospel music and the director of the Chicago Community Chorus and has been esteemed by the American Choral Directors Association for being a composer "whose composition, *Praise His Holy Name*, should be standard repertoire for choirs today and for the next 25 years." In this piece, Hampton utilizes texts from two familiar Protestant hymns: the first verse of *Amazing Grace* by John Newton, and the first verse of *Must Jesus Bear The Cross Alone* by Thomas Shepherd. Returning to these verses instills a message about the song as a whole—a message of praise simultaneously rooted in gratitude and personal resolution.

While the text being sung may be familiar to you, listen for dynamic contrast all throughout, enabling the repeated verses and choruses in this piece to create an evolving world of sound. Each singer is showcased in this piece for how they make these commonly sung words their own; decide what this piece means for you as you listen to the choir accent and individualize each phrase into a new, individualized proclamation.

II. Supplication

NEARER, MY GOD, TO THEE, STEVENS

Nearer, My God, To Thee was composed by Sarah Flower Adams, inspired by Jacob's ladder in the book of Genesis. James Stevens's arrangement—originally written for tenor-bass choir—includes Latin phrases expressing a fervent motivation to climb toward heaven, striving for divinity in the valleys of life.

As the soloist sings the melody, they are accompanied by the choir. Notice how percussive the Latin text sounds underneath the melody, and how these sections juxtapose with those in which the choir joins the soloist on the original text.

Latin text:

At the moment of death, my strength is from heaven.

God helping, nothing should be feared.

Direct us, O Lord, to high places by narrow roads.

Such is the path to the stars.

James L. Stevens

Program notes by Grace Willis

SALUTATION, EŠENVALDS

Ešenvalds is a frequently performed, contemporary composer of choral music in the world today. His musical style ventures from his multiple forms of education, such as being a fellow composer in the creative arts at Trinity College and, his master's degree in composition from the Latvian Academy of Music.

As he often draws inspiration from nature, myth, folklore, and profound, spiritual themes the piece *Salutation* is nothing but exceptional inspiration. The work portrays a spiritual journey of an individual, realizing their whole entire life is a continuous act of praise and worship towards God, with this being represented through highly melodic writing in all parts, moving together with rich and contemplative harmonic structures.

Program note by Tatum Wiley

TO SEE THE SKY, HAGEN

Jocelyn Hagen has composed within a wide variety of vocal and instrumental forms, but *To See the Sky* is exemplary of music and written word serving one another. Hagen wrote this setting of Sara Teasdale's poem "Leaves" in dedication to Dr. Amy Foster, a beloved choral director and friend, shortly after her passing in 2014. The poem was a part of *Rivers to the Sea*, one of Teasdale's early books of poetry, published in 1915. After its publication, the *New York Times* described the book as "a little volume of joyous and unstudied song," as if in anticipation of "Leaves" being set to music a hundred years later.

Hagen has said that the core of the work is the piano accompaniment, since Foster was such a skilled pianist. To See *the Sky* speaks to the absolute importance of a collaborative pianist to a choir, this performance being no exception. Take note of the anthropomorphic swells, vibrating from the piano as its voice lilts and breathes in a speech-like way throughout the piece.

Program note by Grace Willis

STANDIN' IN THE NEED OF PRAYER, GIBBS

Rooted in the African American spiritual tradition, *Standin' in the Need of Prayer* is both a personal confession and a communal plea. In this vibrant SATB arrangement, Stacey V. Gibbs honors the spiritual's call-and-response origins while infusing the work with rhythmic vitality, rich harmonic color, and expressive dynamic contrast. Rather than pointing outward, the text turns inward, reminding us that transformation begins with the self. Notice how Gibb's also carefully incorporates the Swahili translation of "It's me, oh, Lord" into the arrangement. Gibbs's setting invites the choir to embody urgency, humility, and hope, creating a powerful moment of reflection that resonates as deeply today as when the spiritual was first sung.

Program note by Dr. Benjamin Gaughran

III. Assurance

PSALM 23, BASLER

Psalm 23 by Paul Basler is a sacred contemporary choral piece from Basler's multi-movement choral work titled "Songs of Faith." The setting of the piece emphasizes the image of the Psalm and the sense of calm which allows the text to unfold naturally and clearly. Moments such as "He leadeth me beside the still waters" and "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me" are shaped with lyrical phrasing that is combined with gorgeous melodies and rich harmonies to create an unforgettable musical experience.

Program note by Tatum Wiley

UNCLOUDED DAY, KIRCHNER

Unclouded Day was originally written and composed by Reverend Josiah Kelly Alwood after being impressed by the things he saw on a horse ride under the night sky. Within the texts are Christian ideals deeply rooted in the glory of God, and his eternal Home. Arranger, songwriter, and composer Shawn Kirchner made this arrangement of *Unclouded Day* as one of three pieces inspired by the rich and iconic feelings and characteristics of American Folk music.

The piece was originally written to be performed in Hungary by Kirchner's church choir at the time. Grandiose harmonies and complex rhythms provide the piece the opportunity to be somewhat of a spectacle. Engulf yourself in the energetic and high-flying nature of the music, and pay attention to how the melody bounces around the choir as the music plays along. The text and the music come together to offer the feeling or emotion of how glorious it must be to see the City that is made of gold.

Program note by Justice Mack

THOU GRACIOUS GOD, WHOSE MERCY LENDS, WILBERG

Mack Wilberg's decorated musical career encompasses music directing, composing, arranging, and conducting across the nation. This specific arrangement of *Thou Gracious God, Whose Mercy Lends* was created by Wilberg for the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square which he currently directs and is featured on their album "Peace Like a River." This hymn arrangement is set to a traditional English tune that is widely recognizable to many ears.

The familiar feel of the tune is juxtaposed with rich, broad harmonies spanning up to eight different voice parts in the choir. While each verse of the hymn repeats the same main tune, Wilberg has created beautiful imagery through the use of both the vocals and the piano accompaniment that feels like the titular flowing river. Each subsequent verse adds depth, beauty, and strength as the music develops, building to a powerful conclusion of "Amen" that seem to ascend to that "Gracious God, whose Mercy Lends."

Program note by Kate Howe

Thank you for joining us this evening. We look forward to seeing you at our future concerts.

