

Lauridsen and His *Lux*



Image by Free-Photos from Pixabay

Could ten weeks change your life? What if you spent those weeks all alone on a fire lookout tower in the Pacific Northwest near Mount St. Helens, with your only human contact from the once-a-week food delivery? Well, for most of us these ten weeks would be pretty endless, and not in a good way. I suppose the lookout job would require that you scan each segment of forest every so often, so you'd have at least that structure to your days, but my word! Confirmed introvert that I am, even I would find the whole experience pretty daunting. Such, however, was very, very much not the case for Morten Lauridsen when he did this very thing back in 1962.

Let me quote from an interview he did in 1999. Here's what he says himself about how he made the decision to go into music:

And yet, when I went off to college I thought that perhaps I wouldn't be in music; I'm not quite sure why. I had a great interest in English, a great interest in history. So I went off to

Whitman College, a very fine small school in eastern Washington, and studied that and steeped myself in history. I didn't take a single solitary class in music. That summer, I worked for the Forest Service and got on one of those towers with the lookouts up by Mount Saint Helens. . . . I was up there for ten weeks and did a lot of self-examination. I decided that I really belonged in music, but not quite sure in what capacity. So I went back to Whitman College for another year and took every music class I could possibly lay my hands on. I had a thought that I might try composition. I just wasn't sure, but I also thought that I should probably go to a major school of music in a large urban area — a large metropolitan area — and so many people pointed towards Los Angeles. They said, "If you go down there and study with that great faculty, by taking the courses of all types, it will sort itself out." So I went to L.A.¹

Okay. So Lauridsen visited USC, thinking he “might try” composition. He set up a meeting with the head of the composition department, Halsey Stevens, to ask if he could take a class. Note this simple act, because it's very much of a piece with Lauridsen's approach to life: “Go ahead and take the risk. What have you got to lose?” I wonder what he had to do in order to “set up” this meeting. No internet, remember. Long-distance phone calls were expensive but perfectly doable, so I suppose that Lauridsen simply called the USC switchboard and asked to be connected to the appropriate faculty office. As any telemarketer knows, cold calls are murder! Or maybe he wrote a letter. Anyway, he got to the meeting and Stevens said, “Let me take a look at your composition portfolio,” and Lauridsen said, “I don't have one.” Hmmm. Stevens said, “Well, you know, we don't really take beginners.”

But then Stevens considered this 20-year-old kid who had flown down there all the way from Washington (which would have been a much bigger deal back then—we're talking 1963),

so rather than just saying “no” he asked if the young man could play him something on the piano. Lauridsen just happened to have the Brahms “E-Flat Rhapsody” memorized. (Or, as he puts it, “in his fingers” or “under his fingers.” He was and is a fine pianist as well as a “middling” trumpet player.) Stevens looked at him thoughtfully and started asking him questions. At the end of the conversation he said, “Mr. Lauridsen, I’ll tell you what. I’ll give you one semester in a composition class and we’ll see how you do.”

Lauridsen says,

I was twenty years old and I’ve always wished I had a tape of that conversation, because I could have whispered to him, “I’m going to succeed you down the line, and when you develop Parkinson’s, you’re going to ask me to finish pieces in your style.” All of this I did for him towards the end of his life.²

When I first heard read this passage I was a little taken aback. It sounds almost . . . I don’t know—pretentious? portentous? But it’s really not, at all. In fact, in at least one interview Lauridsen makes it clear that he considers all the work he did finishing up Stevens’ compositions to be a way of “giving back.” Stevens gave him his chance, and it’s rare that anyone gets to do anything to pay a debt such as that.

What if Stevens *had* said “no”? Who knows? Would Lauridsen have gone back to Whitmore College, or applied elsewhere, or (horrors!) become an English teacher? But no. That hour-long conversation gave him his entry into the world where he’d decided to go. I tend to think he’d have found another way forward, but it’s all very much an open question. (Kinda reminds me of that Robert Frost poem . . .)

One more funny little anecdote before I get on with the show here: While Lauridsen’s mother was a pianist and singer, she and Lauridsen’s father were very much opposed to this whole

move-to-LA-and-become-a-musician hoo-ha. Her boy was going to get in his 1953 Buick and drive down to the big city. She said to him, “Well, if it doesn’t work out, you can always come back—and eat crow.” But he said, “Maybe it’ll work out and maybe it won’t, but crow isn’t on my menu.” I wonder if *his* mom knew *my* mom.

Lauridsen rented a cheap house in a pretty crime-ridden part of LA and managed, as he says, to “keep afloat” playing gigs with his trumpet or typing term papers. Can you imagine being able to do that today? And he worked extremely hard. Eventually he was asked to join the faculty, not in composition at first but in music theory. So fascinating! His academic career took off from there. He’s now a distinguished professor emeritus of composition at the Thornton School of Music at USC, having taught there for over 50 years.

So he could have had this great career at this great school teaching a subject he loved, and that would have been just fine. But he didn’t want to just *teach* composition; he wanted to *compose*. So that’s what he started doing. Interestingly enough, his first published composition is a sonata for solo trumpet and piano, rated as “Grade 7—Virtuosic.” (Yes, it’s still for sale, but apparently so little-known that Wikipedia doesn’t include it in its list of Lauridsen’s publications.) The first composition he published for the voice that I’ve been able to find is something titled “Backyard Universe” for tenor solo and piano, with the text from a set of three poems by someone named Howard Witt, a fellow Californian who had a long career as a poet in the 1950s and 60s. The poems are about Witt’s children and their activities in the back yard: ballet dancing, a birthday party, nature exploration.

I’d love to know how Lauridsen chose that set of poems. He does have children of his own, although I’ve been unable to find out much more than that about his family life during the

time those children were growing up. The same 1999 interview quoted above yields the nugget that one of his sons is a “brilliant poet,” and when he’s asked if he’s set any of his son’s poems to music he says no, but that he intends to do so. I don’t see that that has happened. In the documentary *Shining Night* he says at one point about the island where he spends his summers, “I told my boys to just shovel me into a hole on the beach” when he dies. So that statement must mean that he has at least two sons. I haven’t found anything about the mother of those sons. However, I did manage to ferret out that Lauridsen is now married to Amber Kim, a choral conductor who has been associated with some of the same institutions as the composer. I would love to know that story! Honestly, I’m not trying to pry into the man’s personal life to be some kind of ghoul. It’s just that everyone, pretty much anyway, is so awed, so *serious*, about Lauridsen himself, that it’s hard to get a glimpse of the real person who wrote this sublime music. The musicologist Nick Strimple has called him “the only American composer in history who can be called a mystic.” Well, maybe. I’m not sure that Lauridsen takes himself too seriously. He does take his music very seriously, though, so much so that he spends time every morning (every morning that he’s somewhere with internet access, anyway) responding to e-mails from people who have been moved by hearing it.

But I do wonder if Lauridsen is sometimes tempted to roll his eyes at the questions he’s asked. After all, the basic facts of his life show up in almost every interview, and so let’s get on with the subject at hand, shall we? I got immensely tickled at this exchange, again from the 1999 interview already quoted:

BD: *When you’re sitting at the desk, and you’re putting the little dots on the paper, are you controlling that pencil, or does the pencil lead your hand across the page?*

ML: *I’m controlling the pencil because it’s a battle every step*

*of the way. I'm a reviser.*³ (ML thinks of saying, perhaps, 'Why yes, my good man. I have a mystic pencil. Didn't you know that?')



*Nov. 15, 2007, NEA Press
Release, Michael Stewart*

Nov. 15, 2007, NEA Press Release, Michael Stewart And then there are all the awards and honors. I'm including a picture of Lauridsen with George W. Bush in 2007 as he accepted the National Medal of Arts. It's an interesting question as to how much time that medal cost the composer. He had to fly across the country to Washington DC and I'm sure stayed a couple of days at least. Wasn't there a dinner? And of course the ceremony itself. These occasions can be pretty deadly, I'm sure. But they're also an opportunity to get the word out about your work. I think I see a twinkle in the composer's eye here. Hope so, anyway.

One aspect of Lauridsen's life that must be a great anchor to reality is the time he spends every year on Waldron Island, one of the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington state. He

went there when he was a boy and loved it so much that he went back as an adult to buy property there and build something for himself and his family. At first he directed his efforts to carpentry, buying a dilapidated, disused general store that needed huge amounts of work. Since the focus of the original building was toward the road where the customers would come in, there were no windows facing the water. So one of Lauridsen's first acts was to take a chainsaw to that back wall and cut some openings. Now he has that main building in somewhat finished shape and so has moved on to build a secondary structure that he calls a "meditation cottage," where he likes to go and read poetry. (He's a great lover of poetry; somewhere I read or heard that he starts every composition class with the reading of a poem.) There's no electricity or running water there. During the school year, at least until his retirement in May 2019, he's been down in Los Angeles on the University of Southern California campus. During the summer he's gone back to Waldron Island. When he first decided to do composing on the island he needed a piano out there, and the only access is by ferry. He had a \$50 spinet in the back of his pickup (or his VW van—accounts vary) and when he drove it onto the ferry it sank down almost to the water line. "What've you got in there, a piano?" asked the ferryman. They did make it across the passage, and Lauridsen's been using that cheap piano ever since to do his composing on the island.

A big boost to his career came when he was asked to be the composer in residence for the LA Master Chorale, and how he got into a relationship with that group is another example of his willingness to go out on a limb (or showing "moxie and perseverance," as the author of the following interview says), so much so that I'm going to quote somewhat at length from what Lauridsen said in that 2014 interview for the arts and culture blog "All Is Yar"--

It's 1984 and I'm reading the Los Angeles Times. I'm looking

at [the Master Chorale's] repertoire coming up and I see my name and the piece [Mid-Winter Songs with texts by Robert Graves]. This is huge! I'm just beginning my mid-career. It's a great thing to have this.

Well, I wait to hear from them, and I wait to hear from them. And I don't hear from them. So after a while, I called up and I got Robert Willoughby Jones, who was the Executive Director at that time. And I said, "Hi. My name is Morten Lauridsen and I couldn't help but notice you're doing a piece of mine." And there's this long silence and he said, "I'm sorry, we're not going to be able to do that." He said, "It's nothing about the piece at all, it has nothing to do with that. We love the piece."

"But [Roger] has been apprised of the fact that this is his last season. He's not a happy camper about this. So he told the board that [with regards to] their planned season, you might want to put that where the moon don't shine!" (Laughs) "You catch my drift? And he's not going to do anything new, he's going to do his old favorites – Danny Boy and etc. . . ."

And I said, "This is terrible news. Is there anything I can do?" And he said, "No, I'm sorry." I said, "Well, give me his phone number." (Laughter) And I remember him saying, "You don't want to do that!" I said, "What do I have to lose? Why don't I call him up and play it for him? Maybe I can get him to do it."

So I finally got his phone number and I called Roger Wagner at home: "Hi, my name is Morten Lauridsen. I couldn't help but notice you're going to be doing my Mid-Winter Songs." And the same thing, "No, I'm sorry, things have changed. . . ." And I said, "Well, that's awful news of course. But why don't I come up and play them for you? You might do them sometime." "No," he says again. "I think I should come up and play them for you." I finally got him to say yes. I said, "It doesn't take long."

So I went up and played it for him. And I simply sat down at the piano. Played it all of the way through. And after that he said, "Do that part again. I like that. What did you do right there?" So at the end I announced, "Maestro, those are my Mid-Winter Songs. I hope you'll reconsider." And two days later I got a call from Robert Willoughby Jones saying, "I don't know what happened, but it's back on the program."

Yeah! . . . and I often think what if I hadn't made that phone call? . . .

Indeed.⁴

If nothing else, this story is a good reminder that it's not enough for the artist to sit up in his garret—or out on his island—if he really wants to reach people. He has to go out into the world and put his ideas over. Otherwise, there they sit, like the poems of Emily Dickinson, in a drawer somewhere, being discovered, perhaps, long after the author is dead. And what fun is that for the author?

So there the composer was, plugging away, teaching and writing, getting some exposure but not hitting the big time, and then in 1994, when he was 51, a piece that he'd been commissioned to write for the LA Master Chorale, "*O Magnum Mysterium*," just *took off*. Here's how Stacy Horn, author of the fascinating book *Imperfect Harmony*, puts it:

When Lauridsen's interpretation premiered in 1994, Paul Salamunovich of the Los Angeles Master Chorale turned around and, for the first time in his choral conducting career, spoke directly to the audience. If anyone had asked him who his favorite composer was, he told them, he would have said Tomás Luis de Victoria. Victoria's "O Magnum Mysterium" remains as fresh as the day it was written. "Tonight, you're about to hear the world premiere of the twentieth-century counterpart," he told the audience. "A piece so beautiful," he

said, it would go on to outperform every American choral piece ever written. With those words he turned around, raised his baton, and roughly six minutes later, at fifty-one years old, Morten Lauridsen had his first genuine blockbuster.⁵

Three years later he wrote *Lux Aeterna*. As with so many modern composers who write music based on ancient liturgical texts, he felt free to pick and choose rather than following a set list. He started writing it as he was struggling with the news that his mother was dying. That same woman who'd played the piano and sung to him as a child and who'd scoffed a bit at his desire to become a musician, yes, that one. I was so glad that I ran across the tidbit about her "eating crow" comment because it was such a humanizing fact about her. Relationships are messy and complicated, which takes nothing away from the love we feel for each other and the grief we experience at a loss. I certainly had some monumental fights with my own mom—and I still miss her even though she's been gone for over 25 years. Three of the great requiems (*Lux* is based loosely on a requiem mass) were inspired by the death of the composer's mother: Fauré and Brahms as well as Lauridsen. (Stacy Horn, the author quoted in the previous paragraph, says that when she did a phone interview with the composer she asked him what type of voice his mother had but that he refused to answer that question. She thinks his refusal probably stemmed from the personal nature of the voice. Even a man who is so available for interviews, both in print and on video, has some reticences.)

A further fascinating tidbit about his mother: "She came around. She attended one of his concerts in Portland, and shortly before her death listened to a tape of her son's '*O Magnum Mysterium*.' 'When I die, I'd like to have that played at my funeral,' she told him. It was."⁶ Raises an interesting question here: Had his mother not heard any of his music up till that point, never attended any concerts featuring it? Don't

know.

It's great that I'm able to include the actual words of the composer himself as well as material produced from interactions with him. So for Lauridsen I'll start out with a bang with material from the 2012 documentary *Shining Night*. I'd encourage you to watch the five-minute segment from the film that focuses specifically on the *Lux*:

“Reflections on *Lux Aeterna* with Morten Lauridsen and Paul Salumunovich”

Hope that's whetted your appetite for the whole film, which you'll have to rent or buy. When I watched it I paid five bucks to have access for 72 hours. It's well, well worth that small amount of money:

“A Man, an Island, and Music That Moves the World”—link is to the page on the film website where you choose what you want to do in terms of purchases. I didn't want to link directly to the page where you can stream the film because I would have to approve cookies for you. There's a lot on that page, so take a look—and then watch the film!

“Morten Lauridsen—Coming to USC”—the composer tells the story about getting his big break from the head of the USC composition department. (This is actually the first of ten short videos in a set covering various topics about music and composition. If you're as charming and delighted as I think you'll be by this first one, just click on the rest of them that you'll be given on the YouTube sidebar.)

And a lovely interview in which Lauridsen has a longer conversation with a good overall explanation of his career and even talks about that trumpet sonata:

“Why Does Music Move Us So?—Morten Lauridsen”

So what is Lauridsen doing these days as I write this in June 2020? Well, the latest info I've been able to find is from May 2019, at the end of the academic year in which he retired from USC. I'll quote from a previously-noted article again here:

He leaves Los Angeles soon to live permanently at his home on the San Juan Islands in Washington, but he doesn't expect to slow down much. Lauridsen will continue doing residencies around the world — up next are Tucson and Wheaton College.⁷ I'm sure his residencies for the year of 2020 have all been cancelled, but he's probably content to stay on Waldron Island for the foreseeable future.

A note about my own experiences singing Lauridsen's music: I belong to a community choir, the Cherry Creek Chorale in Englewood, Colorado. The first Lauridsen piece I ever sang was "Sure on this Shining Night" with text by James Agee for a Christmas concert. Then for a concert titled "April Showers Bring May Flowers" we sang—what else?—a couple of the pieces from his "Rose" song cycle. Our latest performance of his works was indeed, however, the *Lux*, and we were so very privileged to sing it at two separate venues: our regular concert location and also the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Denver. That performance stands out as one of our best, both in the quality of the music we produced and also in pure enjoyment of singing. I remember finishing it and standing there, hearing the applause from a very enthusiastic crowd who had come out on a beautiful Sunday afternoon to hear us and smiling so hard I couldn't stop. **The video includes some other good stuff** before we launch into the *Lux*. If you'd like just to listen to the Lauridsen, skip forward to 23:30.

And finally, if you just can't get enough of Lauridsen and other modern American classical choral composers, I'd strongly recommend this video. You'll get to see Lauridsen, Eric

Whitacre, and someone named Frank Ticheli (whom I had not heard of but who is now on my list of Composers To Follow), along with a short segment from Dana Gioia, former poet laureate of the US. I can't recommend it highly enough:

[“American Voices” from KCET](#)

Sources cited in text:

¹[“Composer Morten Lauridsen: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie”](#)

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴[“Visiting Morten Lauridsen”](#)—I'd encourage you to follow the link and read the whole fascinating post.

⁵[Imperfect Harmony](#), pp. 220-221 Kindle edition.

⁶[“Light and Dark: World renowned composer counters Mozart in Green Valley”](#) (now behind paywall)

⁷Ibid.

