

## *Anthem Notes for March 19, 2017*

### *Pilgrims' Hymn*

Stephen Paulus (1949-2014)

*Even before we call on Your name  
To ask you, O God,  
When we seek for the words to glorify You  
You hear our prayer;  
Unceasing Love, O unceasing Love  
Surpassing all we know.*

*Glory to the Father;  
And to the Son,  
And to the Holy Spirit.*

*Even with darkness sealing us in  
We breathe Your name,  
And through all the days that follow so fast  
We trust in You;  
Endless Your grace, O endless Your grace  
Beyond all mortal dream.*

*Both now and for ever,  
And unto ages and ages, Amen.*

This expressive anthem adapts a prayer from the Russian Orthodox church in such a way that we may almost feel a series of deep connections: with each other, with ourselves, and with our God. The first stanza reminds us that God knows our words before we speak them: “Even before we call on your name to ask you, O God. . .” The phrase “unceasing love” describes love that is beyond imagining: “surpassing all we know.” Can we truly comprehend God’s love for us? In response, we can only say “Glory to the Father. . .”

The second stanza presents a profound message: “Even with darkness sealing us in, we breathe your name.” The darkness could be the end of day, the end of our lives, the end of time. Regardless, the verb “sealing” is powerful and vivid; yet, we “breathe your name.” The anthem ends very quietly (*pianissimo*) with a sense of awesome reverence.

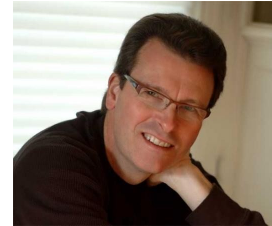
Composer Stephen Paulus set a text by Michael Dennis Browne and set it perfectly; it is an incredible wedding of text and music that enhances and dramatizes the text, filling it with powerful emotion. The anthem is actually taken from a one-act opera based on Leo Tolstoy’s short story, *The Three Hermits*. It details the pilgrimage of a Russian Orthodox bishop who is taught the value of simple faith from three strange and saintly hermits. In the opera, this piece is sung by a chorus of pilgrims who travel with the Bishop.

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In some ways, the composition is very simple in straight four-part harmony with some irregular rhythms—measures in 4/4, 5/4, 3/4, 2/4 but the quarter note tempo remains the same throughout. The challenge for the choir is to be true to the dynamic markings of the composer—from whisper soft to fortissimo (very loud)—and to maintain balance among the parts. Although the composer indicates the piece is in Db, there is no key signature and transpositions to other keys are important to the setting of the text.

Composer Paulus, who suffered a devastating stroke in July 2013 and who died in October 2014, was a prolific American composer. He wrote over 600 works for chorus, opera, orchestra, chamber ensemble, solo voice, concert band, piano, and organ, receiving premieres and performances throughout the world as well as a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Classical



Stephen Paulus

Composition in 2015. His musical style has been described by *The New York Times* as “lush and extravagant,” and critics from the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* *Opera News*, and many others praised his work.

He fulfilled music commissions from the Tucson Symphony Orchestra as well as serving as TSO’s first composer-in-residence. He had a close relationship with Tucson, including giving a choral workshop sponsored by the American Guild of Organists, where your director of music first became acquainted with this anthem. If you would like to hear the anthem again, there are several performances on YouTube. Just “Google” *Pilgrims’ Hymn* and several options should appear.

Michael Dennis Browne (b. 1940), poet, taught at several universities culminating with thirty-nine years at the University of Minnesota, where he was director of the creative writing program, a member of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers.

Thanks to Bob Foltz, conductor, this morning.

*Glory to the Father,  
and to the Son,  
and to the Holy Spirit*