

O Magnum Mysterium (*O Great Mystery*)

Morton Lauridsen

O Magnum Mysterium

Lauridsen's serene, soaring version of *O Magnum Mysterium* from 1994 is probably his best-known and most performed work, beloved by choirs around the world. He explains how an encounter with Zurbarán's 1633 painting *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose* had a profound and puzzling effect on him. He only later learned that the three images in the painting were all **Baroque symbols of the Virgin Mary**. Shortly after, he was asked to compose a piece for a Christmas concert. After struggling for months with the *Magnum Mysterium* text that so many composers, including **Palestrina**, had set over the centuries, he realized that the significance of the Virgin Mary had to be paramount. Lying in bed one night it came to him that it had to be done with one note. On the word "Virgo" in the middle of the piece, a G-sharp note - the only note out of the key of the setting - has to be musically resolved, thereby shining a sonic spotlight on the meaning of the word. It is thus the most important note in the piece. Such small details underly so much of Lauridsen's best works, which continue to delight musicians and concertgoers around the world.



“...the objects in this work are symbolic offerings to the Virgin Mary. Her love, purity and chastity are signified by the rose and the cup of water. The lemons are an Easter fruit that, along with the oranges with blossoms, indicate renewed life. The table is a symbolic altar.

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American composer **Morton Lauridsen** (born 1943) is a native of the Pacific Northwest. His work as a Forest Service firefighter and fire lookout on an isolated fire tower near Mount St. Helens helped him realize that music had to be a central part of his life. He studied composition at the University of Southern California, and began teaching there in 1967 until his retirement in 2019.



Five of the more than 200 CDs which feature his works have been nominated for Grammy Awards, and he has been the recipient of many awards, grants, prizes and commissions. In recent years Lauridsen has divided his time between Los Angeles and his home on Waldron Island in the San Juan Archipelago, just to the

northeast of Victoria BC and within sight of the Vancouver Island coast.

The 2012 documentary **Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen** gives a moving account of his life and accomplishments. While suffering ill health in the last few years, Lauridsen continues to compose even while his touring for residencies and appearances has been curtailed.

Roger Smith

Further Reading

It's a Still Life That Runs Deep - *The Wall Street Journal*

Morten Lauridsen: The sounds of silence - *Ottawa Citizen*

mortenlauridsen.net

Watch & Listen

Morten Lauridsen: Advice to Young Musicians

S:t Jacobs Ungdomskör - O Magnum Mysterium

Trailer: *Shining Night: A Portrait of Composer Morten Lauridsen*