



ĒRIKS EŠENVALDS

# The Doors of Heaven



Portland State Chamber Choir  
Ethan Sperry

## The Doors of Heaven

- |          |   |              |
|----------|---|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>The First Tears (2015)</b>   | <b>14:04</b> |
|          | Alex Habecker, Tim Havis, Emmalyn Fox, Adam Ramaley<br>Lisa Riffel and Jereme Wilkie, <i>Vocal soloists</i><br>Jeff Evans, <i>Native American flute</i><br>Max Kolpin, <i>Percussion</i><br>Erick Lichte, <i>Jaw harp</i><br>Kenan Koenig, <i>Overtone singing</i>                |              |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Rivers of Light (2014)</b>   | <b>6:33</b>  |
|          | Emmalyn Fox, <i>Soprano soloist</i><br>Sterling Roberts, <i>Baritone soloist</i><br>Shankar Viswanathan, <i>Jaw harp</i>  |              |
| <b>3</b> | <b>A Drop in the Ocean (2006)</b>   | <b>7:49</b>  |
|          | Rebecca Yakos, <i>Soprano</i>   |              |
|          | <b>Passion and Resurrection (2005)</b>  | <b>30:12</b> |
|          | Hannah Consenz, <i>Soprano</i><br>Genna McAllister, Jaclyn Casabar<br>Adam Ramaley and Sterling Roberts, <i>Vocal quartet</i><br>Hanaa El-Warari and Bryanna West, <i>Descant sopranos</i><br>Portland State University String Ensemble<br>Jonathan DeBruyn, <i>Concertmaster</i> |              |
| <b>4</b> | Part I  | 9:36         |
| <b>5</b> | Part II   | 5:11         |
| <b>6</b> | Part III  | 7:12         |
| <b>7</b> | Part IV   | 8:13         |

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**Ēriks EŠENVALDS (b. 1977)**  
**The First Tears • Rivers of Light**  
**A Drop in the Ocean • Passion and Resurrection**

Born in Priekule, Latvia in 1977, Ēriks Ešenvalds is rapidly becoming one of the world's most performed composers of choral music. He has won multiple awards for his work, including the Latvian Grand Music Award three times (2005, 2007 and 2015), The International Rostrum of Composers First Prize (2006), and New Composer Discovery of the Philadelphia Inquirer (2010). Ensembles worldwide have commissioned his works, including oratorios for the Boston Symphony, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Utah Symphony, the Britten Sinfonia, and a *cappella* choral music for the King's Singers, Latvian Voices, the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge, the Holst Singers, Imogen Heap, Polyphony, and numerous choirs in the United States. Ešenvalds' compositions appear on many recordings and, to date, five recordings are exclusively devoted to his choral music. This album is the first recorded by an American chorus.

Like many modern choral composers, Ēriks Ešenvalds often writes complex music, dividing the choir into eight or even sixteen parts, using an expanded tonality to create gorgeous, lush textures that almost overwhelm the listener. This sumptuous ethos has come to epitomise the 21st-century choral sound. But, unlike many of his contemporaries, Ešenvalds is equally

comfortable writing in an angular, aggressive style that channels the more stringent tonalities of the 20th century. What makes Ešenvalds' music so compelling is that he uses these two musical vocabularies side by side to bring a dramatic text to life. Ešenvalds has as much of a gift for crafting a libretto as he does for setting text to music: where many choral composers choose static texts – prayers, poems, or nature images – Ešenvalds prefers the dynamism of narratives, and he often combines multiple texts in order to create the dramatic movement he wants to capture in music. Writing in a post-Communist era, but having grown up with no religious upbringing allowed, Ešenvalds brings fresh eyes and ears to texts that most of us have known since childhood, but he encountered first as an adult. This album features four of his longer narrative works: one (*Rivers of Light*) about the beauty of nature, two (*A Drop in the Ocean* and *Passion and Resurrection*) about religious faith, and one (*The First Tears*) based on a Native American Legend that combines both faith and nature.

*The First Tears* (2015) is based on the Inuit legend of the Raven and the Whale, a story of how grief came into the world. Ešenvalds learned the story from native elders in Greenland and Alaska. His composition uses Native American

flutes, jaw harps, percussion, and expanded vocal techniques to create the mystical world where Raven – the creator of the world – accidentally destroys one of his own creations. Each section of the narrative is followed by reflective music where the words fall away, and tone syllables create space for the listener's imagination to inhabit the mood of the story. At 14 minutes, this is a long piece for a *cappella* choir, but the drama of Ešenvalds' music makes us feel as if we have listened to the soundtrack of a movie that needs no visual aspect to be fully alive.

*Rivers of Light* (2014) is one of several pieces Ešenvalds has written about the Northern Lights. Here, he combines ancient *Sámi* Scandinavian folk melodies with passages from British explorers' journals. Scandinavians see the Northern Lights frequently, and thus their everyday folk melodies (sung in this piece by solo voices) are used to capture the (to them) ordinary spectacle of the dance of lights in the sky. The British explorers, by contrast, are encountering the aurora for the first time and are overwhelmed by their beauty and energy, feeling as though 'The Doors of Heaven have been opened'; Ešenvalds writes his most expansive and beautiful chords in an attempt to capture their vision of heaven through the medium of music.

*A Drop in the Ocean* (2006) was written in memory of Mother Teresa. The altos chant the Lord's Prayer aleatorically in Latin in the background while the sopranos sing her favorite

prayer of St Francis of Assisi, "Lord, make me a channel of your peace." Gradually, the prayer melody fragments as the weight of the world closes in around her. As she tries to pray, she is assaulted by whispered fears, which grow to screams of anger. She wishes to escape as the sopranos are pushed to the extremes of their range in the ten-part cacophony of "O, that I had the wings of a dove." But she, and with her the listener, at last finds solace in her own most famous words: "My work is nothing but a drop in the ocean. But if I did not put that drop in the ocean, the ocean would be one drop the less."

The final and largest work on the album is Ešenvalds' first oratorio: *Passion and Resurrection* (2005) for soprano soloist, vocal quartet, choir, and string orchestra. Instead of using the traditional settings of this story from one of the four Gospels, Ešenvalds constructs his own libretto from a variety of liturgical sources including the Byzantine liturgy, the *Stabat Mater*, and passages from Job, Isaiah, and the book of Psalms. The piece begins with a vocal quartet singing a portion of a Renaissance motet by the Spanish composer Cristóbal de Morales. The string orchestra enters next in a completely different key, but the vocalists pay no attention, continuing their prayer, oblivious to the dissonance around them. The quartet returns throughout the work as a dispassionate Greek chorus (or perhaps the voice of 'the church'), commenting on the events, but taking no part in them, seldom resting in the same key as the orchestra. Next the soprano soloist appears in

the role of Mary Magdalene, watching the events of the Passion and wondering if her own sins are to blame for the horror she witnesses. The choir enters as a divine voice of forgiveness; the choir has the most complex part in this work, having to constantly change the role they play in this drama. After Mary is forgiven, the choir becomes the crowd that first narrates, then witnesses, and finally executes the crucifixion. Ešenvalds' music for this scene is graphic and chilling, not shying away from the violence of this act. The scene ends with the entire choir as the voice of Jesus asking God to forgive the people who are killing him. Ešenvalds' depiction of Christ's death at the end of the third movement is equally vivid with every element of the ensemble (solo soprano, quartet, solo violin and orchestra) playing simultaneously, but layered chaotically, each needing their own cathartic release from pain. The remainder of the work depicts humanity's response to the crucifixion: an alternation between sections of meditative contemplation and those of deepest sadness, leading to the Resurrection which appears not with the joyful music we are accustomed to, but with the same terror present at the crucifixion. Ešenvalds' spectators, it seems, are just as terrified as we might be at the spectacle of a man rising from the grave. The oratorio concludes with a more modern perspective as we are invited to make peace with what has happened and contemplate the possibility of eternity. The soprano soloist, small vocal ensemble, and full chorus combine to chant a final mantra in alternation, 'Mariam

Rabboni' as Mary sees Jesus from beyond the grave and follows him into eternity. The Passion story has been set to music many times, but where most settings of the Resurrection end with triumphant Hallelujahs, Ešenvalds through his choice of texts and music gives the most personal, soft and loving vision of life and love beyond the bounds of death.

I have often thought of the tonal music of the 18th and 19th centuries as being the music of human construction, with major and minor chords representing the lines and blocks we construct to depict order within nature. Ešenvalds' expanded tonality, though it includes dissonant tones, sounds to me even more consonant than major and minor, something like the next dimension of construction. Perhaps these are the harmonies of the Fibonacci sequence, the sounds of the spiral, or the way in which nature actually orders itself but which remain beyond complete human comprehension. Perhaps this is why it works equally well to depict the wonder a human feels when first viewing the Northern Lights, or when encountering the Divine in a religious context. Ešenvalds' ability to write this music is a rare gift, one that allows us to view centuries-old human stories from a new perspective: in his music, indeed, the doors of heaven are opened in all their beauty and complexity.

**Ethan Sperry**

## 1 The First Tears: Synopsis

It was Raven who created the world. One day, Raven was out on the water in his kayak, when he saw what he thought was an island. He rowed up to it and tried to land his kayak, but a huge mouth opened up and swallowed him. It wasn't an island at all, but an enormous whale! As he went down the whale's throat, Raven thought that he would surely die, but instead he saw the Whale's ribs rise up around him like huge ivory columns. In the distance he could see a mysterious light, and could hear a faint sound as if someone was banging on a drum. Raven followed the light and went further inside the Whale, where he came to a strange little house. He peered in through the window, then knocked on the door and went inside. He came into a small room, and there in the corner sat the most beautiful young girl he had ever seen.

'Won't you marry me? And come out into the World with me?'

'I do not belong in the world just as you do not belong inside the Whale, but you can stay here and keep me company for a while if you like. However I must warn you never to touch my drum or my lamp.'

She then stood up and started to dance. When she danced quickly, the Whale soared through the ocean, and when she danced slowly the Whale rested gently near the surface of the water. The girl then stopped

dancing and walked straight out of the door. 'Where are you going?'

'It's not important, just a matter of breath and life, life and breath.....'

'Who are you? And why do you live inside a Whale?'

'I am the Whale's Soul and my drum is the Whale's heart. My lamp must never go out, or I will die, and there will be nobody to beat my drum. I sing and dance all day and all night and never grow tired.'

But when the girl next left the room, Raven did something truly dreadful: he ignored what the girl had said to him. He touched the lamp. Raven burnt himself on the lamp, and dropped it on the floor. It hit the floor, the flame went out. The girl fell in through the door and dropped down dead; the house collapsed and became a pile of dead whale bones. Suddenly Raven was all alone in complete darkness, inside a mess of blood, fat and blubber. Raven clambered back up the Whale's throat, up through its blow-hole, up onto the top of its dead body. Raven flew higher and higher, far from the sea, he flew to the Earth, and there he wept the first tears the world had ever known.

*Inuit legend retelling by Eriks Ešenvalds*

## 2 Rivers of Light

### Sámi Text (Soloists):

Kuovsakasah reukarih tákko teki, sira ria, tákko teki, sira ria, sira siraa ria.

Guovssat, guovssatradni go, libai libai libaida,  
Ruoná gákti, nu nu nu.

*Northern Lights slide back and forth, sira ria,  
back and forth, sira ria, sira siraa ria.*

*Northern Lights, blanket shivering, libai libai libaida,  
green coat [traditional Sámi costume], nu nu nu.  
Sámi folk songs*

**English Text (chorus):** Winter night, the sky is filled with symphony of light, the sky is flooded with rivers of light. The doors of heaven have been opened tonight. From horizon to horizon misty dragons swim through the sky, green curtains billow and swirl, fast-moving, sky-filling, the tissues of gossamer. Nothing can be heard. Light shakes over the vault of heaven, its veil of glittering silver changing now to yellow, now to green, now to red. It spreads in restless change, into waving, into many-folded bands of silver. It shimmers in tongues of flame, over the very zenith it shoots a bright ray up until the whole melts away as a sigh of departing soul in the moonlight, leaving a glow in the sky like the dying embers of a great fire.

*Text compiled by the composer  
after writings by Charles Francis Hall,  
Fridjof Nansen and various other writings  
on the Northern Lights*

### ③ A Drop in the Ocean

Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie, et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem: sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

*Our Father, which art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil. Amen.*

LUKE 11: 2B–4

Lord, make me a channel of your peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,  
Where there is injury, let me sow pardon,  
Where there is discord, let me sow harmony,  
Where there is error, I may bring truth,  
Where there is doubt, let me sow faith,  
Where there's despair, let me sow hope,  
Where there is darkness, I may bring light,  
Where there is sadness, I may bring joy.

ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI (c.1181–1226)

Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!  
Oh, the wings of a dove!  
I would fly away,  
I would flee far away and be at rest.  
I would find my place of shelter far from the  
tempest and storm.

PSALM 55: 6-8

Ah, Jesus, you are my God,  
Jesus, you are my spouse,  
Jesus, my life, my love, my all in all.

My work is nothing but a drop in the ocean,  
but if I did not put that drop, the ocean would  
be one drop the less.

MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA (1910-1997)

## 4 Passion and Resurrection

### PART I

#### **Quartet:**

Parce mihi, Domine,  
nihil enim sunt dies mei.  
Quid est homo, quia magnificas eum?  
Aut quid apponis erga eum cor tuum?  
Visitas eum diluculo, et subito probas illum.  
Usque quo non parcis mihi, nec dimittis  
me, ut glutiam salivam meam?  
Cur non tollis peccatum meum, et quare  
non auferis iniquitatem meam?  
Ecce, nune in pulvere dormiam, et si mane  
me quaesieris, non subsistam.

*Leave me alone, Lord.  
My life makes no sense.  
Why is man so important to you?  
Why pay attention to what he does?  
You inspect him every morning and test  
him every minute.  
Won't you look away long enough for me  
to swallow my spittle?  
Can't you ever forgive my sin?  
Can't you pardon the wrong I do?  
Soon I will be in my grave,  
and I'll be gone when you look for me.*

After JOB 7:16-21

**Soprano:** Woe is me, for my foolish love of  
debauchery and my cleaving to iniquity have  
become a deep night unto me in which no  
light shines. Accept thou the wellsprings of  
my tears, thou who drawest the waters of the  
sea up into the clouds. Turn thy countenance  
upon the sobbing of my heart, thou who  
hast come from Heaven in thy inexpressible  
sacrifice. I shall kiss thy immaculate feet; I  
shall dry them with the tresses of my hair.  
In Paradise, Eve seeing them approaching,  
hid herself in fear. Who will examine the  
multitude of my sins, and thy judgments? O  
my Saviour, Redeemer of my soul, do not  
turn away from me: I am thy handmaiden,  
thou who art infinitely merciful.

From BYZANTINE LITURGY

**Choir:** Thy sins are forgiven; thy faith hath  
saved thee, go in peace.

LUKE 7: 48, 50

## PART II

**Choir:** My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. My Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

*MATTHEW 26: 38, 42*

And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. When they had plaited a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand, and they spit upon him: and they have bowed the knee before him. They mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And after they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

*After MATTHEW 27: 28-31*

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

*LUKE 23: 34*

**Quartet:** My friend betrayed me by the token of a kiss: whom I shall kiss, that is he, hold him fast. That was the wicked token which he gave, who by a kiss accomplished murder. Unhappy man, he relinquished the price of blood, and in the end hanged himself.

*TENEBRAE RESPONSORY FOR  
MAUNDY THURSDAY*

**Soprano:** How great is thy love for mankind, O Lord! Thou bent down and washed Judas' feet, although he denied and betrayed thee.

*From BYZANTINE LITURGY*

### **Chorus:**

Amicus meus osculi me tradidit signo:  
Quem osculates fuero, ipse est, tenete eum!  
Hoc malum fecit signum,  
Qui per osculum adimplevit homicidium.  
Infelix praetermisit pretium sanguinis,  
Et in fine laqueo se suspendit.

*TENEBRAE RESPONSORY FOR  
MAUNDY THURSDAY*

## PART III

**Soprano:** At thy mystic Supper, admit me to thy communion, O Son of God. For I shall not betray the secret to thy enemies, nor give thee the kiss of Judas. But, like the thief, I beseech thee: Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.

*From BYZANTINE LITURGY*

**Choir:** Verily I say unto thee: today thou shall be with me in paradise.

*LUKE 23: 43*

**Soprano:** The grieving Mother stood beside the cross weeping where her Son was hanging. Through her weeping soul, compassionate and grieving, a sword passed. Who is the man who would not weep if seeing the Mother of Christ in such agony?

*From STABAT MATER*

## PART IV

**Choir:** Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!

*JOHN 19: 26-27*

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?  
*My God, My God,*  
*why have you forsaken me?*

*MATTHEW 27: 46*

They have pierced my hands and my feet,  
they have counted all my bones. They  
divided my garments among them, and upon  
my garments they have cast lots.

*PSALM 22: 17-19*

The enemy hath persecuted my soul, they  
have smitten my life down to the ground, they  
have made me to dwell in darkness, as those  
that have been long dead.

*PSALM 143: 3*

I thirst!

*JOHN 19: 28*

It is finished!

*JOHN 19: 30*

**Soprano:** By his stripes are we healed.

*ISAIAH 53: 5*

**Quartet:** Father, into thy hands I commend  
my spirit.

*LUKE 23: 46*

**Soprano and Quartet:**

O dulce lignum, O dulces clavos,  
O dulcia ferens pondera:  
quae sola fuisti digna sustinere  
Regem coelorum et Dominum.

*O sweet wood, whose sweet nails held the  
sweet burden. You alone were the one who  
held the Ruler of Heaven and the Lord.*

*ALLELUIA AT MASS ON  
THE FINDING OF THE HOLY CROSS*

**Choir:** Why seek ye among the dead, as a  
mortal, the One who abides in everlasting  
light? Behold the linens of burial, the Lord  
is risen!

*After LUKE 24: 5-6*

**Quartet:** Woman, why weepst thou?  
Woman, whom seekest thou?

**Soprano:** Sir, if thou hast borne him hence,  
tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will  
take him away.

*JOHN 20: 15*

**Soprano, Quartet and Choir:** Mariam.  
Rabboni.

*JOHN 20: 16*

## Portland State Chamber Choir

Photo by Paige Rader



James DePreist and Eric Ericson. Portland-born composer Morten Lauridsen described their singing as “an absolutely top-notch superb display of choral artistry.”

The choir has recorded the choral music of Margaret Garwood on the Hildegard label and the music of Veljo Tormis on the Albany label, at the request of Tormis himself. The chamber choir’s 2012 recording CD *A Drop in the Ocean* was a finalist for the 2012 American Prize in Choral Music. Their latest CD, *Into Unknown Worlds*, was named a ‘Record to Die For’ by *Stereophile* magazine. It was the first ever student choral recording to receive this distinction, and was a finalist for the 2014 CARA Award for Best Classical Album.

Recently the PSCC has been asked to collaborate with a variety of performers in the Portland area. In the summer of 2014, the choir served as the chorus for the world premiere of the opera *The Canticle of the Black Madonna* by Ethan Gans-Morse; for Christmas 2015, they performed Handel’s *Messiah* with the Oregon Symphony under the baton of their music director Carlos Kalmar; and in May 2016, the choir performed Stravinsky’s *Persephone* with the same forces in a fully staged production directed by Michael Curry.

## Ethan Sperry

Photo by Brian Lee



Hailed by *The Oregonian* for providing “the finest choral concerts in Portland in recent memory,” Ethan Sperry is director of choral activities at Portland State University and artistic director and conductor of Oregon Repertory Singers. Sperry began studying conducting at the age of eight, cello at the age of twelve, and singing at the age of eighteen. He earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Harvard College and a master’s and a doctoral degree in choral conducting from the University of Southern California. Ensembles under his direction

have toured all over the world, and have performed at major venues in the United States including the Hollywood Bowl, The Kennedy Center and the United Nations.

A prolific arranger of world music for choirs, Sperry is the editor of the *Global Rhythms* series for Earthsongs Music, one of the bestselling choral series in the country. Sperry is also a frequent collaborator with film composer AR Rahman and has appeared as a guest conductor for him numerous times, including at Bollywood Night at the Hollywood Bowl and the 2008 Filmfare Awards, the Indian equivalent of the Oscars. He also serves as a consultant for the KM Music Conservatory in Chennai, the first classical music school in India, which opened in 2009. From 2000-10, Dr. Sperry was on the faculty at Miami University in Ohio where he conducted the men’s glee club, Collegiate Chorale, and Global Rhythms ensembles. From 2000-06 he was the artistic administrator of the Arad Philharmonic Chorus in Arad, Romania, and from 2001-03 was the principal conductor of the Choeur Régional de Guadeloupe, the only symphonic choir in the French West Indies.

## Portland State University String Ensemble

The Portland State University String Ensemble is drawn from the ranks of the Portland State University Orchestra. Under the direction of Ken Selden since 2006, the Portland State Symphony Orchestra has received three awards for Adventurous Programming from ASCAP and the League of American Orchestras. Recent guest artists with the orchestra include Manuel Barrueco, Jennifer Frautschi, Matt Haimovitz, Anna Polonsky, Awadagin Pratt and Orli Shaham, as well as PSU faculty members Hamilton Cheifetz, Christine Meadows, Carol Sindell and Richard Zeller. In addition to its own concert schedule, the PSU Orchestra performs annually with the The Portland Ballet and the PSU Opera Theatre. All instrumental performers on the disc are drawn from the Portland State University Orchestra.



NAXOS

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The Latvian composer Ēriks Ešvalds has rapidly become one of the world's most performed choral composers. His ability to bring a dramatic text to life through textures that are lush yet permeated with a more stringent and angular aesthetic has ensured a steady stream of commissions from leading orchestras and choral forces. The four works here reflect an interest in the beauty of nature, religious faith and legend. *The First Tears* explores an Inuit story and employs subtle instrumental colouration from jaw harps and Native American flutes, whilst *Passion and Resurrection* is a profound and powerful exploration of Christ's death and Resurrection.

Ēriks  
EŠENVALDS  
(b. 1977)

The Doors of Heaven

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Portland State Chamber Choir  
Ethan Sperry, Conductor

A complete list of artists may be found on page 2 of the booklet  
Includes sung texts which may also be accessed at [www.naxos.com/libretti/579008.htm](http://www.naxos.com/libretti/579008.htm)  
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