



# JONATHAN LESHNOFF

Elegy • Violin Concerto No. 2 • Of Thee I Sing

Noah Bendix-Balgley, Violin  
Canterbury Voices  
Oklahoma City Philharmonic  
Alexander Mickelthwate



## Jonathan Leshnoff (b. 1973)

### Elegy • Violin Concerto No. 2 • Of Thee I Sing

This album, the Naxos label's fifth in its ongoing series devoted to the music of Baltimore-based composer Jonathan Leshnoff, is doubly commemorative. On one level, it celebrates the collaboration between the composer, the Oklahoma City Philharmonic, and its music director Alexander Mickelthwate, by presenting the orchestra's first full-length album recording since its formation in 1988. On another level, though, the works by Leshnoff selected for this recording reflect our communal need for musical expressions of remembrance, memorialization, and hopefulness. *Of Thee I Sing* marks the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, whereas Leshnoff's *Elegy*, co-commissioned by the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, "is written in memory of the thousands of nameless people who suffered under oppression," as the composer explains. Yet despite the somber intentions behind these works, the resulting compositions communicate a sense of life-affirming vitality.

Much of Leshnoff's work focuses on what might be considered "legacy genres," as evidenced in his prolific output of symphonies, concertos, oratorios, and string quartets. These forms have attracted composers across centuries of music history and have yielded a canon of acknowledged masterpieces. Leshnoff openly declares his affinity with this legacy. Rather than seeking to overthrow musical tradition, he embraces how these inherited musical forms offer an unending potential for distinctive originality. His works prove that this tradition still offers a vital outlet for unmistakably contemporary expression. A long list of commissions and performances by major orchestras, including those in Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Kansas City, Nashville (heard on a GRAMMY-nominated Naxos album, *Violins of Hope*, 8.559809), Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, demonstrate his success in this endeavor. Conductors Marin Alsop, Giancarlo Guerrero, Manfred Honeck, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Robert Spano, Michael Stern, and Jaap van Zweden, have all championed his music. His concertos have been performed by such notable soloists as Manuel Barrueco, Jeffrey Khaner, Johannes Moser, Gil Shaham, Jason Vieaux, and Joyce Yang, ranking Leshnoff among the most frequently performed living composers by American orchestras in recent seasons.

Leshnoff's musical style is direct and expressive, marked by the dichotomy of two contrasting modes of expression. One aspect of his musical personality features an extroverted intensity of pulsating rhythms, subtly shifting irregular meters, and unpredictable accents. A complementary idiom of slow, inward reflectiveness is characterized by a sustained melodic lyricism with the support of densely lush harmonies. These contrasting approaches are united by a harmonic vocabulary built out of generally identifiable chords and triads that often connect in unexpected, non-functional patterns. His music speaks eloquently in a style that is unmistakably his own and that quickly becomes recognizable upon repeated listening.

The present album offers a representative cross-section of Leshnoff's recent works composed between 2017 and 2022. His *Elegy* (2022) joins the growing repertoire of string orchestra works with commemorative or memorial associations, particularly among listeners in the United States: Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (played at Franklin Delano Roosevelt's funeral), Gustav Mahler's *Adagietto* from the *Fifth Symphony* (selected by Leonard Bernstein to mark the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy), and George Walker's *Lyric for Strings* (composed in memory of the composer's grandmother) all inhabit a similar emotive space. The commission for *Elegy* was jointly supported by the Tennessee Holocaust Commission and the Bellingham Symphony Orchestra as part of music director Yaniv Attar's "Harmony from Discord" initiative. Scored for string orchestra with the addition of harp, timpani, and (exceptionally) four horns, Leshnoff addresses the contradictory states of "harmony" and "discord" through two contrasting thematic ideas. He describes the opening idea as "a somber, dark theme" that is "lonely and contemplative." The work's central section introduces "a hopeful, brighter theme" in which the French horns double parts of the string texture, suffusing the music with an added richness of timbre. After a climax propelled by pulsing timpani strokes, the final section combines both thematic ideas and notably ends on a major triad, "symbolic of the hope that has emerged through the dark, discordant eras of history," the composer adds.

Leshnoff's *Violin Concerto No. 2* (2017) follows the so-called "symphony-concerto" model, as did his subsequent *Piano Concerto*, by employing a four-movement structure. In both works, Leshnoff adds a brief, dance-like *scherzo* before the work's



finale, thereby replicating the common shape of a symphony. (Significant precedents include Liszt's *First Piano Concerto*, Brahms' *Second Piano Concerto*, and Shostakovich's *First Violin Concerto*.) Further reinforcing this work's symphonic cohesion, a unifying motto theme reappears in three of the four movements. Its initial appearance occurs at the outset of the first movement. Given by the solo violin, the melody is sustained and lyrical, featuring long note durations and widely spaced intervallic leaps. Soon the music grows in intensity, becoming a kinetic study in perpetual motion that persists despite the solo violin's long-breathed melodic declarations, derived from the motto theme, that reemerge throughout the movement.

The concerto's second movement is the emotional core of the work, with the violin accompanied only by strings and harp. Much of Leshnoff's output is inspired by his study of Jewish mysticism, especially the ways in which, as he says, "the authentic Jewish mystical schools outline in great length and detail the spiritual architecture of the universe and its relationship with God and mankind." Entitled *Chokhmah* ("Chokhmah Yud"), the concerto's slow movement is the part of an ongoing ten-work, multi-year project that "parallels the ten fundamental building blocks of Jewish spiritual thought. 'Chokhmah,' in mystical thought, is the unknown, mysterious genesis of any creative idea. Like an embryo, it contains the entire structure in one small 'point.' Here the lyrical, plaintive melody grows out of the most minimal background and instruments in the orchestra." The frequent, large rising leaps of that melody once again reveal a kinship with the concerto's motto theme.

After the profundity of *Chokhmah Yud*, the subsequent *scherzo* offers a moment of light-hearted relief before the finale revives the driving perpetual motion and athletic violin writing of the opening movement. The thematic material here is initially independent of anything that has come before. Near the movement's conclusion, however, the motto theme at last makes a triumphant return, heard in counterpoint above the scalar figures which opened the movement. Commissioned by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and co-commissioned by the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, *Violin Concerto No. 2* received its premiere in May 2018 under Jaap van Zweden with soloist Alexander Kerr in Dallas.

As the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing was approaching, conductor Alexander Mickelthwate reached out to Leshnoff to propose a memorial commission. Mickelthwate envisioned a piece for chorus and orchestra "that transcends the atrocity and focuses on all the good that came out of it in the last 25 years. A city growing together. But also transcending death. To the point where in this bizarre world music actually unifies and makes the listener step out of the crazy into a spiritual sphere. Where the spiritual becomes reality and the other just a dream." Leshnoff approached his task with utmost sensitivity, calling this "the most serious commission I have ever received" and acknowledging that the premiere would occur "in the city where it happened, in front of those who witnessed it." The result would be *Of Thee I Sing* (2020).

The composer drew inspiration from Samuel Francis Smith's familiar 1831 poem *America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)*, reserving the chorus until the work's conclusion where they would sing the first three stanzas with its usual tune. With that arrival point as the goal, the score begins with Leshnoff's now familiar style of pulsating harmonies, unpredictable *sforzando* hits, and sustained brass melodies. The music captures the fear, confusion, and anxiety of that tragic day – in Leshnoff's phrase, the orchestra plays "as if crying out in pain." Indeed, 19 April 1995 remains the worst act of homegrown terrorism in US history, resulting in 168 deaths including 19 children. A contrasting slow section follows, as if frozen in time, while lyrical melodies gradually emerge above sustained harmonies. Soon the energy of the opening resumes, redoubling in orchestral aggression as the music builds in both tempo and dynamic. Material from the opening is reprised and eventually the work arrives at a triple *forte* climax succeeded by a haunting harmonic progression.

At last the chorus makes its entrance, singing the well-known text and tune. Only now does it become fully apparent that many of the melodic ideas heard up to this point are in fact pre-echoes of *America*. Leshnoff elects not to present the hymn as a whole, but instead he navigates seamlessly between phrases from the original and passages of his own invention, building a magnificent choral edifice worthy of Maestro Mickelthwate's guiding vision. When "mortal tongues awake" and the "rocks their silence break," the chorus sings at glorious, full strength. Yet rather than conclude with this moment of exaltation, Leshnoff appends a brief epilogue. The composer explains, "With one last refrain of *My Country, 'Tis of Thee*, the music subsides and the strings sustain peaceful chords, taking us to a serene and hopeful place."

### **Of Thee I Sing (2020)**

(Text: Samuel Francis Smith, 1808–1895,  
*America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)*)

My country, 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing;  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the Pilgrims' Pride,  
From every mountain side  
Let freedom ring.

My native country, thee,  
Land of the noble, free,  
Thy name I love;  
I love thy rocks and rills,  
Thy woods and templed hills,  
My heart with rapture thrills,  
Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze,  
And ring from all the trees  
Sweet freedom's song;  
Let mortal tongues awake,  
Let all that breathe partake,  
Let rocks their silence break,  
The sound prolong.



## Jonathan Leshnoff



Photo: Erica Hamilton

GRAMMY-nominated composer Jonathan Leshnoff is renowned for his music's striking harmonies, structural complexity, and powerful themes. The Baltimore-based composer has been ranked among the most performed living composers by American orchestras in recent seasons and his compositions have been performed by leading international orchestras and chamber ensembles in hundreds of concerts worldwide. He has received recent commissions from Carnegie Hall and orchestras across the United States, and his compositions have been premiered by classical music's most celebrated soloists. There are eight all-Leshnoff albums to date, five of which have been featured on Naxos American Classics. A notable recent release is the 2019 Naxos recording featuring Leshnoff's music performed by the Nashville Symphony and conductor Giancarlo Guerrero (8.559809). Nominated for a GRAMMY Award for Best Classical Compendium, the album includes the world premiere performance of his *Symphony No. 4 'Heichalos'* with the Violins of Hope. Reference Recordings released a highly acclaimed all-Leshnoff album featuring world premiere recordings of his *Piano Concerto* and his *Symphony No. 3* commemorating the First World War, and earlier in 2020 the label also released an extensively reviewed album featuring the world premiere performance of his *Double Concerto for Clarinet and Bassoon* by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and conductor Manfred Honeck, which made it to the top of the Billboard charts. Other notable releases include a recording of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus performing his *Symphony No. 2* and *Zohar* oratorio (ASO Media). Leshnoff's catalog is vast, including several symphonies, various concertos, solo and chamber music works. Leshnoff is a Professor of music at Towson University.

[www.jonathanleshnoff.com](http://www.jonathanleshnoff.com)

## Noah Bendix-Balgley



Photo: Nikolaj Lund

First concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic, Noah Bendix-Balgley also regularly appears with leading international orchestras and as a soloist. Recent highlights include concerto appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic, and solo engagements around the world, with extensive tours throughout Asia and Europe. Born in Asheville, North Carolina, Bendix-Balgley began playing the violin at the age of four. At the age of nine, he played for Yehudi Menuhin, and later graduated from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and the Munich Hochschule, studying with Mauricio Fuks, Christoph Poppen and Ana Chumachenco. Now a gifted educator himself, Bendix-Balgley teaches at the Karajan Academy of the Berlin Philharmonic and frequently gives masterclasses including at his alma mater in Indiana, Morningside Music Bridge, Domaine Forget, the Australian National Academy of Music, and the Shanghai Orchestra Academy. [www.noahbendixbalgley.com](http://www.noahbendixbalgley.com)

## Canterbury Voices



Photo: Michael Anderson

Now in its fifth decade, the prize-winning ensemble Canterbury Voices is Oklahoma's premier symphony chorus, performing three concerts per season at the Civic Center Music Hall in Oklahoma City. Often accompanied by the Oklahoma City Philharmonic and other community partners, Canterbury consistently offers artistic and educational experiences of the highest caliber to the broadest and most diverse audiences possible in the Central Oklahoma region. In addition to having commissioned new works by Stephen Paulus, Edward Knight, Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, and Dominick Argento, Canterbury has performed alongside many talented singers and musicians from around the United States, including Kelli O'Hara, Sarah Coburn, Barry Manilow, Ron Raines, and Andrea Bocelli. Through its mission – to transform lives, inspire communities, and educate the future – Canterbury also maintains a 20-member ensemble comprised of some

of the most talented singers in Oklahoma, a youth music education program featuring four choirs, an immersive summer camp for students who love to sing, and an afterschool music program in partnership with Boys and Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County.

## Oklahoma City Philharmonic



Oklahoma Philharmonic Society, Inc. exists to provide inspiration and joy for the community through orchestral music and maintains a strong commitment to enrich the lives of those it touches, enhance the cultural life of the community, educate future generations about the value of music, entertain audiences, elevate the quality of every performance, and to serve as a leader for positive community growth through the performance of excellent symphonic music, and to cooperate with other arts agencies for the betterment of its community.

[www.okcphil.org](http://www.okcphil.org)

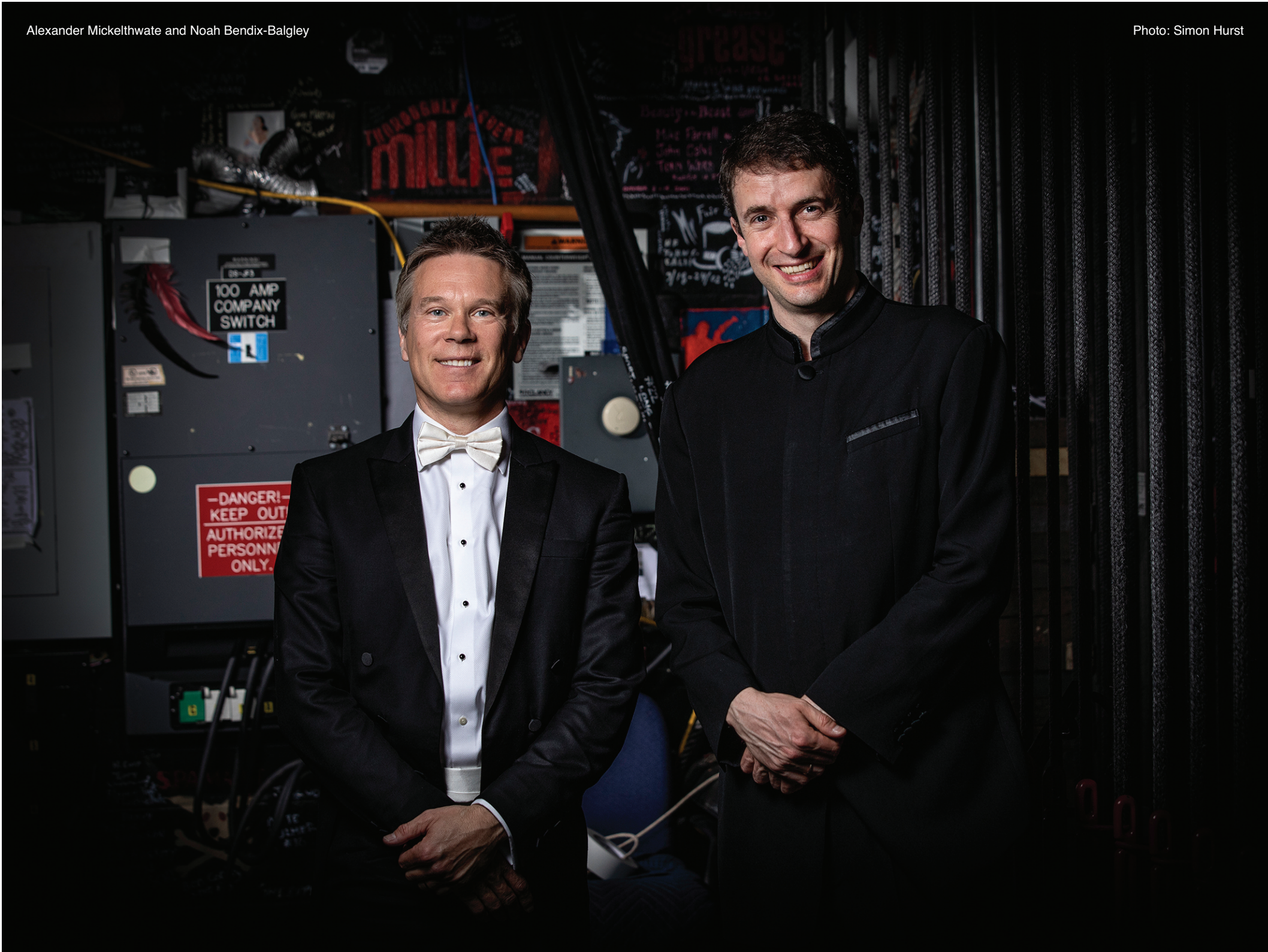
Tracing its roots back to the city's first professional orchestra in 1924, the Oklahoma City Philharmonic formed in 1988 under the musical direction of Joel Levine with the help of dedicated civic leaders and corporations. Throughout the years, the orchestra has performed a diverse selection of music with many different artists. It featured on PBS with Michael Martin Murphey in a performance titled *Sagebrush Symphony* for the program *Austin City Limits*, and appeared with Kathie Lee Gifford on her CBS Christmas special *Just in Time for Christmas*. Guest artists have included Itzhak Perlman, Amy Grant, Yo-Yo Ma, Joshua Bell, Tony Bennett, Olivia Newton-John, Bebe Neuwirth, Sir James Galway, Chris Botti, Renée Fleming and most recently Kristin Chenoweth, Kelli O'Hara, Pink Martini, and Ben Folds. The

## Alexander Mickelthwate



Alexander Mickelthwate became music director of the Oklahoma City Philharmonic in 2018, and has embraced Oklahoma City and its rich and colorful tapestry. Artistically, he has programmed several concerts with a Native American theme, and has created some touching tributes to the city's history. In 2020, he led the commissioning of a special piece for the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. Mickelthwate was born and raised in Frankfurt, Germany. He received his degree from the Peabody Institute, and has worked with orchestras in Atlanta, Winnipeg and Los Angeles. He is music director emeritus of the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra in Canada, and in 2022 accepted the position of music director of the prestigious Bear Valley Music Festival in Bear Valley, California.







# Jonathan LESHNOFF

(b. 1973)

- |   |                                     |              |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | <b>Elegy (2022)</b>                 | <b>8:41</b>  |
|   | <b>Violin Concerto No. 2 (2017)</b> | <b>24:54</b> |
| 2 | <b>I. Broad</b>                     | <b>6:45</b>  |
| 3 | <b>II. Very Slow “Chokhmah ה”</b>   | <b>9:56</b>  |
| 4 | <b>III. Scherzo</b>                 | <b>2:14</b>  |
| 5 | <b>IV. Fast</b>                     | <b>5:57</b>  |
| 6 | <b>Of Thee I Sing (2020)</b>        | <b>22:28</b> |
- (Text: Samuel Francis Smith, 1808–1895)

## WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

**Noah Bendix-Balgley, Violin** 2–5

**Canterbury Voices** 6

(Artistic director: Randi Von Ellefson)

**Oklahoma City Philharmonic**

**Alexander Mickelthwate**

Recorded live on 22 May 2022 at the Visual and Performing Arts Center Theater, Oklahoma City Community College 1, 4–5 March 2022 2–5 and 31 January to 1 February 2020 6 at the Thelma Gaylord Performing Arts Theatre, Civic Center Music Hall, Oklahoma City, USA

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## AMERICAN CLASSICS

This is Naxos’s fifth album devoted to the music of leading American composer, Jonathan Leshnoff. He was GRAMMY-nominated for his album *Violins of Hope* (Naxos 8.559809) and is among the most frequently performed of living composers. The themes of these recent works are remembrance, memorialization, and hopefulness. *Elegy* addresses ideas of harmony and discord through contrasting thematic ideas. The *Violin Concerto No. 2* follows the ‘symphony-concerto’ model with a resonant and lyrical slow movement inspired by Jewish mysticism at its core. Pulsating harmonies eventually subside into serene and hopeful writing in *Of Thee I Sing*, written in an act of creative transcendence to commemorate the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.



[www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com)

Playing  
Time:  
**56:06**