



Zebulon Highben

2011 Raabe Prize Winner

"Love Is The Key"

The ALCM Raabe Prize for Excellence in Sacred Composition is awarded every two years for a single musical work, published or unpublished, and written within the last five years. The work should reflect a larger history of excellence on the part of the composer who need not be Lutheran. Any sacred piece may be submitted. Compositions that include the voice or voices are preferred over those for instruments alone. The \$2000 monetary award is shared equally by the winner and a musical or ecclesiastical organization chosen by the composer. Dr. William and Nancy Raabe of Columbus, Ohio, established this prize to recognize and encourage significant accomplishments in composition contributing to the body of sacred music for the church in the Lutheran heritage.

Love Is The Key

Love is the key of life and death,
Of hidden, heavenly mystery;
Of all Christ is, of all he saith,
Love is the key.

As three times to his saint he saith,
He saith to me, he saith to thee,
Breathing his grace-conferring breath:
"Lov'st thou me?"

Ah, Lord, I have such feeble faith,
Such feeble hope to comfort me;
But love it is strong as death,
And I love thee.

~ *Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)*

Zeb Highben writes: *Love Is The Key* sets the poem "A Song for the Least of All Saints," by Christina Rossetti. Both the title and the second stanza of the poem are allusions to John 21:15-19, in which Jesus asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him. Rossetti puts this question at the center of her poem, directing it at herself as well as the audience. The other

stanzas are structured around it: The first stanza describes the centrality of love both to life and faith. The third stanza begins anxiously, alluding to Peter's three denials (John 18:15-27), but ends affirming love's triumph over "feeble faith" and even death itself, quoting the famous passage from Song of Solomon 8:6.

In *Love Is The Key* I have tried to capture the dramatic flow of Rossetti's poem. The tempo of each successive stanza increases with the growing urgency of the text. The seven-measure motive which begins the piece returns in an abbreviated form between stanzas as a reminder of love's presence even in the midst of anxiety and strife. The number three, central to the poem and to John's narrative about Peter and Jesus, also serves to unify the piece; this is particularly evident in the second stanza.

Love Is The Key will be premiered and recorded by Magnum Chorum at its May 14 concert at Nativity of Our Lord Catholic Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. This 50-voice chamber choir, under the direction of conductor Christopher Aspaas, presents colorful concerts, commissions and premieres new sacred works, and is the choir in residence at Westwood Lutheran Church. *Love Is The Key* is being published by MorningStar Music Publishers.

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Zebulon M. Highben is a choral conductor, church musician, and composer. He is currently pursuing the D.M.A. in choral conducting at Michigan State University. He is also Director of Music at First Presbyterian Church of Lansing and conductor of the Ingham Festival Chorale.

Highben has taught at the University of Wisconsin River Falls, Luther Seminary, and the annual Lutheran Summer Music Academy and Festival, where he has been The Paul Bouman Chapel Choir Director since 2005. At Michigan State, his teaching duties have included assistant conductor of the University Chorale and Men's Glee Club as well as undergraduate courses in conducting and music history. From 2004 until 2009, Highben was Choirmaster and Associate Musician at Westwood Lutheran Church in suburban Minneapolis, where he directed multiple choirs and oversaw the Fine and Visual Arts Series. Under his direction, the 70-voice Westwood A Cappella Choir released two recordings and was invited to give solo performances at the Minnesota ACDA state convention (2006) and the St. Olaf College Choral Festival (2008).

Highben's choral and liturgical compositions have been performed by church, collegiate, school, and community choirs and are published by Augsburg Fortress, Boosey & Hawkes, GIA Publications, and MorningStar Music. He is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons*, and with Kristina Langlois co-edited the book *With a Voice of Singing*, a Festschrift in honor of Ronald A. Nelson.

He holds the B.M.E. (*magna cum laude; with departmental distinction*) from Ohio State University, where he studied conducting with Hilary Apfelstadt and James S. Gallagher, and the M.S.M. from Luther Seminary and St. Olaf College, where he studied with Anton Armstrong and Robert Scholz. His conducting mentors at Michigan State include David Rayl, Jonathan Reed, and Sandra Snow. He studied church music with John Ferguson and Paul Westermeyer, and composition with David Cherwien and Ronald A. Nelson.

Highben was the Midwest regional president of ALCM from 2008 until 2010, and is also active in the American Choral Directors Association, the American Composers Forum, and the Hymn Society. He is a commissioned Associate in Ministry (AIM) in the ELCA.