PROGRAM NOTE

VINCENT'S SKY

Jake Runestad (b. 1986)

Considered "one of the best of the younger American composers" *(Chicago Tribune),* Jake Runestad (b. 1986) holds a Master's in Composition from the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University where he studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Kevin Puts. He has also studied with acclaimed composer Libby Larsen. An award-winning composer of "highly imaginative" *(Baltimore Sun)* and "stirring and uplifting" *(Miami Herald)* musical works, Runestad has received commissions and performances from leading ensembles and organizations such as the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Santa Fe Desert Chorale, the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, the Philippine Madrigal Singers, Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare, and many more.

Moved by the natural world, as well as the worlds of poetry and the visual arts, Runestad's music frequently weaves various sensibilities into his riveting, emotionally driven compositions. Whether drawing upon the indigenous Mayan poetry of Humberto Ak'abal in *Footprints*, or including immersive lighting in *The Ways of Stars*, Runestad treats inspirational sources as structural partners through his creative processes. An authentic intersection of artistic disciplines becomes integrally realized across several of his multimedia projects.

Case in point is Runestad's *Vincent's Sky.* Written in 2025, the work brings together music, painting, and poetry, showing that artists find muses whenever they open their eyes and hearts. For example, and by way of some background for this work, Vincent van Gogh felt inspired by the poetry of Walt Whitman, particularly in 1889 while conceiving and painting "The Starry Night." In fact, van Gogh read *Leaves of Grass* and the cluster of poems therein titled "From Noon to Starry Night" where the night sky serves as a manifestation of eternity and cosmic interconnections. Across *Vincent's Sky,* the composer invites the listener to an enveloping sensory voyage with evocative mindscapes and landscapes. As such, Runestad's score tackles both van Gogh's and Whitman's emotional worlds, those fraught with contradictions, extreme sensitivity, profound empathy, and drastic oscillations between luminous joy and crushing despair. Two autodidacts, both felt everything with raw, unfiltered force, they absorbed the suffering of the marginalized, possessed a romantic-cosmic feeling towards the beauty of nature, and experienced the pain of rejection. However, while van Gogh suffered such polarizing magnitudes as alienation and deep personal despair that reflected his tragic struggle with reality, Whitman felt them as an outward-facing, robust persona of public inclusion, exuberance, and psychological resilience.

Crafted in three sections, *Vincent's Sky* opens to the listener the inner and outer worlds of a creative mind and spirit. While the piece musically examines van Gogh's "sky"—an expansive canvas of possibility, vital aliveness, and emotional turbulence—through pathos, Runestad's music helps to celebrate dualisms found within the artist himself and across his paintings: the swirling, roiling brushstrokes through woodwind and percussion murmurings project a powerful sense of inner psychological playfulness and unrest; the heavy, rhythmic loops of ultramarine and cobalt blue

paired with glowing yellow stars of the brass and vocals capture a dynamic tension—reconciling the chaos of his mental state with a search for visual and spiritual harmony; the journey to the stars by way of wind chimes and voice, which, as van Gogh stated to his brother Theo in a letter, that just as humans take a train to reach a destination on earth, it "takes death to go to a star."

Runestad sonically paints, juxtaposing the artist's brushstrokes with some of Whitman's iconic verse alongside lines from van Gogh's letters to his brother. Much of the music for the 17-minute work for choir and wind ensemble takes shape from incorporating a musical cryptogram—assigning pitches that spell out "VINCENT"—to help anchor the narrative of the piece, the journey of which explores iconic paintings as guided by words from van Gogh and Whitman.

The first painting, "Olive Trees"— illuminating rows of gnarled, twisted olive trees set against an intense, radiant yellow sky with a glowing central sun; painted in November 1889 while staying at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France—vibrantly celebrates sunlight, yellow hues, and joy. As van Gogh looked out his window in the asylum, he found deep spiritual connection and peace in nature, viewing the stark reality of the olive trees as a vital source of personal strength. Because of this, Runestad's music "shines" by pairing the silvery hues of high winds and mallet percussion with the warmer golden shades of the brass, and as the full wind ensemble undulates and flows, the choir pulses with vitality and jewel-filled wonder.

The second, "Wheatfield with Crows"—painted in July 1890 near Auvers-sur-Oise in France—van Gogh filled the canvas with "sadness and extreme loneliness," yet also sought to include the vital, "healthy and fortifying forces" of the countryside. To do this, he used high-impact complementary colors, such as deep blues against blazing yellow-oranges, and electric greens against earthen reds, to generate visual tension and movement. Given this, the music emotes an almost far-away, ever-reaching appreciation of earth's beauty alongside ever-present chaos, ghostly voices, and unrest.

The third, "The Starry Night"—a day-time memory from a pre-sunrise view painted in June 1889 from his room at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum—illustrates a dazzling, swirling exploration of inner turmoil and hopeful transcendence. The painting depicts a quiet, orderly town resting in the rolling hills. It features small cottages and a prominent church steeple inspired by Dutch memories rather than an exact French landscape. And while van Gogh's imagery and colorations conjure admiration of nature as well as psychological chaos with motifs of hallucinations, darkness, and symbols of death across his canvases, the music, in the end, evokes Whitman's resilient openness, the hopeful twinkling of stars pushing back against the dark.

Commissioned by a Consortium of which Drs. Buchanan and McCauley of the John J. Cali School of Music were a part, a portion of the proceeds from this commission will be donated to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

– Dr. Marissa Silverman