

**December 10 & 12, 2010**  
**Immanuel Lutheran Church – New York City**

**Program Notes, Texts and Translations**

Today's program of sacred choral music focuses on works for double chorus. We sing examples from the Baroque, the Romantic period, and the late twentieth century. Dividing a choir into eight parts provides a composer with a far greater palette of color than is possible with four parts, and in the absence of an orchestra, the technique can yield a welcome range of choices and contrasts.

**Komm, Jesu, Komm**

**Bach**

Bach's great double chorus motets were always written for a funeral or other special occasion because at those times he could use larger forces than in a normal Sunday service. Of the many motets he must have written, only six have survived. The text of *Komm, Jesu, Komm* is the first and last verse of a poem by Paul Thymich, a paraphrase of John:16, in which a weary soul calls for Jesus to come and offer relief from the trials of this life, in the everlasting life of the spirit.

Bach uses different meters for each section of the motet. The opening section, in moderate triple meter, is the darkest: "My body is weary ...My strength is fading ...The path is too difficult." ("Mein Leib ist müde ...Die Kraft verschwindt je mehr und mehr ...Der saure Weg wird mir zu schwer.") Descending lines and angular counterpoint predominate, accentuating the hardships of life, with a sustained pedal tone for basses leading to a clear cadence. Following this cadence, the mood shifts to the more hopeful sentiment, "Come, I yield myself to you" ("Komm, ich will mich dir ergeben"), which is expressed in quick duple meter.

The last and longest section, before the motet concludes with a chorale, is a stately celestial dance in 6/8 meter which expresses the poet's faith. Bach sets the words "You are the right way, the truth and the life" ("Du bist der rechte Weg, die Wahrheit und das Leben") with a harmonic progression which travels through much of the circle of fifths sixteen times with minor variations, setting up a reassuring pattern that the listener can count on and predict intuitively, just as the faithful can count on life after death.

Throughout the motet Bach varies his texture by employing the double chorus in a variety of ways: the choruses interact in a dialogue; one chorus sings a fugue while the other provides accompanying chords; one chorus sings a long eight bar phrase on its own, repeated exactly by the other chorus; and the choruses join in true eight-voice polyphony, at its densest in climaxes. With ecstatic confidence, a stately four-part chorale concludes the motet with the words, "My spirit...shall soar with its creator" ("Er soll bei seinem Schöpfer schweben").

**Amen**

**Corigliano**

John Corigliano's compositional career is marked by great honors and awards for his scores, numbering over one hundred, of immense variety and appeal. His Symphony No. 1 (1991) was commissioned by Meet The Composer for the Chicago Symphony. Channeling Corigliano's

grief over the loss of friends to AIDS, this work has been performed by more than 150 orchestras, and won the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition. His second symphony won the Pulitzer Prize in Music. *The Ghosts of Versailles* was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in 1991 and succeeded with both audiences and critics. His *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra: The Red Violin* was composed for Joshua Bell in 2005 (developed from themes in the François Girard film) and won Corigliano an Oscar in 1999. Recent works include *Conjurer*, for percussion and string orchestra, cabaret songs introduced by William Bolcom and Joan Morris, and *Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan*, which won him his third Grammy Award, for Best Classical Contemporary Composition, in February 2009.

Corigliano's setting of *Amen* (that most succinctly singable of liturgical texts) employs much the same antiphonal technique as the other pieces for double chorus on this program. And Corigliano finds as much power in the circle of fifths as did Bach in *Komm, Jesu, Komm*. Here the two choruses alternate in a rather peripatetic harmonic sequence which cycles resolutely through every major key three times over the course of the work. The middle section of the piece evolves into a more complex set of rhythmic ideas, and features a striking vocal effect: slow, melting slides from one chord to the next.

### **Leise rieselt der Schnee**

**Maclean**

The NAS chamber chorus sings five short works for the Christmas season, four of them composed within the last twenty years. We begin with a simple setting of an Austrian carol by Clare Maclean, an Australian composer originally from New Zealand. Maclean graduated from the University of Sydney in 1982 with first class honors and a composition prize. She has had a long association with the Sydney Chamber Choir; in 1995 the Choir issued a CD devoted entirely to her music. For the past three years she has been composer-in-residence for the Saint Louis Chamber Chorus.

### **Christmas Rounds**

**Kilstofte**

The New Amsterdam Singers is in the process of discovering the composer, Mark Kilstofte; we sang a work of his last season, and have programmed two more for May 2011. Kilstofte won the 2002-03 Prix de Rome, the Aaron Copland Award, an ASCAP award, and fellowships from the MacDowell Colony and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Christmas Rounds* is an intricately designed work on a text by John Milton. A soloist leads with a single line like plainchant. Then the chorus enters in a rhythmic section built on small germs of melody in "cells" that repeat, which the composer likens to "celestial clockwork". The rest of the piece combines the initial chant melody with elements of the "clockwork" fragments.

### **Ave Maria**

**Verdi**

Giuseppe Verdi is known to us mainly as a composer of operas and of a magnificent *Requiem Mass*. His *Ave Maria*, heard today, has a curious origin. A letter in the journal *Gazetta Musicale di Milano* posed a "scala enigmatica" as a puzzle, challenging readers to send in "solutions" which harmonized the scale. The scale was sufficiently odd, being neither major, nor minor, nor any known mode, that it seemed an interesting opportunity, and over half a dozen replies were

published. Verdi's "solution" took the form of a four-voice a cappella work with the Ave Maria text repeated twice. The scale is found first in the bass, then the alto, then the tenor, and finally in the soprano, a practice rooted in settings of Marian songs from 16th century Italy. At first Verdi did not intend the piece for performance, but it was eventually heard in public in 1895. It was published as one of the *Four Sacred Pieces*, his last work. In Verdi's hands the "enigmatic scale" became the impetus for a work as densely chromatic – and as deeply felt – as any he wrote.

In a New York Times review of a Robert Shaw performance of *Ave Maria*, Bernard Holland commented that Verdi had written music "that threatens to spin beyond the orbit of accepted harmony, but that, through elegant, unexpected solutions, finds direct routes back to it... There is a catlike quality here, a willingness to risk any perch and an inexplicable capacity for landing on one's feet."

### **The Lamb**

**Heath**

William Blake's poem, "The Lamb," is a favorite text for composers. Fenno Heath wrote his setting in 1990 for the Yale Glee Club, with whom he had a long association. He was its conductor from 1953 to 1992, and composed both original works and many arrangements, first for men's voices, and, starting in 1970 with the admission of women to the University and the Glee Club, for mixed voices.

### **The Babe of Bethlehem**

**Betinis**

The December 2010 concert marks the third year that we have sung a work by Minnesota composer Abbie Betinis, whose music is being performed increasingly in the United States and abroad. This young composer has been commissioned by nearly forty music organizations, including the Dale Warland Singers, the American Suzuki Foundation, Cornell University Chorus, and the Schubert Club, where she has been composer-in-residence. *The Babe of Bethlehem* starts with a simple melody by William Walker, a shape note hymn published in 1835 in *Southern Harmony*. Betinis uses six of Walker's original eight verses, and each is given a different treatment, culminating in an 8-voice Hallelujah.

### **Cantus Missae**

**Rheinberger**

Josef Gabriel Rheinberger was born in Liechtenstein, and entered the Munich Conservatory at the age of twelve. He later became professor of composition at the Conservatory, and held other important musical posts, including one at the Munich Court Theatre, and the position of royal court conductor to King Ludwig II of Bavaria. He was an ardent student of Renaissance music, of Bach, and of the church music of Mozart and Michael Haydn. He became famous as a teacher of composition and organ, even numbering Americans such as Horatio Parker and Gene Chadwick among his students.

Rheinberger composed eighteen settings of the Mass for a variety of forces, some with orchestral accompaniment. But the *Mass in Eb* heard today is the only one for double chorus. It shares many features with Venetian double chorus works: a variety of textures including the alternation of two choirs, the splitting of the choir into high vs. low voices, and the occasional unison

passage. But Rheinberger makes use of the harmony of his time (late nineteenth century), and this yields a different sound from the Renaissance model.

Rheinberger felt that the purpose of music was to “express in the language of feeling that which the comprehension of words can disrupt and turn to conflict.” The grace and naturalness of his vocal lines give pleasure to the singer and listener alike.

**Hodie Christus natus est**

**Poulenc**

Our program concludes with Poulenc’s festive Christmas piece, *Hodie Christus natus est*, the fourth of his motets for the season. The setting is one of his most successful works. The rhythmic and melodic counterpoint that was important to Renaissance composers is not found here. Rather, Poulenc offers skillful handling of vocal color, and great rhythmic vitality.

Program notes © Clara Longstreth