

Program Page

New Amsterdam Singers

The Church of the Holy Trinity, 316 East 88th Street
Friday, March 2, 2012 8 pm; Sunday, March 4, 2012, 4 pm

Clara Longstreth, Music Director
Max Blum, Assistant Conductor
Pen Ying Fang, Accompanist

Ave Verum Corpus William Byrd (1543-1623)
Civitas Sancti tui William Byrd
Sing Joyfully William Byrd

Max Blum, conductor

Dum complerentur dies Pentecostes Tomás Luis de Victoria (c. 1540-
1611)
Christus factus est pro nobis Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Amazing Grace traditional American,
Elizabeth Basile, mezzo-soprano arr. Eriks Ešenvalds (b. 1977)

The Chamber Chorus

Whispers Steven Stucky (b. 1949)

Intermission

The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass Carol Barnett (b. 1949)

Ballad: Refrain Katherine Leahy, soprano

Kyrie

Ballad: First verse

Ellen Stark, alto

Gloria

Ballad: Second verse and refrain

Barbara Zucker-Pinchoff, alto

Credo

André Guthman, tenor; Lilian Matsuda, soprano

Sanctus

Ballad; Third and Fourth verses

Scott Wilson, tenor; Laura Klein, soprano

Agnus Dei

Art Thou Weary (Instrumental)

Benediction

Lilian Matsuda, soprano; Barbara Zucker-Pinchoff, alto; Max Blum, tenor

Conclusion

Katherine Leahy, soprano

Paul Woodiel, fiddle; Cenovia Cummins, mandolin; Steve Gibb, banjo;

John Benthall, guitar; Dave Phillips, bass

Program Notes

I call today's program "Juxtapositions" because the two main works combine elements not normally thought of together. In one case a piece written in 2002 extensively quotes a Renaissance motet; in the other, a 2007 Mass is accompanied by a bluegrass band. But before we get to those, we begin with six a cappella works sung by the Chamber Chorus.

In fact, these six "juxtapose" three historical periods, the Renaissance, the 19th Century, and the 21st Century; in each period, the art of sacred composition for unaccompanied voices is highly developed.

William Byrd was considered the greatest English composer of his time. As a boy he is thought to have sung in the Chapel Royal, and at age 29 he was appointed to the important post of Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. He served as organist and composer there from 1572 until 1594, and was the favorite of Queen Elizabeth I, who was a musician herself. This was a time of enormous tension between Protestants and Catholics, tension that escalated at times into bloodshed. Byrd was raised in a Protestant home, but as an adult became a fervent Catholic. He was listed in 1584 as a "recusant", one who did not attend services of the Church of England. Had he not found favor with his Queen, a *moderate* Protestant, he would have been in real danger.

While serving the Church of England in the Chapel Royal, Byrd obeyed his conscience by composing 50 motets, some of which reinterpreted biblical texts in a contemporary context, and by choosing themes and codes that were understood by fellow Catholics as "protest songs." He eventually joined in clandestine celebrations of the mass (in homes or other inconspicuous settings), and between 1592 and 1595 wrote and printed three (contraband) masses. Later he published frankly liturgical works in a collection called *Gradualia*.

We begin with one of Byrd's most famous motets, *Ave Verum Corpus*, from *Gradualia*, 1605. The four-voice work uses a hymn text by a 14th Century pope.

An earlier work, *Civitas Sancti tui*, from the 1589 collection, *Cantiones Sacrae*, uses a text from Isaiah about the destruction of the holy city. Byrd often used the word "Jerusalem" as a code for Papal authority in England. So in lamenting "Sion deserta facta est" and "Jerusalem desolata est", he was referring – in code – to the absence of a Catholic monarch in England. The work is unusual in that he emphasizes

lower voices by dividing the basses, which yields a special, dark sonority.

Sing Joyfully, by contrast, divides the women's voices, not the men's. This setting of Psalm 81 is fast-paced and celebratory. The well known work has the flavor of a madrigal, with close imitation of the catchy tunes.

Tomás Luis de Victoria was a contemporary of William Byrd, a towering figure in the Golden Age of Spain. He grew up in northern Spain, went to Rome to study and serve as choir master, and returned to Madrid to become chaplain to the Empress. *Dum Complerentur*, a five-voice motet, was written in Rome in 1585. Two sets of pealing "Alleluias" punctuate the dramatic text, which treats the appearance of the Holy Ghost to the apostles, causing them to speak in many languages.

Now we skip ahead three hundred years to the nineteenth century, to a concise masterpiece of Anton Bruckner, *Christus Factus Est*. Bruckner was not a happy man, and achieved public recognition surprisingly late in life, at about age 60. A perpetual student, never convinced that he had fully mastered his craft, he was still amassing certificates and diplomas in his forties. He suffered from fits of depression and spent several months in a sanatorium. He always hoped to marry, but never did. When his symphonies did not meet with instant approval, he accepted advice from his peers to undertake extensive revisions, in which he never believed. Only after his death were the nine large-scale symphonies played and appreciated in the form in which he had originally intended them. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, his stature and reputation grew enormously.

While Bruckner's reputation rests on his symphonies, he wrote 60 choral works, and spent much of his career as organist and composer for the church in Austria, at St. Florian's, and at the Cathedral of Linz. *Christus Factus Est* is a late work, composed in 1884. Bruckner had used the text twice before, but this final version was his finest. The motet begins and ends very quietly, but swells to three climaxes in the middle, as the text, for Maundy Thursday, proclaims that God exalted Christ and gave him a name above all names.

Eriks Ešēvalds has not had to wait decades for recognition. At age 35 he is probably the foremost composer in Latvia, a country known for its love of choral music. His works have been performed worldwide, in Germany, Poland, Norway, Austria, France, China (World Choir Games in 2006), Belarus, Sweden, and the USA. He has won many prizes, including the Year's New-Composer Discovery by the Philadelphia Inquirer in 2010. He performed with the Latvian State Choir at

the White Lights Festival in New York City in November 2010. In 2011-13, he holds the position of Fellow-Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge University.

Amazing Grace was written for the Riga Youth Choir, "Kamer", in 1977. Here Ešenvalds has made a fairly elaborate arrangement in eight parts of the famous hymn. The song had its origins in 1835 when William Walker combined the lyrics of minister-composer John Newton with a familiar tune called "New Britain" (author unknown). In this arrangement six verses travel through four keys. Ešenvalds' chords are wide spaced, and, while incorporating some dissonance, achieve a lofty, clean sound.

Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for his *Second Concerto for Orchestra*, Steven Stucky is widely recognized as one of the leading American composers of his generation. As influences on his own musical sensibility, Stucky acknowledges several of the great figures of twentieth-century music, chief among them Debussy, Stravinsky, Ravel, Bartók, and Ligeti. His music is recorded on seven labels.

In recent years Mr. Stucky has received commissions from the BBC Proms, Chanticleer, the Pennsylvania Wind Quintet, Boston Musica Viva, and the Minnesota, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, and St. Louis symphony orchestras. He has written solo works for many distinguished artists, including Evelyn Glennie, and has been commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, NEA, Meet the Composer, and the Institute of American Music. In September 1990 his orchestral work, *Angelus*, opened Carnegie Hall's Centennial Season celebration.

In addition to composing, Mr. Stucky is active as a conductor, writer, lecturer, and teacher. He is a frequent guest composer on college campuses. He won the ASCAP Deems Taylor Prize for his 1981 book, Lutoslawski and His Music. Among his other honors are fellowships from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1980 he has been on the faculty of Cornell University, where at present he is Given Foundation Professor of Composition and Artistic Director of Ensemble X, a professional chamber ensemble specializing in new music. Since 1988 he has been associated with the Los Angeles Philharmonic as composer-in-residence, new music advisor, and consulting composer.

In February 2012 Mr. Stucky had a performance of his chamber music at Symphony Space, as well as three performances of his "Son et Lumière" with the New York Philharmonic under Alan Gilbert. Also in February, his "Silent Spring" was performed in New York by the Pittsburgh Symphony, for which he is composer of the

year.

Mr. Stucky writes that *Whispers* was commissioned by the vocal group Chanticleer in 2002, and was conceived as a companion piece to an earlier composition, *Drop, Drop Slow Tears*, which incorporated a reminiscence of a Renaissance work by Orlando Gibbons.

“Whispers recalls fragments of William Byrd’s Ave Verum Corpus, surrounding those fragments with my own setting of lines from Walt Whitman’s Whispers of Heavenly Death (1868). In both the Whitman and the Byrd, thoughts and images of death are so transmuted by the power of great art that the result is not sadness, but instead a kind of mystical exaltation. This is a blessing that we need more than ever in our own time...”

In this a cappella work Stucky uses a chorus of eight parts for his own music on Whitman lines, and a semi-chorus singing, as if from a distance, the Byrd fragments. [Note that the NAS Chamber Chorus sang the complete Byrd motet at the beginning of today’s program.] The dynamic level is soft overall, but swells to brief climaxes on the words “Tides” and, later, “great cloud masses.” The passage on “flowing” carries the voices downward in complex scales until they join on a single low D which forms a “pedal” to the semi-chorus’ plea for mercy. The Byrd fragments stop in mid-phrase as the Whitman group sings of a “far-off star, appearing and disappearing.” The chords themselves thin to an open fifth.

Carol Barnett’s varied catalog includes works for solo voice, piano, chorus, diverse chamber ensembles, orchestra, and wind ensemble. She was awarded the 2003 Nancy Van de Vate International Prize for Opera for her chamber opera, *Snow; Meeting at Seneca Falls* was featured at the 2006 Diversity Festival in Red Wing, Minnesota. Other recent works include *Song of Perfect Propriety*, *Prelude and Romp*, and *Praise*, for organ and steel drum. The Minnesota-based composer has received commissions from the American Guild of Organists, Minnesota Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Harvard Glee Club, and the Children’s Theatre of Minneapolis. She is a charter member of the American Composers Forum, and a graduate of the University of Minnesota, where she studied composition with Dominick Argento and Paul Fetler. She was composer-in-residence with the Dale Warland Singers from 1992-2001, and currently teaches at Augsburg College in Minneapolis.

Ms. Barnett wrote her own program notes, explaining why she accepted the commission from Philip Brunelle, artistic director of the VocalEssence Ensemble Singers, to write a bluegrass Mass. The idea first came from a supporter of

VocalEssence who was himself a bluegrass bass player. Mr. Brunelle chose Carol Barnett, the poet Marisha Chamberlain, and the existing band, Monroe Crossing, as the forces to bring the idea to life.

Barnett writes, “*To bring the solemnity of the classical-based Mass together with the down-home sparkle of bluegrass – now there’s an assignment. My highest hope is that listeners coming from one tradition – classical or bluegrass – and perhaps dubious about the other, might discover something new and wonderful in the combination, as I have. Composing the music for The World Beloved has given me the chance to write cheery sacred music – all too rare in a medium heard while visiting my grandparents: country music with a church flavor that told stories and came out of a scratchy old record player. Grandma would not have allowed dancing, but under the table I tapped my toes.*”

The Mass is organized in twelve movements. The traditional text of *Kyrie* is heard in both Latin and English. *Gloria* uses no Latin, rather a poem, “Glory be to God on High”, written by Marisha Chamberlain. *Credo* also has an entirely new text by Chamberlain. *Sanctus* is the liturgical Latin text, as is *Agnus Dei*. The *Benediction* is a new blessing by Chamberlain. Interwoven through these traditional Mass movements are ballads on biblical themes, but couched in folk-like poetry and sung by soloists in a style similar to that of a bluegrass singer.

The writer Marisha Chamberlain is a novelist, playwright, poet, librettist, and college professor. Her first novel, *The Rose Variations*, was published in 2009, and she is currently at work on a second novel. She has held fellowships from the NEA, the Rockefeller, Bush, McKnight, and Jerome foundations, and has been artist-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony. She collaborated with Carol Barnett on a chamber opera in 1997, which was performed by the Minnesota Orchestra. The collaboration with Barnett on *The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass* resulted in a much praised recording, and many performances across the country.

The term “bluegrass” is an invented word for music derived from old-time traditional music of Appalachia. It is characterized by fiddle and mandolin virtuosity, and vocal “high harmony.” Later in its history it was influenced by the blues, and there was cross-fertilization with the country music industry. The father of bluegrass was Bill Monroe who, in 1939, formed an acoustic string band called Blue Grass Boys.

The introduction, called Ballad, and the last movement of the Mass are sung by a soprano soloist, unaccompanied. The band joins with the chorus for the lively *Kyrie*, with its syncopated rhythms and banjo and guitar licks. The banjo accompanies the next verse of the ballad, while the folk band joins in for *Gloria*. The following verse

of the ballad begins as a solo, continues for women's chorus, and leads seamlessly to *Credo*, which incorporates both solos and chorus, and, by the end, the band. *Sanctus* is a bouncy, rhythmic movement that starts softly and slowly builds to ecstatic hosannas. Tenors and basses lead the next, darker set of ballad verses which drive without pause to the unaccompanied *Agnus Dei*. The band has its own interlude before the sunny *Benediction*, including an exuberant canon. The conclusion echoes the introduction in all ways but one.

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