

Program Notes 10/16/2008

Psalms, Hymns & Spiritual Songs

The title for tonight's concert comes from Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your heart to God."

It matters little whether a "psalm" is somehow different from a "hymn" or a "spiritual song." These are all songs that express the singer's relationship with God, ranging over every conceivable emotion: joy, lamentation, praise, thanksgiving, even anger—and much more.

Tonight's featured instrument—the harp—is especially well suited to accompany these songs. Some associations with the harp are almost cultural clichés: "little David playing on his harp" and harps as the instruments of choice among the angels in heaven, as only two of the more familiar images. Yet even these clichés have a powerful basis in the history and symbolic associations of the instrument. The Greek concept of the Aeolian harp was of a stringed instrument activated by the wind, understood to be the "breath" of the gods. ("Inspiration" literally means "breathing into" or "having been breathed into.") Even more significant for our purposes tonight, the important American folk hymn tradition known as Sacred Harp (shape note) singing prized the belief that the "Sacred Harp" is the human voice itself.

While spiritual songs may vary among cultures and throughout history, the impulse to sing them seems timeless and universal. Tonight's sampling ranges from modern settings of ancient Hebrew psalms to American folk tunes and spirituals to contemporary Christian anthems. It is our hope that these songs--individually and collectively--may "dwell in you richly."

Rejoice and Sing Out His Praises by Mark Hayes (1953-)

Published in 1985, this rousing, jazz- and rock-influenced opener bases its text upon several Psalms (104:33-34, 108:1b, and 103:1-5). The driving, body-moving rhythms remind us that, for the ancient Hebrews, the Praise Psalms' cries of "Bless the Lord, O my Soul" meant praising with one's whole bodily self, not just the "soul" divided from the "body," as in the later Greek notion.

A major figure in contemporary Gospel music, Mark Hayes earned a bachelor of music degree from Baylor University. His numerous compositions have earned him honors ranging from a Dove Award in 1986 to a 2007 Carnegie Hall appearance conducting his *Te Deum*.

Bow Thine Ear, O Lord by William Byrd (1543-1623)

This motet, from the first collection titled *Cantiones Sacrae*, published in 1589, reflects composer William Byrd's persecution as a Roman Catholic in the violent religious upheavals following Henry VIII's establishment of the Protestant Church of England. Byrd's musical meditation on Isaiah 64:10 ("Thy holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation") is his psalm of lamentation over the wars among religious factions he both witnessed and suffered.

William Byrd was a student of and later collaborator with Thomas Tallis, a fellow Roman Catholic. With no little historical irony, despite the Protestant persecutions, both Tallis and Byrd overcame their political disadvantages to become pillars of Anglican/Episcopalian church music to this day.

Two Settings of Psalm 42:1-3

Sicut Cervus (Like as the Hart)

by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594)

One of the giants of all early choral music, Palestrina was of special importance to the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation of the latter sixteenth century. In its responses to the Protestant Reformers, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) directed that Catholic liturgy and music also be made more plain and understandable to the worshipping faithful. While this greater simplicity did not replace the use of Latin, it nonetheless inspired Palestrina's genius for beautiful melodic flow and choral harmony—what came to be called "the Palestrina Style."

Like as the Hart Desireth the Waterbrooks

by Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Like his admired sixteenth century predecessors Tallis and Byrd, Howells became a giant of Anglican church music in his own time—and still today. While sounding more "modern" than his Renaissance models, Howells's music is consciously modeled after their madrigal-like structure. Still, to many ears "Like as the Hart" may sound unmelodious. The effect is intentional. Given the intensely longing character of the Psalm text, the music heightens this restless, yearning mood. While scored for the key of e minor, definite e minor tonalities occur only rarely, and then usually in sparse, two-note chords. This constant movement around the home chord of e minor but rarely coming to rest there also depicts the restless flow of the water brook. Further imitations of the movement of water (much like the style of the Palestrina motet) are heard in cascading effects of downward melodic lines and suspensions. Culminating the restless "avoidance" of the e minor chord is the surprising assertion of E major at the end of the piece—appropriately signifying a positive, faithful answer to the question "When shall I come before the presence of God?"

Sing Me to Heaven by Daniel E. Gawthrop (1949-)

This popular anthem was commissioned in 1990 by VOCE, a community chamber chorus in a northern Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. Music director Carol Hunter wanted a piece that would “speak to singers about what music [means] in their lives.” In searching for a text to convey this feeling, composer Daniel Gawthrop turned to his wife, poet Jane Griner.

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Gawthrop has received over one hundred commissions and has had his works performed and recorded by such prominent choral groups as the Gregg Smith Singers, the Turtle Creek Chorale, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. He currently serves on the Board of Advisors of the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition at Brigham Young University.

By the Waters of Babylon (Psalm 137: 1, 4-6),
a Traditional Jewish melody, arr. David Buley (1958-)

Psalm 137:1 (“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered you, O Zion”) is the classic exile lament, specifically the exile of the Jewish people in their Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE. In his preface notes to the anthem (published in 1992), arranger David Buley further extends the psalm’s significance: “The psalmist also sings of fear that in an alien place those songs [of longing for homeland] would be of no worth. Yet God’s songs inhabit all places and all time. . . . If the singer forgets that—or ceases to remember—there may be no more singing.” The importance of this need for remembrance is embodied in this anthem by the touching and effective use of passacaglia (or chaconne) form: repetition in canonic upper lines over the repetition of an insistent, ostinato bass line, with related variations.

Canadian composer Dr. David Buley is Assistant Professor of Music Education at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario.

Amazing Grace, an American Folk Hymn, arr. John Rutter (1945-)

How can the world’s most famous living church music composer arrange the world’s most famous Christian hymn tune and make it sound fresh? One innovation is to feature the harp, whose “inspiration-receiving” symbolic character (described above) fits this famous hymn text perfectly.

Rutter’s inventiveness also includes setting the music in unexpected keys and creatively modulating among them. The opening key of G flat (six flats in the key signature) and the closing key of C flat (seven flats) would present unusual challenges for the “average” church choir or accompanist. But these surprising (and rich) tonalities—along with modulations along the way to E and to A flat—make this familiar piece a new listening experience, even if the reasons for that impression aren’t immediately clear.

The John Newton text is as familiar as the New Britain tune. What may be less well known is that Newton’s storied repentance for his slave-trading career did not occur as the immediate inspiration for his writing the hymn text. The famous storm at sea inspired his conversion to Christianity (in gratitude for the sparing of his life), but his opposition to slavery seems to have begun almost ten years after he wrote “Amazing Grace” in about 1772. Indeed, the hymn text may have been inspired more by a hymn-writing competition with another well-known hymn writer, William Cowper, than—at least at the time—by his repentance for his slave-trading.

Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,
an American Folk Hymn, arr. Mack Wilberg (1955-)

“Here I raise my Ebenezer” is a vow of dedication recalling an Old Testament story of recovery from loss in the defeat of the Israelites and of the capture by the Philistines of the Ark of the Covenant at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4-5). Later, in 1 Samuel 7, after regaining victory Samuel gives the name Ebenezer to the stone marker he erects in thanksgiving to God, emphasizing the name’s translation from Hebrew: “stone of help.”

The text is by English hymnist Robert Robinson (1726-1790), who wrote the hymn in 1757 to celebrate his recent commitment to become a Methodist preacher. Before and after writing this famous text, however, Robinson was “prone to wander,” even at the end of his life struggling with religious doubts, including sympathies with Unitarianism. The well-known American folk tune was first catalogued in John Wyeth’s Repository of Sacred Music in 1813. The tune was named “Nettleton” after its composer, Connecticut Reformed pastor and theologian Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844). The arrangement here is by Mack Wilberg, since March 2008 the music director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Audiences may recognize this setting from the televised concert “A Thanksgiving of American Folk Hymns” presented by the Brigham Young University Choirs that has been frequently rebroadcast by PBS stations ever since the original 1994 concert.

Chichester Psalms by Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Perhaps in response to the threats of nuclear-armed Cold War and the global impacts of the assassination of an American President and the intensifying (and televised) war in Vietnam, Leonard Bernstein sensed that the modern world needed an impassioned plea for divine help. His turning to the Hebrew Psalms (called by some the “original Jewish hymn book”) showed how profound and often primal these songs can be as cries of sheer humanity and faith even against the odds.

Commissioned by a Christian church, the (Anglican) Cathedral of Chichester, in Sussex, England, for its 1965 choral festival, Bernstein’s work is a complex witness to his Jewish heritage. Sung in Hebrew, the piece meditates upon parts or the entirety of Psalms 2, 23, 100, 108, 131, and 133, divided into three movements. Although the original score was for full orchestra and chorus plus soloists, the later, reduced scoring for organ, two harps, and percussion is used for tonight’s concert.

The work is difficult and demanding of its performers, not only technically but emotionally. The tenor part in the opening

movement, for example, is among the most difficult in all choral music, for its range and intensity. Time signatures vary widely, and include meters of 5/4, and 7/4 (reflecting Bernstein's interest in Judeo-Christian number symbolism). Harmonic structures are always carefully planned and often symbolic, yet unconventional, even at times deliberately shocking. The range of emotional expectation from the performers is often best exemplified by Bernstein's own indications in the score of such expressions as "boisterously" and "Allegro feroce" ("ferociously fast"). Owing to its many sections of energetic dancelike rhythms, the piece is physically challenging almost even beyond its emotional toll. Perhaps chief among its many powerful effects, the middle movement counterpoints a tranquil, innocent setting of Psalm 23 for women's voices and boy soprano (or countertenor) soloist against the worldly violence expressed in Psalm 2:1-4, reflected in the men's voices by fierce, brutal rhythms. The prominence of the harp in this movement symbolizes (among other things) the proto-psalmist David in his youthful vulnerability. Senza sentimentalita (without sentimentality), Bernstein allows ominous sounds from the organ and percussion to have the last word in this remarkable second movement.

Despite the dark ending of the second movement, the piece ends in greater serenity than Bernstein's other great religious work, his Symphony No. 3, Kaddish, written just two years earlier, in 1963. The final movement of Chichester Psalms emphasizes humility and patience, finding ultimate hope in the words of Psalm 133:1 ("Behold how good, and how pleasant it is, for brethren to dwell together in unity"), with the final Amen ending on an extremely quiet, unison G for voices alone.

A Selection of African American Spirituals

Among the most profound gifts to American music and Christian faith are the spirituals that grew directly out of African slaves' experience in the "New World," including songs in post-slavery history that continued directly in that musical tradition, and continue still today.

While some may debate the theology of the title I'm Gonna Sing 'Til the Spirit Moves in My Heart (Is the impulse to sing praise the cause or the effect of the moving of the Holy Spirit?) no one is likely to question the sheer joy of this creation by legendary composer Moses Hogan (1957-2003) of both an original text and original music. Although composed as recently as 1995, the piece sounds like a true "original" of the traditional Spiritual style.

Tonight's setting of the well known spiritual Give Me Jesus is by Dr. Larry L. Fleming (1936-2003), founder and long-time director of the National Lutheran Choir.

Let Everything That Hath Breath is a rollicking Gospel-choir setting of Psalm 34 by Dr. Jeffery L. Ames (1969-), currently Assistant Director of Choral Activities at Baylor University. His Ph.D. in Choral Conducting and Choral Music Education and Master of Choral Music Education degrees from Florida State University made him a classmate of GCA maestro Stephen Mulder.