

The Heart's Reflection

Program Notes by Ed Wight, Musicologist

CANTATE DOMINO

The Welsh composer Karl Jenkins fashioned a wide-ranging musical career before focusing on classical composition. Playing keyboard and oboe, he performed in several rock/jazz fusion bands - *Nucleus*, and *Soft Machine*). In the 1980s, his myriad pop composition styles won several major awards for commercial advertising before turning to classical choral writing in the 1990s. In **Cantate Domino** he evokes a free-flowing Gregorian Chant rhythm based on word accentuation (though within a triple-meter framework and 4-bar phrasing absent in authentic chant). However, the modal harmonies and soft dynamics create a rich atmospheric setting. Listen especially for the gentle effect of the soprano melody accompanied by humming which opens the second half of the piece.

STABAT MATER

With over 100 masses, 370 motets, and 50 sacred madrigals, Palestrina “ranks with Orlando de Lassus and William Byrd as one of the towering figures in late 16th-century music” (2001 New Grove Dictionary). His greatness does not rest solely on numbers, however. No native Italian composer of that century “mastered the richly developed polyphonic techniques [of their predecessors] more completely.” And as styles changed, most Renaissance composers were forgotten, but Palestrina served as a model of (conservative) sacred polyphony for the next two centuries.

His double choir setting of **Stabat Mater** renders that last comment a bit ironic, because Palestrina deviates from his typical polyphonic style. The very long text of Stabat Mater called for a more continuous homophonic setting. “Palestrina was an innovator in writing for two harmonically independent choirs...in his works [published] from 1575 onward” (New Grove). He provides a far higher amount of alternating blocks of sound - brief, dramatic dialog between the choirs – than usual in his distinctive approach to the power of this sorrowful text: Mary viewing her Son on the cross.

VIDI AQUAM

Vidi aquam opens with an extensive organ prelude, not surprising given Gabriel Jackson’s many piano and organ compositions. Yet the choral genre remains by far his most extensive genre, with over 100 works. He served as Associate Composer of the BBC Singers from 2010-2013, and won the British Composer Award (British Academy of Songwriters, Composers, and Authors) three times. Jackson incorporates variants of the opening prelude later in the work, in both another brief solo passage and as accompaniment for the five-voice setting of this *Paschaltide* antiphon performed the Sundays after Easter. He masterfully builds and varies the scoring throughout, starting with the soprano section, then soprano and alto, a 3-part section alto tenor, and bass – saving the full choir for a climax late in the piece.

KOMM, JESU, KOMM

First written in the 13th century, the motet genre enjoyed a particularly long compositional history. Several factors defined the German motet when Bach wrote them in the early 18th century: a sacred text often set for double choir, sophisticated counterpoint, and perhaps an improvised *continuo* part - but neither independent instrumental parts nor vocal solos. Paul Thymich wrote the text of **Komm, Jesu, Komm** for the 1684 funeral of a Leipzig Cathedral Rector. Each strophe ends with a quotation from John 14: 6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And not surprisingly, Bach presents myriad varieties of 'sophisticated counterpoint' in abundance – dramatic single-bar echoes between the choirs, longer, full-phrase choral alternation, homophonic passages as well as points of imitation for all eight parts, and one choir's homophonic accompaniment to imitative counterpoint in the other.

"By Bach's time, the motet had been largely eclipsed in sacred music by the cantata." Yet "Bach's motets, unlike his cantatas, remained in constant use in Leipzig after his death," and in many smaller German communities as well. "They were among the first of his vocal works to be published" (Oxford Companion). Perhaps the absence of independent instrumental parts and difficult vocal solos in his motets accounts for this greater popularity.

LONG ROAD

Latvian composer Eriks Eišvalds's career continues to flourish. He won his third Latvian Grand Music Award in 2015, as well as the Gramophone Critics Choice award that same year. Eišvalds was chosen as president of the jury for the 2016 Rimini International Choral Competition, and still wins many international choral and orchestral commissions. While he writes in many different genres, choral works account for three quarters of his more than 100 compositions. He wrote **Long Road** in 2010 in his native Latvian, and dedicated the English Language version to Stephen Layton and *Polyphony*.

Eišvalds setting of Paulina Barda's poem depicting unrequited love ("A long road to heaven's shining meadow...and an even longer road to your heart") opens gently, in hymn-like homophonic texture and diatonic harmony. It grows more dramatic, with louder dynamics and a descant group. But the middle section takes your breath away, with a stunning shift to choral tone clusters as accompaniment for an expressive, aleatory alto flute solo. Striking modulations govern the powerful conclusion fashioned by the repetition of lyrics and opening motives, before falling away softly with the return of the flute in a surprisingly tender, yet inconclusive coda.

INTERMISSION

THREE VOCAL QUARTETS, OP. 64

Choral music played a major role in Brahms's career, reflecting the extraordinary enthusiasm for it in Germany and Austria. Musicologist Leon Botstein writes "Amateur singing was a dominant component of 19th century German social and cultural life...From the 1820s on, choral

groups for women, for men, and for mixed voices sprang up in every town and city of German-speaking Europe”

Botstein also noted that “Of all the major composers in the history of music, Brahms was perhaps the only one to have distinguished himself as a choral director.” He held three such posts: In 1859 he created the Hamburger *Frauenchor* (women’s chorus), in 1863 he was appointed conductor of the Vienna *Singakademie*, and in the 1870s he conducted the Vienna *Singverein*.” And though Brahms titled this Op. 64 set ‘Quartets for four solo voices,’ he informed the publisher that “these numbers could be performed on occasion by...chorus.”

The remarkably rich harmonies throughout **An die Heimat** (‘To the Homeland’) perhaps reflect a special yearning by Brahms. He wrote it in the early 1860s, while conducting the *Singakademie* during his first extended stay in Vienna, thinking of his Hamburg home. Written in 1874, **Der Abend** sets Schiller’s text of classical allusions to the sun-God Apollo and Thetis, the water or sea Goddess. Brahms changes style in the middle section, depicting Thetis, offering far more homophonic textures for the choir and lyrical arpeggios in the piano. For the final chorus – **Fragen** - Brahms returns to Georg Daumer, the poet of both sets of his *Liebeslieder Waltzes*. In a translation of a Turkish folk poem, the tenor (who is in love), enters into a dialogue with his heart (the other three voices, who pose many questions for him. Both humor (“What’s the problem? – I’m in love, that’s the problem”) and striking pathos (What would you give to see her? – Myself, you, the Earth, the heights of Heaven) co-exist equally in this delightful finale.

BRING ME LITTLE WATER, SYLVIE

The rest of the program focuses on American popular song, and it begins with **Bring me little water, Sylvie** by Huddie Ledbetter. A folk and blues singer, composer, and musician, he was also known as ‘Lead Belly.’ He mastered the 12-string guitar at virtuoso level and also played piano, violin, mandolin, harmonica, and several different types of accordion. The New Grove Dictionary of American Music writes that he was “the most prolific of all songsters, with a repertory of over five hundred songs...His work is distinguished by its wide range and variety, and he also became a notable custodian of the African-American song tradition.” His life covered an incredibly ‘wide range’ as well, serving prison terms of seven years for murder and another three for assault – while also writing many beloved American songs. Moira Smiley’s arrangement effectively travels from unison voices to several increasingly rich harmonizations. This song sounds for all the world like a spiritual, and Smiley’s website says Ledbetter based it on his Uncle, and Aunt Silvi.

ANGEL BAND

The son of a church choir director, William Bradbury (1816-1868) likewise held several positions as organist and conductor. But he soon started writing some of his own music for these

occasions, and for the final twenty years of his life edited and published 59 books of hymns (his own compositions as well as many others) and music for school choirs. Remembered today primarily as a hymn composer, he wrote such popular hymns as 'Jesus Loves Me', 'Like a Shepherd Lead Us', and 'Sweet Hour of Prayer'. He wrote the simple yet poignant music for **Angel Band** in 1862. Shawn Kirchner arranged the first verse for women, the second for men, and the third for full choir and descant. Kirchner saves most of the chromaticism for the wordless transition to that final verse.

UNCLOUDED DAY

Josiah Kelley Alwood was an ordained minister and circuit rider for the United Church of Christ. He would be gone from his family for weeks at a time, riding on horseback to revival meetings and giving lectures on Christian doctrine. Inspired by the beauty of a rainbow against black nimbus clouds in an otherwise clear sky, he wrote both words and music for **Unclored Sky** in 1879. The high spirits and paucity of chromaticism – only two such pitches appear throughout the piece – evoke the gospel style in this 8-voice setting, in which Kirchner once again saves the triumphant descant for the final verse.

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE --- HOLD ON!

The concert closes with two spirituals arranged by Moses Hogan, "probably the most well-known name in the Gospel / Choral genre, and rightfully so" according to one critic. He was a pianist, conductor and arranger of international renown and best known for his settings of African American spirituals. The year before his untimely death at age 45 in 2003, he published the celebrated and influential Oxford Book of Spirituals. "Black Spirituals constitute one of the largest bodies of American folksong that survived into the 21st century, and are probably the best known [of them all]" (New Grove).

This Little Light of Mine belongs to the large family of "intensely moving slow spirituals...suffused with melancholy." Unlike so many sorrowful spirituals, however, this one features a sweet, hopeful solo melody. Hogan provides a wonderfully atmospheric choral accompaniment, weaving a soft and delicate tapestry of rich, modal, jazz-oriented gospel chords to extraordinary effect in the loveliest piece on the program.

Hogan then draws from another style of spirituals, sometimes known as 'Jubilees' – "quick in tempo, highly rhythmic and often syncopated" (New Grove) for **Hold On!** He sets it in F Minor, which includes the traditional flattened 3rds, 6ths, and 7ths, but also with special melodic insistence on the flattened 5th (C-flat) - which is frequently repeated at the ends of phrases. The unpredictable repetition patterns and lively call-and-response sections fly by, reinforced by continuous accents at high speed, fashioning a marvelous and dynamic climax to today's concert.