

PROGRAM NOTES for A DISTANT SONG
5/14 and 5/15/2022

By Ed Wight

A UKRANIAN PRAYER

By John Rutter

The Grove Dictionary of Music states that John Rutter, born in 1945, “has become probably the most popular and widely performed composer of his generation.” His remarkable popularity in the light classical, English part-song and Christmas genres led him to form his own choir, the Cambridge Singers, in 1981 and his own record label, Collegium Records in 1984), to perform his compositions and arrangements.

To honor Ukraine at this moment, he adopts the flavor of Eastern European modal writing in the haunting and beautiful *A Ukranian Prayer*. The text is brief and telling: “Good Lord, protect Ukraine. Give her strength, courage, faith and hope. Amen.” The piece closes with the gentle warmth of the “Amen” setting. Rutter offers this piece free of charge, and it is being performed around the world during this time of war in Ukraine.

SFOGAVA CON LE STELLE (“Calling out to the Stars”)

By Claudio Monteverdi

Claudio Monteverdi is one of those revolutionary figures in music, who (like Beethoven) left enduring masterpieces in two different centuries (16th and 17th) and two different styles (Renaissance and Baroque). Our concert today includes his pieces from both eras.

The late 16th-century Renaissance is up first, in *Sfogova con le Stelle* - a selection from his fourth book of madrigals. Like other Renaissance madrigals of the 16th century, Monteverdi sets this one *a cappella*. (His last five books of madrigals, in contrast, pioneered Baroque style by including *basso continuo* instrumental accompaniment.)

This impassioned, lovesick pleading with the stars reflects late Renaissance style, with its advanced modal harmony. Opening in a style approaching D Minor, the first phrase nonetheless already closes on a D Major chord, a free chromaticism unheard in early and middle Renaissance. Note also the delicious word painting with the sudden animation in all voices for “O imagini belle” (Oh, beautiful images of my love), the liveliest flourishes in the piece.

BEATUS VIR (“Blessed is the Man”)

By Claudio Monteverdi

The Baroque era, ca. 1600-1750, witnessed the first flourishing of major instrumental genres (symphonies, concertos, sonatas). “Although he composed little or no independent instrumental music, Monteverdi’s writing for instruments was genuinely innovative” (Grove).

Unlike the a *cappella* madrigal above, *Beatus vir* (Psalm 112) thus comes with two separate solo instrumental parts as well as a *basso continuo* accompaniment for the six-voice choral setting. While the Renaissance often employed instrumental doubling of vocal lines, note the flowing 16th-note passages of the truly idiomatic (Baroque) instrumental style for the flutes. Monteverdi matches this vocal/instrumental contrast with the frequent dramatic contrast of voice parts; note the soprano opening immediately by full choir, or his penchant for contrasting voice pairs for immediate shifts in register. With such fluid dramatic writing, it’s no wonder that Monteverdi wrote the first opera, *L’Orfeo* of 1607, to survive in the repertory – yet another Baroque Era innovation.

ABENDLIED (“Evening Song”)

By Josef Rheinberger

Musicologist Leon Botstein writes, “Choral singing does not retain the dominant role it once possessed for the public at large...Amateur choral singing was a dominant component of 19th century German social and cultural life...Few other activities bridged the home and public sphere so intensely. The significance and vitality of the German vocal-group tradition from the 1820s on [beginning with Schubert, Mendelssohn, and Schumann]...cannot be under-estimated.”

Josef Rheinberger, with hundreds of sacred and secular part-songs and masses, remained squarely in the center of this choral tradition. He demonstrates a sophisticated yet lightly-worn expertness in counterpoint throughout this six-voice setting of *Abendlied* from 1855. In 1864, Rheinberger became conductor of the Munich Choral Society, and with his appointment in 1877 as *Hofkapellmeister*, “He acquired considerable influence on the cultivation of sacred music...[based on] his indisputable mastery and the planned coherence of his compositional style...imbued with polyphonic thought” (Grove).

IN PARADISUM (“In Paradise”)

By Christine Donkin

Canadian composer Christine Donkin, born in 1976, currently serves on the faculty of the Victoria Conservatory of Music. She writes for performers of all levels, from young students to established professionals. One of her publishers, Graphite Publishing, states

that “While her compositions have been programmed at Carnegie Hall and the Moscow Conservatory, they also frequently appear at concerts for music students, community orchestras, and church choirs.” Increasingly concerned with development of young musicians, “Over 100 of her compositions and arrangements appear in the Royal Conservatory of Music graded repertoire and studies books.”

Composers such as Faure and Durufle included *In Paradisum* as the last section of their Requiem Masses. The text concerns angels greeting the soul’s arrival in paradise. Donkin’s lovely setting draws on the modal style, open fifths, and lighter counterpoint (no points of imitation) of the Renaissance era. Yet this *a cappella* eight-voice setting also updates that style with some 21st century harmonic effects, the soft sustained pedal points further enhancing the primarily serene atmosphere.

ICH STAND IN DUNKELN TRAUMEN (“In My Dark Dreams”)

By Clara Wieck Schumann

Along with Nancy Reich’s biography (now in its second edition) and a harvest of recent scholarship, Clara Wieck Schumann has finally started receiving long overdue recognition. She was considered one of the greatest of all 19th century pianists, “the peer of such keyboard giants as Liszt, Thalberg, and Anton Rubinstein” (Grove). With a career as piano virtuoso lasting over sixty years, “she had a great influence on concert life and pianism of the 19th century.” She and Liszt were among the earliest to offer recitals of other composers’ music, instead of just their own works, and as a young woman Clara Schumann was “one of the few pianists to perform music from memory” (Grove).

Reich writes that “During her lifetime, Clara Schumann’s songs were performed by the greatest singers of the 19th century, in the great concert halls of Europe...She had strong ideas about the performance of German lieder, and deplored the fact that many singers didn’t have a true understanding of the text.”

Ich Stand includes that marvelous lieder technique where the final line of text changes the meaning of the song. In a dream, the singer is in rapture, gazing at a portrait of the beloved one. At the end, however, tears flow - as it is realized that it’s only a picture; it’s not real, it cannot speak. Her piano preludes to her songs set the mood, and “in such songs as...*Ich Stand*, the piano postludes are elegant resolutions of the sorrows expressed” (Reich).

LIEBST DU UM SCHONHEIT (“If You Love Beauty”)

By Clara Wieck Schumann

“The songs of Clara Schumann contradict the common misconception that women write only light, sentimental “parlor” pieces...All her songs written after 1840 are harmonically adventurous, emotionally powerful, and musically sophisticated” (Reich).

Listen for the rich harmony and quick changes of mode in just the opening phrase of this delightful song, one that she presented to her husband on their first Christmas together. *Liebst Du* was among three of Clara’s songs included with nine of Robert’s in a joint project, “Twelve Poems from Friedrich Ruckert’s *Liebesfruhling*.” Without telling her, Robert Schumann negotiated for its publication, and “she received the first printed copy on her birthday in 1841, thirteen days after the birth of their first child” (Reich).

SOIR SUR LA PLAINE (“Evening on the Plain”)

By Lili Boulanger

Perseverance and courage defined the career of Lili Boulanger. While she wrote a wide variety of vocal and instrumental music, “her most characteristic compositions are choral” (musicologist Richard Taruskin). Indeed, her cantata, *Faust et Helene*, won the coveted “Prix de Rome” in 1913. This was the great annual prize for composition from the Paris Conservatory – the most prestigious in France - and she became the first female composer to win it. Yet she never enjoyed good health. She was afflicted by what we now call “Crohn’s Disease” at age two, suffered its effects throughout her life, and died at the tragically young age of 24.

Her sister, Nadia Boulanger, became one of the great composition teachers of the 20th century, mentoring such young composers as Aaron Copland, Elliot Carter, and Walter Piston. Yet Nadia ardently championed her sister’s works before and after Lili’s death in 1918. Debussy also passed that year, and today’s stunningly beautiful cantata from 1913, *Soir sur la Plaine*, matches the harmonic richness and complexity of that celebrated French icon.

Lili Boulanger’s late works went even a step beyond Debussy, as this very gifted young composer began experimenting with polytonality. While that technique still lay in her future, the delicate, Impressionist sophistication of both the lovely opening soprano solo, and the lush modal parallelism of the first choral entrance take your breath away. Such richness continues throughout the most beautiful work on today’s concert.

CLEARING AT DAWN

By Alvin Trotman

An American composer born in 1989, Alvin Trotman already displays a wonderful gift for choral writing. A graduate in composition from Southern Methodist University, Southern Oregon Repertory Singers have approached him for a commissioned work to be performed in 2024. He fashions a delicate harmonic palette rich with added sixths

and ninths in *Clearing at Dawn* - this sweet, understated setting of Chinese poet Li Po's celebration of the peacefulness at dawn and its spreading light on the abounding colors of spring.

THE SUN NEVER SAYS

By Dan Forrest

Until the 20th century, composers were often virtuoso instrumental performers as well. Dan Forrest provides a welcome return to that tradition, with a Masters in Piano Performance in addition to his Doctorate in Composition from the University of Kansas. So while it's no surprise that *The Sun Never Says* features an instrument, it's not his own; he writes for solo cello. The cello adds a richness to the choral texture, especially on the brief cadenza at the end against the sustained choir chord. And listen for the sopranos slipping in that pungent major seventh at the last minute.

This accomplished American composer also holds the prestigious and influential position as national chair of the American Choral Director's Association Composition Initiatives Committee.

SELENE'S BOAT

By Don Macdonald

Selene's Boat also includes instrumental accompaniment, this time from a pitched member of the percussion section – a hang drum, or “hapi.” Like Dan Forrest, MacDonald also performs professionally (on sax, violin, and voice). His conducting credentials include orchestras, choruses, and jazz bands, the latter style providing the foundation for this delightful crossover piece. It consists primarily of nonsense syllables, jazz syncopations, pop *glissandos*, and light jazz harmony sprinkled with “blue notes.” Out of that extended mix comes a surprising alto solo, the first presentation of Allison Girvan's lyrics, before migrating to the full choir.

EDO LULLABY

Arranged by Paul Smith

Edo was the traditional Japanese name for Tokyo. This restrained and gentle Tokyo Lullaby features Asian modal melody in an approximate pentatonic style. A lullaby often features a somewhat simple and repetitive style, as motives of the main melody recur throughout. It also includes aspects of a lament, perhaps a mother soothing a young boy, as his babysitter has returned to her mountain home. But she left souvenirs

behind, a drum and a flute. Paul Smith, the co-founder and CEO of the British vocal ensemble VOCES8, effectively captures Japanese style in this arrangement.

MAMA SAID

By Ruthie Foster

And speaking of Mothers (and of the Mother's Day celebration last weekend), what better way to follow a lullaby than with a piece titled "Mama Said"? Did someone say "Spiritual"? Ruthie Foster, an American singer-songwriter of blues and folk music, has shared the stage in performance with such legends as Bonnie Raitt, the Allman Brothers, and Susan Tedeschi. She won the "Female Blues Artist of the Year" award and was a United States Artists Fellow in 2018. Get ready for more nonsense syllables, perpetual "blue notes," and sweet jazz harmony. Also, a tip of the hat to Paul Rardin's great arrangement, inside the style!