

PROGRAM NOTES

By Ed Wight

LAUDA SION SALVATOREM St. Thomas Aquinas wrote the text for *Lauda Sion Salvatorum* around 1264. In the Hebrew bible, “Sion” is a synonym for Jerusalem. The opening stanza of the text translates as “Sion (Jerusalem) lift up thy voice and sing; Praise thy Savior and thy King.” The composer of this setting, **Tomas Luis de Victoria**, is also remarkable. His music constitutes one of the greatest peaks of late Renaissance music (with Palestrina, Lassus, and Byrd). He wrote far less music than his famous contemporaries, however, restricting himself solely to sacred texts. *Lauda Sion* employs frequent imitative dialogue between the choirs, sometimes lasting a complete phrase and quicker exchanges lasting only a bar. And in text and music, it also reflects Victoria’s penchant “to lean more towards the joyful than the sad.”

VERE LANGUORES With respect to the title of this concert, “Light out of Shadow,” the previous piece leaned more to the light, but *Vere Languores* certainly invokes the darker shadows. It depicts Christ’s suffering and languor; the cross, the nails, carrying our burdens alone. It is one of thirty-three motets that **Victoria** published in 1572. He frequently uses more expressive chromatic color than his great contemporary, Palestrina. Both in *Vere Languores* and his writing in general, such flashes of harmony create “a poignancy rarely encountered in other [sacred] music of the period” (2001 Grove Dictionary: Grove7). The calm restraint of this setting nonetheless uses eleven of the twelve available pitches, a degree of harmonic color found nowhere else in the sacred music of the High Renaissance.

JUBILATE DEO With accomplishments in both the late Renaissance and early Baroque eras, **Giovanni Gabrieli** of Venice became one of the very few composers (Monteverdi and Beethoven are the others) to write masterpieces in two different historical periods. Like his great contemporaries, Palestrina and Victoria, Gabrieli is known almost entirely for his sacred compositions. By the 17th century, his reputation spread throughout Europe. Northern princes especially sent their court musicians to study with him, cementing his influence among early Baroque composers – Alessandro Tadei (from Graz), Morgens Pederson and Hans Nielsen among others (Denmark), Johannes Grabbe from Westphalia, and Heinrich Schutz (Saxony).

Jubilate Deo (Psalm 100) reflects both styles mentioned above. Gabrieli employs the vocal canonic writing and full, eight-voice choral texture of the Renaissance, as well as the written instrumental accompaniment (though here it just doubles the voices) and sacred chromaticism of the Baroque. Occasionally, one also hears the divided choir tradition (and its low/high effects) particularly associated with Venice in the 16th century. The opening phrase begins high with sopranos and tenors, but continues low as the sopranos stop and the basses and altos enter. The canonic writing appears most prominently in the sopranos (again in the opening phrase), but Gabrieli employs it in all voices.

KOMM, JESU, KOMM “Bach’s output embraces practically every musical genre of his era” (1988 Norton/Grove Encyclopedia). In the genre at hand, several factors defined the German motet when **Johann Sebastian 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 with neither independent instrumental parts nor vocal solos. Nonetheless, “the density and complexity of his music...[contain] layers of religious and numerological significance rarely to be found in the work of other composers” (Norton/Grove). For the extensive and dense *fugato* passage near the beginning on “Der saure Weg” (“The bitter way”), occurring after a full pause, each of the eight voices takes the motive in turn.

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. *The Oxford Companion to*

Bach notes that “Bach’s motets - unlike his cantatas [and most of his other music] - 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.”

LAUDA JERUSALEM The son of a professional violinist, **Antonio Vivaldi** did far more than anyone else to establish the modern solo concerto. He wrote 350 of his 550 concertos for solo instruments – and composed the vast majority of those solo concertos for violin (230). However, he also made substantial contributions to vocal music as well. Vivaldi wrote 45 operas, 40 cantatas, 21 motets, and set 30 psalms (including *Lauda Jerusalem*) – and once again biography played a huge role. In 1703 he was ordained as a priest, and although he never sought a post in that capacity, it facilitated his hiring as maestro di violino at the *Pieta* “one of four Venetian institutions for the care of orphaned or abandoned girls. Services...at the *Pieta* were a focal point of the social calendar of the Venetian nobility” (Grove 7). (Henry Purcell wrote his most famous opera *Dido and Aeneas* for a similar institution for girls in London.) This accounted for much of his remarkable vocal output, including today’s psalm setting for two sopranos, double chorus and string orchestra.

Light texture dominated his solo concertos, so it comes as no surprise that the choral writing in *Lauda Jerusalem* reflects his penchant for homophony – with occasional contrapuntal dialogue. “It is noteworthy how frequently Vivaldi allots the principal melodic interest in choral music to the violins, with the choir declaiming homophonically” (Grove). The light textures (that also dominate his solo concertos) contrast strongly with the masterful counterpoint in the Bach motet we just heard. But texture isn’t everything. Bach paid Vivaldi the ultimate compliment to another composer; he copied and arranged Vivaldi’s concertos.

NUNC DIMITTIS Born in 1935, Estonian composer **Arvo Part** was writing modernist serial compositions by the 1960s. This earned him an official rebuke from the Soviet authorities. Shifting gears in the 1970s, he extensively embraced “contact with plainchant and the music of the Orthodox Church - which affected his music both technically and spiritually” (1988 Norton/Grove Encyclopedia). Now composing overtly sacred vocal compositions almost exclusively, he thus once again found himself at odds with the Soviets, and emigrated to the West in 1980. Frequently adopting a contemporary embrace of Gregorian chant simplicity, “the majority of Part’s works after 1980 are for chorus or small vocal ensemble” (Grove 7). He writes *Nunc dimittis* for a *cappella* chorus.

This piece offers an extraordinary distillation of medieval Gregorian simplicity. It never changes key, with opening and closing passages set softly in C-sharp Minor, framing a vibrant C-sharp Major section in the middle. He builds extensively upon his deliberately restricted material; the bass pedal on C-sharp for the opening phrase returns for the basses with the closing section’s reestablishment of C-sharp Minor – but now it’s a C#-G# pedal for that entire 40-bar passage. Part sets the final phrase of text (beginning *quod parasti ante facium* – “which Thou hast prepared”) as a gradual crescendo, with an immediate shift to C-sharp Major. But he sets the soft final passage to a different text, the Lesser Doxology, a Christian formula praising God. The “Shadows” again: a dark minor mode for praising God! The result of Part’s intentional simplicity: the most haunting and sensuous *a cappella* choral work on today’s concert.

VENI SANCTE SPIRITUS During a long and prolific career (remarkable especially because of the destruction during the “Thirty Years War”), **Heinrich Schutz** became the first composer to put German music on the map. He wrote the first German opera, *Dafne* (subsequently lost), and “was the greatest German composer of the 17th century – the first of international stature” (Grove 7).

By 1619 he was *Kapellmeister* of Dresden, director of the largest and most important musical establishment in Protestant Germany. Given such a prestigious position, it comes as no surprise that, like Gabrieli (with whom he studied in Venice 1609-12), his output was almost exclusively sacred. During the 1620s he produced a number of manuscripts including *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. His works “are notable for their contrasting textures and sonorities” (Norton/Grove). He scores each of the five verses for different combinations of vocal and instrumental soloists,

saving the choir for the final verse. The independence of the instrumental parts, as well as some striking chromaticism, shows the further evolution of Baroque style beyond the era of his great teacher, Gabrieli.

AND THE SWALLOW Prodigious talent can follow myriad paths. **Caroline Shaw** became the youngest ever Pulitzer Prize recipient for her a cappella *Partita for 8 Voices*. She won this year's Grammy Award for "Best Contemporary Classical Composition" with another vocal work, *Narrow Sea*. Yet she started violin lessons at age two, and on that instrument earned both a performance degree (Rice University) and a Masters Degree in performance (Yale University). It doesn't stop there. Celebrating her diverse achievements, *The Guardian* writes that she has recently collaborated with "rappers Kanye West and Nas, soprano Renee Fleming and mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter,...scored films, starred in a TV comedy, performed for the dying...and is making the leap into opera."

Shaw and George Crumb, an inspiration early in her career, "both share an affinity for string quartet [and] find joy in unexpected sounds" (*Guardian*). The Pulitzer jury praised the *Partita* as an "inventive a cappella work uniquely embracing speech, whispers, sighs, murmurs, wordless melodies, and novel vocal effects." Listen as Shaw's *and the swallow* similarly creates some astonishing vocal and rhythmic effects, combining wordless melody with other textured voices throughout this setting of Psalm 84.

SOUS BOIS The daughter, grand-daughter and sister of successful composers, **Lili Boulanger** wrote a wide variety of vocal and instrumental music. But the esteemed musicologist Richard Taruskin states that "her most characteristic compositions are choral." 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.

Boulanger wrote *Sous Bois* in 1911, and fashions a demanding piano accompaniment for this early choral work. Yet its simple opening - on a single pitch, the dominant (Ab) of the D-flat major key of the piece – followed by gentle, undulating figures recalls the harmonic richness of Ravel's similar beginning to *Piece en Forme de Habanera*. This harmonic sophistication is no coincidence, reflecting her career-long "quest for harmonic and instrumental color" (Grove 7). Reflecting this, she enlivens the passage of dense choral counterpoint for "Le rossignol chante" ("The nightingale sings") with remarkably colorful chords (F major 9th, F diminished 9th, Eb major 9th) consecutively in the piano. She later began to explore polytonality before it appeared in Ravel's postwar works. The delicate impressionism here, typical of all her works, demonstrates again that her fragile health deprived the world of a potential rival of Ravel and Debussy, silenced far too soon.

Her sister Nadia Boulanger became one of the great composition teachers of the 20th century, mentoring such young composers as Aaron Copland, Elliot Carter, Walter Piston, and Adolphus Hailstork, whose works close this concert. Nadia also wrote music, yet ardently championed her sister's works before and after Lili's death in 1918, and always considered Lili the better composer.

SEGULARIAK Spanish composer, conductor and teacher **Josu Elberdin** won the commission for this delightful piece from the 2010 Tolosa Choral Competition. Also an accomplished singer and organist, "he frequently serves as a clinician for both children and adult choral conducting workshops in Spain and abroad: Indonesia, Lithuania, France, Bulgaria, and Columbia" (Elberdin website). In Spain, he has served on the faculty of the Pasaia Music School since 2000, and as organist at Pasaia's Nueva Sonara del Carmen Church since 1991. He often specializes in rewarding, high-quality compositions for children's choirs that tell a story. *Segalariak* ("The Reapers") reflects just such a youthful, folk-like vitality. Elberdin wrote it in an accessible vocal style: transparent texture (homophony or light counterpoint), balanced four or eight-bar phrasing throughout, nonsense syllables in the bass, and a simple verse structure tells the story of the reapers and their role in the festive harvest feast.

TROIS BEAUX OISEAUX By the outbreak of World War I, **Maurice Ravel** had finally established a celebrated international reputation distinct from Debussy. After an inauspicious start, the string of popular orchestral works and the ballets *Mother Goose* and *Daphnis et Chloe*, *Rapsodie espagnole*, *Pavane pour une infante defunte*, and *Valses noble et sentimentales* firmly established his career. Then as an ardent French patriot, Ravel was “desperately anxious to serve his country” (1980 Grove Dictionary). He dedicated each of his “Trois Chansons” (1914-15) to those whom he thought could help him enlist. The dedicatee of *Trois Beaux Oiseaux*, Paul Panleve, was successful, and Ravel drove motor vehicles for the French military during the early years of the war.

The “Trois Chansons” became Ravel’s only *a cappella* choral pieces. While waiting to enlist, he wrote *Oiseaux*, about a young woman waiting to hear from her beloved in the war. After hearing its rich Impressionist harmony, easily flowing textures, and wordless accompaniment by the lower voices, “one wishes he would have composed more [of them]” (David Goyertsen). This single choral set, however, matches the success of his other works, in a career that any composer would envy. No composer before or since placed such a large proportion of their work in the standard concert repertory.

GENTLY REST Acclaimed as conductor, choral composer and artistic director, **Craig Hella Johnson** wears many hats successfully. He has won guest-conducting positions with the Santa Fe Symphony, San Antonio Symphony, Austin Symphony and Chicago’s Music of the Baroque. He remains constantly in demand as a choral conductor, serving 31 years as founder and director of Conspirare, 23 years as director of the Victoria Bach Festival, as well as for the Vocal Arts Ensemble in Cincinnati, the University of Texas, and serving as artistic director for Chanticleer in 1998-99. Johnson is currently the Faculty Artist in Residence at Texas State University. In 2015 he won the Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance. *Gently Rest* is an excerpt from his “Considering Matthew Shepherd,” about a gay man’s death at the hands of murderers. From start to finish, he writes a wonderfully gentle lullaby in 7/8 meter “intended as a lullaby of comfort for Matthew’s mother” (Johnson).

Gently Rest also reflects his extensive work with the Bach Festivals in Chicago and Victoria. He writes the violin solo with reference to one of the most beautiful *obbligato* arias in the entire classical canon, *Erbarne Dich* (“Have mercy, my God”) from Bach’s “St. Matthew Passion.”

TRUST IN THE LORD American composer **Adolphus Hailstork**, born in 1941, continues to fashion a distinguished career in contemporary American music. He studied with Nadia Boulanger in 1963, and graduated from Michigan State University with a Doctorate in Composition in 1971. A composer of multiple operas, symphonies, concertos, string quartets, and piano sonatas, this African-American composer has written “major works in nearly all musical media, from musical comedy to solo piano and choral works.” The U.S. Marine Band performed his *Fanfare on Amazing Grace* at President Biden’s inaugural in 2021, and he won the Ernest Bloch Award for Choral Composition in 1971 for *Mourn Not the Dead*. “His musical language is postmodern and pluralistic” (Grove 7) and creates a rich hybrid of African-American and Classical European-American music. With sacred titles found in his genres, that choral magic continues in *Trust in the Lord*.

WAKE UP MY SPIRIT Hailstork offers another “rich hybrid” for this lively closing number. He freely adopts the text of Psalm 57 - the New International Version (NIV) – verses 8-11. He personalizes and softens it. Instead of “I will awaken the dawn,” Hailstork writes “I *myself* will awaken the dawn.” Instead of “Awake my soul” (Verse 8) his title is *Wake up, My Spirit*. His classical techniques remain at the forefront: motivic work (only a few motives dominate this piece) and rich modulation. And while the final change of key to D Major is the richest of all (“Wake up!”), undergirding it is the African-American jazz fondness for “blue notes” – a flat 7th C-natural appears in every cadence. The concert closes in joyful affirmation.