

Program notes 2/2018

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Austrian composer and organist Anton Bruckner's thirty-odd motets are a crucial part of his compositional output. They express his devout Roman Catholic beliefs, using the modal chords and fluid melodies of the Renaissance masters. But the harmonic shifts and compositional techniques display a clearly Romantic sensibility: blocks of contrasting sound display Bruckner's roots as an organist and improviser.

*Ave Maria* (1861)

While leading the church music for the Linz Cathedral, Bruckner programmed and played many sacred works of Bach and Italian Renaissance masters. For six years, he traveled to Vienna to study counterpoint with Simon Sechter, and completed this *Ave Maria* as a kind of graduation thesis. The first section emphasizes Mary's annunciation, with a three-part women's choir contrasting with a four-part men's choir. The middle section unites all of the voices, giving us a foretaste of the harmonic lushness found in his symphonies, and concludes with a heartbreaking *diminuendo* of supplication.

*Christus factus est* (1884)

*Christus factus est* was composed while Bruckner was the Austrian Emperor's court organist and a professor of harmony at the Vienna Conservatory. This four-part "cathedral in sound" was dedicated to Father Otto Loidol of the Benedictine monastery of Kremsmünster, who subscribed to the Cecilian movement (seeking to bring back the spare, *a cappella* choral style of Palestrina). Bruckner created an extraordinarily symphonic work that achieves striking harmonic effects through long *crescendos* and interrupted climaxes. It sets a Holy Week text from Philippians 2, exploring the drama of the crucifixion.

Elliott Gyger (b. 1968)

Elliott Gyger, a native of Sydney, Australia, began writing music at about the age of ten. His composition teachers have included Ross Edwards, Peter Sculthorpe, Bernard Rands and Mario Davidovsky. He holds a Bachelor of Music from the University of Sydney (1990) and a PhD in Music from Harvard University (2002). His awards have included the Peggy Glanville-Hicks Fellowship, the Walter Hinrichsen Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and commission grants from the Australia Council and the Fromm Foundation.

Elliott Gyger's music essays a synthesis of some of the bewildering diversity within Western art music of the late 20th and early 21st century. Grounded in the structural rigor of high modernism, it is concerned with the nexus between harmony and instrumental/vocal gesture. His instrumental works typically explore dramatic interactions between soloists and groups, whether in an orchestral or chamber context. His substantial vocal and choral output is similarly multilayered, with many pieces setting texts in multiple languages.

Gyger is also active as a conductor, teacher and writer on new music. He was Assistant Professor of Music at Harvard from 2002 to 2007, and has taught at the University of Melbourne since 2008, where he is currently Senior Lecturer in Composition. He has written extensively on Australian composer Nigel Butterley, including a book on his music published by Wildbird Press in April 2015.

*Hebrew, Latin, Greek* was commissioned by The Seraphim Singers in 2002. At that time Elliott Gyger was a singer in the group, and sang in the recording of the work for the CD *Windows on the Divine*.

Gyger introduces the work as follows:

*In chapter 19 of John's Gospel, we are told that Pilate had an inscription put above Jesus' head on the cross – "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews" – that the inscription was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. A number of fascinating questions arise as to how this inscription might have been intended and/or read by various speakers of the three languages. Latin was the language of Pilate and the imperial Roman authority under which Jesus was crucified. Pilate believes that Jesus is innocent, but is too weak to oppose the crowd's push for his destruction; labeling him "King of the Jews" -- that is a potential leader of resistance to Roman rule – creates a credible justification for his execution. To a Hebrew-speaking Jew, by contrast, the label would come across as a cruel taunt, aimed not only at Jesus himself, whose "kingship" does not appear sufficient to protect him from the most ignominious death, but also at the Jewish authorities who brought him to trial (and who are quick to object to Pilate's wording). That the "King of the Jews" should be a "Nazarene" – i.e., from the outlying region of Galilee, rather than the Jewish heartland of Judaea – adds insult to injury. Greek was the language of merchants and travelers, including many Jewish families from all over the eastern Mediterranean who had returned to live in Jerusalem, but it was also to become the language of most early Christians (including, of course, the author of John's Gospel). To them, Pilate's accusation/taunt was also an unwitting acknowledgment of the true, divine kingship of Christ, revealed fully in the Resurrection and again at the end of time.*

*In this work I have taken Pilate's trilingual inscription as the starting point for a triptych of meditations on the identity of Jesus, as revealed in the texts from the liturgy of the Easter Triduum. Niglathah (the movement performed today) makes use of the opening verses of the Suffering Servant Song from Isaiah (52: 13-53:3) in Hebrew, the Old Testament reading for Good Friday*

*While the Old Testament is usually taken for granted as part of Christian tradition, a return to the original Hebrew language serves as a useful reminder of the origins and continuing existence as a non-Christian sacred document. In approaching the extraordinary words of Isaiah, interpreted by Christians as a searing prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion, I could not help but wonder uncomfortably how Jews feel about the Christian reading of the text – especially in light of the centuries of Christian persecution of the Jews, collectively held responsible for Jesus' death. The result is a setting which attempts to dramatize the tension between Isaiah's words and their Christian interpretation, by*

*superimposing on the Hebrew poetry a musical structure based on the Stations of the Cross. In this structure the role of the suffering Jesus is played not by the baritone soloist (who functions rather as a cantor-cum-Evangelist), but by an obbligato double bass, while other characters (Mary, Simon of Cyrene, Veronica, the women of Jerusalem) are played by the chorus. The refrain/inscription is heard three times: once broken up among the supporting cast, the spat out violently as Jesus is crucified, and finally as a peaceful epitaph over the tomb.*

Julian Wachner (b. 1968)

As Director of Music at New York's historic Trinity Church Wall Street, Julian Wachner oversees an annual season of hundreds of events, with duties that include conducting Trinity's flagship weekly series, Bach at One, which canvasses the entire choral-orchestral output of J. S. Bach, and leading Compline by Candlelight, Trinity's innovative and fully improvised variation on this ancient monastic ritual. He also curates the long-standing and cherished Concerts at One series, presenting an eclectic program of weekly concerts for Lower Manhattan and beyond through its HD live and on-demand webcasting. Besides serving as Principal Conductor of Trinity's resident contemporary music orchestra NOVUS NY, the Trinity Baroque Orchestra, and The Choir of Trinity Wall Street, Wachner is also Music Director of the Grammy Award-winning Washington Chorus, with whom he won ASCAP's Alice Parker award for adventurous programming and Chorus America's Margaret Hilles Award for Choral Excellence.

Wachner has an extensive catalogue of original compositions that have been variously described as "jazzy, energetic, and ingenious" (*Boston Globe*), having "splendor, dignity, outstanding tone combinations, [and] sophisticated chromatic exploration" (*La Scena Musicale*), and being "a compendium of surprises" (*Washington Post*). The *New York Times* has characterized his music as "bold and atmospheric," demonstrating "an imaginative flair for allusive text setting," and has praised him for "the silken complexities of his harmonies." The *American Record Guide* noted that "Wachner is both an unapologetic modernist and an open-minded eclectic – his music has something to say."

Wachner also enjoys an active schedule as a guest conductor. Orchestral engagements have included performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra; Montreal, Pacific, Calgary, and Pittsburgh Symphonies; New York Philharmonic; Seraphic Fire; National Arts Centre Orchestra; Philharmonia Baroque; Hong Kong Philharmonic; Bang on a Can All-Stars; and Apollo's Fire. In addition, he has conducted the San Francisco Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Hawaii Opera Theater, Juilliard Opera Theater, and New York City Opera, as well as for Carnegie Hall Presents, National Sawdust, and the Lincoln Center Festival.

With multiple Grammy nominations to his credit, Wachner has recorded on the Chandos, Naxos, Atma Classique, Erato, Cantaloupe Music, ARSIS, Dorian, Acis, and Musica Omnia labels. He is published exclusively by E.C. Schirmer and represented worldwide by Opus 3 Artists.

*At the Lighting of the Lamps*, commissioned by the Seraphim Singers in 1999, is in three movements. They form an arch-like cycle framed by a flute soliloquy, representing the “*laetare*,” or glimpse of joy offered by God the humankind in the form of fire. Wachner’s compositional language juxtaposes a new-medieval sound world with twentieth-century French harmonies in the manner of Duruflé or Messiaen. In addition, there are a few intentional melodic and gestural borrowings from Orff’s *Carmina Burana* (another twentieth-century work looking back to the Middle Ages). -Randolph Nichols

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

| *Vespergesang*, op. 121 (pub. posthum.)\_(1833)

*Laudate pueri*, op. 39, no. 2 (1837)

One of the most brilliant of the early Romantic composers, Felix Mendelssohn came from a wealthy, distinguished Jewish family. Mendelssohn’s sacred choral music is considered by most scholars to be the most important genre of his broad output. When Felix was a child, the young family moved to Berlin and converted to the Lutheran church. Felix, a devout lifelong Lutheran, nonetheless remained conscious of his Jewish heritage (his grandfather was the noted scholar, Moses Mendelssohn), but he developed an unconflicted enthusiasm for the cantatas and passion settings of Bach and for the oratorios of Handel. Most of the sacred music Mendelssohn composed was intended for the Lutheran liturgy, but he also composed pieces for the Huguenot, Catholic, Jewish, and Anglican faiths. He set a variety of religious texts, but had a preference for the Psalms.

In 1833, Mendelssohn was appointed Düsseldorf’s music director, and his *Vespergesang* dates from this period. The Vespers responsories *Adspice domine* (the first movement, based on Psalm 119) and *O lux beata trinitas* (the last, from a Latin hymn attributed to St. Ambrose of Milan) are written for the unusual combination of four-part men’s choir, cello and double bass; this results in some dark, contrapuntal textures in A minor supporting polyphony in the voices in the first and third movements. A group of soloists surround a repeated psalm tone with varied harmonies in the fourth movement, and a beautiful hymn setting in close harmony closes the work. Although no organ part appears in the score, Mendelssohn accompanied the work from the organ in his own performances. The full collection of five movements was not published until after the composer’s death.

The beautiful *Laudate pueri* (Praise, children), op. 39, no. 2 was composed in 1837, but inspired by his visit to Rome in 1830 at the age of twenty-one. Mendelssohn wrote the motet for three-part female chorus and organ as a reaction to visiting the fifteenth-century French church at the top of the Spanish Steps, the Trinità dei Monti, where he praised the quality of the singing in a letter to his parents: “The French nuns sing there, and it is wonderfully lovely.... Now, one should know one more thing: that one is not allowed to see the singers. Therefore I have come to an unusual decision: I will compose something for their voices, which I remember exactly...”

Although most European choirs Mendelssohn heard during his travels used exclusively boys as sopranos, the expressive singing of the cloistered nuns in Rome made a profound impact on him. He became one of the first composers to write consistently for mixed (gender) choirs, and he requested that women sing both soprano and alto parts in his later oratorios.

The work falls into three large sections, the first which will be performed on this concert. Mendelssohn became fascinated with the flexible nuances of unison Gregorian chant during his visit to Rome, and his *Laudate pueri* begins with imitative, devotional music in E-flat over a meditative organ part. The main melody and formal structure are based loosely on the first movement of Palestrina's *Missa Assumpta est Maria*. The text is a call to praise (from Psalm 113) and gentle harmonies moving to G minor, progressing through several sequences of fifths, and frequent melodic suspensions add slight Italian accents to the work.

Christina Whitten Thomas

Christina Whitten Thomas's works have been performed throughout the United States including at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Disney Concert Hall. Christina has received commissions from the Los Angeles Master Chorale Chamber Singers, the Denver Women's Chorus, Vox Femina of Los Angeles, the Esoterics of Seattle, Melodia Women's Choir, the Apollo Men's Chorus, The Golden Bridge, and the Vermont Choral Union. Her awards include 1st place in the Indianapolis Symphonic Choir competition, 1st place in the Los Robles Master Chorale competition, 1st place in the Park Avenue Christian Church competition, 2nd place in the NATS Art Song Composition Award, the Sorel Conductor's Choice award, and the Sorel Medallion. Her choral cycle *Choral de Bêtes* can be heard on Musica Sacra's 2012 CD release *Messages to Myself*.

Her music is published by E.C. Schirmer and Hal Leonard, as well as available through MusicSpoke.com. Christina holds a M.M. in composition from the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music and resides with her family in Pasadena, California, where she is also an active teacher and vocalist. More information can be found at [www.christinawhitten.com](http://www.christinawhitten.com).

Marian Partee

Primarily a writer for theatre, Marian has received over twenty productions of her plays, musicals, and operettas around the country. Venues include: Red Mountain Theatre Company (Birmingham, AL), Theatre Building Chicago, Actor's Co-op (Hollywood), City Lights Theatre (San Jose), The Great American Melodrama (Oceano, CA), UC Irvine, Northwestern University (where she earned her B.S. in Theatre), California Institute of the Arts (where she earned her M.F.A. in Acting), and her church, La Cañada Presbyterian. As a performer, she has appeared in over forty plays and musicals. She lives with her husband and two children in La Cañada Flintridge, California. [www.marianpartee.com](http://www.marianpartee.com)

## **The Deceiver – Notes by Marian Partee, lyricist**

For this piece, Director Jennifer Lester suggested the story of Jacob's divine wrestling match (Genesis 32:22-31). She pointed out that anyone on a spiritual path struggles with God; even Jesus did so.

Through the lens of modern psychology, Jacob's family could be termed "dysfunctional." Jacob convinces his first-born twin, Esau, to sell him his birthright. Then his mother encourages Jacob to trick his father into giving him the blessing due his brother. Fearing Esau's wrath, Jacob flees to Haran. There, Jacob is himself deceived into marrying a woman he doesn't love. He later marries her sister as well, whom he does love. The wives vie for his affection by trying to have the most children, even involving their handmaidens as surrogates. From this strife will spring the twelve tribes of Israel.

As our scene unfolds, Jacob fears that Esau will destroy him and his family. His only hope is in the Lord. However, God's blessing will not be easily won.

Like any person of faith, Jacob yearns to understand the identity and destiny that a mysterious God has planned for him. Tenacious and courageous, he will not meekly accept an ill fate. He clings to the promises his Maker has made. He implores God to deliver him from danger and to bless him. In His mercy, the Lord redeems his broken, desperate life.

God seeks intimate engagement with Jacob. Although we may not experience the same kind of visceral encounter with the Lord, our struggles with Him can likewise leave us humbled and transformed.

## **The Deceiver – Notes by Christina Whitten Thomas, composer**

The text for "The Deceiver" is based on the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel from Genesis 32:22-31. In this light, I have structured the music as if I am writing a story. The piece loosely follows the form of prologue, exposition, increasing conflict, climax, resolution, and epilogue, a technique I have used in other pieces of mine. The opening soprano and alto lines set the scene, creating an atmosphere of quiet anticipation. The narration begins with the tenors and basses. As the lower voices shift to express the ambiance of the natural world, the women continue to spin the story of Jacob's troubled past. Musically I have tried to capture the resonances of the wind in the trees, the echoes across a vast river valley, and the hushed sounds of evening.

With "A shadow draws near," the music builds with apprehension, leading into the struggle. The tenors and basses trade off a relentless, unnerving line as the choir depicts Jacob facing his adversary. This section builds to the first climax at "This is no man. This is the shaper of worlds." Then the choir goes on to name God "Sustainer... Builder... Maker..." until the second climax at "Giver of covenants, curses, blessings."

As we move toward the moment of resolution, the music highlights, through simpler lines, "Why did he contend with men when their hands did not hold his fate?" This is the moment of realization. We must put our faith in God alone.

The choir returns to the opening motive from the soprano and alto voices. They begin with uncertainty, then gradually evolve to deliverance as Jacob receives his new name “Israel.” You can hear the harmonic language blossom and shift to a feeling of contentment and momentary peace. The piece ends with a feeling of uncertainty, however, as Israel’s fate remains unresolved.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

*O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf*, op. 74, no. 2 (1879)

Brahms was an active conductor and composer who maintained one of the largest personal libraries of choral music in Europe. As a choral conductor, Brahms preferred Baroque works, especially those of Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) and J. S. Bach (1685-1750), and this motet is a direct result of that study, based around a Lutheran chorale melody. Brought up Lutheran in Hamburg, Brahms was familiar with both Martin Luther’s 1526 *Deutsche Messe* (one of the first plainchant settings of the mass to use German text) as well as Luther’s translation of the Bible. For his *Two motets*, op. 74, he choose to sets texts by Luther and by the Jesuit priest Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld (1591-1635), dedicating both works to Philipp Spitta, the editor of the first Complete Edition of Bach’s works.

*O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf* (*O Saviour, rend the heavens*) is a chorale verse motet. It sets a 1622 Advent text by the Jesuit priest Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, which in turn is an adaptation of the Latin *Rorate coeli de super* inspired by the Book of Isaiah. Brahms groups the five verses of the old Lutheran chorale tune into three contrasting sections. The chorale melody is sustained by the sopranos for the first two verses. There is a dramatic shift of meter for the third verse (“O Erd, schlag aus”/ O earth, break out), with a more operatic treatment of the text and the chorale melody shifting to the tenor voices.

In the central section, Brahms abandons triple meters in favor of a slower 4/2, with beautiful imitative writing over an ornamented chorale tune in the basses. Brahms changes the original “*ewig Tod*”/”eternal Death” to “*bittre Tod*”/”bitter Death”, and allows the sopranos to repeat that text within a freely imitative texture. Brahms intensifies the harmony until a point of crisis, with an augmented chord at “*führ uns mit starker Hand*”/”lead us with a strong hand.”

For the exuberant final section, the chorale melody passes from the altos to the outer voices, and is fragmented and imitated virtuosically, using inversion and syncopation. A flashy “Amen” concludes the work, bringing this encyclopedic *tour de force* to an exciting conclusion on a ringing major chord.