



THE ORIGINAL SURROUND SOUND

Antiphonal Glories through the Ages

Sunday, November 15, 2009 | 4:00pm

Kennedy Center Concert Hall

WRITTEN BY:

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Notes on the Program

[These notes use the standard abbreviations for voice range: S for soprano, A for alto, T for tenor, B for bass. Thus "SATB" is your standard four-voice chorus – the chorus for the Bach *St. John Passion*, the Brahms *German Requiem*, or the Stravinsky *Symphony of Psalms*. "Choral unison" means that the chorus sings the same line, the sopranos and altos an octave higher than the tenors and basses.]

Introduction

The idea of musical antiphony—one musician or set of musicians answering another across a space—is as old as Isaiah's cherubim clamoring "Holy, Holy, Holy" to each other. It is not a characteristic of Western music only—ask an ethnomusicologist about call and response. But the use of multi-part choruses, separated in space, which alternate between singing separately—one replying to the other—and singing together first became popular in the sixteenth century. St. Mark's in Venice, with its two balconies complete with organs at opposite ends of the crossing, was particularly important in developing this style of music. Three generations of composers for St. Mark's—Adrian Willaert (ca. 1490–1562, at St. Mark's from 1527); Andrea Gabrieli (ca. 1510–1586, at St. Mark's from 1566); and Andrea's nephew Giovanni Gabrieli (ca. 1553–1612, at St. Mark's from 1584)—are the three musicians most often mentioned in the pioneering of this style: it is Giovanni Gabrieli in particular who is associated with the style in the minds of most musicians, and it is Giovanni Gabrieli who has the most pieces on today's program. None of the three quite follows the standard image of a Gabrieli multiple-choir piece—two SATB choruses answering each other (like his *O Magnum Mysterium*, which the Choral Arts Society has often done in its Christmas concerts.): this concert hopes to demonstrate his range as well as his mastery.

Works for multiple choruses alternating between singing separately and together has persevered to our time, informing many masterpieces of choral music, sometimes in whole—much of the music of Gabrieli's pupil Heinrich Schütz; the *St. Matthew Passion*; *Israel in Egypt*; the Verdi *Te Deum*; Mahler's Eighth Symphony; the Bartók *Cantata Profana*—sometimes in part—the Sanctus of the Verdi *Requiem*; Berlioz *Romeo and Juliet* (Capulets and Montagues!). A confessional note: in the polychoral style as cultivated by the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the individual voices maintain their independence when the various choirs combine:



when two five-voice choruses are singing simultaneously you get real ten-voice counterpoint. Later works can be more lax: when the two four-part choruses in the *St. Matthew Passion* sing together, they sometimes sing in eight real parts and sometimes as a single four-part chorus separated in space. And the physical separation of choirs becomes less of a requirement: nobody expects the chorus performing the Verdi *Requiem* to reposition itself into two choirs for its Sanctus.

Today's program contains three works by Giovanni Gabrieli, the figure most associated with the Venetian polychoral style; it also contains a work written far from Venice during Andrea Gabrieli's time, by the English composer Thomas Tallis: the 40-voice motet *Spem in alium*. We are also performing four twentieth-century works which show how the idea of double chorus had developed by the last century: one major work and three brief Marian motets.

Three of today's works for chorus are not, in fact, "antiphonal" or "polychoral": this is a style which needs other kinds of works for contrast. We are also using brief instrumental works to cover the stage changes inevitable in such a program.

Creator of the Stars of Night

9TH CENTURY SARUM PLAINSONG, MODE IV

Creator of the Stars of Night is not in itself an antiphonal piece. It is plainchant from the Sarum rite (that is, the rite as sung at the Cathedral of Salisbury, England during the Middle Ages) coming to us by way of the Episcopal *Hymnal 1940*. We are beginning today's concert with this bit of mediaeval plainchant to get everyone's ears adjusted to music coming from various places in the auditorium. Its spatial distribution and the assignment of various verses to tenors and basses, sopranos and altos, or choral unison have been decided by the Choral Arts Society for today's concert; they are not part of the music itself. It may help to think of it as a sort of prelude to the concert proper.

Omnes gentes, plaudite manibus

In ecclesiis

GIOVANNI GABRIELI

The two major publications which circulated Giovanni Gabrieli's music throughout Europe are both entitled *Sacrae Symphoniae*: the first volume published in 1597, the second posthumously in 1615. Not all the pieces in either volume are polychoral: each collection starts with single-chorus motets for a modest six voices and moves up gradually to end with works for as many as four separate choruses. Nor, as we shall see in *In ecclesiis*, are all the "voices" singers: many of the motets also include instrumental parts which are also counted in the number of "voices." We are doing one motet from each of the volumes of *Sacrae Symphoniae*.



Omnis gentes, from the 1597 volume, is for sixteen voices, all choral. This is not the largest number of voices in any Gabrieli motet—one of the works in the 1615 collection is for 19 voices—but it is the most opulent of the motets in the first collection. The text—"O clap your hands, all ye people" is from Psalm 47 (King James numbering), the Psalm proper for the Feast of the Ascension ("God is gone up with a shout..."). The Feast of Ascension was a major Venetian holiday: it was on that day that the Doge ceremonially cast a ring into the Adriatic to symbolize that Venice was wed to the sea. Thus this text called out one of the richest of Gabrieli's motets.

The sixteen voices of *Omnis gentes* form four distinct four-voice choruses. Only two of them are in the standard choral disposition SATB; one is pitched higher—no voice lower than tenor—and one pitched lower—no voice higher than alto. In today's performance the four choruses are disposed as follows: in the "chorister seats" at the back of the stage in the high-voice chorus (SSAT); at the rear of the auditorium, in the first tier, is the low-voiced chorus (ATBB); the two SATB choruses are positioned on the sides of the auditorium in the box tier. Each of the SATB choruses has its moment of four-voice glory, singing while the other three choruses are silent, but most of the motet is for a dense and jubilant sixteen-voice texture, with constant trading back-and-forth between one (or two) choruses and one (or two) others. The whole ends with an extremely Gabrielian "Alleluia."

In ecclesiis is not only a work beautiful in its own right; it is also of historical importance for the rediscovery of Gabrieli as choral composer in the twentieth century. It was the Gabrieli vocal work chosen for printing in the pioneering *Historical Anthology of Music*, the first important English-language anthology of music from earlier eras; it was also the opening cut of the Cambridge Records mono LP of Gabrieli, the first commercial LP of his music to be performed with consideration towards historical performance practice. This writer learned the Gabrieli sound from *In ecclesiis*: for me it's an old friend as well as a noble piece of music. (It is also one of the two works on this program which the Choral Arts Society has presented before in formal concert, the other being today's concluding *Jubilate Deo*.)

Mass for Double Choir

FRANK MARTIN

Frank Martin, premier Swiss composer of the twentieth century, is best known to concertgoers for his thorny works of the 1940s and 1950s, particularly the *Petite Symphonie Concertante* (harp, harpsichord, piano and strings; 1945), the *Concerto for Seven Wind Instruments* (1949), and the *Etudes for String Orchestra* (1956). Fans of choral music know him for his large-scale oratorios, most particularly *In terra pax* (1944), *Golgotha* (1949) and *Le Mystère de la Nativité* (1959). Martin's Mass for unaccompanied double chorus was written in 1922: early in his life he



was not sure of its value—he had called it a “youthful sin”—and withheld it from performance until 1962 and from publication until 1972. Since its publication it has emerged as one of the great twentieth-century mass settings for unaccompanied chorus, the full equal of such monuments as the Vaughan Williams (1920–1921, also for double chorus), the Poulenc (1937, without a Credo), and the Hindemith (1963, his last piece).

The Frank Martin Mass—for two equal SATB choirs—is a double-chorus work down to the bone. Twice, at the climax of the first “Kyrie eleison” and at the climax of its partner the “Christe eleison,” the sopranos of both choirs join together in unison to establish without question the main melodic line: otherwise there is no spot where equivalent voices in the two choirs sing in unison for more than two or three beats. (Passages in octaves between the equivalent voices of the two choirs are somewhat less rare: note the opening of the “Quoniam tu solus sanctus” in the Gloria, announced by a broad tune for basses of the first choir and basses of the second choir, first choir an octave above the second.)

The traditions of polychoral writing had, in fact, changed from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. For one thing, there is no expectation in the Martin that the two choirs will be widely separated in space. There are places where a moderately wide separation would be attractive—the early pages of the Sanctus, for instance, where the cherubim are calling “Holy, Holy, Holy” to each other—but even by the end of this section we have a texture where it is helpful that the two choirs are near to each other. And there is no longer the idea that each chorus must always be written as four independent voices: there is a fair amount of choral unison within each chorus.

In fact the Frank Martin Mass uses—always with an intelligence and an insight which will be manifested in his later works which involve double string orchestra—a great number of textures available to the double chorus. Describing them in detail is the job of masters’ theses in music: here it will be enough to point out two spots, both highlights of the Mass, which represent polar opposites of double-chorus writing. The light and joyful “Cum Sancto Spiritu” which closes the Gloria comes very close to undifferentiated eight-part choral writing: looking at the score one can see how the two-chorus idea operates in the music, but the listener will feel more the heritage of the great Haydn/Mozart “Cum Sancto” fugues. In contrast, the Agnus Dei starkly differentiates the two choirs: Choir Two lays down a steady quarter-note pulse, very slowly changing its harmonies, while over these harmonies Choir One unfolds a long, expressive melody in choral unison, extending in time beyond the usual triple-repetition of the Agnus Dei text. (The following “Dona nobis pacem” is a brief, once-through-the-words ending in humble eight-part harmony.)

Later in his life Frank Martin explored the thorny questions of the Christian religion in his full-evening oratorios. Before his death he became reconciled to the work of serene faith that is his 1922 Mass.



Spem in alium nunquam habui
THOMAS TALLIS

Thomas Tallis's 40-voice motet *Spem in alium nunquam habui* is the most famous Renaissance work for a very large number of voices—though, as we shall see, it does not hold an absolute record for largest number of parts in a sixteenth-century sacred work. Tallis, whose motets are one of the glories of Tudor church music, did not usually write for many-voiced ensembles: the largest number of voices in any other Tallis motet is seven, and many are four-voiced. In fact he wrote his forty-voice motet as the result of a challenge. Here is the story, as told by a contemporary ([sections in brackets are twentieth-century paraphrase by *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*):

In 1567 the Italian composer-cum-diplomat Alessandro Striggio (ca. 1536-1592) visited London on diplomatic business; he showed off one of his forty-voice pieces (he had two), presumably to Tallis as well as to others in England interested in music. The contemporary narrates: "[a music-loving duke] asked whether one of our Englishmen could sett 'as good a songe' [as that which had been sent into England by the Italians]. Tallice being very skillful was felt to try whether he would undertake ye Matter, which he did and made one of 40 partes which was songe in the long gallery at Arundell house." The probable date of the first performance was in August 1750, when the Duke of Norfolk, who is the person most likely to have been the "[music-loving duke]" of the anecdote, was released from prison: the message of the text is certainly apt for such an occasion. It is probable that the general shape of the piece—eight equal choirs—was inspired by the octagonal banquet hall of the owner of "Arundell house"—though, alas for musicological tidiness, the octagonal banquet hall was not in Arundell house itself but in the owner's country residence.

Spem in alium is for eight equal five-voice choirs, each one SATBB. Here, for those who want them, are a few guideposts to the structure of the piece.

At the start of *Spem in alium* the eight choruses enter one by one, each individual chorus feathering in one or two voices at a time. As Choruses Five through Eight begin to enter, starting in on the text "Praeter in te...", Choruses One through Four feather out one by one, letting the later-entering choruses carry the music.

Four times in the piece all 40 voices are heard at once: first at the final appearance of the text "Praeter in te, Deus Israel," where Choruses One through Six enter en masse over a texture being carried on by the other two choruses. The second 40-voice spot is not marked by so massive an entrance: it comes at the words "Et omnia peccata hominem...", which is first sung by Choruses One and Two: after a few measures Choruses Three through Eight enter—together, but with various melodic-rhythmical motives rather than in an assertive mass (we all sin, but each of us sins differently). The third and fourth moments in which all 40 voices are singing come at the setting of the final line of the text, "Respice humilitatem nostrum"—look down on our humility. The first "Respice," the first spot in the piece where all 40 parts enter in



rhythmic unison, is marked also by a magical change of harmony; it quickly backs off to a texture in which only two choruses are singing at a time (the text is, after all, about humility). The second "Respite"—again an entry of all voices in rhythmic unison—starts a final section, about one-seventh of the piece as a whole, which is for all 40 parts until the end.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about *Spem in alium* is that what seems like such an extravagant apparatus, taken up by a composer whose preferred ensemble is a chorus of four or five parts, should be to a text of such humility, and should respond to this text with such sensitivity. *Spem in alium* may be a rarity in its forces, but is not a stunt: it is deeply felt music, and it is a privilege—a humbling one—to sing it.

Three Marian Motets

FRANZ BIEBL | BENJAMIN BRITTEN | JOHN TAVENER

Franz Biebl's *Ave Maria* is today's one piece for tenors and basses alone. It is scored for a soloist (doing the three brief bits of plainchant which introduce the three sections of the motet), male trio (TTB, performable also, as it is being performed today, by small choir) and TTBB male chorus. The four-voice chorus sings a straightforward harmonic setting of the *Ave Maria* text, with the three-voice group responding with a somewhat more musically inflected version of each set of words. Both groups are equally important: it's not a matter of solo and accompaniment. In today's performance the three-voice small chorus is sung by the tenors and basses in the chorister seats, while the full four-voice choir is sung by the tenors and basses in the hall.

A brief description of the form: three times the soloist sings a bit of plainchant associated with the Annunciation. The first two times the choruses respond with a setting of the Latin text of the *Ave Maria* through "...fructus ventris tui Jesu." To the third bit of plainchant it responds with the extended text of the *Ave Maria*, through "...hora mortis nostrae," and adds an Amen. The setting of the first part of the *Ave Maria* is the same as that of the first two responses; the remainder is new.

Benjamin Britten's *A Hymn to the Virgin*, to an anonymous mediaeval English macaronic poem ("macaronic" = working in bits of another language than English), is the most purely antiphonal of today's pieces. (It is also the shortest, save for Tallis's *If Ye Love Me*.) For the first two verses of the poem a chorus singing the English words is answered by a chorus singing the Latin interjections. At the start of the third verse the lower voices of Chorus One briefly lay down a slower harmony, accompanying Chorus Two as well as the sopranos of Chorus One; then the opening texture returns. This is a very early piece of Britten's, written when he was a teenager and revised for publication (probably adding that little bit of elaboration at the start of the third verse) in 1934, when Britten had just turned 21.



John Tavener's *A Hymn to the Mother of God* is for two six-part choruses (each one SAATBB) singing in canon at the distance of three *very* slow beats—a quarter-note lasts more than a second, and there is no note shorter than a quarter-note in the piece. The effect is of a slow-moving, gently dissonant mass of sound. Three times the piece moves from *piano* to *molto forte*, each time (including the last time) it is followed by a long silence. The composer writes of the piece that it "is a setting of a text from the Liturgy of St. Basil. It speaks of the almost cosmic power attributed to the Mother of God by the Orthodox Church." The composer inscribes the piece "In memory of my Mother—Eternal memory!"

If Ye Love Me

THOMAS TALLIS

Thomas Tallis's *If Ye Love Me, Keep My Commandments* is included in this concert to clear the palate after a performance of works for double/quadruple/octuple choruses, and to present Tallis in a work more typical of his style than the 40-voice *Spem in alium*. *If Ye Love Me*, probably the most-performed of Tallis's English anthems, is for single SATB chorus unaccompanied. It sets its text—Jesus' words of promise from John 14:15-17—simply and with a sincerity that gives them special life to anyone who knows this short, quiet piece.

Jubilate Deo

GIOVANNI GABRIELI

Giovanni Gabrieli wrote three quite separate motets to texts beginning "Jubilate Deo." But it is the eight-part motet we are performing today which is by far the best-known of them; in fact it is probably Gabrieli's most-performed choral work. It comes not from either of his volumes of *Sacrae Symphoniae* but from a miscellaneous 1613 publication entitled *Promptuarii Musicii* containing works of composers ranging from the famous (Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, Praetorius, Palestrina) to the utterly obscure (Gregorio Zucchini).

This most famous work of a composer most famous for his multiple-choir music is quite solidly in eight voices (SSAATTBB): it is not, however, for multiple choirs. There is no way the eight voices can be divided into two choirs of four voices answering each other (or into one choir of five voices answering one of three, or...). The textures of polychoral writing appear throughout it—the small fragments of text tossed between one set of voices and another (listen, for example, to what happens to "conjugat"); but the sets of voices exchanging such fragments change from phrase to phrase and from section to section of the piece. This can be seen as the texture of polychorality abstracted and applied to a single-chorus work: it can also be seen as polychorality about to be born. At any rate, this *Jubilate Deo* is both a familiar piece of music and a major work of its creator, a fitting end to a concert which started by celebrating the work of Gabrieli.