

Christmas with the Choral Society, December 8, 2007

Program Notes

(In order of performance with comments from choir members)

Part I—The Advent of Christmas

Gloria; Johann Sebastian Bach

We open tonight's concert with the **Gloria** from the famed *Mass in B Minor* by **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750). Bach actually composed the *Gloria*, coupled with the *Kyrie*, first as a *Missa*, which was composed for and dedicated to the Elector of Saxony in 1733. However, Bach spent the next fifteen years of his life, of his own accord, expanding the *Missa* to create his complete *Mass in B Minor*, knowing it would not be performed in its entirety during his lifetime due to certain textual and formal elements which deemed it unsuitable for both the Protestant and Catholic settings of his day. With this in mind, some assert that Bach composed the *Mass in B Minor* as an art form which reflects true reverence and devotion. At any rate, it is considered by many to be music's greatest masterwork.

For me, Bach's work and Handel's *Messiah* are ideal for us to sing at the holidays. I hope the audience agrees. These works are truly classic choral pieces, rich with meaning, depth, sound and majesty. They are demanding, but singing them with the Choral Society inspires me and makes me proud to be part of a group that can offer such beautiful sounds. To me, these works are true gifts of the season. Sometimes the voices and sounds surrounding me in this music are so glorious, I just want to be part of the audience so I can enjoy the whole experience and soak it all in; but then I wouldn't be able to sing the music, which is an uplifting experience. I sincerely hope the audience enjoys these works." (Lu Ann White)

"This is possibly the most challenging of all the pieces in the program to sing, filled with joyous praises of 'Glory' and longing for 'peace on Earth.'" (Nathan McKellar)

"Bach loves altos. The *Gloria* showcases the alto line—at least that's my thinking from deep in the alto section. What a joy to master the intricate passages and then hear them dance against the other parts." (Ann Selzer)

Selections from *Messiah*; George Frideric Handel

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), German-born composer who spent most of his adult life in England, composed his most famous work, ***Messiah***, during the summer of 1741. While Handel enjoyed widespread success composing concerti grossi, operas and oratorios during his lifetime, he was in financial ruin when he began work on *Messiah*, an oratorio based on a Biblical libretto compiled by Charles Jennens. Amazingly, Handel created the complete score for *Messiah* in just 24 days. *Messiah* debuted in Dublin, Ireland in 1742 and saw many performances in London thereafter. *Messiah*, which means "Anointed One," makes musical commentary on Jesus' birth, passion, and resurrection. Tonight we will share several selections from *Messiah* as we recount the celebrated story of Christmas.

"*Messiah* brings back great memories of my days at Luther College, where we would rehearse and perform portions of it each year at Christmas under the direction of Weston Noble. I still have notes in my score from those rehearsals!" (Deborah Svec-Carstens)

"I enjoy all of the Handel selections. I love the style of the music, and singing this masterwork is a real thrill. Handel is one of my favorite all-time composers. Nothing says Christmastime like Handel's *Messiah*!" (Ashley Coopridger)

"I listen to the *Messiah* all year round!! Not only is the music brilliant and inspiring, but the Biblical text is full of hope and praise. Truly one of my all time favorite pieces of music." (Nathan McKellar)

"I am thrilled to be singing the *Messiah* this year. It has always been a part of my family's holiday tradition. When we began rehearsing it this fall, I was taken back to days watching my mom accompany the community choir and my dad singing in it. Later both my sister and I also sang with the choir. It is truly a family event for me!" (Sarah Updegraff)

"Singing the *Messiah* with such precision, determination, and unity has made me love this music even more." (Carolyn Petsche)

And the Glory of the Lord; George Frideric Handel

Handel's *And the Glory of the Lord* chorus, with text from Isaiah 40:5 of the King James Bible, prophetically declares to the world that the Glory of the Lord will soon be revealed. And with this Glory, comfort will come, the world will be transformed and all flesh shall see it together. It is truly a joyful dance of anticipation for the glorious event.

And He Shall Purify; George Frideric Handel

The prophecy continues in ***And He Shall Purify***, as **Handel** sets to music the declaration found in Malachi 3:3 that the Messiah shall cleanse and make ready those who choose to follow Him, "that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness." In this chorus, the richness of the message is echoed in the richness of the words that express the concept of purification.

Magnificat Collegium Regale; Herbert Howells

We move to a work by the esteemed English composer **Herbert Howells** (1892-1983). The text for the *Magnificat* recounts Mary's response to the revelation that she is to be the mother of the Son of God, as the prophecies foretold. Howells created over twenty settings of the *Magnificat* from the Anglican Evensong service, of which the ***Magnificat Collegium Regale*** (for King's College, Cambridge) is considered one of the finest. This sacred work draws on a rich tradition of Anglican Church music, while successfully incorporating modern harmonies and counterpoint, to create a rich and colorful rendition of Mary's prayer.

"There is something indescribably haunting and powerful about the 'Glory be to the Father' section of the *Magnificat* that moves my soul every time I sing it. I feel like the choir is singing and moving as one being during this part of the piece." (Angela Doss)

"I have grown to so appreciate Howells. As with other pieces of his we've sung, he lays out a foundation of beautiful, haunting melodies and then, boom! there's a magical chord, a transforming sound." (Ann Selzer)

For Unto Us a Child is Born; George Frideric Handel

Returning to selections from *Messiah*, we next musically declare the glad tidings of the birth of the Savior. Drawing on the text of Isaiah 9:6, **Handel's *For Unto Us a Child is Born*** chorus rejoices in the reality of Isaiah's prophetic words foretelling the birth of the awaited Messiah. It declares that the Savior will govern and that He shall be called "Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

"Of all the selections from the *Messiah*, I think *For Unto Us a Child is Born* is my favorite. I love both the message as well as the buoyancy of the line. The rhythm patterns are distinct and draw

the audience into the music. Listen for the themes that are sung by each voice part and answered again by another voice part.” (Jane Rider)

Singing the Messiah will always be a trip down memory lane back to my days as a music student at Luther College, where the Messiah was performed every Christmas season for over 50 years by Luther students, alumni and community members. Every time I open my scruffy and well-loved score I smile because my student post office box and phone number from freshman year are on the inside cover. *For Unto Us a Child Is Born* is among my favorite choruses because of its exuberant dance over the birth of Jesus. It was also the first chorus we worked on with Weston Noble and I was one of his ‘guinea pigs’ called down to the front to demonstrate the style he was looking for. I was terrified because I was a freshman and was a bit in awe of him. It ended up being great fun and something I will never forget.” (Angela Doss)

Glory to God; George Frideric Handel

The story continues in **Handel’s *Glory to God*** chorus as, following the declaration of an angel to the shepherds, a multitude of the heavenly host appears to herald in the news of the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:14). In the original score, Handel inserted the phrase “*da lontano e un poco piano*” (as from a distance, and rather softly) for the beginning of the piece. The dynamics then quickly crescendo to a climax as the angels sing praises to God and promise peace and goodwill to all people.

His Yoke is Easy; George Frideric Handel

In **Handel’s** chorus ***His Yoke is Easy***, the story moves to the impact of the birth of Christ in the lives of mankind. He invites all to take His yoke upon them because “His yoke is easy and His burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). As the choir sings, watch for the terraced dynamics that emphasize and echo the joy and importance of this invitation.

Hallelujah; George Frideric Handel

Finally, **Handel’s *Hallelujah*** chorus (also referred to simply as *The Hallelujah Chorus* because of its great popularity throughout history) proclaims the triumph of Christ, the culminating effect that was initiated in the story of Christmas. Drawing on verses found in Revelation 11 and 19, the chorus boldly proclaims “Hallelujah! [literally translated ‘praise to God’] for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever.” Tradition holds that during the debut of *Messiah* in London, King George II stood during the performance of this chorus, a tradition occasionally re-enacted by listening audiences.

"I last sang Handel's *Messiah* when I was a freshman in college. It was a wonderful experience to be part of a large choir performing with the orchestra. I'm thrilled to have had the opportunity to do it again. *The Hallelujah Chorus* has been especially fun. It is so well known, but it is deceptively difficult. Getting the notes and rhythms right is easy but turning it all into music is the challenge. I enjoy taking a piece that everyone is familiar with and presenting it in a way that makes it new." (Aaron Chittenden)

Part II—The Carols of Christmas

Masters in This Hall; Mack Wilberg

Mack Wilberg (b.1955) provides this dynamic arrangement of the traditional French carol ***Masters in This Hall***. With its dance-like energy, this carol speaks of the Magi’s journey to see the newborn King. In this arrangement, Wilberg uses frequent key changes to paint the growing anticipation associated with the grandeur of the event. Associate Music Director of the Mormon

Tabernacle Choir, Wilberg is a composer, arranger, guest conductor and clinician throughout the United States and abroad.

“Every time I hear this arrangement of *Masters in This Hall* performed by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir I am reminded of the majesty surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. I hope that as we perform it tonight, we can convey that same majestic feeling as we commemorate His birth.” (Tiffany Tolman)

***Whence is That Goodly Fragrance Flowing?*; Mack Wilberg**

As he did with his arrangement of *Masters in This Hall*, **Wilberg** arranged the traditional French carol ***Whence is That Goodly Fragrance Flowing?*** for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. The carol expressively recalls the story of the questioning shepherds as they learn of their Redeemer “in manger lying.” After understanding the meaning of the signs, they are urged to “haste away” to Bethlehem.

“In the three Christmas concerts that I have sung with the Choral Society, I always look forward the most to singing Mack Wilberg’s arrangements of traditional carols. He is truly a master of choral arrangement. I was unfamiliar with this carol when we began it, but its simple beauty has captured my heart. For me, the sweet tenderness of this song truly evokes the spirit of that sacred night.” (Marie Hansen)

“This piece captures the sense of awe that must have been felt by those who were there on that first Christmas night. Shepherds coming into Bethlehem from the fields, a new star in the heavens. . . all bearing witness to the birth of the Redeemer.” (Nathan McKellar)

***How Far Is It to Bethlehem*; Stephen Paulus**

Stephen Paulus (b. 1949) arranged the traditional English carol ***How Far Is It to Bethlehem*** as part of his *Carols for Christmas* collection, first performed by The Dale Warland Singers. As one of America’s most accomplished composers, Paulus has over 300 works to his credit, including music for chamber ensembles, solo voice, concert band, piano, organ, chorus, orchestra and opera. With a distinct American flavor, his work has been described as “. . . irresistible in kinetic energy and haunting in lyrical design” (Cleveland Plain Dealer). “Mr. Paulus often finds melodic patterns that are fresh and familiar at the same time....His scoring is invariably expert and exceptionally imaginative in textures and use of instruments” (The New York Times).

“I think *How Far Is It to Bethlehem* has given me something to ponder on a deeply spiritual level. I have taken it to ask the question of how far is my heart from Bethlehem and then gone a step further - do I know in my heart how far it was, then, from Bethlehem to Calvary? Subsequently, am I willing to travel along that road with Him? Bethlehem was just the beginning. . .” (Brenda Wedemeyer)

For the many years my mother has been coming to Choral Society Christmas Concerts, she has particularly loved hearing our Stephen Paulus selections. I know she will love hearing Deborah's solo as will all of this evening’s guests.” (Jane Rider)

***A Festival of Carols*; Frank Ferko**

Until a recent move to the West Coast, **Frank Ferko** (b. 1950) spent over 30 years in the Chicago area, where he served as the composer-in-residence for The Dale Warland Singers, which premiered ***A Festival of Carols*** in 2002. Based on Christmas carols by 19th century American poets and hymn writers—some more familiar than others—*A Festival of Carols* is a bright and energetic interpretation of traditional Christmas texts. According to Ferko, “In the present work all of the music is new whether or not the texts are familiar. Thus, the carols herein are not arrangements of previously existing tunes but entirely new melodies and harmonizations with the

harp used both as an accompanying instrument and as an intrinsic thread within the larger musical fabric.”

“While I have loved singing all the selections for this year’s concert, I particularly enjoy this new twist on some familiar carols. I love how this new tune for *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is rhythmically haunting and yet invites listeners into the music as it declares in hushed tones ‘that Jesus Christ is born.’” (Tiffany Tolman)

"The harp with Christmas music is magnificent and glorious. Add to that, the fun the second basses have with all the ‘basement’ notes. If this were still baseball season, I'd call that a double play." (David Davidson)

***Christmas Flourish*; Randol Alan Bass**

Accomplished composer, arranger, conductor, and performer **Randol Alan Bass** (b. 1953) created ***Christmas Flourish*** for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in 1992 by request of the then chorus-master for the Dallas Symphony Chorus, Ronald Shirey, to whom the arrangement is dedicated. Bass recalls, “Mr. Shirey was a major part of my education in choral art and I was very flattered to be asked to create something to honor him, as well as to write for the very capable musicians of the Dallas Symphony.” Bass further described this work as having a “jolly energy.” In this work he takes familiar carols and gives them an energetic, powerful style, fitting for the finale of the concert.

“When we sing this medley of carols I think of what it must have been like for the shepherds to hear the choirs of angels proclaiming Christ's birth. I like to imagine I was one of the angels.” (Marie Hansen)