

Notes on the Program

Musica Sacra

Schütz, Bach, Brahms, and Bruckner

Tonight's program explores the great sacred motets of Heinrich Schütz, Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms, and Anton Bruckner. These works from the Germanic tradition span more than 200 years and are sung in both German and Latin. They offer a direct view into a musical lineage descending from Schütz and the Dresden court up to the late 19th century.

We begin with three motets by Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672). *Jauchzet dem Herren*, SW36, one of the *Psalmen Davids* of 1619, reflects the composer's stay in Venice, where he studied with the great Giovanni Gabrieli from 1609-1612. When Schütz returned to Germany he brought with him the hottest goods in current musical style and thus enlivened the court at Dresden considerably. *Jauchzet dem Herren* is written for two choirs in the antiphonal habit of Gabrieli. The effect of these antiphonal choruses is marvelous and reflects the practice of such works at the Basilica of San Marco in Venice. (By the way, Schutz would eventually return to Venice much later to study with Monteverdi.)

We perform SW36 along with two striking motets that set texts Schütz included in his *German Requiem* of 1636. These are completely different works, published in his *Geistliche Chormusik* of 1648. These stunning gems feature word painting to an amazing degree, reflecting at once the polyphony of Palestrina and the *Ars Nova*, or "New Art," of Monteverdi. *Die mit Tränen* and *Selig sind die Toten* are sung tonight from editions prepared by the founder of Musica Sacra, Richard Westenburg and published in 1983.

Our program tonight is in two parts, and each part concludes with one of the great motets of J.S. Bach (1685–1750). We have from him six great motets, and two additional works have come to light since the publication of the *Neue Bach Ausgabe* in the 19th century. From the six we have chosen, *Fürchte dich nicht*, BWV 228, and *Der Geist hilft*, BWV 226. Both of these motets are for double choir, as was the opening piece by Schütz on tonight's program. Bach takes this antiphonal influence—literally "anti-sounding," meaning separate elements performing in concert so as to create a tapestry of sound across space—and brings it to its summation. The motets of Bach are deeply complex, reflecting an incredible application of instrumental music techniques for the voice that at the same time clearly evolve from the words of the text.

Fürchte dich nicht is in two large parts. First we hear the antiphonal portion: "Fear not, I am with thee, be not dismayed." It is as if the choirs resounding one against the other create a sense of affirmation. A stunning device enters on the words "Ich stärke dich," "I will strengthen thee," when Bach solos out individual sections of the choir, for the moment unaccompanied, as though a single voice were speaking to the audience. At the textual turn to "denn ich habe dich

erlöset," "I have redeemed thee and called thee by name," Bach brings the chorus to a simple four part texture, reflecting the influence of Palestrina in what we refer to as "Stile Antico." It is interesting to note that Bach the numerologist chose to make this transition at exactly the halfway point: literally, at measure 78 out of a total of 156 measures, the texture becomes completely different! In the final measures Bach returns to Venetian polychoral technique for a double choir conclusion and a final affirmation of the opening text.

Concluding the second part of this evening's program is *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, "The Spirit helps our infirmities." Here Bach uses an idiom which seems more aligned with his Brandenburg Concertos. A triple-meter dance rhythm infuses this text with a spirit of optimism, and again Bach has set this motet for double chorus. The meter changes at the text "Sondern der Geist selbst," "The Spirit makes intercession for us," and converts after the initial change to a music much more fugal in nature, narrowing to five parts: the sopranos of each choir are independent of each other, but the alto, tenor, and bass parts are unified.

The third section of this motet is in four parts, with the direction "Alle breve," roughly meaning "in two beats." This creates a much more intimate texture for the setting of the text "Der aber die Herzen forschet," "He that searcheth the hearts." Finally, this motet concludes with one of Bach's great four-part chorales, setting the third verse of Martin Luther's *Komm heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*, a text that essentially summarizes the message of the entire motet.

The music of Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) and Anton Bruckner (1824–1896) provide the core of this evening's second half. From Brahms's Opus 109 and 110, we perform the *Fest-und Gedenksprüche*, a large scale motet in three sections, and *Ich aber bin elend*, a moving and impassioned—and shorter—work. Both pieces are again for double chorus.

You will hear immediately the Opus 109 as a tribute to the motets of Bach that also belies Brahms's affinity for early music in its Venetian polychoral nature. This commemorative work was written on the occasion of Brahms being named an honorary citizen of Hamburg in 1888. The texts are biblical but are set here for a rather nationalistic occasion. A quick survey of the text shows that Brahms establishes our forefathers and mothers as having cried out to the Divine, trusted in the Divine, and as a result peace and strength were gained. The movement begins "Feierlich bewegt," "Solemnly stirring," in a flowing triple meter. Halfway through the meter shifts to compound time, depicting a more grounded sense of strength. The second part of the motet is in A-B-A form, setting a fast triple meter depiction of "A strong man armed," Brahms abruptly shifts gears at "Aber," "But," and the text "A kingdom divided is brought to desolation"; this a sharp warning. One is reminded of the great moment in the second movement of his *Deutsches Requiem*, in which Brahms also uses the word "aber" as a turning point. This dramatic device serves the musical structure beautifully, as the central portion of the movement is then developed but then morphs into a seamless return of the initial text, "Wen nein starker." The final movement of Opus 109 continues this use of contrasting meter to establish a grand structure: after a flowing triple meter for almost the full first half, a dramatic pause occurs before the admonition "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently." Here a much more tender, softer music claims the intimacy of this text. When we

arrive at the Golden Mean—measure 82 out of a total of 105 measures—the opening triple meter returns to culminate this large a cappella composition with optimism.

Brahms's Opus 110, No. 1, for double choir, reflects in spirit the music of Schütz's second motet, *Die mit Tränen*. Here harmony is king, illuminating the pathos of the text. Much of the choral writing is in "block form," meaning that either Choir One or Two may have passages that are sung together syllabically. In this regard, though the sentiment is so very different, we hear again the sonic clarity of this evening's opening motet by Schütz.

Anton Bruckner wrote his motets *Virga Jesse* in 1885 and *Ave Maria* in 1861. Known for his large-scale symphonic structures, many classical music lovers are astonished to discover these choral gems. Here Bruckner is concise in form but expansive in romantic style. *Virga Jesse* exhibits dramatic phrase building and extremes in dynamics, from the symbol *fff*, fortississimo, to *ppp*, pianississimo. One remembers that Bruckner was the organist at the monastery of St. Florian in Austria, where he is buried. He clearly was writing for an acoustically reverberant space and builds into his motets grand pauses that take advantage of such. Bruckner's setting of *Ave Maria* begins with Venetian polychoral technique, here established by having the sopranos and altos singing as one choir, and the tenors and basses then in alternation. These groups combine in loud resonant cries to "Sancta Maria" and retreat to a much more tender dynamic at "ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae."

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