

MUSICĀ SĀCRĀ

Under the Arches:

Music of Bach, Brahms, Bruckner, and Rheinberger

Monday, May 18, 7:30 PM

Cathedral of St. John the Divine, NYC

Kent Tritle, conductor

J.S. BACH (1685-1750)

Komm, Jesu, Komm (Come, Jesus, Come), BWV 229

- Date of composition: 1731-32
- Premiere location: Leipzig

Notable for being the only motet by Bach that does not use a biblical text, *Komm, Jesu, Komm* is ripe with polychoral dialogue between two choirs, used with great effect to create an alternating volley of supplication. For us who are English speakers, the “Come, Jesus, Come” phrasal cognate offers potent immediacy to the German text, making the text by Paul Thymich instantly discernable. The piece is divided into two distinct parts: motet and aria. As you will be able to hear, the motet is sectionalized with clear phrasal endings and beginnings, always portraying the affect of the text through length durations, text setting, imitation, and interplay between homophony and polyphony. There is motivic congruency in the string of quarter notes bi-syllabically on words/phrases in different verses, such as “Jesu,” “ich sehne,” (I seek) and “mir zu” (for me); a sense of deep yearning is painted and traced through this motif, and one can combine these words to create a wholly new phrase of striking intelligibility and emotion (e.g., *Jesus, I seek [you] for me*). The minor seventh intervallic descent with a rising chromatic half step on “der saure Weg” (*the sour way*) is quintessential Bachian text painting, as are the long-held bass notes on “schwer” (*heavy/difficult*). The baroque sprightliness on “Komm, komm, ich will mich dir ergeben” offers a welcome mood change as the weary body gleefully offers his/her tired body to Christ, using a mini-fugue texture (often called a “fugato”) to lead us into the final section of the motet. The lively melismas on “die Wahrheit” and “das Leben” (truth and life) are beautiful juxtapositions to the heaviness of “schwer” and the yearning prayer of the first verse.

The aria combines the two choirs in a through-composed and homophonic statement of firm abandonment into Jesus’ hands, reminiscent of Christ doing the same to God the Father while on the cross. While we cannot be sure of this piece’s original purpose since the autograph manuscript is lost, the urgency of “guter Nacht” is a common funeral theme in works of this period.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Schaffe in mir, Gott, op. 29, no. 2

- Date of composition: 1860
- Premiere location: Vienna (1864)

Brahms' *Schaffe in mir, Gott, ein rein Herz* is one of those self-contained, miniature magnum opuses. This approximately six-minute piece (although tempos on this piece vary greatly!) sets three verses of the popular penitential Psalm 51, and provides the listener with an expansive world of contrapuntal techniques and harmonic vocabulary. Divided into three sections, the first section contains the famous "canon in augmentation" between the soprano and bass II, meaning that the two voices contain the exact same melodic content but the bass moves at half the speed. While hardly discernable to the unbeknownst ear, the informed listener is able to name this masterful motivic familiarity, which they may pick out against the content of the inner voices.

The second section on "Verwirf mich nicht von deinem Angesicht" is dense with imitative polyphony and a more adventurous harmonic language, depicting the distress of the forlorn spirit in its request to the Almighty to remain near. The attention to textual nuance and declamation amidst heavy counterpoint is almost Bach-like in its effectiveness, further demonstrating that Brahms had a firm grasp of common-practice era practices as well as the Romantic-era compositional style for which he has now become known.

The third and final section of the motet returns to *Andante*, serving as a stark contrast to the preceding, Baroque-inspired fugato section. This final verse is quintessentially Romantic: sweeping melodic lines, mid-phrase dissonances, and a rich harmonic language made doubly affecting through meticulous dynamics by the composer. The lugubrious lines offer "comfort" indeed, ushering us into the running allegro and animato that finish the piece. Brahms embraces text painting to the fullest extent here, with the final "sustain me"—with the tenor's penultimate triplet gesture—proving to be a lush and satisfying conclusion to this two-motet collection.

ANTON BRUCKNER (1824-1896)

Os justi (The mouth of the righteous), WAB 30

- Date of composition: 1879
- Premiere location: St. Florian Abbey, Austria

Composed for the Roman Catholic liturgy as the gradual for the *Commune Doctorum*, this now stand-alone motet is one of the most frequently recorded sacred works in the Romantic repertory. Known for its sumptuous eight-part *a cappella* texture, sweeping vocal lines, finely placed dissonances, and the moving A-section climax that recurs twice in this ABAC form, the piece is notable for being based on the Lydian mode and absent of any altered pitches. The Cecilian Movement in the second half of the 19th century called for a return to more traditional church polyphony, with an emphasis on the church modes, *a cappella* singing, and sacred works being composed for specific liturgical settings. Scholars theorize that this influenced Bruckner,

just as C.V. Stanford was influenced by the quasi-comparable Oxford Movement in England at around the same time (one need only listen to his anthem, “Beati quorum via”). The “Alleluia” C-section of this motet (and whether or not it should be sung) has been a frequently debated and unnecessarily contentious issue amongst conductors: put simply, if used within liturgy, the *Alleluia* should (and *would*) be sung, but in concert performance, it is totally optional, since it serves no actual liturgical function (the *Alleluia* follows the gradual in liturgy).

Like the previous two works, the B section (*et lingua ejus loquetur judicium*) of “Os justi” begins with a fugato, which then evolves into a study in intricate four-voice polyphonic writing. While Bruckner may have indeed been influenced by the harmonic purity sought by the Cecilian Movement, the Romantic-era penchant for luxury and dramatic declamation through dynamics still prevails, and the release into the final climactic “Lex Dei”—which, on the downbeat, spans an expansive three-and-a-half octaves between the bass II and soprano I—is overwhelming. The nature of the tenor II’s oscillating and jumping line in this section has long been an affectively characteristic trait of this motet, made doubly striking the second time around when the tenor I lands on “Dei” on the following downbeat as sopranos I & II jointly meet on a F natural through contrary motion, creating a minor second dissonance with the tenor I that resolves in a way that is Palestrina-like in its craftsmanship.

JOSEF GABRIEL RHEINBERGER (1839-1901)

Cantus Missae, Mass for Double Choir in E-flat, op. 190

- Date of composition: 1878
- Premiere location: Munich

The *Cantus Missae*—commonly known as the “Rheinberger Mass in E-flat”—is one of the crown jewels of the Romantic choral repertoire. While Bruckner’s “Os justi” was composed in alignment with the ideals of the Cecilian movement, this mass for double choir is in firm opposition to the suppression of individualistic musical expression. The Cecilians’ desired textual intelligibility and the coddling of the sacred denounced musical individuality and composer self-expression. While drawing inspiration from the polyphonic and compositional treasury of the preceding centuries, Rheinberger’s glorious mass setting stands apart because of its unique voice and striking musical affect.

The antiphonal dialogue between the two choirs in the opening Kyrie is idiomatically Venetian and yet could be the product of the Italian Renaissance in its polyphonic language. The expressiveness of the vocal lines is enough to lead the supplicant to ask for mercy—Rheinberger’s counterpoint develops so very organically. The triumphant *Gloria* is a well-balanced mixture of homophony and imitative polyphony, with moments of Machaut-like syncopation that accent word declamation and creates a laudatory atmosphere. The *Credo* is almost an anomaly in the work, with stark Romantic declamation that sings like Mendelssohn and the emphatic text painting that was severely frowned upon about the Cecilian movement. Like all *Credos*, the setting is predominantly syllabic, save for the 10-measure *Amen* at the end.

When Otto Ursprung wrote that the work is the “most beautiful, pure vocal music of the 19th century,” one imagines he was thinking of the opening measures of the *Sanctus*. These transcendent eight bars before the “Dominus Deus Sabaoth” have long been a token selling point for the work. The C-minor, “Lento” *Agnus Dei* is once again Romantic text painting at its finest, with a type of harmonic tension that is ripe for penitence. Interestingly, despite rallying against a return to traditional Tridentine Roman Catholic choral music in its conception, Pope Leo XIII greatly admired this work, awarding it the Gregorius Medal in 1879.