

Harmonia Chamber Singers

Tenebrae: A Concert by Candlelight

Notes by Michael Harris

We begin our tenebrous musical meditation on darkness and light with Charles Wood's incandescent 1912 anthem **Hail, Gladdening Light**. A student of Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford, and later a masterful teacher of composition at Cambridge, Wood is best known for his Church of England choral music; his "*a cappella* music demonstrates fastidious craftsmanship and a supreme mastery of the genre" [Wikipedia]. The text by John Kemble derives from the 3rd century Greek hymn *Phos Hilaron*, known as the "Lamp-Lighting Hymn" – one of the earliest Christian hymns, originally found in the collection Apostolic Constitutions. Wood skillfully uses the *decani/cantoris* arrangement of the traditional chancel for the responsory double choir structure of the piece. Set in the bright key of A Major, it explores other related sharp keys like F# minor, C# major and E major, with one surprise shift to C Major underlining "We hymn the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Though largely homophonic in texture, the one bit of contrapuntal extravagance occurs on the phrase, "The lights of evening round us shine"; Wood lights our lamp for this evening very effectively!

Ave verum corpus is one of William Byrd's most beloved motets. It appeared in Byrd's large collection of Latin sacred music Gradualia, Book One (1605). Many scholars believe that Byrd, though an organist with the Chapel Royale, converted to Catholicism in the 1570s, and that these Latin motets were composed for the use of recusant Catholic noblemen like his patron Baron John Petre. **Ave verum corpus** is listed in Gradualia as a chant for the Feast of Corpus Christi, a devotional that celebrates "the Real Presence of the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ in the elements of the Eucharist" [Catholic News Agency]. John Harley detects Byrd's strong belief in this doctrine in the music: "...the false relation contained in the second and third chords makes quite clear Byrd's position on the topical issue of transubstantiation. It lays stress on the word '*verum*' and that bread and wine are truly the body and blood of Christ. Byrd's convictions are translated into music of great fervor, possessing a highly

personal quality accentuated by his addition to the text of the repeated words '*miserere mei*.'

Along with his composing, Roderick Williams, OBE, is a very busy singer, with 40 recordings of classical song, 30 CDs of oratorio and cantatas, and 10 complete operas. Thus, when he was commissioned by the ORA Singers to write ***Ave Verum Corpus Re-imagined*** (2020), he approached the assignment from a chorister's inside perspective. He related in an interview: "I know the Byrd *Ave verum* from the performer's eye-view – from singing the bass line many times... and probably the treble line when I was a young boy. So, I know the piece very well; and when Suzi Digby asked me to expand on it in some way, I just wanted to use the bits of the piece that I love most, that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and kind of augment them in some way and glue them together." Williams glues his favorite bits of Byrd's motet using three 4-part choirs overlapping with each other in various polytonal and dissonant combinations, taking the English taste for false relations to an Ivesian extreme, resolving to an intense D major/minor final chord. If Byrd wanted his *Ave verum corpus* to affirm the reality of Jesus' presence in the Blessed Sacrament, then Williams' reimagining truly gives us the awed feeling of experiencing this revelation.

Scottish composer James MacMillan has stated that "I find beauty in stark things like darkness," so it follows that his Catholic faith keeps him writing pieces connected with the darkest days of Holy Week – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. "It's as if I'm going round and round these three days, but not tiring of it...trying to make sense of it through writing music." His 2009 ***Miserere***, commissioned by the choral group The Sixteen, is a case in point. It's a setting of Psalm 51, a desperate plea for forgiveness – the legend being that the poet is King David, repenting for his affair with Bathsheba. Traditionally, Psalm 51 is chanted during the morning prayer on Good Friday. MacMillan maintains interest throughout the lengthy 19-verse text by his unending variety of choral textures. The piece begins with 4-part tenors and basses in homophonic style, an E minor paragraph with the marking 'desolate and cold' but continuing 'warmer

and warmer' until the alto takes over, handing the piece over to Soprano 1 and 2 in dovetailing duet, eventually accompanied by sustained A-T-B harmonies, and resolving to E major. The second section starts with stentorian Tenors and Basses set against Sopranos and Altos, then the melody in the Bass is accompanied by Soprano-Alto-Tenor, topped off by a canon between those three upper voices. Twice in the piece, MacMillan employs the plainchant tune from Allegri's setting of *Miserere* – first in 4-part Anglican Chant style, then toward the end as accompanied monophonic chant. The final verse is given over to a slow, serenely lyrical tune that bespeaks MacMillan's Scottish heritage, giving us the sense that King David's confession has been fully absolved.

Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere* is a legendary sacred choral work, but it's difficult to separate the legend from the historical reality. Allegri's 1638 composition was old-fashioned in its own day – the *stile antico* – modeled on the *Miserere* by Costanzo Festa. Its forces include two choral groups of 5 and 4 voices respectively alternating verses of Psalm 51, with a verse of solo Gregorian-style reciting tone in between them. The plainchant passages use the ninth church mode known as the *tonus peregrinus* or wandering tone; this mode characterizes the choral verses as well. Allegri wrote it for the exclusive use of the Sistine Chapel Choir for Holy Week services; publishing copies of it was prohibited. In 1770, a 14-year-old Wolfgang Mozart heard it at the Sistine Chapel and was able to make his own copy, but what he copied is not the *Miserere* that we know today. Historian Ben Byram-Wigfield has demonstrated how an error in the 1880 Grove Dictionary of Music and a faulty score edited by Ivor Atkins (1919) radically altered the piece. Among the changes were the replacing of the *tonus peregrinus* chant melody by another psalm mode unrelated to the original piece. And the famous high C for the soprano in Choir 2 is based on a transcription by Felix Mendelssohn that places that phrase a 4th too high. John Rutter's 1996 edition gives us options as to which *Miserere* version to follow, but audiences today want to hear that questionable high C – and who would deny them that pleasure? As John Ford's film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance moralized: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend!"

When Buffalo-based composer (and Harmonia singer) Caroline Mallonee was commissioned to create a piece marking the 225th anniversary of Baltimore's

Quaker-run The Friends School, she composed **O Lux** (2009), a 21st century version of *stile antico*. The composer crafted her own Latin text; here, the light being invoked is not the Blessed Trinity, but represents (I think!) the scholarly knowledge imparted by The Friends School (symbolized by the cascading downward scales of the opening motive) and the knowledge gained by the students (suggested by the Lydian mode-inflected rising scales). Ms. Mallonee uses the time-honored device of canon, often with very close voice entrances, resulting in crunchy dissonances similar in effect to Roderick Williams' reimagined *Ave verum corpus*. The opening canon features four parts (S-A-T-B), but later the canonic counterpoint opens out to eight voices, perhaps representing students carrying their special light with them into the larger community.

Ēriks Ešņvalds is one of Latvia's leading composers (3-time winner of the Latvian Grand Music Award), but his audience appeal is worldwide. I believe that the key to this popularity is his religious foundation – studying at the Latvian Baptist Theological Seminary before getting his master's degree in composition at the Latvian Academy of Music. His strong spirituality shines through in **Only in Sleep** (2012), his setting of Sara Teasdale's poem. Teasdale speaks of how, in dreams, we can return to our childhood and meet our beloved friends of long ago. At the end, she wonders if her old friends dream of her as she dreams of them. Ešņvalds opens with a soprano soloist intoning the plaintive melody against the roseate glow of the hushed choral harmonies underneath. The 8-part choir takes over the theme while a few sopranos add an exquisite, floating descant above the main theme. The soloist returns for the final verse, extending her longing for the past in a heart-rendering vocalise. It's worth observing the Palestrina-like purity of the scoring – not a single accidental mars this G-flat major movement. Let's face it – this is a tearjerker *par excellence*, so get out your handkerchiefs in advance!

The Sound of Silence (1964, arr. 2021) is another source for legends. Did Paul Simon write this dystopian vision of modern life as a response to the assassination of President Kennedy? Was the opening line "Hello Darkness, my old friend" a reference to Art Garfunkel's Buffalo-born friend Sanford Greenberg, who

became blind while they were students at Columbia University? And how did the song become the mindset of Benjamin Braddock, the disaffected youth played by Dustin Hoffman in the film The Graduate? Suffice it to say that this portrait of 1960s social malaise captured the pulse of a new generation. British arranger Alexander L'Estrange has given fresh life (and fresh sound) to *The Sound of Silence*, tailored to the strengths of the brilliant *a cappella* group VOCES8. The arrangement starts in the depths, with the melody done by a solo low bass, where it stays for two verses, the upper parts providing rhythmic patterns on neutral syllables. In successive verses, the tune migrates to the tenor, then to the alto, and lastly to the soprano. Only near the end, on the phrase "The words of the prophets..." does the ensemble sing in rhythmic unison, before whispering the concluding "sound of silence." It's a model of theme and variations sustaining the interest in a strophic song form.

Many fine musicians have put their personal stamp on the African-American spiritual, such as Hall Johnson and William Dawson, but Moses Hogan raised the spiritual to a high artistic level that no one had heard before. Trained at Oberlin and Juilliard, Hogan's solid classical technique allowed his imagination to flourish in this genre. With **This Little Light of Mine** (2002), Hogan does the unexpected. Usually performed as a vigorous, up-tempo rhythm number, Hogan treats it like a slow, lyrical ballad, almost a love song, with the solo supported by wordless rich choral harmonies. Even when the choir takes over in the last verse, marked "Gradually faster, with spirit," it still has an unwavering stately grace. Those who search for a Biblical source for the song point to the Gospel according to Matthew 5:14-16 – "Ye are the light of the world... Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Imagine how James MacMillan must have felt when he got a call from Westminster Abbey asking him to compose an anthem for the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. This was back in 2011, while the Queen was still quite well, thank you! It's an indication of the long-term planning that goes into all things royal! MacMillan quickly wrote the piece, **Who Shall Separate Us?** and was asked "to keep quiet and not tell anybody." The text that he was asked to set – Romans

8:35a, 38-39 “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” -- was one of the Queen's favorite Biblical passages, because of its optimism. MacMillan says of it: “There’s a sense of hope for the future...the words point to her deep faith; she was a persuasive and quiet advocate of the Christian perspective, communicating in a way many clergy can’t manage.” Having been knighted by the Queen in 2015, when the sad inevitable day arrived that the music finally would be used, Sir James realized that he had never actually heard the piece performed. He heard it for the first time along with millions of other listeners at the Queen’s funeral on September 19, 2022. Says Sir James, “It’s one of the most significant things that has ever happened to me.” Creating light in the darkness – this is what music can do.