

Harmonia Chamber Singers

Anton Bruckner *Mass No. 2 in E minor*

Robert Pacillo, conductor

March 8, 2025, 7:30 PM

Church of the Assumption

435 Amherst St, Buffalo, NY

Program notes by Michael Harris

Christus factus est (1884), Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Gradual Motet; text – Philippians 2:8-9

For Anton Bruckner, an unquestioning and steadfast believer in Roman Catholic doctrine, **Christus factus est** is the central and concentrated core of his faith. The text from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians reflects the Christian "last will be first and the first will be last" principle: Christ willingly sacrificed himself for us to be crucified, only to be raised up by God, who "gave him a name which is above all names." This greatest of miracles was given powerful dramatic expression in Bruckner's 1884 motet (his third attempt). Starting in a dark D minor, it travels immense harmonic territory in its 79 measures before reaching its triumphant D major conclusion – D minor to F minor, D flat major to E major/minor, F major working its way back to D minor. Along the way, we hear many of Bruckner's musical fingerprints: melodic octave drops that represent 'majesty', the rising Dresden Amen motif on "exaltavit illum" (exalted him) and "super omne nomen" (above all names), long and intense crescendos and decrescendos, and sustained pedal tones in the bass against dissonant passing tones in the upper three lines. The coda's setting of "quod est super omne nomen" uses an undulating chromatic motif that paraphrases the conclusion of the *Kyrie* from his *Mass in E minor*, a quotation also used at the end of his 1873 version of *Christus factus est*.

The Universe within You (2021), Stephen Barton (b. 1982)

Text: Jalāl al-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273)

Stephen Barton, an English composer based in Los Angeles, is on the cutting edge of sound technology, working in film (*Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*), television (*12 Monkeys*, *Star Trek: Picard*), and video games (*Star Wars Jedi*, *Apex Legends*), as well as doing research in spatial and immersive techniques for music in virtual reality. Barton may be the perfect candidate to musicalize Rūmī's existential nostrum that "the entire Universe is within you" – after all, one of his scores is for the video game *Multiversus*! How did he get into choral writing? He started his career as a boy soprano in the Winchester Cathedral Choir and toured the world with that ensemble. He also happens to be on the Advisory Board of the VOCES8 Foundation, the educational arm of VOCES8, one of the most acclaimed *a cappella* vocal ensembles today. **The Universe Within You** was commissioned by VOCES8 – an eight-voice piece for double choir. Its otherworldly flavor is created through judicious use of bitonality between the two choirs, starting with F major in Choir 1 set against A minor

in Choir 2; the clashing harmonic planes intersecting in slow overlapping phrases cast an ethereal spell. When at last the two choirs come together tonally, the harmonic movement is by thirds – F major to D flat major, suggesting space in the Holst Planets manner. Thus Barton turns an 800 year old idea into a 21st century futurist vision.

A Farewell (2018), Elaine Hagenberg (b. 1979)

Text: Frances Anne [Fanny] Kemble (1809-1893)

American composer Elaine Hagenberg says that “I try to seek out...lesser known texts, and to give voice to poets who other composers have not examined.” With **A Farewell**, Hagenberg has recovered the poetry of Fanny Kemble – 19th century English actress, writer and abolitionist, best known for her slave narrative *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*. Hagenberg was attracted to Kemble’s poem *An Entreaty* because of its moving portrayal of parting: “a description of leaving behind a beloved time and place. Children are often enchanted by nature, and the beauty and descriptive imagery in the poem returns us to our youth. The overall arc of the composition is based on lyrical and lush harmonies while gentle dissonance and suspensions create a sense of yearning... This poem granted me a glimpse into my childhood of woodlands and wildflowers, and is an invitation for others to reflect on ‘echoes sweet’ and a time to which they have said farewell.”

Un soir de neige (1944), Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Text: Paul Eluard (1895-1952)

“Of all the springtimes in the world, this is the ugliest!” is the opening line of Francis Poulenc’s 1943 choral masterwork *Figure humaine*, based on Paul Eluard’s poems that supported the Resistance movement in France during the Nazi occupation in World War II. A similar seasonal malaise can be found in Poulenc’s 1944 **Un soir de neige**, a six-voice mini-cantata that serves as a small pendant to *Figure humaine*. In this suite of four Eluard poems, the desolate and bitter winter imagery represents the repression of French life under Nazi rule. On this bleak winter journey, the wounded woods are full of hunted animals, cold bodies vainly seek a warming fire, and the snowy scene is likened to a prison. Poulenc supports this mood of snowy menace with frequent use of the tritone (the devil’s interval!) in both melody and harmony, diminished chords, sudden changes in tonality, and phrases that don’t fully resolve to the home key. We in the icy throes of WNY can well identify with this profoundly cold unease; the symbolic societal parallels are there if you want them!

The Bird’s Lullaby (2018), Sarah Quartel (b. 1982)

Text: E. Pauline Johnson (1862-1913)

Born of a Mohawk chief and an English mother, E. Pauline Johnson was a poet who served as a bridge between indigenous culture and the larger Canadian nation. She performed her work billed as *Tekahionwake* [double life], and gave the Anglophone world a sympathetic portrayal of Iroquois life. Her 1895 collection *The White Wampum* included the

poem **The Birds' Lullaby**, whose verse/refrain strophic structure made it a natural choral text for London, Ontario-based composer Sarah Quartel.

The obvious musical choice for setting this poem might have been to take melodic ideas from Mohawk tradition, but Quartel went in a different direction, instead turning it into a 1960s rock-style bop in the neo-Baroque mode of Eleanor Rigby or God Only Knows. Written for 4-part women's voices, the catchy melody migrates from one section to another: first verse for Soprano 1, second verse for Soprano 2 and third verse for Alto 1. The accompanying voices gradually shift in style: in verse 1 maintaining a staccato quarter note scat throughout, while verse 2 switches to dotted quarter note syncopations, and verse 3 combining the dotted quarter figure with sustained chords. It wouldn't be surprising if this stubborn earworm caused you to "drowse to [its] dreamy whispering"!

Hark! I Hear the Harps Eternal (1967), Trad. American; arr. Alice Parker (1925-2023)

Text: *The Southern Harp* (1844)

From 1950 to 1967, Alice Parker was the primary arranger for the Robert Shaw Chorale, for which she provided over 200 compositions, at least half of which derived from American hymns, spirituals and popular songs. One of the richest musical sources was the shape note song – so-called because it used notation in which each step of the scale was given a differently shaped note-head. These hymns appeared on her last Robert Shaw Chorale album – the 1967 *Sing to the Lord*. Parker says in the liner notes that her arrangements “are patterned closely after the harmonizations found in the old hymnals. The stark open 4ths and 5ths, the parallel octaves, the changes to 2 and 3-part writing, the imitative sections are all part of the style. The very sounds that seemed uncouth and old-fashioned in the 19th century now sound fresh and even modern to us.” In the 1844 collection *The Southern Harmony*, the hymn **Hark! I Hear the Harps Eternal** [inspired by the heavenly visions in the Book of Revelations] is set to a tune called INVITATION; its pentatonic profile and compelling ‘Scottish snap’ rhythms suggest an origin in Scottish folksong. Among Parker's contrapuntal felicities is in the 3rd verse when she sets the melody of the verse against the melody of the ‘Hallelujah’ refrain, lending a learned touch to this rough-hewn style.

Mass in E minor, WAB 27 (1866, rev. 1869, 1876, 1882), Anton Bruckner

Text: Mass Ordinary, Roman Rite

The old saying that “Life begins at forty” very much applied to the composing life of Anton Bruckner; it's precisely as he turned 40 in the 1860s that he began to work on the symphonies that would establish his worldwide reputation. His first real masterworks, however, were in the field of sacred choral music: the *Mass in D minor* (1864), the *Mass in E minor* (1866), and the *Mass in F minor* (1867-68). While the D minor and F minor Masses were conceived on a symphonic scale with the orchestra taking the lead in the music's motivic development, the Mass in E minor is a special case, in which the accompanying wind ensemble acts more like another choir, at times dove-tailing with the singers and at other times supporting them.

From 1855 to 1868, Bruckner served as organist at the Old Cathedral in Linz, Austria. The Bishop of Linz, Franz Josef Rudiger, wanted a New Cathedral built, and when the cornerstone was laid in 1862, Bruckner supplied his own festive cantata: *Preiset den Herrn*. Then Bishop Rudiger commissioned him to compose a Mass to consecrate a Votive Chapel at the apex of the New Cathedral's apse. Bruckner completed the *Mass in E minor* in 1866, and conducted it outdoors at the Chapel dedication in 1869. An inveterate reviser, Bruckner touched up the score before its 1869 premiere and made further revisions in 1876 and 1882 – this latest version is the one that we present tonight.

Bruckner was influenced by the Cecilian Movement, which encouraged a return to the Renaissance a cappella choral style exemplified by Palestrina's pure contrapuntal elegance and by Gabrielli's antiphonal ensemble groups; indeed, the 8-voice writing in Bruckner's Sanctus movement quotes a motif from Palestrina's *Missa Brevis*. He was also beholden to Romantic innovators like Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner – thus the rising chromatic idea in the *Benedictus alludes to the opening of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde*. In *The Wind and Wind-Chorus Music of Anton Bruckner*, Keith Kinder sums up: "Although the *Mass in E minor* takes its inspiration from the polyphony of the High Renaissance... the harmony, the instrumental writing and chromatic development of motives reflect Bruckner's musical thinking at its most inventive. This is a work of astonishing originality that seems to simultaneously look far into the past and well into the future."

Bruckner created rich sonorities with his performing forces of 8-voice parts (S-S-A-A-T-T-B-B) and a 15-voice wind band (oboe 1 & 2, clarinet 1 & 2, bassoon 1 & 2, 2 horns in F, 2 horns in D, 2 trumpets in C, and alto, tenor and bass trombones). The opening *Kyrie* is close to the Cecilian Movement ideal, almost entirely unaccompanied with just a few wind interjections at fortissimo moments. Its undulating chromatic idea that migrates to many voice parts will be recognized from its 1884 appearance in Bruckner's motet *Christus factus est*. The winds take a more active role in the *Gloria*, providing rhythmic impetus with motoric quarter and eighth notes. The hushed middle section (*Qui tollis peccata mundi*) features solo instruments like the minor 3rd motif for the horns and the descending scales for bassoons, oboes and clarinets. The *Gloria* ends with a triumphal double fugue on "Amen," with the band doubling the choir.

We see that this Mass was designed for liturgical use, as Bruckner didn't set the opening words of the *Gloria*, reserving that incipit for the priest to deliver. The same is true for the following *Credo* in which the celebrant sings the plainchant "Credo in unum Deum." The curved unison motif starting with "Patrem omnipotentem" is antiphonally tossed between choir and winds, spelled by the a cappella calm of "Et incarnatus est." Spiky 8th notes undergird the choir at "Et resurrexit" and builds the excitement until the recapitulation of the opening unison motif at "Et in spiritum sanctum." The *Credo* ends with sustained choir singing of "Amen" while woodwinds play triplets and trombones have the last gasp of the curved unison motif. Bruckner's method of unifying his Mass with these motivic reprises reaches its ultimate example at the end of *Agnus Dei*: while the choir softly intones "Dona nobis pacem," the woodwinds bring back the undulating chromatic theme from the *Kyrie*, reinforcing the idea of mercy while the choir pleads for peace. So may it be!