

Handel Choir of Baltimore
British/American Connection
April 18, 2010 at 4pm
Grace United Methodist Church, 5407 North Charles Street, Baltimore 21210

PROGRAM NOTES

I. 75th Anniversary Homage to Country and Composer

Maryland-born Francis Scott Key noticed the text rhythms of his poem, *The Defence of Fort McHenry*, fit fairly closely a quasi-drinking tune, *The Anacreontic Song*, composed by British composer and musicologist John Stafford Smith, one of the first serious collectors of works by J.S. Bach. Key's description of the victory of the Americans over the British in the War of 1812 was indeed fitted to a 30-35 year old British tune! It was not until 1931 that *The Star Spangled Banner* was adopted as our national anthem. Handel Choir is pleased to première this six-part *a cappella* arrangement by Dennis Desormier.

We all recognize the British national anthem, *God Save the Queen* (Handel Choir performs a Canadian arrangement so as to be inclusive of our North American neighbors) as having the same tune of our own *America* (also known as *My Country 'Tis of Thee*). So, despite the American struggle for independence from England, the two songs which both have served America as national anthems, *The Star Spangled Banner* and *America*, are both based on British melodies. As Dennis Desormier has pointed out, perhaps Americans wanted independence but not necessarily distance. Today, of course and fortunately, our two countries are fine allies.

"When his loud voice in thunder spoke" is from *Jephtha*, Handel's last oratorio. In the story based on the Book of Judges, Jephtha has called the Israelite sons to war against the Ammonites. Handel depicts a resulting "pantheistic weather event" (Winton Dean) whereby tumultuous forces of nature such as thunder, billows, and the tide take on human properties of roaring, raging, and laughing. This, one of his most glorious choruses, exemplifies Handel's high artistic legacy.

II. 20th-Century Britain

The centerpiece of our concert is Vaughan Williams' exquisite 20-minute *Mass in G Minor for a cappella* double chorus and soli. Known for his folk song adaptations and somewhat impressionistic parallel harmonies, Vaughan Williams based the *Mass* instead on medieval modal scales and grand polyphonic textures in the spirit of the great Elizabethan liturgical music. It is an early work dating from 1920-21 and, though intended for Anglican services, was first premièred by the City of Birmingham Choir. The first liturgical performance took place at Westminster Cathedral in 1922. Note: Like Handel, Vaughan Williams is buried at Westminster Abbey.

Herbert Howell's turbulent Rhapsody No. 3, Op. 17 in C# minor for organ, is performed by Jonathan Moyer on Grace United Methodist's 121-rank, 5-console Möller organ. This youthful, virtuosic and richly dark work was composed in 1917 while Howells was convalescing from a prolonged illness and mourning the loss of a friend in World War I. At times it is flowing and lyrical while other passages belie bitter anger and a deep sense of loss.

Complementing and preceding these two works is Benjamin Britten's vibrantly festive *Antiphon* for choir, soloists and organ, a splendid setting of the early 17th-century Welsh poet George Herbert's poem,

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"Praised be the God of Love." At the end of Britten's setting of the line "Praised be the God who hath made two folds [of God's children] one," three solo treble voices representing the Trinity sing six iterations of the word "one" on the same slightly unsettled F major chord. The choir counters four times with the word "two" on progressively diverse harmonies. This back and forth of "one" and "two" inevitably merges into a confident, assuring "one" in F major.

III. More from 20th-Century Britain

Written in 1981, John Tavener's introspective, ethereal *Funeral Ikos* for six-part unaccompanied singers tells of the reward in Paradise for those who are righteous. The work, translated into English from the Greek Orthodox Order for Burial of Priests, is based on chant-like melodies, often sung in unison and expanded into parallel thirds. Each verse is followed by the refrain "Alleluia."

IV. Back and Forth Across the "Great Pond"

Each of our four guest vocal soloists brings us a song of his/her own choosing – a brief sampling of the wonderfully rich and vast vocal solo repertoire by British and American 19th- and 20th-century composers.

Loveliest of Trees is the first in George Butterworth's most famous song collection, *A Shropshire Lad*, composed in 1911 on texts by A. E. Housman. The poem is a simple expression of regret at the fleetingness of life: with a long life expected, there are only fifty spring times left in which to see the cherry tree bloom. The song became the basis for his 1912 orchestral rhapsody of the same name.

American composer Samuel Barber's *The Secrets of Old*, composed with more modern and less predictable harmonies and rhythms, also addresses old age. But here three women's knowledge of old secrets is celebrated, such as how a man successfully pleased a woman the most or how a pair loved each other for so many years.

In 1954 the lion of 20th-century British composers, Benjamin Britten, set Thomas Hardy's poetry into an eight-song, twenty-minute cycle for tenor and piano entitled *Winter Words*. The final song, *Before Life and After*, encapsulates the sense of how, within the imperturbable and vast landscape of time, real life experience is fleeting.

Finally, American Aaron Copland's setting of the lullaby *The Little Horses* does indeed clip-clop along with the "coach and six-a little horses" preceded by representation in the accompaniment of a rocking cradle. Certainly this song reflects every parent's wish for their child to have, upon waking, "sweet cake and all the pretty little horses."

V. All Americana

While one can rightly assert Americans have appropriated Britain's national anthem melodies (and a great many folk songs), it works both ways! British composer Michael Tippett arranged five African-American spirituals for his extended choral-orchestral work, *A Child of Our Time*. The spirituals function, like chorales in Bach's Passions, as moments for calm reflection. A pacifist, Tippett began composing the work September 5, 1939, just two days after the British declaration of war against Germany.

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The following program notes are kindly provided by Carl B. Schmidt, professor of music at Towson University, Handel Choir board member and Randall Thompson scholar. Dr. Schmidt's The Story of

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Randall Thompson's *Alleluia Revisited: A Facsimile Edition with Commentary* will be published in late spring 2010 by Thompson's publisher ECS Publishing in Boston.

During his lifetime Randall Thompson (1899-1984) was often referred to as the "Dean" of American choral composers. It would be hard to argue with this assessment because his music has been sung, played, and recorded throughout the world by generations of singers and instrumentalists. In the 1970s more than 300,000 copies of his choral works were often sold in a single year, and sales of *Alleluia* now exceed three million copies. Why is his music so popular, one might ask. Because it is skillfully written, texts are felicitously set, melodies and harmonies are memorable, and it is imminently singable. Melinda O'Neal has chosen three Thompson works that have direct connections with members of the Handel Choir family for performance this afternoon.

Thompson prided himself that virtually all of his compositions were commissioned. *Alleluia*, written from 1-5 July 1940, was requested on 15 May by Serge Koussevitzky who wanted a new American choral work for performance at the inaugural assembly of the new Berkshire Music Center on 8 July. Thompson accepted the challenge and composed a seventy-eight measure, six and a half minute *a cappella* piece on but two words—Alleluia, Amen—that conductor G. Wallace Woodworth (father of Handel Choir board member Ellery Woodworth) had but one brief rehearsal to prepare before it was premièred. In fact, the music, written in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, arrived in Lenox, Massachusetts just before 2 pm. Woodworth played it over once on the piano, rehearsed it with his makeshift student chorus for an hour, and by 3:30 the premièred had taken place. Astonishing what great composers and conductors can do "on short order"!

Alleluia stands as a reminder of world events in 1940. While Koussevitzky wanted something of a celebratory fanfare for the music festival's opening, Thompson was painfully aware of the Fall of France to the Germans in early May and simply could not write such a piece. "Times," he said, "were simply too sad."

Glory to God in the Highest was written in six days while Thompson was abroad in Gstaad, Switzerland during July 1958. The impetus was a request from Harold C. Schmidt (father of the present writer) who had casually asked Thompson if he could write something for possible performance by the Harvard Summer School Chorus at a concert he would conduct on 14 August. Ironically, the *Christian Science Monitor* advertised the piece on 12 August as "'Fanfare for Chorus' (1958) especially commissioned by Mr. Schmidt for the summer School Chorus." Thompson had finally written a fanfare!

This brief work on a text from Luke 2: 14 features a vigorous opening "A" section with changing meters followed by a more sedate sequential "B" section on the words "And on earth, peace good will t'ward men." It ends with a full reprise of the "A" section. Thompson's publisher E. C. Schirmer rushed the work into print with an eye on the upcoming Christmas market.

Bitter-Sweet is the first of Two Herbert Settings Thompson wrote in 1970 and 1971 respectively. To our knowledge neither setting was commissioned. Rather, *Bitter-Sweet* was written "For Katie," Thompson's granddaughter who had died tragically of a brain tumor in September 1969 at a very young age. Thompson, always meticulous concerning choice of texts, was introduced to Herbert's early seventeenth-century verse by his friend, colleague, and editor Thomas Dunn who also gave *Bitter-Sweet* its first performance at the Church of the Incarnation in New York City on 25 October 1970. Dunn was Melinda O'Neal's long-time mentor, friend, and in 1999 a colleague professor at Indiana University. His passing last year was marked by a memorial service at Church of the Redeemer (Towson, MD) in which both she and Handel Choir board member Henry Lowe participated.

Thompson's brief letter to Katie's parents announcing his choice of Herbert's two-stanza poem is dated simply "Eternity '69." These poignant lines were ideal to express the bitterness of death and

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the sweetness of life. More than in any other vocal work he composed, Thompson has relied on chromaticism to express the *Schadenfreude* [sorrow/happiness] he felt. At times almost tortuous in its ambulatory chromatic lines used to create intense word painting, the piece ends with a G-major triad caressed first by a “bitter” E-flat in the tenor and then by a “sweet” E-natural in the soprano which then turns down to a D completing the final major triad. Did Thompson have in mind Brahms’ treatment of death in *Ein deutsches Requiem*—a work he knew well—as leading to everlasting life?

Charles Ives is one of the most important and original voices in American music. Born into a New England family with strong musical and religious inclinations and later trained at Yale University under Horatio Parker, Ives wrote music as a sideline to his every-day career running Ives & Myrick, one of the most prestigious insurance companies of his era. Though better known for his instrumental music, Ives wrote a celebrated volume of art songs and a number of religious works including ten Psalm settings either *a cappella*, with organ, or with a few instruments. *Psalm 67*, one of the most accessible of these Psalm settings, was composed ca. 1898-99 but not performed publicly until 1937.

We know that as a child Ives’ father had family members “stretch” their musicianship in various ways including singing in one key while he accompanied in another. Ives’ Psalm settings also challenge the singer’s musicianship skills. *Psalm 67* is Ives’ experiment in having the men sing basically in G minor while the women sing predominantly in C major creating what is called bi-tonal harmony. The magnificent opening chord announcing the two keys is absolutely haunting. Few works can be so easily identified from a single initial sound as this one! The *Psalm* proceeds in chordal style followed by an imitative section (men vs. women) that in turn concludes with a reprise of the opening passage again in chordal style. The last several measures are chanted in a non-specified rhythm on the words “God shall bless us; and all the ends of the earth shall fear Him.”

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Handel Choir closes in honor of our folk traditions and home. In the classic American folk song *Shenandoah*, a West-bound traveler speaks directly to the Shenandoah Valley: “I long to see you and hear your rolling river” and “your smiling valley.” We too, like the Western traveler, look back to Great Britain and Handel, and we honor these fine music legacies which have been carried over to the new land.

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