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The Motets of Georg Schumann (1866-1952)

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This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Georg Schumann and the centennial of the publication of his first motets. Although he could be numbered among composers who were well-known in their own day but are now largely forgotten, interest in Schumann's music has enjoyed a revival in recent years through new research, re-publication of several motets, and new recordings, permitting a fresh evaluation of his achievement.[1] This revival has built upon a tradition of performing the motets which began in Germany, but has been maintained more notably in the United States over the past 80 years.

Schumann's tenure as Director of the Berlin Sing-Akademie, grandfather of amateur choral societies, would alone have established him as one of the most significant figures in the choral life of twentieth-century Germany. Schumann led the Sing-Akademie from 1900 to 1950, longer than any other conductor, and his directorship was notable in several ways. He programmed many 20th-century works alongside the traditional repertoire mainstays, he pursued an ambitious program of touring throughout Europe, and he advocated movement toward a more modern approach to the performance of baroque music. The ability of the chorus to maintain its activities unabated through both world wars attests to his diplomatic and administrative skills: incredibly, in the months surrounding the fall of Berlin in late April 1945, the 78-year-old Schumann conducted the Sing-Akademie in the Brahms *Requiem* on 14 April and Bach's *B-minor Mass* on 21 and 24 November, followed by the *Christmas Oratorio* a month later.[2]

Schumann wrote for chorus, orchestra, piano, organ, chamber ensembles, and solo voice. As Daniel Price points out in his recent dissertation, he has been compared with Brahms, not only in fundamental compositional style, but also in the general shape of his career.[3] Notable as virtuoso pianists in their youth, both went on to write in nearly every genre excepting opera. Schumann's conducting career featured tenures in Danzig and Bremen before his fifty years in Berlin; Brahms (albeit more briefly) also conducted several choruses, including, in Vienna, both the Singakademie (1863-64) and the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (1872-75). Both composers were deeply involved with music of the past as performers and editors, and both arranged a substantial body of folksongs for chorus, as well as for solo voice with piano.

Schumann's choral oeuvre presents interesting points of comparison with that of Brahms. Both made impressive early showings with extended works for chorus and orchestra: Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (1868) and Schumann's student oratorio *Amor und Psyche* (1888) and, more significantly, the oratorio *Ruth* (1908). Brahms's shorter works for chorus and orchestra (the *Alto Rhapsody*, *Schicksalslied*, *Nänie*, and *Gesang der Parzen*) find parallels in Schumann's *Totenklage*, Op. 33 (1903), *Sehnsucht*, Op. 40 (1905), and V*ita somnium/ Elegie*, Op. 78a/b (1936). Schumann's *Preis- und Danklied*, Op. 47, also has many external similarities to Brahms's *Triumphlied* (1872). Although Brahms's masterful secular choral partsongs find almost no parallel in Schumann, the blending of sacred and folk-based Marian influences seen in Brahms's

Correction: The previous issue (Winter/Spring 2002) was printed with incorrect volume and issue numbers. It should be listed as volume XLIV, Number 1.

[1] Major biographical sources on Schumann include Paul Hielscher, "Georg Schumann," in *Monographien Moderner Musiker,* Volume I (Leipzig: C. F. Kahnt, 1906); Georg Schumann, "Wie ich Musiker wurde," in *Die Musik* 8 (1908/09): 214-17; Herbert Biehle, *Georg Schumann: Eine Biographie* (Münster: Ernst Bisping, 1925); Daniel Price, *The Choral Music of Georg Schumann: A Historical and Musical Analysis,* D.M.A. thesis, University of Cincinnati, 1995 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1996); and Gottfried Eberle and Michael Rautenberg, eds., *Die Sing-Akademie zu Berlin und ihre Direktoren* (Berlin: Staatliches Institute für Musikforschung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1998).

[2] Gottfried Eberle, *200 Jahre Sing-Akademie zu Berlin* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1991), 196.

[3] Price, 189-94.

Marienlieder (Op. 22) is echoed in Schumann's *Drei geistliche Lieder,* Op. 51 (1909) and *Drei altdeutsche Lieder*, op. 63 (1915).

Both composers published motets in several collections. Brahms's five main sets (Op. 29, 37, 74, 109, and 110) are matched by six sets by Schumann.

The Motets of Georg Schumann[4]

Drei geistliche Gesänge, Op. 31 (Leuckart, 1902; new editions forthcoming, Roger Dean Music, 2003)

1. Und ob ich schon wanderte (Ps. 23) (re-published by Alliance Music Publications, 2001,ed. Daniel L. Price; also published as *Yea though I Wander,* Augsburg, 1948, ed. Paul J. Christiansen)
2. *Siehe, wie fein und lieblich* (Ps. 133)
3. *Herr, wie lange* (Ps. 13)

Drei geistliche Lieder, Op. 51 (Leukart, 1909)

1. *Wo ist ein Gott, wie du bist?*
2. *Maria Wiegenlied am Drei-Königstage,* with soprano solo)
   (also published as *Mary's Cradle Song,* Augsburg, c. 1945, arr. for female chorus by Oscar R. Overby)
3. *Huldigung beim Jesukind: Erde singe, daß erklinge*

Drei Motetten, Op. 52 (Leuckart, 1909)

1. *Komm, heil'ger Geist* (Luther) (re-published by Earthsongs, 1994, ed. Gordon Paine)
2. Das ist ein köstliches Ding (Ps. 92) (re-published by Earthsongs, 1991, ed. Gordon Paine; also published as *How Great Are Thy Wonders,* Augsburg, 1960, ed. Paul J. Christiansen)
3. *Herr, erhöre meine Worte* (Ps. 5 and 6) (re-published by Alliance, 1997, ed. Lawrence Kaptein)

Gesänge Hiobs [Songs of Job] for mixed choir and organ, Op. 60 (Leuckart, 1914)

1. *Wo ist ein Mensch, wenn er tot?*
2. *Muß nicht der Mensch immer im Streit sein?*
3. *O daß ich wäre, wie in den tagen*

Fünf Choralmotetten for mixed chorus (Leuckart, 1922)

1. *Wie schön leucht' uns der Morgenstern*
2. *Jesus meine Zuversicht*
3. *Ermuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist* (with alto solo)

4a. *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (SAATBB with brass and organ)
4b. *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (TTBB with brass and organ)

5. *Von Himmel hoch da komm' ich her* (with soprano duet)

Drei Choralmotetten, Op. 75 (Lienau, 1932/1934)

1. *Jerusalem, du hochgebaute Stadt*
2. *Sollt ich meinem Gott nicht singen?*
3. *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr' dahin* (with brass and organ)

[4] The original Leuckart and Lienau editions of the motets are out of print. Reprinted copies can be obtained from the original publishers, or from the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. Op. 60 and Op. 71 (excepting No. 4 a/b) are also found in the Library of Congress.

The Music of the Motets

Schumann held choral posts in both Danzig and Bremen during the 1890s, but it was only after his appointment in Berlin that he returned to choral composition in earnest after a fourteen-year hiatus following his 1888 *Amor und Psyche*.[5] Possibly inspired by his new position, the *a cappella* psalm settings of Op. 31 fall outside the body of extended accompanied works that formed the typical repertoire of the Sing-Akademie. The lyrical imitation of the first two motets of Op. 31 is colored with Schumann's characteristic chromaticism and with sudden modulations to keys removed by a third. *Herr, wie lange*, the longest of the three, presents a thorough chromatic *tour de force,* progressing from B-flat minor to E major through extended chains of seventh chords; this work calls for a high level of expertise. As we will see, it was the first and third works from this opus, along with one motet from Op. 52, which seem to have launched the performance history of Schumann's motets in the United States, when they were introduced in the 1920s by the St. Olaf Choir.

Immediately following the oratorio *Ruth* (1908) Schumann returned to the *a cappella* idiom with Op. 51 and 52 (both from 1909). A mixture of styles is found in Op. 51. The chromatic inflections of *Herr, wie lange* appear in tamer form in *Wo ist ein Gott*. This work's most striking feature is its brief coda: after the cadence on D-flat, the first "Amen" is set to a traditional plagal cadence, but one borrowed from a distant key (A minor to E major); the final "Amen" then leaps back, unprepared, to an authentic cadence in D-flat.

The two remaining sacred *Lieder* of Op. 51 are both in modified strophic forms, and are built with modal and diatonic materials, giving them a much simpler, more folk-like effect. *Maria Wiegenlied* sets a medieval German carol for soprano solo with brief choral responses in Latin. The third work, also oriented toward adoration of the Christ-child, is tuneful and straightforward, again pursuing a harmonic path much simpler than the motets that precede or follow this opus.

With Opus 52 comes a return to harmonic opulence and a pinnacle in Schumann's achievement in the motet genre. *Komm, heil'ger Geist,* the first of the motets to be set in eight parts throughout, exploits nearly every possible textural contrast available with this voicing. At the same time, Schumann indulges his fondness for common-tone modulation as he moves from A-flat through C and E and continues through chains of thirds and secondary dominants back to the initial tonic. One of his most frequently performed works, *Das ist ein köstliches Ding* exhibits much of the harmonic richness of *Komm, heil'ger Geist,* while maintaining a four-voice texture with only occasional divisi passages. Its appeal combines a memorable melodic directness with the sudden expressive harmonic colorations that characterize Schumann at his best. *Herr, erhöre meine Worte* again presents a complex late-Romantic harmonic language, travelling through a chromatic descent from B-flat minor through A-minor to A-flat major, with a number of harmonic detours en route. This motet works toward progressively simpler textures, starting with frequent eight-part divisi passages, and ending with an extended passage for four parts.

Gesänge Hiobs (Songs of Job), Op. 60, is Schumann's only collection set throughout for chorus with organ, but moments where the organ functions independently are rare. The texts, although all from Job, suggest a variety of moods. The anguish of the first motet is set with opening and closing passages in D minor, enclosing a short, chromatic fughetta with descriptive descending subjects ("as waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up," Job 14: 11). The second motet depicts man's constant struggling through an energetic antiphonal contest between two SATB choirs *(Allegro con passione)*. A brief double fugue involves all eight voices at the text, "my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope" (Job 7:6). The coda *(Adagio)* moves by thirds through a sequence of short homophonic statements from E to C, then G to E-flat, then B-flat to G-flat, before returning to E as the dominant of the final A minor cadence. The third motet, *O daß ich wäre, wie in den Tagen,* is the most straightforward of the set, with a largely triadic melody reminiscent of *Daß ist ein köstliches Ding*. After the two-measure introduction, the organ has no truly independent material, and one could easily imagine this work performed *a cappella,* taking its place alongside the much better-known motets of Op. 31 and 52.

The two final motet collections—Op. 71 (1922) and Op. 75 (1932-34)—both consist of sets of chorale variations. They are the most complex of the motets, and tend to be somewhat longer than their predecessors. While the craftsmanship and harmonic technique are even more advanced here than in the earlier motets, these works are less frequently performed; the re-publication that has revived interest in Op. 31 and Op. 52 has not yet benefited Op. 71 and Op. 75. Although these chorale motets equal, and perhaps surpass, the earlier works, they do so at the expense of an

[5] Price, 38.

increase in difficulty. Space does not permit detailed analysis of these eight works.[6] Schumann's approach to chorale variation technique is perhaps most closely related to the Brahms of *Es ist das Heil* or *O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf,* but reaches beyond Brahms in both harmonic complexity and motivic development of the chorale melodies. Where Brahms is compact, Schumann is expansive, delighting in modulatory sequences and extended cadential passages full of suspensions and deceptive resolutions. Among the finest features of the chorale motets are the closing double-fugue of *Ermuntre dich* (Op. 71, No. 3) and the colorful textures of *Vom Himmel hoch* (Op. 71, No. 5), where two solo sopranos and the divided soprano and alto sections are designated as *Die Engel,* while lower voicing portrays *Die Menschen*. The extended chains of sequences in *Jerusalem, du hochgebaute Stadt* (Op. 75, No. 1) could serve as textbook examples of how to navigate seemingly endless journeys to distant keys. One motet from each opus is set for brass, timpani and/or organ with chorus; unlike the organ accompaniments in Op. 60, in both of these works the instruments have essential independent material and contribute substantially to the dramatic effect.

Schumann's Motets in America

Schumann planned several trips to the United States. One would have coincided with the first American performances of *Ruth* in 1910 in Chicago and in Oberlin, Ohio; another Chicago visit is discussed in a series of letters from 1913.[7] Yet a third planned visit to conduct at Chicago's 1924 North Shore Festival was prominently announced in the *Musical Courier*.[8] According to this announcement, Schumann, whose "activities in Germany are too well known to readers of the *Musical Courier* to need introduction," had "written five motets that will be sung by the A Cappella Choir at the festival" (presumably Op. 71). It appears, however, that none of these planned trips was ever realized.[9]

The first American performances of Schumann motets apparently took place in 1922. That year's tour program of the St. Olaf Choir under F. Melius Christiansen featured a group of three psalm motets—Op. 52, No. 2, and Op. 31, Nos. 1 and 3 (all sung in English)—beginning a continuing American tradition of performance for these works and a few others.[10] Christiansen had studied at the Leipzig Conservatory from 1897 to 1899; it is possible that he encountered Schumann's early music there, and that the motets later came to his attention in connection with one of Schumann's planned American visits. In any case, Schumann's motets appear frequently on programs of the St. Olaf Choir during the rest of the twentieth century. In 1923, the choir performed *Earth, in Singing (Erde singe,* Op. 51, No. 3) and in 1926 *Come, Guest Divine (Komm, heil'ger Geist,* Op. 52, No. 1) appears alongside *Yea through Death's Gloomy Vale* (a repeat of Op. 31, No. 1). *Come, Guest Divine* was also programmed on the 1941 tour, the last conducted exclusively by the elder Christiansen before his son Olaf joined him as associate conductor. Schumann motets appear on 24 of the 76 tour programs from 1922 to 1997, and have been programmed repeatedly by each of the choir's four conductors.[11]

The influence of F. Melius Christiansen's sons was also important in the performance history of Schumann's motets in America. Before assuming directorship of the St. Olaf Choir in 1943, Olaf C. Christiansen taught at the Oberlin College Conservatory of Music for twelve years, and founded the A Cappella Choir there (later, the Oberlin College Choir). Separate part-books to the Op. 31 motets remain at Oberlin, and were used by him at least as early as 1933[12]; Robert Fountain, who conducted at Oberlin 1948-1971, also programmed and recorded motets from Op. 31 and Op. 52 throughout his tenure there and his subsequent years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Paul J. Christiansen, younger brother of Olaf, was every bit as instrumental in promoting Schumann's motets during his fifty years (1937-87) at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. In addition to frequent performances, he edited two Schumann motets, substituting English texts. (See page 2.)

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[6] Price, 153-69 and 170-77 provides extended discussions of these works.

[7] Letters from Schumann's estate cited in Price, 235.

[8] *Musical Courier,* 8 November 1923, 12.

[9] Price, 19.

[10] Joseph M. Shaw, *The St. Olaf Choir: A Narrative* (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College, 1997), 646. The performance of these motets on the 1922 tour was "tremendously uplifting," according to a review written by H. E. Krehbiel for the New York *Tribune,* quoted in Leola Nelson Bergmann, *Music Master of the Middle West: The Story of F. Melius Christiansen and the St. Olaf Choir* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1944), 188.

[11] Shaw, 643-685, lists the St. Olaf Choir tour programs 1912-97. Kenneth Jennings succeeded Olaf C. Christiansen in 1968; Anton Armstrong succeeded Jennings in 1990.

[12] According to Hugh F. Floyd's ongoing research into Oberlin's choral history, Olaf C. Christiansen performed Op. 31, No. 1 in June, 1933.

Recent Recordings

Privately produced recordings which include motets by Georg Schumann have been available for many years from the American colleges which introduced this repertoire to the United States,[13] but two recent commercial recordings have made Schumann's music available to a wider international audience. *Georg Schumann: Geistliche Musik der Spätromantik,* (JUBALmusic, CD 980524, released in 1998) holds special historical interest.[14] Five motets appear here, as well as three organ works and the 26-minute orchestral variations on the chorale *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten* (Op. 24, 1899). The motets include *Jerusalem, du hochgebaute Stadt* and *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* from Op. 75, and the complete Op. 31. Both Op. 75 works are sung by the Berlin Sing-Akademie. The former performance is undated, and is conducted by Hans Hilsdorf, who was appointed director of the choir in 1973; the latter is performed in an early, prepublication version, and is conducted by Schumann himself in 1933. One could wish for more polish in both of these live performances, but the first provides the only recording of one of the finest of the motets, and the second gives us our only window on Schumann the conductor, and a revealing view of performance practice in one of Europe's most prominent choirs in the mid-1930's. Although Schumann's scores are replete with changes of tempo, dynamics and expression, one hears here a fairly straightforward reading of a chorale, where the most obvious expressive device is a scooping from below the pitch at the beginning of many phrases. The voices are almost devoid of noticeable vibrato, and if one sets aside imprecisions of pitch and rhythm, the choral tone has much in common with the approach heard in recordings of the St. Olaf Choir from the 1930's. This recording appears to contradict the common notion that German Romantic choral music should be sung with opulent, vibrato-laden tone.[15] Both works are performed with instrumental support; No. 3 is originally scored for brass and timpani, but No. 1, published by Schumann without accompaniment, is performed with organ and strings in a scoring by Hilsdorf. The recording of Op. 31 dates from a 1986 radio broadcast by the Alsfelder Vokalensemble, conducted by Wolfgang Helbich. These performances reach much higher levels of accuracy and expression, and set a superb standard in every way.

The second recent disk devoted to Schumann is a 2000 release featuring the Purcell Singers under Mark Ford on the ASV label. *Georg Schumann: Choral Music* (ASV CD DCA 1091) offers six collections: the motets of Op. 31, 51, 52 and 60, as well as Op. 41 from 1905 (four choruses for men's voices), and *Drei altdeutsche Lieder,* Op. 63 (1915), for mixed voices. The performances are uniformly excellent, and the entire project, presenting such a body of out-of-print repertoire, is a logistical as well as a musical triumph. Ford tends toward a more direct approach than Helbich, lingering less over cadences, and favoring faster tempi throughout, but the performances still find a depth of expression, avoiding the emotional detachment one hears from many English choirs. A few highlights among many are the two lullabies of Mary, Op. 51, No. 2 *(Maria Wiegenlied)* and Op. 63, No. 1 *(Beim Kindelwiegen,* a setting of the carol *Joseph, lieber Joseph mein),* both featuring delightful choral interplay with ideal (but unidentified!) soprano soloists. According to the program booklet, Ford is "researching other works of Georg Schumann, for future performance"; one can only hope that the same forces will soon tackle the later, more complex chorale variations of Op. 71 and 75 with the same care and enthusiasm, to complete a recorded picture of Schumann's motets.

Bach: The Learned Musician
Aspects of Bach Biography

Alfred Mann

We had the opportunity recently to report to the readers of the *American Choral Review* the remarkable finding of Bach documents which the Harvard scholar Christoph Wolff accomplished in the Ukrainian town of Kiev. Developments overtook the chronicler: by the time the article appeared (*American Choral Review,* Winter/Spring 2001), a positive exchange between the two governments involved having occurred, the precious collection was already headed for a return to the Berlin library that was its original owner.

As if to project this close sequence of events onto another level, Christoph Wolff has published two major Bach biographies within a decade, the latter one having been issued to mark the Bach year of

[13] Of particular historical interest is the 1941 St. Olaf Choir performance of *Come, Guest Divine (Komm, heil'ger Geist)* conducted by F. Melius Christiansen, on *The St. Olaf Choir Choral Masterworks Series,* Vol. I, released by St. Olaf College in 1998.

[14] Available in the United States only through Brandenburg Historica (<www.brandenburghistorica.com>).

[15] As Joseph M. Shaw has noted, F. Melius Christiansen "brought to this country a north German style of singing that insisted on a controlled vibrato in sacred music..." (Shaw, 218).

2000—the 250th anniversary of Bach's death. It is entitled, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (W.W. Norton, New York, 2000), and indeed such sections as the "Prologue—Bach and the Notion of Musical Science" and a chapter headed "Musician and Scholar" remind the reader of an aspect not usually associated in our mind with a Bach biography. At the same time it becomes evident how true is the image of this association of musical art and scholarship in Bach's work, for the volume is singularly well documented.

The first thought given publicly to the work may have emanated from a 1978 discussion in Marburg, the old German university town, at the occasion of an international Bach Festival and a meeting of experts. A particular question was raised with a view of the 1985 Bach anniversary then approaching—the 300th return of the date of Bach's birth: Had the time not come for a new comprehensive Bach biography to replace the work by Philipp Spitta (1873-80), then a century old? Wolff, at the time already recognized as a leading international Bach scholar, commented that Spitta's all-embracing biography had remained so valuable that in his opinion the thought of replacing it would be futile. What would be needed were smaller essays dealing with numerous individual issues of new Bach research that had arisen in the meantime.

Spitta's work takes its place among the fundamental biographies written at the dawn of modern musicology about the great eighteenth-century composers—Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. But it stands out among them. No other biography offered such pioneer work on the composer's artistic world—in this case, the significance of composers such as Buxtehude, Böhm, Pachelbel and Reinken. Spitta's was also the only one among those works to find a sequel that warranted international response: Albert Schweitzer's distinguished book (1905). Guided by the concept of musical symbolism, it was eventually rejected by its author, though it lives on in editions and translations. Contemporary with Schweitzer's book was the sensitive study by the French music historian Andre Pirro (1907), and the next major Bach biography to appear was by a British scholar, Charles Sanford Terry (1930). It placed its emphasis upon purely biographical detail still relatively unexplored; we know more facts now, three quarters of a century later, but Wolff's recent writing serves again as a reminder of how much is not known, and may never be. Bach scholarship was bound to agree with the view Wolff expressed in 1978: nothing of particular significance appeared in 1985. But now we are faced with two new studies that represent the highest level of Bach scholarship.

Wolff answered his own challenge. The first of his two works is entitled *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Harvard University Press, 1991); it is a collection of studies that veritably cover a lifetime of his past Bach research, though they offer something new on every page.

Curious but significant is the opening of his Preface. "This volume may well be understood as a book about a book the author doesn't feel quite ready to write." In a subtle way not fully clarified even to the author himself, it announces the second book that was to follow almost a decade later; at the same time, however, it makes clear why two books were needed: the first deals with the building stones. It does so in a most significant manner. The "building stones," in every chapter, are those of fresh and almost startling studies, issues either so far not recognized or, for that matter, not suspected—such as Bach's intimate understanding (and absorbing) the Palestrina style, exposing the false myth of the "deathbed chorale," or such questions as the history of the *Art of Fugue* and the completion of its last fugue.

Now, almost a quarter-century after his Marburg statement, Wolff has issued his second Bach biography, a book that may well take its place next to Spitta's work. It immediately distinguished itself from the latter—it would be unrealistic today, Wolff writes, for anyone to attempt a comprehensive work in the Spitta tradition. The modern Bach scholar may attend merely to bringing the image of Bach—"as objectively as possible and as subjectively as legitimate"—in line with the current state of scholarship. One realizes, however, that he has succeeded in much more than serving this modestly-stated goal. Bach as "learned musician," while a dominant one, is still only one original aspect of the new presentation. The outline of the book, unlike that of the preceding one, is not set by research issues but by the familiar pattern of the chronological biography. But how this has changed, how unbelievably much as been achieved—largely though the author's own efforts—in a relatively short time! Each major composition is shown within its complete history, and yet the style of narration stays fluent. Next to all imaginable documentation, there is room for such a delightful chapter as "A Singing Bird and Carnations for the Lady of the House—Domestic and Professional Life." One is tempted to call this book a "definitive work." Wolff himself has warned us that such a concept is elusive. The value of his achievement, nevertheless, will remain permanent.

Report from New York City

Robert Schumann: *Das Paradies und die Peri* (Op. 50, 1843) August 3-4, 2001, Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts
Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra,
Gerard Schwartz, conductor
Riverside Choral Society,
Patrick Gardner, director

Christine Goerke, *Die Peri*, Kristine Jepson, *Der Engel*, Robert Brubaker, tenor, Peter Rose, baritone

Reviewed By David DeVenney

Beginning in 1841, Robert Schumann put aside the composition of lieder to concentrate on writing music in longer forms, particularly orchestral and chamber music. His first long choral work, completed in 1843, was *Das Paradies und die Peri*; it would be followed later by *Szenen aus Goethe's Faust* (1844-1853) and *Requiem für Mignon* (1849). All three works are secular, as the composer had come to believe that the "biblical oratorio," a lengthy work in set pieces (recitatives, arias, choruses) on a biblical or religious subject, had been played out. In a letter to a friend upon completion of the *Paradies* score, Schumann boasted that he had created a "new genre for the concert hall."

The text for the work is taken from Thomas Moore's epic *Lallah Rookh*. It was translated by Schumann's friend Emil Fleischig, but the composer freely added portions to his libretto, excised others, and re-wrote still more. The story concerns a mythical Peri, the offspring of a mortal and a fallen angel, who is unable to pass through the gates of heaven. An angel, seeing her despair, tells her that she may indeed gain entrance by bringing with her "the gift that is most dear to Heaven." She travels to India, where she gathers one drop of blood from a valiant youth who dies battling a tyrant prince. Alas, that does not open the doors to heaven, so the Peri flies to Egypt, where she gathers the last sigh from a maiden who dies in her plague-stricken lover's arms, rather than desert him to keep herself safe. Nor is this accepted, and the Peri makes a third journey to Syria, where she steals a tear from an old man, a sinner who repents his disreputable life upon observing a young boy at his prayers. His tear is accepted as the "gift most dear," and the Peri enters at last into heaven.

Moore's tale was quite popular in the nineteenth century, appealing to his contemporaries with its explicit Romanticism, its exotic locations, and its theme of achieving eternal salvation through heroic suffering. Unfortunately for today's audiences, the stock characters who inhabit the story are contrived and two-dimensional. Combined with the flowery poetic style, these factors have kept the work out of the modern choral repertory. That is unfortunate, since Schumann considered the work one of his best, and it received more performances in the composer's lifetime than almost any other major work that he wrote.

More to the point, the music of *Das Paradies* is astoundingly beautiful. Although there are nominally twenty-six separate numbers among the three parts of the oratorio, hardly ever is there a pause in the music. One movement moves seamlessly into the next; even at those moments when there is a full cadence (e.g., No. 7 into No. 8), the final chord of the earlier movement usually functions as the dominant of the next.

One can hear in *Das Paradies* ample evidence of Schumann's melodic gifts, as in the opening and closing arias for the Peri: the first distressful when she is denied the gift of heaven, and the last jubilant and bright when she at last is allowed to enter. The music for the chorus is equally appealing; especially noteworthy are the plaintive chorus at the death of the valiant young hero in Part I, "Weh', weh', weh', er fehlte das Ziel" (No. 8), the famous chorus for women's voices that opens Part III ("Schmücket die Stufen zu Allahs Thrön," No. 18) and the rousing solo (Peri) and chorus that concludes the 90-minute work. Schumann lavishes care as well on the orchestra. A great portion of the piece is written for strings alone, saving the woodwinds for color (including some enticing Oriental effects), and the brass and percussion for moments of power and high drama.

This substantial and beautiful work should more frequently take its place today among other nineteenth-century oratorios. The two performances noted here were given as part of the 2001 Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center in New York. The Festival Orchestra played very well, with spirit and subtlety, and with a rich and flexible tone. The Riverside Choral Society was well-prepared and sang with confidence and verve, although intonation was sometimes insecure in the women's voices, particularly when entering on higher pitches. The outstanding soloist among a host of good performances was Christine Goerke as the Peri. Her adroit dramatic characterization was anchored to a rich and powerful vocal instrument. The other soloists were uniformly fine and well-chosen for their roles, with the exception of Mr. Brubaker, whose dramatic readings of his part often interfered with his ability to sing accurately on pitch.

Report from Washington, D.C.

Palestrina Choir: Selections from *Motetti del Fiore* (1532) Saturday May 11, 2002
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Washington, DC

Cathedral Choral Society: *A William Walton Centennial Celebration* Sunday May 19, 2002,
Washington National Cathedral, Washington, DC

Reviewed By Dawn Culbertson

In an era when many classical music organizations are playing it safe with their programming for fear of losing audiences and funding, it's refreshing to hear a group like Washington, DC's Palestrina Choir. Since its founding in 1986, the group's concerts have consisted almost entirely of unfamiliar sacred music, primarily from the Renaissance, for unaccompanied voices — a repertoire many groups and radio stations would shy away from. But, judging from the crowded sanctuary of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Washington at their most recent concert, there are a lot of people out there who are glad the choir has chosen to not play it safe.

This particular concert featured ten motets from the first of an eight-volume set of motets called *Motteti del fiore*, published in 1532 by Jacques Moderne. Although not well known today except to scholars of Renaissance and church music, the series had a profound influence on Palestrina, who used many of the book's motets as source material for his masses. A few of the composers are fairly well-known today, such as Philippe Verdelot, but most are relatively obscure, such as Lupus Hellinck, Jacquet of Mantua, Andreas de Silva and Matthieu Lasson.

Eight of the ten motets were in responsory form, but because many of them were written in the continuous, dense polyphony of the late 15th-century Netherlandish style, the ABCB structure of the music was somewhat hard to follow. The beauty of the music, however, was easily evident, from the penitential *In te, Domine, speravi* of Hellinck to Jean Courtois's *Inviolata*, a hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary for men's voices alone, to two motets about the birth of John the Baptist — Verdelot's *Gabriel archangelus* and Hilaire Penet's *Descendit angelus* — both of which ended with jubilant "Alleluias." Throughout the concert, director Michael Harrison looked like he wasn't doing much more than simply beating time, but perhaps that was all he needed to do, considering the professionalism of the 14 singers in the group. Outside of a shaky start in *Gabriel archangelus*, the diction was crystal-clear, the rhythm and pitch absolutely precise, and the blend superb. The concert seemed to be over much too soon.

Early music, along with monarchs, also played an important, though indirect, role in a concert celebrating the centennial of the birth of William Walton by another and much larger Washington-based group, the Cathedral Choral Society, directed by J. Reilly Lewis. Two works about historical monarchs were performed, a suite from the film *Henry V* and the oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast.* Also heard were the *Coronation Te Deum*, written for the coronation of Elizabeth II and *Crown Imperial Coronation March*, commissioned by the BBC for the coronation of Edward VII (and also performed at his brother's coronation when Edward abdicated six months later).

The scoring and feel of the *Te Deum*, with its jubilant tone (except for an unexpectedly quiet ending), shimmering effects of organ and strings, and brilliant punctuation by the brass, owes more than a little to the influence of works like Handel's *Coronation Anthems* and *Utrecht Te Deum*, while some of the music for *Henry V* actually quotes Renaissance tunes, which serve as the base material for the final movement. Except for two excerpts from *Henry V* — the moving *Passacaglia: The Death of Falstaff* and the wistful *Touch her soft lips and part,* both scored for strings — most of the program was in a bright, extroverted style, making heavy use of brass and percussion. *Belshazzar's Feast*, completed in 1931 and also commissioned by the BBC, probably couldn't be described better than the adjectives given in the concert's program notes: "exciting, exotic, brilliant, barbaric." The libretto, which Osbert Sitwell put together entirely from Biblical texts, was inspired both by Sitwell's fixation on Babylon as a metaphor for World War I and by the growing political turbulence of that era, when the Nazis were just coming to power in Germany. Its style is also more than a little reminiscent of Vaughan William's *Sancta Civitas,* which also contains a lengthy section about the fall of Babylon and was completed only six years earlier.

Except for some mushy diction in the *Te Deum* — which could partially be the fault of the National Cathedral's overly live acoustics — and the strings being slightly behind the beat in *Crown Imperial*, the performances were superb, and baritone Sanford Sylvan provided some especially hair-raising moments in *Belshazzar's Feast.*

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