

PROGRAM NOTES

Dixit Dominus

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) had begun to establish himself as an opera composer in Hamburg when he decided on a complete change of scene and journeyed to Italy, reaching Rome in 1707. Surprisingly, for an unwavering Lutheran, he quickly secured the patronage of three cardinals, gave a wildly successful performance on the organ of the Church of St. John Lateran, and was soon composing church music. Although he apparently kept composing operas during his Italian period, these were not performed in Rome, since all opera performances had been strictly forbidden by Pope Clement XI.

The psalm setting *Dixit Dominus* (Ps. 110) was probably composed under the patronage of Cardinal Carlo Colonna, as one of a large set of probably eight pieces, including five psalms, for Vespers celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Church of St. Maria di Monte Santo, one of the “twin churches” in Rome’s Piazza del Popolo. The psalm text seems just the thing to flatter a patron from one of Rome’s old, powerful families like the Colonnas, with its assurance of a ruler’s victory over his enemies. It can be interpreted as a confirmation of the power of an earthly ruler like King David. Also, the mention of Melchizedek (the priest who appears in *Genesis* to bless Abraham) has been taken as a reference to the Messiah, the high priest chosen specifically by God, and thus of a higher order than those who simply inherited the priesthood as members of the priestly tribe.

The 22-year-old Handel, having already proven himself a master of counterpoint during his North German “apprenticeship,” added a facility for expressive melody and lively Corelli-style instrumental writing during this Italian “journeyman” phase of his career. During his final, “master” period, he re-used music from the *Dixit Dominus* in several of his well-known operas and oratorios. The brilliant Italian concerto style is displayed from the very beginning of *Dixit Dominus* with the repeated, energetic declamation of the word *Dixit*, like rapid sword thrusts; and in the use of five solo voices set in contrast against the choral background. There are particularly dramatic word paintings, notably the repeated *conquassabit* in the seventh movement, illustrating the smashing of enemy heads. The choral writing is virtuosic throughout, described by H. C. Robbins Landon as “of staggering technical difficulty, displaying immediately the excellence of Roman choirs at the beginning of the century.”

“On the Beach at Night”

Andrew Imbrie (1921-2007) was born in New York City and reared in Princeton, New Jersey, where during his teens he became a composition pupil of Roger Sessions. After service in World War II, he continued studying with Sessions at the University of California at Berkeley. Imbrie was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome 1947-49, then returned to teach at Berkeley until his retirement in 1991.

Imbrie’s music is atonal and not composed with a particular method, although influenced by the “long line” or “large gesture” advocated by Sessions. As Imbrie described it in CD liner notes from 1993, his music “... is neither experimental nor conventional ... The composer must constantly resort to innovation—yet he is influenced by the other music that he loves, both old and new. Without such participation he would be powerless. Originality, if indeed present at all, is the style with which the composer characteristically chooses, weighs, shapes, and distorts.”

“On the Beach at Night,” with a text by American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892), was published in 1961. It is a highly descriptive and dramatic depiction of the sunset scene of father and child, with the brief earthly-celestial drama painted in subtle and highly detailed choral and orchestral effects.

Berliner Messe (Berlin Mass)

Arvo Pärt was born in Paide, Estonia in 1935, and graduated from the Tallinn Conservatory in 1963. He worked in Estonia as a film composer before emigrating to Vienna, then to Berlin, in 1981. His earliest compositions were tonal, and showed the influence of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Later he switched to a strict serial style based on Schönberg’s, then again back to a tonal music based on old polyphonic forms and Gregorian chant. Later he developed the *tintinnabuli* style used in the *Berlin Mass*, derived from the sound of bells. As Richard Kostelanetz

wrote, “Pärt’s creative career can be viewed as dialectical, moving from thesis through a serialist antithesis to the current synthesis.”

The *Berlin Mass* was composed in 1990 for four soloists and organ, and later revised for chorus and string orchestra. It is comprised of the five traditional mass movements, plus *First Alleluia*, *Second Alleluia*, and *Veni Sancte Spiritus* movements which make it suitable for its intended use at the Feast of Pentecost (with Christmas and Easter, one of the three major feast days of the Christian Church and celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit). Pärt’s use of chant-like declamation and slow tempos gives the piece a stately serenity reminiscent of Renaissance choral music, while his careful attention to the nuances of the language give the Latin words a familiar, almost conversational tone.

Pärt’s style has been described as “minimalist,” but it is a minimalism completely different from that of composers like John Adams or Philip Glass, who compose music that is rhythmically-driven, with only intermittent changes in harmony. In contrast, Pärt’s music never has what American Bandstand fans used to call “a good beat.” There is no palpable pulse except that of the words themselves; instead there is constant harmonic variety in the different combinations of pitches and of vocal and instrumental timbres. There is little explanation of this from Pärt himself—Richard Kostelanetz quotes him as saying, concerning other contemporary composers, “There is no music; there is only explanations,” and “Everything I ever said about music I wanted to forget.”

The *tintinnabuli* method is displayed clearly in the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, and *Alleluias* of the *Berliner Mass*: the sopranos and tenors sing only notes of a triad chord, and so their lines move only by leaps. The altos and tenors start each phrase on a note *not* in the triad, and their lines move only stepwise. There is only one word per measure, with a constantly-changing meter. After the chorus sings each line of the text, there is a punctuating “period” from the orchestra.

The *Veni Sancte Spiritus* is a sequence, a hymn proper to a specific day in the church calendar, here Pentecost. Also known as the Golden Sequence, it is one of the few sequences that still remain in the official Roman Catholic liturgy. The text is by an unknown 13th century author, in rhyming seven-syllable lines. Pärt seems to emphasize the special nature of the sequence by abandoning the strict *tintinnabuli* method, using a prevailing triple meter, and spreading the words over multiple measures, with each three-line stanza punctuated by a triple-long measure of sustained final syllables.

The *Credo* is composed in harmony that could almost be by some other 20th-century choral composer—but still in an unhurried, one-word-per-measure declamation, ending with a uniquely consonant “Amen.” The *Sanctus* returns to the *tintinnabuli* style, and the *Agnus Dei* brings still another formula, with mostly-stepwise lines repeated by widely-leaping echoes from other voices until the steps are abandoned altogether and all voices conclude with intervals of perfect fourths and perfect fifths.

– Eric Leibrock