

PROGRAM NOTES

HOPE

Program Notes by Tom Benjamin

Hope was commissioned by soprano and pianist Alison Matuskey for performance with the Columbia Pro Cantare Chamber Singers. Alison asked for a setting of the poem "Hope," but I was so pleased to be writing for so fine a singer and chorus that I decided to write a whole cycle of Emily Dickinson settings. The poems are selected to embrace a wide spectrum of dear Emily's work, which runs from the elegiac to the playful, and the music is designed to showcase the range of Alison's vocal and dramatic abilities. I have always loved Dickinson's work, and had recently visited her house in Amherst and the tiny room where she wrote most of her great poems. I was greatly moved by the experience, as I have been by Alison's musicianship and her own optimistic largeness of spirit.

“Light and Shadows”

Program Notes by Barbara A. Renton, Ph.D.

The theme of this concert, which celebrates the birth year anniversaries of three composers, is “Light and Shadows” – a theme struck by these words from the oratorio, *A Child of our Time*, by Michael Tippett (and the original setting for tonight’s final work):

“I would know my shadow and my light, so shall I at last be whole.”

“Light” as metaphor and sign, has customarily been associated with joy, hope, truth, life, day, goodness, God, heaven; “Shadow,” with darkness, signifying suffering, despair, obscurity, death, night, evil, Satan, hell. There is a fittingness to the contrasting themes as they are presented in music during this month whose religious observances include the Jewish feast of Purim – a time of rejoicing in deliverance, and the Christian season of Lent – a time of meditation, penance, and renewal. Both observances include the opposites of darkness and light as integral to the spiritual journey of individual and community.

Jephte, Oratorio

Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1674)

At the age of twenty-four, Giacomo Carissimi, a relatively unknown organist, choirmaster, and composer, won the highly-sought-after appointment as *maestro di cappella* of the German College (Jesuit) in Rome, an appointment he held to the end of his life, despite attempts to lure him to other prestigious appointments at St. Mark’s in Venice, for example, or with royal chapels. Although he became famous for his vocal compositions, both liturgical and non-liturgical, he is still justly celebrated for his seminal work in the development of the oratorio – a religious musical genre that applied operatic techniques (still young and developing in Carissimi’s time) but without staging (as opera performances were forbidden during Lent). Based on biblical and religious subjects, these “oratorios” were intended to be produced as a spiritual exercise during Lent in the prayer-assembly rooms of lay religious societies – hence the term “oratorio,” meaning “prayer hall.”

Of the many justly-celebrated oratorio composers in mid-17th -century Italy, Carissimi proved to be the most significant in influence as his compositions quickly spread in his lifetime beyond Rome and Italy to northern Europe – and this without benefit of recordings! *Jephte* was reproduced in its entirety by the Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher in what was the then “Encyclopedia Britannica” of music theory (*Musurgia universalis*, 1650); the much-admired lament of Jephte, (“Heu, heu mihi!”) served as a model for one of Handel’s recitatives; and the final chorus, “Plorate, filii Israel,” widely cited in its day

as a model of expressiveness, was used later by Handel in his own oratorio, *Samson* (“Hear, Jacob’s God”).

The text of *Jephte* is based on biblical verses from the Latin Vulgate translation (Judges 11:12-38) either directly-quoted, or in paraphrase and summary, with added dialogue and contemplative texts. Compared with the oratorios of Handel, J.S. Bach, and Mendelssohn, *Jephte*’s vocal numbers are less strongly differentiated (recitative, arioso, aria) although Carissimi’s writing offers 17th -century models of each in a logical, yet artful flow of narrative, dialogue, commentary, emotional response, in which the chorus serves several of these roles. Like the early shapers of opera, Carissimi’s objective was the clearly-elucidated setting of the text together with the spoken/musical rhetorical devices to reflect and to inspire in the listener the proper degree of emotional involvement. For Handel, to change emotional portrayal meant a formal/structural change (a new “section”), for Carissimi, a few short measures of florid melody or embellishments would suffice. A final note: scholars have heard in the continuous emphasis on – and repetition of – the word “unigenite” (“only-begotten”), references to a Christ-figure. In other words, within the tragedy there was a pointer to the light of future hope.

The narrator (“Historicus” - Alto) begins by summarizing and setting the scene; Jephte (Tenor) utters his fateful promise: if he is given victory by the Lord, to sacrifice the first person/thing to greet him on his return home. The chorus both narrates and in quasifanfare flourishes (as the Israelites) illustrates the military nature of the conflict – continued by a duet, Bass solo, and another chorus.

Historicus: When the king of the children of Ammon made war against the children of Israel, and disregarded Jephthah's message, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah and he went on to the children of Ammon, and made a vow to the Lord, saying:

Jephthah: "If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then whoever comes first out of the doors of my house to meet me, I will offer him to the Lord as a complete sacrifice."

Chorus: So Jephthah crossed over to the sons of Ammon with the spirit, strength, and valor of the Lord to fight against them.

Historicus: And the trumpets sounded, and the drums resounded, and battle against Ammon ensued.

Solo: Flee and give way, godless ones; perish, foreigners! Fall before our swords, for the Lord of Hosts has raised up an army, and fights against you.

Chorus: Flee, give way, godless ones! Fall down! And with our raging swords, be scattered!

The Historicus (Soprano) describes the outcome, followed by a Trio illustrating the despair of the defeated.

Historicus: And Jephthah struck twenty cities of Ammon with a very great slaughter.

Historicus: And the children of Ammon howled, and were brought low before the children of Israel.

The Historicus (Bass) leads up to the dramatic moment of Jephte’s homecoming with melodic emphasis on the word “praecinebat” (singing or playing before [someone]).

Historicus: When Jephthah came victorious to his house, behold, his only child, a daughter, was

coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. She sang:

Jephte's daughter (Filia: Soprano) sings an aria whose three melodic sections illustrate the nature of the words (A = dance-like; B = hymn-like; C = dance-like). Her part is interspersed by sections for duet and chorus who appear to join her as her friends and/or servants.

Filia: "Strike the timbrels and sound the cymbals! Let us sing a hymn and play a song to the Lord, let us praise the King of Heaven, let us praise the prince of war, who has led the children of Israel back to victory!"

Duet: Let us sing a hymn and play a song to the Lord, who gave glory to us and victory to Israel!

Filia: Sing with me to the Lord, sing all you peoples! Praise ye the prince of war, who gave glory to us and victory to Israel!

Chorus: Let us all sing to the Lord, let us praise the prince of war, who gave glory to us and victory to Israel!

The **Historicus** (Alto) describes Jephte's horror at the realization of what he has promised. Then begins Jephte's famous grief-stricken lament. His daughter furthers the action by inquiring why he is so stricken. He explains, concluding with the same phrase as the lament. His daughter indicates her acceptance of her part in fulfilling his rash promise with one proviso. Jephte inquires as to what it is. She requests two months to lament her virginity (her lost potential for birthing – creating a future) which Jephte grants.

Historicus: When Jephthah, who had sworn his oath to the Lord, saw his daughter coming to meet him, with anguish and tears he tore his clothes and said:

Jephthah: "Woe is me! Alas, my daughter, you have undone me, my only daughter, and you, likewise, my unfortunate daughter, are undone."

Filia: "How, then, are you undone, father, and how am I, your only-born daughter, undone?"

Jephthah: I have opened my mouth to the Lord that whoever comes first out of the doors of my house to meet me, I will offer him to the Lord as a complete sacrifice. Woe is me! Alas, my daughter, you have undone me, my only daughter, and you, likewise, my unfortunate daughter, are undone."

Filia: "My father, if you have made an oath to the Lord, and returned victorious from your enemies, behold! I, your only daughter offer myself as a sacrifice to your victory, but, my father, fulfill one wish to your only daughter before I die."

Jephthah: " But what can I do, doomed daughter, to comfort you and your soul?"

Filia: "Send me away, that for two months I may wander in the mountains, and with my companions bewail my virginity."

Jephthah: "Go, my only daughter, go and bewail your virginity."

The chorus, with the daughter and artful echoes (duet) of her laments, concludes in a powerful response

to human tragedy.

Historicus: Then Jephthah's daughter went away to the mountains, and bewailed her virginity with her companions, saying:

Filia: Mourn, you hills, grieve, you mountains, and howl in the affliction of my heart!

Echo: *Howl!*

Filia: Behold! I will die a virgin, and shall not in my death find consolation in my children. Then groan, woods, fountains, and rivers, weep for the destruction of a virgin!

Echo: *Weep!*

Filia: Woe to me! I grieve amidst the rejoicing of the people, amidst the victory of Israel and the glory of my father, I, a childless virgin I, an only daughter, must die and no longer live. Then tremble, you rocks, be astounded, you hills, vales, and caves, resonate with horrible sound!

Echo: *Resonate!*

Filia: Weep, you children of Israel, bewail my hapless virginity, and for Jephthah's only daughter, lament with songs of anguish."

Chorus: Weep, you children of Israel, weep, all you virgins, and for Jephthah's only daughter, lament with songs of anguish

Lamentations, second set

Thomas Tallis (1505-1585)

How many composers can be said to have served four sovereigns – particularly the English Tudors – and kept his head (literally)? Thomas Tallis' service in the English Chapel Royal spanned both the Roman Catholic Church and the founding of the new Church of England, with shifts between. He served with distinction such widely disparate monarchs as Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I, and was one of the first composers contributing to the musical settings of the new English-language prayer book. Tallis' music was part of the reform of liturgical music in which clarity of the text was paramount. Compositionally he is a pivotal figure, abandoning older medieval techniques of composition for flexible imitation and word-painting – in effect, accelerating the pace and appearance of melodic/rhythmic changes, while making them seem naturalistic, not forced. His 40-voice motet, *Spem in alium*, is a technical and artistic tour de force (eight 5-voice choirs!) much celebrated but never equaled; the precise impetus and function of the piece remains obscure to this day. His works appeared often in anthologies of his day and later, and two of his hymn tunes appear still in modern hymnals. He died wellrespected and honored; a couplet from his epitaph reads: "As he did live, so also did he die, in mild and quiet Sort (O! happy Man)"

Tallis, in concert with many Roman Catholic composers (Palestrina, Victoria, di Lasso, and others) composed two sets of motets on the biblical texts from Lamentations – assigned by both the Roman Catholic and the reformed English (Anglican) Church to the service of Matins on Maundy (Holy) Thursday. It is unclear whether either of the sets was meant to be used liturgically or for a general service. Although the texts are in Latin, the settings were made in the early years of Elizabeth's reign, probably after 1559, when the English-language prayer book received a Latin language setting. Elizabeth herself preferred the Latin.

Textually, the Lamentations are attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, who bewails the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587 B.C.E. Formally, each “chapter” is in the form of a Hebrew acrostic, so that Chapter 1 (which comprises Tallis’ two settings), begins each “verse” with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order: hence, the first set of Lamentations uses the first two verses of chapter one, beginning, respectively, “aleph,” “beth.” The second set continues with the next three verses, beginning, respectively, with “gimel,” “daleth,” he[th].” What is striking is that Tallis as well as his contemporaries set even the Hebrew letters to music – beautiful music - settings usually far more elaborate than the declamatory style of the verses. The biblical verses are preceded and followed by formulaic texts. Tallis’ *Lamentations* have been touted as two of the finest large-scale settings of the mid-sixteenth century. Originally for men and boys, it has been transposed higher to admit women’s voices. In sum, although expressing sadness and despair, the music insists that there is redemption through suffering, as the entire set ends on a major chord – darkness turns to light.

After an introduction of the text, set in five-part imitation (“De lamentatione Ieremiae”), a more flowing section begins, also in imitation, on the word “Ghimel.” (1:3). The biblical text follows (“Migravit Iuda”) in yet another (close) imitative opening, continuing with successive imitations introducing each phrase. “Daleth,” begins another set of imitative phrases –for only a small number of measures, acting as a short interlude. Then, “Omnes persecutores” begins a new, syllabic section, continuing with new motivic imitations at “Lugent eo,” “Omnes portae,” “virgines eius,” – building to a thick-textured climax. To contemporary ears, listening harmonically, it seems like a series of cadences (musical closes) without end. It would not have sounded so to Tallis and his contemporaries who would have heard more the movement of individual lines than the chordal/harmonic implications.

“He” introduces a short dance-like imitative interlude followed by “Facti sunt hostes” as a new theme introduced to be imitated by the other voices. This is followed by other imitative words and musical themes: “Quia Dominus,” “iniquitatum eius,” A homophonic section follows “parvuli eius” (all voices singing the same syllable at the same time), followed by a change of meter (3/4 time) on the words “Ierusalem,” sung antiphonally (in opposition) by different choir voices, continuing through “ad Dominum,” and shortening the space between imitations on the words “convertere ad Dominum,” thereby increasing the density and intensity of the sound. These last words also serve as a kind of tail-ending, bringing melodic, rhythmic and harmonic movement to a close. The total effect to modern ears is that of a “shoving off,” gaining some momentum, and coasting to a close. To Tallis’ contemporaries, it was the epitome of musical expressiveness and artistic ingenuity.

De lamentatione Ieremiae prophetae:

Ghimel.

Migravit Iuda propter afflictionem ac multitudinem servitutis, habitavit inter gentes, nec invenit requiem.

Daleth.

Omnes persecutores eius apprehenderunt eam inter angustias. [Viae Sion] Lugent, eo quod non sint qui veniant ad solemnitatem. Omnes portae eius destructae. Sacerdotes eius gementes, virgines eius squalidae, et ipsa oppressa amaritudine.

He.

Facti sunt hostes eius in capite, inimici illius locupletati sunt: quia Dominus locutus est super eam propter multitudinem iniquitatem eius: parvuli eius ducti sunt captivi ante faciem tribulantis.

Ierusalem, Ierusalem, convertere ad Dominum Deum tuum.

From the lamentation of Jeremiah the prophet:

Gimmel

After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place.

Daled.

All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress. The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts. All her gateways are desolate, her priests groan, her maidens grieve, and she is in bitter anguish.

Heth.

Her foes have become her masters; her enemies are at ease. The Lord has brought her grief because of her many sins. Her children have gone into exile, captive before the foe.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return unto the Lord thy God.

Five Negro Spirituals from *A Child of Our Time*

Michael Tippett (1905-1998)

Sir Michael Tippett, English composer, conductor, essayist, and radio commentator, whose works received increasing admiration and performance during his lifetime by major performing groups and conductors, has been undeservedly neglected in the 21st century – a century that he had hoped to see ushered in. Truly an original creative mind, Tippett determined to become a composer in his teens and spent many years seeking training and shaping his craft through the act of leading performances of working class musical groups. He selected repertoire from older (pre-17th century) and contemporary English (and other) composers and additional works that he himself wished to study in depth. Although his initial compositional influences owe much to Sibelius and 20th -century neo-classicism, as well as jazz and blues, his musical voice is distinctly his own.

It is impossible to separate Tippett the composer from Tippett the political socialist, pacifist, Jungian reader, and philosopher. Of paramount importance is Tippett's conviction of a deeply spiritual dimension in each and all of humanity: a life that encompasses both the "light" (that which results in compassion, kindness, generosity) and "dark" (that which is responsible for disease, war, revolution, etc.) sides, each of which we have the task and spiritual journey of recognizing and knowing. He is quoted as saying, "I believe in the reality of the spiritual world experienced by some intuitive, introspective apprehension of a kind which, in the past, was formulated generally by dogmatic, revelatory, received religions." That said, Tippett did not consider himself a Christian, but resonated with the themes of Christian literature (notably *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan), and with biblical themes and verses depicting the oppression of the Jews, from which he drew analogies with the oppressed and persecuted of his time. His horror of warfare and all that it encompassed, particularly in its deformation of the human character, resulted in his serving a short prison term for refusing even noncombatant service in the early years of World War II.

On the day of the outbreak of war between Great Britain and Germany (September 3, 1939), Tippett began work on his oratorio, *A Child of Our Time*, intended as a modern parable in which the “child” is led on a journey from naiveté to confront his own dark side and his solidarity with others who seek to destroy as well as save. The basic impulse for the work (and for its title) was a story, *Ein Kind unserer Zeit* (1938), by a young German writer, Odoen von Horvath (1907-38). The real-life story told of a young Jew of Polish origin, Herschel Grynszpan, who assassinated a German diplomat in Paris in an act of despair and protest against the treatment of his parents and some fifty thousand Jews deported back to Poland. The Nazis’ answer was the infamous pogrom, *Kristallnacht*. Tippett’s horrified response gave birth to the work that was to establish his reputation as a significant twentieth-century composer. For the libretto, Tippett first wrote an outline and submitted it to T.S. Eliot, who urged him to complete it himself.

The work is shaped by the tri-partite *Messiah* of Handel, and by the function of the choir and the chorales of Bach’s *Passions*. Tippett did not wish to use church hymns because of what he considered too narrow a collective voice of the faithful. It was a radio broadcast of the African-American spiritual “Steal Away,” with its dynamic phrase, “the trumpet sounds within a my soul” that gave the clue. Tippett later wrote, “I was blessed with an immediate intuition: that I was being moved by this phrase in some way beyond what the musical phrase in itself warranted. I realized that [others would be so moved as well.]” Tippett had found what he sought to function as the world-voice of “everyman.” He chose five spirituals from the collection, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, edited by James Weldon Johnson (New York, 1925; London, 1926), as he said, “for their tunes and words, which provided the exact ‘congregational’ metaphor for five calculated situations in my scheme.”

The settings of the spirituals required study and thought. Tippett recalled the powerful use of the spirituals, particularly “Go Down, Moses,” in the film *Green Pastures*, and listened to recordings of the Hall Johnson Choir (featured in the film) and to the Mitchell Christian Singers. In seeking to retain the immediacy of impact yet signify a broader “congregation” of humanity, Tippett eliminated verbal dialect and used only simple open triad harmonies with an added seventh. His own rhythmic contrapuntal style (an amazingly fresh amalgam of older cathedral-style imitative motets and jazz) contributes to a sense of “lift” and “float” in the resultant sound. Soloists soar out of, over, and back into the chorus texture, and the text, like a banner hanging in the wind, impresses itself on the listeners, who find themselves swept up in and surrounded by the restless, flowing, iridescent sound – a congregation for our time.

1. Steal away.

Beginning on an open octave, this spiritual is given a familiar harmonization and setting. Excitement builds on the word “trumpet” with its imitative fanfare sounds. The soprano soloist plays the role of a young mother comforting her children, yet expressing her doubts and fears.

2. Nobody knows

This is not the tune we are most accustomed to for this set of words, and therefore the first measures may be lost as the listener tries in vain to find something familiar. The upward running motif followed by strong syncopations needs appreciation for its own sake. Here the imitative rhythms, the syncopated accents, the “call and response,” the sudden unisons – all done at a rapid pace and in a short period of time, all beg for a second hearing. “Wait! I didn’t quite get that...”

3. Go Down, Moses

Ringing unison and octave sonorities announce, “A spiritual of anger.” (Tippett) This occurs in the oratorio at the apex of horror, *Kristallnacht*, and all that it stood for. Here Tippett’s contrapuntal

rhythms and whispered offbeats prevent a sense of groundedness except for the words “let my people go” – ending firmly and solidly on an open octave.

4. By and By

This spiritual will probably be unfamiliar to modern audiences. As a piece of contrapuntal writing in which the voices mirror each other, juxtaposing rhythms, the words “lay down my heavy load,” come into full relief. The action rapidly leaps from one part of the choir to another and then to the soloist – still the insistence, “Lay down my heavy load” – again on an open octave - quietly.

5. Deep River

Again a familiar melody. Tippett, like many other Englishmen of his time, surely heard it sung by the African-American basso, Paul Robeson. It functions as a response to the thought, “I would know my dark side and my light, so shall I at last be whole.” It is also the evocation of the mythic river Jordan, across which searching souls seek to pass, and when successful “all the trumpets rang out on the other side.” (Pilgrim’s Progress) Don’t miss the upward-soaring motif, “Oh chillun!” and the quickly-imitative “walk into heaven,” as well as the sighing pleas, “Lord, Lord.”