



Lancaster Singers

We are back!

Saturday 20th November 2021

Gloria

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

Vivaldi wrote at least three settings of this 4th Century hymn. This version, by far the most famous, was written in 1715 for the choir of the Ospedale della Pietà, an "orphanage" for girls which was in all likelihood populated by the illegitimate daughters of Venetian noblemen and their mistresses. Despite this slightly insalubrious start to its life, the work is justly popular for the glorious variety of its twelve sections, considered a highpoint of Vivaldi's choral output.

The opening "Gloria" opens with the insistent rhythms that characterise so much of Vivaldi's work, with a stunning "wall of sound" from the choir. The second section, "Et in terra pax hominibus", could not provide a greater contrast, with long chromatic lines which create and resolve dissonance with great harmonic invention. Later sections introduce parts for soloists, notably the soprano duet of "Laudamus Te" and the poignant alto solo "Qui sedes ad dexteram", sung by members of the choir. The penultimate section recapitulates the theme of the opening "Gloria", before the work concludes with an exultant "Cum sancto spiritu."

Three nocturnes

Morten Lauridsen (1943-)

The American composer Morten Lauridsen here sets three poems - in three different languages - on the theme of "Night." The third nocturne is often performed as a standalone work, but the nocturnes also work as a complete cycle, united by common musical ideas as well as the lyrical theme.

"Sa nuit d'ete" (Its summer night) sets a poem in French by the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. After a quiet initial section in close "cluster" harmony, the work opens out in rapturous wonder, climaxing in a complex 8-part canon.

"Soneto de la noche" (Sonnet of the night) sets Lauridsen's favourite love poem, by the Chilean Pablo Neruda. The quiet and contemplative beginning is reminiscent of a Chilean folk song, as Lauridsen plays with the length of each phrase amid subtle close harmony. A quickening of the pace and a sudden change of key leads to a joyous and passionate central section, before a gradual calming of the mood and a whisper-quiet ending.

"Sure on this shining night" sets a poem by American James Agee. An ecstatic evocation of an ideal Summer night in which "all is healed, all is health", the lyrical melodies and mellow harmonies serve the poem's sense (in Lauridsen's words) of "the wondrous awe that one has being within nature."

Coronation Mass

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

This Mass in C was commissioned by the Archbishop of Salzburg, and first performed at the Easter Day service in Salzburg Cathedral on 4th April 1779, acquiring its nickname through its use at the coronation of King Francis I of Austria in 1792 (and possibly that of King Leopold II in Prague in 1791). Although a major work originally scored for full orchestra, it is relatively short due to the archbishop's preference for shorter services, as Mozart explained in a letter of 1776:

"Our church music is very different from that of Italy, since a Mass with the whole Kyrie, the Gloria, the Credo, the Epistle sonata, the Offertory or motet, the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei must not last longer than three quarters of an hour. This applies even to the most Solemn Mass spoken by the Archbishop himself. Special study is required for this kind of composition, particularly as the Mass must have a full contingent of instruments—trumpets, drums and so forth."

The use of dotted rhythms and terraced dynamics (abrupt shifts in volume) lend the music a joyful and dance-like quality, fitting for both its original festive setting and for the celebration of a coronation. The work has a pleasing interplay between choir and soloists (which in this performance will be provided by members of the choir). This can be most notably heard during the Agnus Dei, when after the serene beauty of a sublime soprano solo, the choir's spirited double-time "Dona nobis pacem" brings the work to a jubilant close.

I was glad

Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848-1918)

This familiar setting of Psalm 122 was written for the coronation of Edward VII in 1902, and has been used at every British coronation since, as well as at the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton. The original Psalm is both an expression of joyful thanksgiving to the Lord for the security of Jerusalem under King David, and a prayer for its ongoing peace and safety. In Parry's setting, this is transformed into a classic piece of English pomp and circumstance, a suitably majestic anthem for the entrance of the new monarch to Westminster Abbey.

On its very first performance in 1902, the signal for the King's arrival was given too early, meaning that the anthem had finished before the procession began. The day was saved by some quick-thinking improvisation from the organist Walter Alcock before the anthem was sung again. No such hitches are expected from the Lancaster Singers. The choir will omit the "Vivat" section of the piece, as they have no current plans to crown a monarch during this evening's concert.

Listen out for the antiphonal singing between two choirs in the central "Jerusalem is builded" section, as well as the lovely prayer for peace, which starts gently before bringing the work (and our concert) to its triumphant conclusion.