

Florilegium Chamber Choir

November 2012

Salamone Rossi (1570-c1630) – *Haleluya / Psalm 146* (1623)
Kurt Weill (1900-1950) – *Kiddush* (1946)
Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) – *Chichester Psalms* (1965)
Morten Lauridsen (b.1943) – *O Magnum Mysterium* (1994)
Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) – *Symphony of Psalms* (1930)

Much has been said about the works at hand today—Stravinsky’s throaty wind and percussion-heavy orchestra lacking a violin section; Bernstein’s use of boy alto or countertenor and his imaginative recycling of material originally conceived for other pieces (including *West Side Story*). So I won’t bother going into any of that here. Instead, I would rather discuss David.

Yes, that David: musician, poet, and second king of the Kingdom of Israel, who reigned around 1000 BC. Of the 150 Psalms shared by the three Abrahamic faiths, 73 of these sacred song-poems carry David’s name, presumably having been authored by him, for him, or about him.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would estimate that around 75 percent of choral music in the Western tradition is based on sacred texts. Some theories on the origins of human language speculate that in the beginning there was no difference between word and melody, that all language was sung language, and that via the evolution of the last million years (or so) language has evolved along two paths, one path with an inclination toward ever clearer and more specific communication of ideas and information, and one path that has continued to seek depth of expression.

We can certainly track progress along the former path: compare the arcane grammatical practices of the Germanic language family (from which also stems English) with the blistering efficiency of PHP, binary, or those dubiously *Matrix*-esque QR codes popping up everywhere. The evolution of the expressive path, however, looks to me less like progress than it does like the unpredictable spasms of a bunch of toddlers and puppies playing together in a giant sandbox—directionless, distracted, inexplicable, but full of verve, gusto, and desperate urgency to reflect something of their experience of living in the world.

It is because of this constant change yet lack of progress in the evolution of our ability to express our human experience, I think, that 3,000-year-old poems like David’s still speak to us. I would go so far as to say that the very idea of a sacred text is intimately linked to lingering remnants deep within our DNA that recall the time when all language was sung. Despite the technological advances that have allowed us to amplify our voices (in decibels, in nearly-infinite streams of simultaneous replications), our voices are still just our weak, ephemeral voices – we remain burdened with the very same hyoid bone connecting our tongue and our larynx, the very same hypoglossal canal, and the very same outer and inner ear structure as our Neanderthal predecessors driving our most vital means of communication.

But “old” does not necessarily equate to “sacred.” The poetry of the Psalms reflects experiences, hopes, and yearnings that are familiar to all of us, and it is this that has moved singers and composers over millennia to give new voice to these old words. Compare the words of the Psalms to the text of *The Iliad*, words describing a specific people in a specific time and place. How many great musical settings have been inspired by *The Iliad*? *The Aeneid*? Or even *Paradise Lost*, a poem on a sacred subject but not of “sacred words?”

This may also begin to explain why such a vast body of choral music has been preserved, much larger than that of instrumental music. The association of the voice with the sacred and of instruments with the profane extends deep into history. Instruments were banned in both early Jewish and Christian practice, being thought of as pagan or unduly rousing, and even Plato set out to radically limit instruments in his ideal Republic, allowing only the harp in the city and “some kind of pipe” for shepherds in the country.

There is no way for us to know what the melodies and singing practices of the Psalms sounded like in the time of David. The closest we can come is via the work of Pope Gregory, who began the process of codifying and notating the chants used in Christian worship in the late seventh century. Included in these records are, of course, the Psalms. But Gregory, perhaps the medieval church’s finest scholar and most efficient executive director, commissioned the 2,000-page lexicon of eponymous chants not because he was a stand-out musician, but rather because of his desire to put the house in order. Which is to say that Gregory was not making this stuff up himself; he inherited the melodies and singing practices from...well...we’re not entirely sure, but it is highly likely that the chant practices he had set to parchment found their origins in the ancient Jewish tradition of Psalm recitation.

I bring all this up because I am struck by the profound range of expression in the six movements of the Bernstein and Stravinsky pieces, and how personal and idiosyncratic this music can be without disrupting 3,000 years of Psalm singing tradition. I am struck by how deftly these two composers manipulate our voices in their attempt to express the sacred idea, as though each composer imagined an entirely new world with entirely different players, adhering to different laws, and sustaining different hopes in which each Psalm would live. For me, it is as though in each movement an entirely different people is reciting each Psalm as they travel along an entirely different journey, and yet they are all our people, it is always our journey, and they are always our voices singing in our language.

After I settled on these two towering Psalm-based pieces as the core of this concert (perhaps two of the greatest symphonic choral works of the 20th century), I wanted to acknowledge another wonderful moment in the history of Psalm singing, brought to us by Monteverdi’s compatriot at the court of Mantua, Salamone Rossi. Rossi’s settings of Hebrew liturgical texts, published in 1623, were the first settings of Hebrew sacred texts in a polyphonic choral style since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. His simple Baroque motets gloriously defied tradition — and secured his place in history. Weill’s and Lauridsen’s contributions, smaller, more personal pieces, a

prayer for sanctification in Hebrew and a responsorial chant in Latin, can be taken as greetings from either side of the family tree.

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