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DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC CONCERT SERIES

MXX060401 P

SENIOR RECITAL

Megan Smith, soprano

Assisted by

Emily Riggs, soprano
Charles Hulin IV, piano

APRIL 1, 2006, 3:00 PM
PERKINSON RECITAL HALL

PROGRAM NOTES

Messiah

Perhaps the most famous choral work in classical repertoire, Handel's *Messiah* continues to stir audiences today with the same inspirational fervor experienced at the premiere performance in Dublin, 1742. Interestingly, one of the most celebrated masterpieces in choral literature only took three weeks to compose. The incredible brevity of Handel's writing period may indicate a tinge of divine inspiration. Handel himself reportedly wept in mid-dictation of the Hallelujah chorus, citing "I did think I saw all Heaven before me and the great God Himself... I think God has visited me." Indeed, the triumphant choruses intertwined with memorable orchestral and vocal melodies have spanned the test of time, tradition and musical style, heavily influencing other notable composers such as Mozart and Beethoven.

Both alto arias *But who may abide* and *He shall feed his flock* represent two distinctly different compositional styles. The first bisects the biblical text from Malachi 3:2 ("But who may abide the day of His coming? And who shall stand when He appeareth? For He is like a refiner's fire") into two musical sections; the legato "a" section and the melismatic "b" section, representing the wrath of God's refining fire. This musical juxtaposition between tempo, melodic phrasing and scripture creates dramatic text painting between Christ's avowed triumphant return and his pending judgment later prophesized in the book of Revelation.

In contrast, the second recitative and aria taken from Isaiah chapters 35 and 40 de-emphasizes Christ's sovereignty as "eternal judge" and highlights the compassionate figure championing mercy and provision. As a shepherd tends his flock, so does Christ protect, heal, uplift and satisfy all who trust in Him. Musically, the rich descending melodic line perhaps represents Christ's descent from heaven to earth, being "made man" to serve mankind:

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. (*Isaiah 35:5,6*)

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (*Isaiah 40:11*)

Israel in Egypt

Composed three years prior to *Messiah*, *Israel in Egypt* depicts the Israelite's deliverance from Pharaoh's oppression as recorded in the book of Exodus. This particular work clearly exemplifies Handel's tendency to "borrow" pre-existing musical material from his other compositions. Handel recycled the oratorio's opening chorus from the *Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline*, composed in 1737. Though this particular quotation is markedly direct, the entire piece may have been stitched together using several random compositions. One author concludes that "The list of sources from which Handel drew his ideas in this work includes everything from Lutheran chorale tunes to keyboard fugues from his student notebook to chamber and choral works he encountered during his Italian sojourn in the years just before he arrived in London. Throughout the oratorio, however, he weaves these borrowed threads into a tapestry of sound that can be mistaken for the music of no other composer."¹

The soprano duet, *The Lord is My Strength*, appears in Part II of the oratorio after Pharaoh's army perishes in the Red Sea. Moses and the Israelites sing praises to God, their rock and salvation for delivering them out of Egypt's bondage.

Chansons de Bilitis

Conceived in 1894 by Debussy's close friend, poet Pierre Louys, the *Chansons de Bilitis* contain a myriad of poetry concerning the life and loves of Bilitis, a young girl struggling with issues of gender and sexuality. After her first passionate sexual encounter with Lykas, a goatherd (the primary action in *La Flûte de Pan*), Bilitis becomes pregnant and eventually abandons her child. Her lascivious lifestyle, wavering sexual affiliation and reckless emotional abandon provided Debussy with a host of artistic inspiration for his musical settings of Louys' poems, *La Flûte de Pan*, *La Chevelure*, *Le Tomb des Naiades*, completed in 1897.

Although Bilitis's character never existed, Louys originally claimed to have found and translated her tale from ancient Greek mythology. Perhaps an effort to enhance the exotic mystery surrounding Bilitis's

alleged ancient derivation, author D'Elbert Keenan explains that "each song consists of four prose stanzas, suggesting the probable length of a prose version of a Sapphic or Alcaic stanza—a correspondence which unquestionably aided in winning credence for the hoax."² Both Louys and Debussy expressed fascination and affinity for Greek sensuality. The ancient eroticism associated with Greek mythology can also be seen in many of Debussy's instrumental works such as *Syrinx* (1913) and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894),³ all based on the mythological character, Pan. According to legend, "Syrinx was a nymph pursued by Pan who, to escape, was changed by Diana into a reed from which Pan made a flute...the narrative of Louys' text (*La flûte de Pan*) clearly reflects the erotic implications of the myth, in which Pan literally plays upon Syrinx, a highly suggestive instrument for the purpose to transform sexual frustration into art. The prevalence of Greek myth, intense sexual innuendo and the scandalous Bilitis ruse heavily influenced Debussy's musical interpretation of Louys' poetry.

Chansons de Bilitis hallmarks many of Debussy's compositional characteristics, including lush melodic contour and ambiguous key relationships. The non-traditional harmonies appear "diluted" from traditional German Romanticism—Debussy does not want to project certain tonal expectations via the traditional approach and resolution of tonic/dominant cadences. Instead, Debussy constructs harmony based on its function to the overall melodic line. In addition, the guiding harmonic principle in this cycle depends on interchanging third relationships and scalar motions based on *modality* rather than fixed *key* signature. In lieu of grandiose musical gestures, Debussy uses close intervallic relationships, the tension created by ambiguous non-functional harmonies through modality, dissonance and lack of cadential resolution and polyrhythmic duple/triple patterns that give the piece excitement and restless energy.

¹ Risinger, Mark. *Israel in Egypt. The Providence Singers Archive*. 1996. On-line. Available: <http://www.providencesingers.org/Concerts/Mar03Concert.html>.

² D' Elbert Keenan, "Pierre Louys," Dissertation, Ithaca: NY, 1927, p. 51.

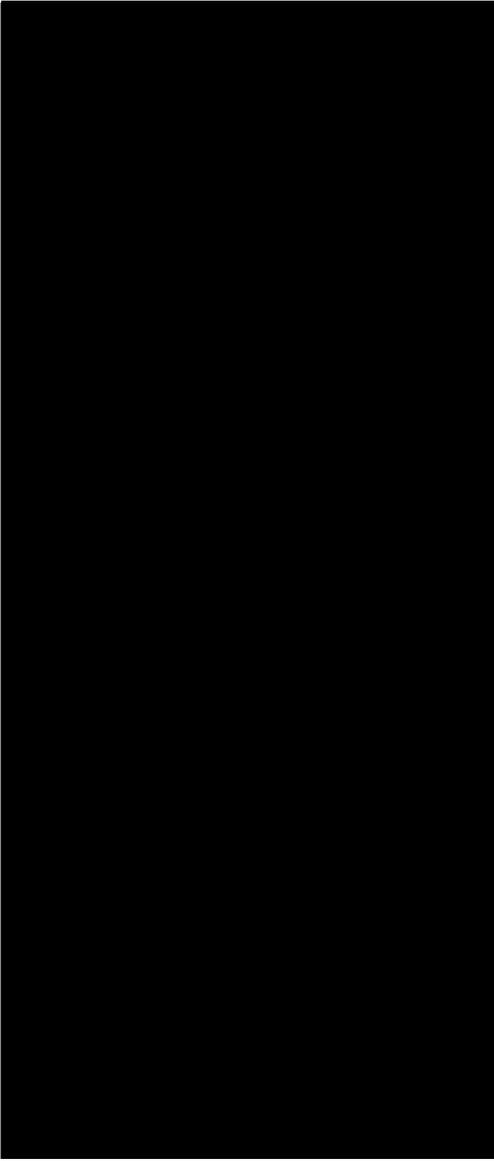
³ Encyclopedia Britannica On-line, *Claude Debussy*

Vier Duette, Op. 61

Perhaps one of the most beloved German Romantic composers, Johannes Brahms is commonly noted for his richly crafted tonal textures and simple yet elegant melodic lines. Highly influenced by Bach's structured form and the romantic tonality of Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn, Brahms once stated that "If we cannot compose as beautifully as Mozart and Haydn, let us at least try to compose as pure."¹

Though Brahms never married, his long-time friendship with Clara Schumann (the wife of Robert Schumann) certainly impacted his musical career. After Robert Schumann's death, Brahms continued to care for Clara and her children, often relying on Clara's musical expertise to critique his own work. Brahms' romantic sentiment toward Clara could not be denied; however, their relationship never progressed beyond platonic friendship. Brahms died in 1897 at the age of 64, only a few months after Clara's death. The lingering mystery of their love echoes in many of his musical works, especially the *lieder*.

The duet cycle in Opus 61 contains poetry expressing love's fickle nature among women. In the first song, *Die Boten der Liebe*, the lilting meter, pastoral imagery and restless melody suggests an air of springtime frolic, budding young love and endless possibility. The final declamation of "passion" sharply contrasts the second piece, *Klosterfräulein*, in which the characters' lament love's missed opportunity: "Spring passed by the bars and brought me no flowers!...Ah, how far above two birds fly in peace! Good luck little birds, you're flying to a better home." The singer appears "trapped" in an emotional (or physical) prison, lamenting that spring has passed the "bars" of her "cell" without a hint of verdant bounty. Perhaps the final stanza suggests that only a spiritual ascension into the heavens will provide true contentment. Finally, the singers assume a more theatrical role, portraying two identical sisters joined at the hip. In love, however, three is a crowd! The two beauties soon discover their affection for the same fellow. Thankfully, the song ends before the quarrel begins!



Ned Rorem

Ned Rorem has been acclaimed as one of the most prolific art song composers in the 20th century. Born in Chicago, 1923, Rorem received training at Northwestern University, the Curtis Institute, Juilliard, and the École Normale de Musique in Paris, studying with notable figures such as Virgil Thompson and Arthur Honegger. Known as both a composer and writer, Rorem published several memoirs concerning his

life, loves and music, *The Paris Diaries* (1966), *The New York Diary* (1967), *The Final Diary* (1974), and *The Nantucket Diary* (1987) among them.

Most noted for his passion for art song poetry, Rorem has composed over 400 songs for solo voice and piano or instrumental ensemble to date: "It was not the human voice that originally drew him to song, but 'poetry as expressed through the voice.' His song writing is graced by his skills at prosody (he sets words with naturalness and clarity, without compromising the range and scope of vocal lines), and by his choice of texts. In his songs he has aspired, in the words of Thomson, to be 'an American Poulenc,' communicating restraint, wit, elegance and direct yet unsentimental expressivity."²

The first six songs on today's program reflect only a fraction of Rorem's creative genius. Composed in the mid to late 1950s, these texts reflect the lush poetry of Whitman, Roethke and Yeats. Though not part of a song cycle, these particular selections reflect the many stages of love's emotional progression and the reflexivity of the speaker's internal self. *O you whom I often and silently come* exudes playful infatuation and longing for requited affection: "Little you know the subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me." The speaker then turns inward for *That shadow, my likeness, Sometimes with one I love, Memory* and *Look down, fair moon*, expressing a range of sentiment including self-efficacy, fear, creativity, wonder, and nostalgia. Finally, the singer turns back to the listener, a now older, wiser, veteran of love's loss and luxury, advising, "*Do not love too long, or you will grow out of fashion like an old song.*"

Finally, the set ends with Rorem's adaptation of Stephen Foster's classic, *I Dream of Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair*. Composed in 1982 during his stay in Nantucket, Rorem describes the piece as his "exceedingly personal gloss on Stephen Foster's contagious tune."

Notes by M. Smith

¹ A. Krantz, Classical Music Archives On-line. 2004.

² Tommasini, Anthony. *Ned Rorem*. Grove Music Online. 2006.