

THE JOURNAL

of the ASSOCIATION OF ANGLICAN MUSICIANS



VOLUME 26, NUMBER 9 † NOVEMBER 2017

AAM: SERVING THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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THE CHORAL MUSIC AND COMPOSITIONAL STYLE OF MCNEIL ROBINSON

JASON A. WRIGHT



McNeil Robinson

I was first introduced to the choral music of McNeil Robinson in November of 2009. I happened to be visiting my friend and colleague John Bradford Bohl, who served as the Assistant Director of Music and Organist at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C. That parish's choir, under the direction of Robert McCormick, was preparing to record the upcoming compact disc We Sing of God (2010), which featured Robinson's Missa Brevis (1996). I immediately became captivated by his style. Flash forward to 2015: I began to ponder the topic for my dissertation and I kept returning to Robinson's choral works. Three former students of Robinson, Anthony Thurman, Kyle Babin, and Andrew Yeargin, had written on different aspects of Robinson's career and music; however, there wasn't

an exhaustive document on his choral oeuvre for both the Christian and Jewish traditions. After conversing with several of Robinson's former students, his wife Cristina, and my committee at USC, it was clear this was my topic. The contents of this article are excerpts from my dissertation that give a glimpse into his biography, influences, compositional process, and choral music. To read the complete document, I invite you to visit www.jallenwright.com > About > Articles and Publications.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

McNeil Robinson II (1943-2015), internationally renowned organist and composer, was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and educated at Birmingham Southern College, Mannes College of Music, and the Juilliard School. In New York City, Robinson served at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, the Church of the Holy Family (United Nations), Park Avenue Christian Church, and Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, as well as at Park Avenue Synagogue. Robinson also taught at Manhattan School of Music and served as Chairman of its Organ Department.

STYLE AND GENRES

Known for writing in a variety of styles and genres, Robinson's works ranged from conservative to progressive, simple to difficult, tonal to serial, music for the liturgy to music for the concert stage. He also wrote music for a film and a play, and he

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The Journal of the Association of Anglican Musicians is published monthly, except for May/June and July/August, for members of the Association. Complimentary copies are also sent to bishops, deans, and seminaries of The Episcopal Church. Subscriptions are available to libraries and publishers.

Advertising space is available at the following rates: \$225 for full page; \$115 for half page; \$80 for quarter page; \$50 for eighth page. For information, contact

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From the President



Dear Friends,

For the past few weeks, I've found myself reflecting on a recent conversation I had concerning the music program at my parish. It started out of the blue, just after Mass, right at that vulnerable point when I'm pretty spacey and empty. Hashtag #JustGivenYourAll springs to mind. It

was the type of conversation I promised myself I'd really try and avoid. You know the sort of thing...buttons pressed, my responses peppered with defensive comments, the whole thing tinged with a sense of disbelief...annoyance, even. It's the sort of conversation I have had in the past. Somewhat naively, I imagined I had moved on to more healthy communication patterns. This time I just wasn't ready. It caught me unawares. And what usually happens under such circumstances kicked in. My emotions got the better of me and I became defensive. Will I never learn?

What was it exactly that managed to press my buttons so fully? I was asked whether I thought we could afford the current music program, and how its offerings seemed more like a concert than worship. How did I respond? Hackles raised, I waded right in—in a somewhat patronizing fashion of course. I outlined the three archetypes for music in worship: the two extremes (explained, of course, in tones of disapproval): congregation sings everything versus choir sings almost everything, and then what we do (cue self-righteous voice and facial expression)! How's that for tooting your own horn and making the listener feel small? So much for pastoral care! I'm reliving the feeling of the smugness of my response again now as I write! How very embarrassing.

Afterwards I was so annoyed with myself. Why had I allowed myself to be triggered in this way? This was a behavior pattern I thought I was over! I pride myself on keeping my buttons pretty well hidden. You know...stoic Brit and all that (with a little West coast therapy thrown in). Okay, I admit it. My mother can still press them, but hardly anyone else can. Hadn't I matured? Wasn't I beyond all this? After all, I was no longer the seventeen-year-old who nearly got fired for disobeying my first vicar's instructions; no longer the thirty-four-year-old who refused to stop playing mid-hymn in school chapel although the rector had wandered over and told me I was playing the wrong tune; no longer even the fifty-one year-old who quit the job he loved (and for which he was hired back two-and-a-half years later) because his relationship with his boss had broken down. No. Those weren't me anymore. I'd learned from such experiences, hadn't I? Apparently not well enough.

How could I have done this better? More healthily? Even this question is premature. *When* should I have responded is probably a more important question. And the answer is clearly not when I did—feeling empty, vulnerable, and defensive. Some of the language I learned in therapy would have been really helpful here. “Thank you for sharing” or “I

really appreciate your feedback” both come to mind. They acknowledge being heard, while disarming the comment and deferring an immediate response. I could then have suggested getting together sometime soon for a coffee, buying myself time to regroup and regain that sense of composure of which I'm usually so proud.

What have I taken away from this experience? A great deal actually: that I need to continue to work on mechanisms to avoid being triggered; that I need to respond more with my head than my heart; that I can't rest on my laurels and assume that everyone understands and is happy with a program even if it seems that way. However successful it is, it is always in need of nurturing.

Was I right? Well, yes, factually. There are parishes where the whole body of Christ sings pretty much everything. There are also parishes where the choir sings pretty much everything, too. And then there are the majority of parishes in between, on their own subtle Kinsey scale of participation levels, my own included, striving to maintain that delicate balance between building the Body of Christ through active participation in communal singing and nurturing the soul through reflective listening.

So what advice would I proffer? Well, I never thought I'd say this but here goes: “Do as I say, not as I did!” Do take a deep breath. Do buy yourself time to make a reasoned and dispassionate response. Do listen without feeling threatened. Do speak from the head more than from the heart. Do let someone know they've been heard. Sometimes that's all they need. But whatever you do, please don't allow yourself to be triggered like I was! “Do as I say, not as I did!”

With every good wish for All Saints' tide!

Sincerely,

Paul Ellison

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ORGUES
LÉTOURNEAU

The Choral Music and Compositional Style of McNeil Robinson

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left behind an unfinished opera. While Robinson composed music for organ solo, organ and orchestra, solo voice with organ and orchestra accompaniment, the majority of his *oeuvre* is choral: he composed sixty choral works, including a wealth of service music for both the Christian and Jewish traditions. These compositions include anthems, settings of the Mass (including Missae breves), Evening Service settings (Magnificat and Nunc dimittis), hymns, psalm responsorials, and service music. Although he composed much of the choral music for use in his own parish and synagogue, other works were commissioned from houses of worship across the United States and abroad as well as for concert use.

COMPOSITION INFLUENCES

Robinson's composition teachers include Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987), Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), and Yehudi Wyner (b. 1929). Robinson said that his music does not sound like that of any one of his teachers.¹ In examining his works, one finds elements of the compositional style of each teacher. The compositions of Stravinsky, Messiaen, and Duruflé were important influences upon his work, as were the serial works of Webern.

Robinson was aware of Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music* (1973) and Charles Wuorinen's book *Simple Composition* (1979/1994), and he used them in his teaching. In an interview, Robinson's former student Andrew Yeargin stated,

Robinson regarded Wuorinen very highly. He used Wuorinen's text *Simple Composition* extensively with improvisation and composition students. He always took great care to introduce Wuorinen's sacred choral works in his Choral Repertoire classes [at Manhattan School of Music]. He had a lot of respect for and interest in Wuorinen's work.²

In 1947, Vincent Persichetti joined the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music, assuming chairmanship of the Composition Department in 1963. It was at Juilliard that Robinson studied with Persichetti in the years 1965-1970.

Before developing his distinct voice in the 1950s, Persichetti was influenced by Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, and Copland. He used polytonality and pandiatonicism in his writing, and his music could be marked by sharp rhythmic interjections. His embrace of diverse strands of musical thought makes characterizing his body of work difficult. Persichetti is credited with having produced a distinctive blend of Classical, Romantic, and Modernist elements. Robinson's music is greatly influenced by Persichetti in harmony, rhythm, and style.

Virgil Thomson's musical style was marked by sharp wit and overt playfulness. He composed in almost every genre of music, producing a highly original body of work rooted in American speech rhythms and "hymn-book" harmony. Though mostly diatonic, some of his work was densely chromatic and even serial in organization. In an interview with Andrew Adams, Robinson noted his study of counterpoint with Thomson.³ Thomson's influence can be seen in Robinson's use of counterpoint and chromaticism.

Yehudi Wyner often seeks in his music to reconcile disparate elements of past and present. Classical, chromatic, and serial elements coexist together with noticeable ingredients of popular, melodic, and gestural inflections from his own Jewish heritage. The result is an eclectic but personal style, poetic and lyrical. Wyner's influence is seen in Robinson's Phase IV pieces that combine various style elements (see below).

Stravinsky, Messiaen, Duruflé, and Webern further influenced Robinson's compositional style. Stravinsky was known for his neoclassical style (1920-1954) and his experimentation with serialism (1954-1968). In an interview with Vocal Arts Network, Robinson said that when he composed the *Messe Solennelle*, he had Stravinsky in his head at all times. Robinson noted that he could imitate Messiaen well, but he tried not to do so. Robinson, like Messiaen, was interested in combining neoclassical and Romantic styles, with allusions to serialism. Duruflé influenced Robinson's use of harmony. Although the subject of this article is Robinson's choral music, it is worth noting that Webern's influence is evident in Robinson's organ composition.

Andrew Yeargin draws additional parallels between Robinson's music and that of both Hindemith and Poulenc. Yeargin compares Hindemith's counterpoint with the textures used in Robinson's *Spice She Brought and Sweet Perfume* (1981). Similarly, he compares Robinson's use of harmony, with increasing chromaticism in *Missa in Die Tribulationis* (1980), to that of Poulenc, in whose works chromaticism may emerge from a tonal landscape and then lessen as the piece closes.

COMMISSIONS

McNeil Robinson wrote most of his choral works for the churches and the synagogue in which he served as Director of Music and Organist; there were, moreover, several commissions from other houses of worship across the United States, mainly on the east coast.

Robinson received choral commissions over his lifetime from academic institutions, professional choral ensembles, and individuals for special events including La Salle Military Academy (*Messe Militaire/Festival Choral Eucharist*, 1983),



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The Hackley School (*Salutation, Dance and Nocturne*, 1968), the American Guild of Organists National Convention (1988) (*Missa Brevis*, 1996), the one-hundredth Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Michael Ramsey, (*Ecce Sacerdos*, 1967), the Haas Family for CBS' Christmas Broadcast (*Hodie Christus Natus Est*, 1968), and Music Sacra (*Messe Solennelle*, 1987).

TEXT

In a 1985 interview with Louis Weingarden on Jewish music, Robinson said, "You can't write a text if you aren't absorbed in it!"⁴ Robinson felt strongly that in order to set a text to music properly, one had to digest its meaning. The texts of his choral music, psalm settings, and hymns come from the Old and New Testaments, the Psalms, and the Ordinaries and Propers of the Mass.

FORM

The majority of Robinson's choral compositions are through-composed. This method of composition allows for the text to be set in a continuous manner without repeating music. In other cases, he chooses to set the music in ABA form, especially for pieces that are sectional such as the Kyrie eleison and Agnus Dei sections of the Mass, or for those that have a repeating text.

CHORAL ENSEMBLE

Many of Robinson's choirs throughout his career were either professional or semi-professional. Robinson's compositions were written with these singers in mind. He was very demanding of sopranos: in much of his music sopranos must possess a virtuosic dexterity, and there are compositions that require the soprano to sing in a high tessitura. For soprano solo lines, the tessitura could even be higher; for example, in *Had I But Pinions* (1982), the soprano is asked to sing B5 and C6 *pianissimo* to imitate the flight into heaven. At times, he would apply the same high range to the first tenors, particularly in compositions for male voices only. In general, his alto and bass lines always lie within a standard range. The majority of Robinson's compositions are composed for SATB mixed chorus or TTBB men's chorus.

ACCOMPANIMENT

Robinson's choral works are either to be sung a cappella or with organ accompaniment. As an organist, Robinson himself played every piece that he composed. Christopher Creaghan, a former student and close friend of Robinson, remarks that the accompaniments to his choral works are generally difficult. However, if one analyzes the score and marks it accordingly, sharing the inner voices between the hands or moving a voice into the pedal, they are manageable.⁵ A few of his compositions, such as the *Missa Brevis* (1996), contain organ registrations; others do not.

The accompaniments and the choral parts are treated as equal forces. This is a common characteristic of English church music—the accompaniment and the choral parts are one voice, not two. Robinson, working in an Anglo-Catholic

parish, would have been keenly aware of this practice. The organ at St. Mary the Virgin was an Aeolian-Skinner (1942), whose sound was lush and rich, and extremely present in the room. According to Christopher Creaghan, it was this space and instrument that exerted the greatest influence upon Robinson's compositions.⁶ The American Classic Turner organ (1996) at the Church of the Holy Family today had not yet been installed during Robinson's tenure; rather, Robinson would have been familiar with the 1965 Delaware organ, a neo-Baroque instrument. Park Avenue Christian Church housed a neo-Baroque Holtkamp instrument, built in 1982; on more than one occasion, Robinson made tonal revisions to this organ to warm up the sound. The organ at Holy Trinity was built by Orgues Létourneau in 1997 and was tonally designed to excel in both French Symphonic and German Baroque organ literature. Park Avenue Synagogue had a large custom electronic Allen (of unknown installation date), which Robinson himself designed. This instrument replaced the Synagogue's former organ, a Casavant Frères instrument of 1926. The specifications of these organs are available at on the Web at www.nycago.org/organs/nyc/.

ACOUSTICAL ENVIRONMENTS

The acoustical environments in many of New York City's houses of worship are superb for both organ and choral performances. Robinson was fortunate to have worked in some of these settings. The three Christian churches where he was employed—St. Mary the Virgin, the Church of the Holy Family, and Holy Trinity—had above-average to extremely live acoustics, owing to their hard surfaces and high ceilings. Park Avenue Christian Church had drier acoustical properties because of the Guastavino tile installed in the ceiling; there, the organ was located behind a screen. In the Christian churches that Robinson served, both organ and choir were positioned at the back of the nave; this projected the sound down the central axis of the building.

When programming Robinson's works, Creaghan suggested that it is important to consider tempo, accents, and other musical features that are affected by acoustical treatments. These pieces, having been born in lively acoustics, would be performed with slight modifications in acoustically dryer spaces. Regardless of the room, it is important that the piece not be performed too slowly or with too much sentimentality. Rather than the overuse of rubato, a more metronomic approach with some flexibility and good phrase direction would be appropriate.

COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

In conversation with American organist Stephen Tharp at an American Guild of Organists Chapter event in New York City (September 8, 2014), Robinson explained his compositional process.⁷ Stravinsky's neoclassical period (1920-1954) had a great influence on Robinson's approach. Stravinsky said that in a piece everything must be indigenous to that piece, everything must fit into a box and the box must be small.⁸ Robinson goes on to add, "Do not add things that do not relate to the music, chicken soup cans or the kitchen sink, or God knows what else!"⁹ Robinson started with an idea

and then saw how many legitimate ways that small idea could work; he then began transmuting the idea. Robinson referred to Charles Wuorinen's priority on not allowing the piece to stray from its essence. Important to Robinson is the need to work on every section simultaneously. He did not believe one could get a piece to cohere if one did not work on everything simultaneously. He believed that after a composition was finished, one should then go back and make revisions. A final stage of his compositional process was postpartum depression. He always felt empty when a piece was finished because he had given his all in writing the composition.

COMPOSITIONAL PHASES

Robinson's music can be described harmonically as tonal, even when the style of the twentieth century was atonal, experimental, and at times extremely dissonant. His music is firmly grounded in the French Romantic language of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which unexpected harmonies arise out of a tonal landscape.

At times Robinson's music reflected his own personal interests and areas of study. Robinson claimed to have studied serialism, although it is unknown with whom. He also knew Forte's set-theory well. These aspects of compositional style are reserved for his organ works. It is only in his organ improvisations that one can see an adventurous harmonic language and where one would experience Robinson at his finest.

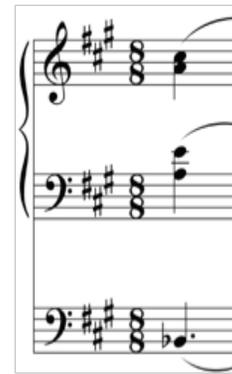
Robinson's works can be divided into four compositional phases: neoclassical, serial, conservative/tonal, and blended. Robinson, himself, referred to some of his pieces as falling into these categories, but it was Andrew Yeargin who first fleshed out these phases.¹⁰ Creaghan, whom Robinson referred to as "scribe,"¹¹ and who has spent countless hours with Robinson's compositions, concurs with Yeargin's organization of the various phases in Robinson's compositional style, but cautions against placing all of Robinson's compositions on a timeline or into a category;¹² he feels that Robinson would not have separated his pieces into categories.

Phase I—Post-neoclassical

Neoclassicism in music was a popular twentieth-century compositional trend, in which composers desired to return to classical ideals, characterized by order, balance, clarity, and emotional restraint. A reaction against Romanticism, neoclassicism emphasized rhythm and contrapuntal textures, expanded tonal harmony, and a focus on absolute music versus program music of the Romantic period. There were two camps of neoclassical influence: the French, exemplified by Satie and Stravinsky; and the German, exemplified by Hindemith. Nadia Boulanger taught several celebrated composers in Robinson's circle, including Aaron Copland, Ned Rorem, and Virgil Thomson. Her teaching sought to extend her understanding of Stravinsky's compositional ideals. As noted above, Robinson was greatly inspired and influenced by Stravinsky and many who followed him.

Robinson's post-neoclassical compositions display the use of progressive harmony, in what might be thought of as twenty-first century tonality. His music in this style is written in a clear and balanced form, as in typical works of

the Classical era. The *Jubilate Deo* is an excellent example of this phase. Harmonically, he uses the additive note, where a chord contains an added 2nd, 6th, 9th, or 13th, here an added 2nd as shown in Example 1.



Example 1: *Jubilate Deo*, m. 16.

The use of chromaticism creates an alternation of diminished chords placed between tonic and dominant chords, as shown in Example 2. This style is rooted in music of the late nineteenth century, a style that can be analyzed using neo-Riemannian theory operations of triadic transformation.

There are six types of triad transformation. The first three are parallel (P), leading-tone (L), and relative (R); in these types, one voice moves by semitone. In parallel transformation, the chord transforms from major to minor (e.g. C major to C minor). In leading-tone transformation, the third of a major triad becomes the root of a minor triad, and vice versa (e.g. C major to E minor). In relative transformation, the root of a major triad becomes the third of a minor triad and vice versa (e.g. C major to A minor). The second set of triad transformation—parallel prime (P'), leading-tone prime (L'), and relative prime (R')—involves two voices moving by semitone. In parallel prime, major and minor triads share the same third (e.g. C major to C-sharp major). In leading-tone prime, the root of a major triad becomes the fifth of a minor triad, and vice versa (e.g. C major to F minor). For relative prime, the fifth of a major triad becomes the root of a minor triad and vice versa (e.g. C major to G minor). These operations made it easy for Robinson to move quickly around harmonically yet remain in the context of one key.¹³

Example 2: *Jubilate Deo*, m. 14.

Robinson creates symmetry in the music by dividing the octave by the tritone. This can be seen in *Jubilate Deo* when the pedal part, a third voice, is added against the treble and bass accompaniments. The pedal part creates extreme dissonance and instability in the choral parts, as shown in Example 3.

Example 3: *Jubilate Deo*, mm. 14-15.

Another feature of music of this phase is Robinson's use of modes, for instance in *Psalm 150*:

Example 4: *Psalm 150*, mm. 54-57.

Robinson's published compositions that are representative of Post-neoclassical Phase I include the *Messe Solennelle* (1980/1981), *Spice She Brought and Sweet Perfume* (1981/1984), *In the Chill of Bleak Midwinter (Ave Verum)* (1971/1979), *Infant Redeemer (Ave Maria)* (1976/1979), *Terra Tremuit* (1978/1979), *Christmas Alleluias* (1979/1980), *Jubilate Deo* (1980/1987), and *Psalm 150* (1998). Compositions that

are more aligned with the styles of Francis Poulenc and Lennox Berkeley are *Missa in Die Tribulationis* (1980/1982) and *Christus Factus Est* (1976). These compositions are tonal with the use of increasing chromaticism and reflecting limited emotion—characteristics of neoclassicism.

Phase II – Serial

Serial compositions use a fixed series of notes, which the composer orders in a row; this row generates melodies, harmonies, structural processes, and variations within a composition. Pitch-content can be manipulated by prime, retrograde, inversion, and retrograde-inversion. Robinson knew the works of Charles Wuorinen, Aaron Copland, Olivier Messiaen, and Ned Rorem, all of whom used this technique.

Robinson did not employ this technique in his choral music, but reserved it for his opera and organ compositions. His compositions representative of this phase include *Scene from Medea: An Opera in Progress* (1979). His first published serial work was *Dismas Variations* (1980/1982), commissioned by Kenneth Starr and dedicated to Vincent Persichetti. This work is based on two four-note sets, identified in Allen Forte's catalogue as 4_Z15 and 4_Z29.¹⁴ A second example, *Angels: Variations for Organ and Orchestra*, consists of seven variations using total serialism, a technique that determines duration, dynamics, and register, in addition to pitch. Robinson uses a mirror-image hexachord melodically.

Phase III – Conservative

Robinson used this phase of writing in his choral music, hymns, and the majority of his Jewish and solo vocal music, as well as in some of his organ compositions. These works are tonal, with slight use of chromaticism (a flare of neo-Romanticism) and highly-structured form. His published works that are representative of Phase III include *Music for the Lord's Supper* (1969/1979) and *Messe Militaire (Festival Choral Eucharist)* (1983/1988).

Of special note is his composition *Had I But Pinions*. This composition stands alone as the most strikingly unusual piece of Robinson's output. Andrew Yeargin describes it as a "luxurious wave of sound and orchestral color created by the ensemble of organ, horn, and harp, coupled with the extremes of tessitura assigned to the

solo soprano (Example 5) and surfeit of emotion outpouring from the chorus [that] perfectly paint the image of one's soul flying on the wing of a dove."¹⁵ Robinson composed this piece for a friend who had been ill and was not expected to live; fortunately, he made a full recovery. This composition exemplifies neo-Romantic flavor.

Example 5: *Had I But Pinions*, mm. 67-71.

Phase IV – Blended

Robinson’s blended compositions show characteristics of both neoclassic and conservative styles. The *Missa Brevis* (1996) is a fine representative of this phase. Robinson combines elements of his neoclassical style by way of form, harmonic language, and rhythm. The conservative side of this work is seen in its formal structure and its use in the liturgical service.

The Kyrie eleison has a contrapuntal accompaniment, reminiscent of the late Baroque and early Classical periods as shown in Example 6.

Example 6: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Kyrie eleison, mm. 1-8.

Robinson uses several themes throughout the composition. The choral writing in the Kyrie eleison (Example 7) sets up the primary theme, which later returns in the Sanctus.

Example 7: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Kyrie eleison, mm. 1-8.

In the Gloria in excelsis, Robinson uses a rhythmic motive, which becomes a cyclical theme throughout the work as shown in Example 8. The horn is reminiscent of horns honking in the streets of New York; and the left hand suggests the movement of subway cars beneath.¹⁶

Example 8: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Gloria in excelsis, mm. 1-2.

In the Sanctus (Example 9), Robinson makes use of ostinato and carillon:

Example 9: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Sanctus, mm. 1-6.

A return of the horn-fanfare motive from the Gloria in excelsis reappears in the Sanctus in augmentation, seen in Example 10.

Example 10: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Sanctus, mm. 37-39.

The secondary theme, found in the Benedictus qui venit of the Sanctus, shown in Example 11, will also be used in the Agnus Dei.

Example 11: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Sanctus mm. 43-47.

Example 12 shows Robinson's use of this Benedictus qui venit theme, in diminution, in the organ part of the Agnus Dei.

Example 12: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Agnus Dei, mm. 1-2.

The primary theme from the Kyrie eleison is altered and disguised in the Agnus Dei, as shown in Example 13.

Example 13: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Agnus Dei, mm. 9-12.

Robinson brings back the horn fanfare motive (in augmentation) from the Gloria and Sanctus, in the Agnus Dei's last three measures, shown in Example 14.

Example 14: *Missa Brevis* (1996) Agnus Dei, mm. 32-end.

Published works that are representative of Phase IV include: *God Is Love* (1975/1979), *Improperium* (1979/1979), *Missa Brevis* (1996), and *Missa Christi Ecclesia* (2013).

PARK AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

Robinson had a long and vibrant career as organist and choirmaster at Park Avenue Synagogue, a relationship that lasted for forty-seven years. During this time, Robinson had the pleasure of working with some of the best-known hazzans and cantors in the United States. Park Avenue Synagogue valued high-quality music, both sacred and secular. During Robinson's tenure, the synagogue commissioned works from noted twentieth-century composers for their Friday evening and Saturday morning Liturgical Music Services. Over the course of his appointment at Park Avenue, he was commissioned to write organ pieces and choral and congregational settings of prayers and hymns.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article, my dissertation, and forthcoming publications on Robinson is threefold: to bring about a greater awareness of McNeil Robinson as a choral musician; to expose Robinson's choral music by providing an overview of his total choral output in both the Christian and Jewish traditions; and to provide an exploration of his compositional style.

Robinson's personal musical journey, his teachings, contributions to sacred music in the United States, and the choral compositions and others, deserve to be recognized and included in the canon of Western music. Robinson was part of a circle of fine musicians, many of whom are considered pillars of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, and I would like to see him recognized with those in his circle.

I did not have the pleasure of knowing Robinson but have come to know him through both his music and those with whom he shared personal and professional relationships. May this article bring about a deeper awareness of his choral music both for the Christian and Jewish traditions.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Andrew Adams. "Celebrating 40 Years: An Interview with Organist/Composer McNeil Robinson," 2. The Vocal Area Network, 2003, www.van.org, accessed October 1, 2016.
- ² Andrew Yeargin. Interview by author, October 29, 2016, Columbia, S.C.
- ³ Adams, *ibid.*
- ⁴ McNeil Robinson. "Interview with Louis Weingarden."
- ⁵ Christopher Creaghan. Interview by author, November 23, 2016, Columbia, S.C.
- ⁶ Christopher Creaghan, chris.creaghan@verizon.net. Re: Organs in NYC [e-mail to Jason Wright jasonaw@email.sc.edu], January 6, 2017.
- ⁷ McNeil Robinson. "Interview with Stephen Tharp," New York City Chapter, American Guild of Organists, YouTube video, 2014, posted 2014 by jameskennerley. <https://youtu.be/KdUrtK9GxC0>.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Andrew H. Yeargin. *McNeil Robinson (1943-2015): The Complete Musician* (unpublished D.M.A. thesis), 21-27.
- ¹¹ McNeil Robinson. "Interview with Stephen Tharp."
- ¹² Christopher Creaghan interview November 23, 2016, Columbia, S.C.
- ¹³ Joseph N. Straus. *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016) 188-189.
- ¹⁴ F. Anthony Thurman. *McNeil Robinson: His Life and Music: 1962-1998* (unpublished D.M.A. thesis), 46.
- ¹⁵ Yeargin. *McNeil Robinson*, 26.
- ¹⁶ John Bradford Bohl. Interview by author, January 12, 2017, Washington, D.C.



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Musicians Called to Serve (Their Diocese)

SONYA SUBBAYYA SUTTON

One of the things I hear most often, and feel most deeply, about membership in AAM is the connections we form with our colleagues, and how important it is to many of us to see each other at Conferences and to maintain those collegial relationships. Our return home from those Conferences, though, can mean a return to the silos of our churches, where we are sometimes geographically very far from another Episcopal church, or reluctant for a number of reasons to reach out to our colleagues. Each church is, of course, part of the larger network of its diocese, and there can and should be opportunities to work within that framework to develop both our own musical and spiritual growth and that of our congregations.

My own formation by music in the Episcopal Church began even before I first started singing as a twelve-year-old in the adult choir of my childhood church. The idea for writing about how and why a diocese might become more involved in supporting the work of musicians in their parishes came from my hope that all Episcopalians would have the kind of transformational experiences I have had in this Church, and from my observations of the church at work in Maryland, of which my husband is Bishop. Sundays, I often get the "music report" when he returns from his visitations, and the news is sometimes grim: very small choirs over-reaching in order to impress the Bishop, keyboard players without any sense of how to lead the hymns, clergy desperate to find anyone in their area willing to play in their church—usually for very little reward—and the list goes on. He would sadly find music to be a detriment to worship on occasion, and he wanted to find ways to help struggling parishes and give them the support they needed to make music, at any level, part of a joyful worship experience. Together we wondered about how someone employed by the Diocese could serve as a resource for clergy and musicians in parishes, and how parishes could learn from each other.

That idea came to fruition a couple of years ago: the right person was hired, and her work for the Diocese of Maryland has been a wonderful success story. In my thinking about this subject, three questions have been important:

1. Who is doing this kind of work?
2. What lessons can be learned from people serving as diocesan musicians?
3. How might those lessons prove useful in shaping the ways in which a diocese could better serve its congregations?

I spoke with four people about their efforts to act as a musical resource for their diocese: Cindy DeDakis, Missioner for Parish Music in the Diocese of Maryland; Mark Trautman, Missioner for Music and the Arts in the Diocese of Newark (as well as Director of Music at St. Paul's, Englewood); Sarah Hussey, Canon for Music in the Diocese of Montana; and Dent Davidson, Associate for Arts and Liturgy in the Diocese of Chicago. For some, this is part-time paid work; for others it

is an honorary appointment. In each case, the Bishop reached out and created a new position for that particular person; these people have been instrumental in developing their position's profile as a work-in-progress. In addition, this past summer I met with Cathy Lamb, formerly one of the musicians at Lichfield Cathedral in the U.K., and now serving her diocese indirectly as the Director of Music Outreach for Lichfield Cathedral School.

It's safe to say that all those with whom I spoke have the same purpose: to lift up music within parishes in ways that help to connect people more fully to God. They used words like "enabler" and "encourager" and "catalyst" to describe themselves. They found that parish musicians appreciated having someone on the diocesan staff who understands the demands of the work. Clergy are glad to have another form of support from their bishop in the work they are doing to help their parishes thrive.

The Diocese of Maryland describes the position of Missioner for Parish Music as someone who is available to assist with:

- Hiring a new musician
- Assessing the parish's current music resources
- Developing new resources
- Finding repertoire appropriate to the parish
- Working with choirs and instrumental musicians to strengthen their leadership
- Developing programming to encourage growth and community outreach.



Dent Davidson

Though the Diocese of Maryland's website states things most clearly, each person I talked to had developed similar goals for his or her work. Dent Davidson in Chicago has perhaps the most creative job description, which begins with "Light fires and issue permission slips." All have found that it is important to be visible at clergy conferences and diocesan conventions, and to be involved in the music at diocesan liturgical events such as ordinations and confirmations; this helps them to establish personal relationships before being invited into a parish for consultation or being asked to serve as mentor for less experienced musicians. Making connections to parishes can happen in other ways too. The Bishop may ask the Diocesan Musician to go with him or her on a visitation, or to reach out to a parish that the Bishop perceives as needing musical help. One person goes *incognito* to parishes and observes the music and liturgy as a newcomer would and seeks then to give helpful feedback to the Rector and Parish Musician. Another is very concerned about being perceived as the Bishop's spy and wouldn't ever make a surprise visit. As with everything, there are nuances, personalities, and local custom to take into account; but the goals of helping to create welcoming, well-done liturgy lies at the heart of this work.

Some of the practical ways that these Diocesan Musicians have worked with parishes include making presentations on Episcopal musical traditions at a church's Sunday forum, and on the importance of music in worship, leading workshops

with parish choirs to help them during times of transition, and consulting with parishes that are searching for a new musician. Dent Davidson offers ideas on the Diocese of Chicago's website for possible workshops in a parish, with topics including hymn singing, chanting, available musical resources, and (beyond music) "The Art of Presiding" and "The Art of Lay Reading." Sarah Hussey has created a detailed online resource for musicians in her diocese, one that makes hymn suggestions and gives a great deal of information on the liturgical seasons and why we do what we do in liturgy. The churches in her diocese are quite small and have difficulty finding musicians at all, and she gives them basic advice that even includes a metronome marking for each hymn she suggests. Each person I talked with has made himself or herself available to act as mentor to musicians who have less experience in church music on conducting, choir training, and liturgical planning.

The Diocese of Maryland has run a successful weekend for parish musicians for many years, bringing musicians together to share ideas and learn from guest clinicians. The Diocese of Newark will be having a gathering of musicians for the first time in several decades, in the hope that this will become an annual event. In Chicago, musicians gather to assist in planning worship for diocesan gatherings, including quiet days and Diocesan Convention. In Montana, where the distances are too great for musicians to gather, the Diocesan Musician is exploring the idea of a webinar; this could be a teaching tool, one that she hopes will expose rural churches to well-crafted and well-executed liturgical styles. She is working on pulling together the first one—a master class with Stephen Buzard to work with organists on their service-playing skills. Creativity has no limits, and technology is here to help us!

These are all steps that can be taken by a diocesan musician to open the door for parish musicians to ask for help, but in fact very few do. Cindy DeDakis finds that clergy are usually more willing than musicians to seek her advice, though she has also experienced clergy who are afraid to "upset the apple cart," even when they know there is a problem with the music or musician in their church. Sarah Hussey points out that in Montana the pioneer spirit and "nobody can tell me what to do" mentality is as apparent in the church as it is in politics. A musician can sometimes be suspicious and territorial when a rector has called in someone from the diocese to help. All agree that they must be invited in, and they certainly can't force anyone to take their advice. They have found that cultivating trusting relationships is the best way to elicit an invitation into the workings of a parish, but is also the hardest part of their jobs.

All of these observations point to the need for more conversation, and for clearer communication. That came up again and again. Pre-conceived ideas, assumptions, and fear



Sarah Hussey



Cindy DeDakis



Mark Trautman

of potential conflict get in the way of so many opportunities for growth. Finding ways to articulate what we do as musicians, even when we think the music should speak for itself, is really important. Mark Trautman wants parish leaders to be reminded that making music come alive—i.e. live music—every week is a rare gift to our congregations, and that choirs provide a valuable way to build a

community of love and energy that is needed by our churches now more than ever. Sarah Hussey wants the Episcopal churches she works with to understand that the liturgical tradition is one that celebrates the transcendence of God, contrasting that with the Evangelical church's celebration of God's immediacy. Teaching a parish musician that music in our tradition should be a reflection of God's mystery, and giving someone the language to communicate these kinds of things to a rector or a congregation could be an invaluable part of a diocesan musician's mission.

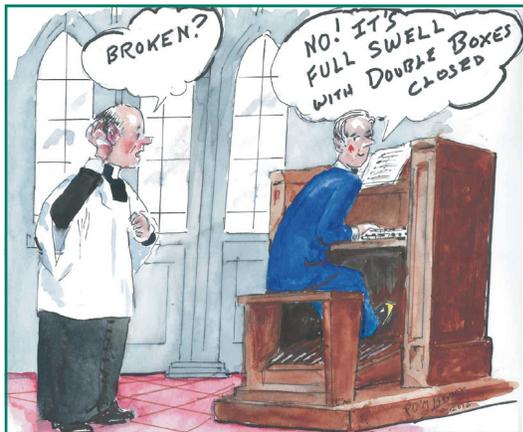
But what a church wants most often is just someone to help it find an organist. In Maryland, Cindy has the luxury of being able to connect with Peabody Conservatory faculty member (and AAM member) Jeremy Filsell, urging him to work with his students in training organists for work in the Episcopal Church. She wondered, as well, if a course could be developed along the lines of "Episcopal/Anglican Liturgy and Music 101" as a training tool for musicians coming from another (or no) tradition. Though clergy from other denominations must usually take an Anglican Studies course, that probably

doesn't include much instruction in Anglican music, so why not a diocesan-sponsored course that helps anyone—whether ordained or not—learn more about worship and music in the Episcopal Church? Sarah Hussey in Montana wants to use her position to help churches collaborate with local piano teachers in raising up new musicians for the church. Could a diocesan musician empower a small parish with very limited resources to develop other kinds of musicians to lead worship, perhaps something as basic as helping a parishioner with a strong voice learn to lead music without a keyboard? An excellent musician isn't necessarily a great worship leader, much less a good liturgist. Thinking outside the box, sometimes in desperation, just might have beautiful results.

The people I spoke with got a good laugh when I asked about the biggest obstacles to the success of their work for their dioceses, besides time and money. Lack of time and money are huge—sometimes insurmountable—obstacles. The people I talked to have other commitments beyond their part-time work for the Diocese. They are in turn working to help ill-paid, part-time musicians who probably have several jobs and often don't have the time or inclination to develop their skills. At the end of the day, music is just one part of the equation for a struggling parish, but a church doesn't have to spend a lot of money in order to make music an important means of spreading the Gospel. Sarah Hussey believes that any church can have a music program that is transformative for its participants—the parish and its community. She noted that the mission of the Gospel is not a short-term one, and neither should the goals for a church's music program. No one is saying that music is more important than outreach or the leaking roof, but it is more than simply decorative. Music is an important building-block for Christian community and, as Mark Trautman urges, we must find ways to say this strongly, confidently, lovingly, and without apology.

I asked what their best advice is for any congregation wanting to improve its ability to have music contribute more fully to its spiritual growth. Sarah Hussey said, without hesitation, "Take out the carpet!"—a battle cry with which many of us are familiar. Members of the clergy may have no idea what a detriment carpet is to music and worship in general, and a diocesan musician could educate parishes about the importance of acoustics in helping music and the spoken word come alive. Sarah wryly noted as well that in the state of Montana no church's architecture could ever hope to compete with the beauty of the surrounding natural world. But the more serious, and unanimous, answer to this question was to lead parishes into more fully supporting the education of children. Cindy DeDakis was thrilled to learn recently that a church in her diocese is taking her advice to begin a chorister program. Such a project had not even been on the radar screen until she asked them about their demographics and saw all the ways in which their parish would be a perfect place for a serious chorister training program. In the Diocese of Newark, Mark Trautman's perspective in working with other musicians in the diocese will naturally be colored by his own work with the choir school he runs at St. Paul's in Englewood. They know, as do many of us, that children are capable of absorbing a great deal of theology, along with musical skills and personal habits of cooperation and leadership, when they sing in church choirs.

Scattered leaves ... from our Sketchbook



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In the U.K., choir training is going strong at British cathedrals, but not as successfully on the parish level, as it has in the past. Cathy Lamb left her position as Associate Organist/Choirmaster at Lichfield Cathedral to take on a position that has her working in schools, bridging a gap between church and state that we aren't comfortable within this country. She doesn't work directly for the Diocese of Lichfield, but the Cathedral's school funds her position in part and the goal is to engage children in singing in the community's schools, teaching them lifelong skills, and connecting them with the Cathedral through choir concerts and other programs. There's more truth than humor in the observation made by Cathy's husband, Ben, who serves as Music Director at Lichfield Cathedral, that he supported her work because without it there would be no tenors or basses in his cathedral's choir of Men and Boys/Girls in the future.

At each level of any organization, anything that happens is a reflection of the leadership. I wondered if these diocesan musicians had any ideas about what might be holding some musicians back from being the kind of leaders who enliven music in ways that help the church grow. What ideas on this would they impart to other musicians in their diocese, given the chance? The resounding answer was "Let go of fear" and "Take risks." They want to urge musicians to let go of the fear that says embracing something new will cause us to lose our heritage. Get off the organ bench and risk leading a hymn unaccompanied in front of the congregation. Be willing to take risks that just might spread the Gospel's message in new and meaningful ways. Teach the congregation something new, first reminding them that every hymn was new once. They would advise musicians to develop their own spirituality, taking time to pray and to be thankful. They want musicians to remind people in their congregations that music is a gift from God, and developing that gift of song should be encouraged in everyone.

It was a delight to talk to five very different musicians, working under very different circumstances in widely differing geographic areas. None of those differences, however, contradicted the common themes I heard. Each diocesan musician had a productive, positive relationship with his or her bishop, and those bishops were very supportive of the diocesan musician's work. Each stressed the need for more conversation and better communication among clergy, congregations, and musicians; and each saw serious chorister training as an important step in the formation not just of future musicians, but of future Christians. They each seemed ready to take risks and think outside the traditional boxes we put ourselves in. A men's Compline choir in Montana? Sarah Hussey saw potential there and has the Bishop's backing to give it a try. How about the "All Y'All Choir" in Chicago, which has 800-plus people singing for Diocesan Convention liturgies? There was a suggestion that clergy and musicians alike refuse to take "no" for an answer, instead risking a re-framing of the question when the goal is music that enlivens worship. Maybe the best advice for any of us—lay and clergy, professional and amateur—is to risk seeking advice and not be afraid to take it.

Some of you are doing these kinds of things informally for your diocese already, but it is time and money well spent to have a musician on the diocesan staff who can be available to visit churches on Sunday mornings, who can help to

articulate a goal of using the rich resources of Anglican music and liturgy to evangelize its congregations, energizing people for mission in their communities and beyond. Working with clergy to create opportunities for diocesan staff to worship together, and to help in shaping diocesan events that make full use of the musical resources available for inspiring worship could and should be an important part of this position in any diocese as well. Having someone who is working, at the behest of the Bishop, to talk about music can add an authority to the message that makes the larger platform of a diocesan musical representative a potentially wonderful source of understanding and growth for churches in that diocese—the kind of understanding that leads to the vital congregations we all want to serve and to experience.

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She is married to the Bishop of Maryland, the Rt. Rev'd Eugene Sutton, and they have four children in their blended family.

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Book Review

ERIK W. GOLDSTROM

Haig Mardirosian. *Vox Humana: Essays About the World of the Pipe Organ and Those Who Play It* (Morningstar Music Publishers, 2017; ISBN-13: 978-0944529737), 152 pp., \$17.00.

Please be prepared for a candid though hopefully not harsh look at some values and assumptions that we as a community take as commonplace and viable. (p. 76)

Duly noted. Many of us are undoubtedly aware of Haig Mardirosian through his work at the Church of the Ascension and St. Agnes, the American University in Washington, D.C., and the University of Tampa, or through his monthly column in *The American Organist*. MorningStar Music Publishers has recently issued a collection of his articles from TAO as *Vox Humana: Essays About the World of the Pipe Organ and Those Who Play It*. Culled from its ten-year run (2003–2013), forty-seven communiqués fill the pages of this modest book, loosely organized into broader categories (albeit after the fact). Mardirosian has added introductory material to each of the sections in addition to a “Prelude” and a “Postlude.” Craig R. Whitney, author of *All the Stops* [PublicAffairs (Perseus), 2013] provides a Foreword to the collection.

The book is divided into eight sections and the aforementioned “Prelude” and “Postlude,” each focusing on a particular facet of the organ world. The first, “The Most Mysterious and Complex Instrument Ever Invented,” looks at the beast we call the organ and at its various components: from stop knobs, to registrations, to the contextual place of the organ (is it still the King of Instruments?). Of the seven articles in this section, perhaps the most interesting is the June 2004

installment, in which Mardirosian muses on imagination (or rather, the lack of it) in organ building. Gone are the halcyon days when organ building was a trajectory of innovation and creative alternatives. In its place, the author argues, “we have wound up with a taste for predictable, excellent sameness.” (p. 18) Ours is an era of instruments marked by great workmanship, but also crashing conformity.

“Who are We?” is Mardirosian’s next question, and he walks us through notions of stereotypes, “applied learning,” loner culture, and Virgil Fox. The outside world, particularly mass media, often paints us as “minstrels to genocidal maniacs, malevolent spirits and self-righteous Bible thumping bigots” (p. 30) Think *Sound of Music*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and *Dracula*—1931 version, please. But is this really who we are? Are we lesser individuals because we practice a “performing art” and not a theoretical one (never mind that the instrument under our fingertips is a marvel of physics, not to mention gymnastics)? And what of our “aloof” and separate natures? Are they not, in part, derived from our “very origins” as solo artists and solo managers of music programs? (p. 43) These are some questions you’ll be asked to ponder here. Virgil Fox, you ask? He receives a most gracious nod as an individual “who exerted enormous influence for the good and the right.” (p. 47)

“Inside Baseball” was among the best collection of essays, if only because it contained much of the provocative writing that seems to characterize Mardirosian’s discourse. It’s a chapter devoted to insiders, shoptalk, and “those in the know.” His introductory essay, “Hard Music,” asks us point blank: “Do we play less hard music now than we used to (or more bluntly, Are we taking the easy way out?).” The author notes the trend away from organ literature’s “monoliths,” both by performers and composers alike. It takes time, energy, and immense focus to conquer a difficult piece. More and more (it seems) it is easier to turn from a repertoire challenge when a comfortable chorale prelude in C major is within arm’s length. But, Mardirosian argues, this is tantamount to throwing in the towel or raising the

white flag. “If the organ is to enjoy a long-term future, it would seem that the diet of easy listening cannot suffice.” (p. 70) We must continue to challenge ourselves and our audiences (that includes the congregation) if our profession and our art are to stand for anything at all.

Mardirosian next turns his gaze to recitals, in a two-part installment, firing this opening salvo: “If orchestras and opera companies are dying, or at least struggling against serious—even terminal—disease, then the organ recital world has long been in the lock of rigor mortis.” (p. 77) The problem need not be re-iterated—we have all played to houses numbering in the teens at one point or another in our careers. Most of the time our response to such disappointment is what the author calls “dogged persistence”: “If something is failing, let’s do it more.” (p. 77). In short, the problem is less the problem itself than the way we choose to handle the problem. It’s time to think outside of the box.

The slow decline of the organ is certainly tied to its unbreakable link with Christianity. As Christianity loses prominence within contemporary culture, so too falls the organ. Or perhaps the recital is dying because there is an “oversupply of a tired product.” (p. 80) Whatever the cause, the organ recital needs a reboot.

“A Little Laughter” provides a brief respite before the next volatile chapter, “Nostalgia.” This section, when taken with “Inside Baseball,” are the real meat of the book, providing its most provocative discourse and its most searing insights. Here we visit the battlefields of professional prospects, the end of music and “ultimate things.” This isn’t a section for the blissfully (or willfully) ignorant. Here is painful truth. Questions of retention, growth, and professional advancement arise: Do the new organists play better, more insightfully, more musically? Are working conditions better than when we entered the field? In short, is our profession improving, or are we allowing it to languish, facing an uncertain and bleak future?

“The End of Music” (another two-part installment) continues his unyielding assessment of our future, taunting us with truly final questions:

“Will (our) music end? Has it already died?” The music world grows smaller and Mardirosian reminds us that much of our music was purpose-built. “Bach never composed cantatas for the abstract love of scriptural themes of the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity.” (p. 105) Do we exist in an ever-shrinking world because the purposeful nature of our music continues to disappear? And if this is true, how do we grapple with this stark reality?

An elderly colleague disappeared about a year ago. He sold all of his belongings, his house, and his car, then took his entire music library, the proof and toolkit of a long career in music, and threw it into a dumpster. He moved to parts unknown in Central America. Word just got back. He died. That’s one way of handling it. (p. 105)

Of course, the anticipated outrage was hurled towards the author—the teeming masses seemingly unaware of his use of “provocative assertion.” One way to call up the troops is to declare the beloved cause already dead. Mardirosian walks his argument back (a bit) in Part Two, but the question remains: What are we to do about an art that seems as if it is dying; that seems as if it no longer matters? His answer lies in the future, and I think it stands as a convincing argument:

The whole question, it would seem, is less about the living or dying of music as we know and love it than about who steps in to fill the void and what will emerge as the music of the future. (p. 108)

Survival lies not in the past, but in the promise of what is to come. We must confront this reality honestly and challenge (and support) those who follow us to help formulate thoughtful and meaningful navigation.

“Impact” helps us emerge from the gloom. Here Mardirosian attempts to illustrate the significant purpose that our art and we as musicians have on each other and those around us. We form relationships with like-minded individuals; we suffer and succeed together despite the solitary nature of our profession. We have teachers who never gave up on us; we have students

whom we challenge to become better. In the process we create community and in that community we foster caring. It is worth quoting the author at length here (the backdrop is Easter Vigil):

We organists belong with our colleagues in the musical arts, in dance, in theater, in film, and fine art, in poetry and literature as the norm of cultural expression. But even more broadly, just as the observances of this month compel all to see each other as siblings in a community of giant breadth, to hear the ineffable stories of the origins and redemption of humankind, the miracles that have sustained it, the legends and the lore, so our art and our instrument, our interests and conversation, and yes, even our debates all find a renewed place in that grander cosmos of human inquiry and utterance. (p. 127)

Mardirosian insists that he is not the prophet of doom, but I confess that I often felt a dire finality seeping through his pages. This may well be the result of reading in batches; too many articles at one time read within an unmitigating atmosphere of provocation and cold, hard truths. Whatever the reason, by the end of the book I was quite disheartened. There was little joy left for me in either the art or the profession. We live in an era in which STEM is more important than staff and coding more important than counterpoint, and in which immediacy is prized over patient, painful, persistence. Mardirosian’s book felt like one more attempt at apologia—one more defense of the organ and, tangentially, ecclesiastical art. The dumpster awaited my offering.

Enter Sophia and her grasshopper. Shortly after finishing Mardirosian’s book, I was in my truck listening to NPR when a story came on the air about an eight-year old bug-loving girl named Sophia (www.npr.org/sections/the-two-way; accessed September 19, 2017). Sophia was teased and bullied in school because of her interest in insects (never mind that she let grasshoppers ride on her shoulder), and her mother was desperate to encourage her passion

and reassure her that such enthusiasm wasn’t “weird.” At wit’s end, her mother wrote to the Entomological Society of Canada and explained her dilemma, asking if there were someone in the profession who could talk to Sophia and give her some much needed support.

The Society quickly tweeted out a call to arms and the resulting response was nothing short of miraculous. More than 1,000 replies and over 130 direct messages ensued, ranging from encouraging professional backstories, to offers of papers and nets to keep her interest alive, to lab-visit invitations. But perhaps the most astounding result of this cry for help is that Sophia is now the co-author of a scientific paper on the role of Twitter in promoting women in science, written in conjunction with the Ph.D. candidate who initiated the tweet itself.

So what does any of this have to do with the organ, our profession, or Mardirosian’s book? Quite simply, absolutely everything. Clarity often resides where you least expect it, and one four-and-a-half-minute story on NPR showed me a salient truth about our art. It is up to us, the community itself, to encourage our collective growth and prosperity (and that includes saving the profession for future generations). Help will not come from outside our ranks, particularly if we are barren within—the cavalry isn’t over the next hill. And this is precisely Mardirosian’s point. The future of organs, organ music, and those who play it lies with those who do. We may not know what the future looks like, but if there’s to be a future at all, we have to believe in it and start talking candidly about it. The solutions are out there, but only if we find them together. Sophia’s story not only banished my defeatist attitude, but also gave me insight into what Mardirosian was actually saying. And while it may be true that his individual articles don’t hang together in a tightly-knit argument, his overall message comes through loud and clear. I’ll let Sophia tell you: “It’s going to take a lot of hard work, but the more hard work you do, the better the thing you’re working for is.” **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

Choral Music Reviews

JASON OVERALL

Last month's review featured recent releases by Encore Publications in honor of its twenty-fifth birthday. This month's selection includes several recent titles in the Encore catalog for the Advent and Christmas season, perfect for any last-minute needs.

Jamie Hitel. *Hark the glad sound!*, SATB, unacc. (Encore Publications, 020479, 2014), 3 pp., \$2.60.

Philip Doddridge's familiar text is a useful antidote to the antiquated sense of Advent as a penitential season. The poem's jubilant expectation has become justly popular for its joyful tone of eager anticipation. Jamie Hitel's strong setting employing an original melody embodies the words in bright choral homophony and deliberate motion. A few chromatic turns in the last verse are a bit awkward, yet the piece is full of interest from beginning to end. Ranges are moderate and voices never divide, keeping the technical difficulty moderate.

Paul Treppe. *All hail to the days*, SAATB, unacc. (Encore Publications, 020539, 2016), 4 pp., \$2.60.

An early seventeenth-century text and traditional English carol tune appear in an engaging arrangement written for the Ely Cathedral Choir. Treppe treats the altos, tenors, and basses in an instrumental manner in wordless accompaniment figures built with rhythmically driving chord repetitions as the sopranos sing the carol melody. Verses one and three use the same setting, and verse two presents the melody in four-part homophony. Treppe handles the harmony well, introducing some effective and idiomatic cross-relations for additional interest. The coda wraps up the piece

with the lower-voice accompaniment figuration and a final statement of the last phrase in large octaves (with an apparent misprint on the entrance pitch for the basses). The text is a celebration of the season of Advent as a season of new beginnings with no reference to prophecies or coming birth. In all, this enjoyable arrangement offers an appealing way to begin the season or Advent festival of lessons and carols.

Timothy Rogers. *Whereas Adam caused by sin*, SATB, unacc. (Encore Publications, 020478, 2017), 4 pp., \$2.60.

Timothy Rogers, the personality behind Encore Publishing, is also a talented composer, and the catalog contains several of his works. This original carol juxtaposes an anonymous fifteenth-century text with a chromatic tune that stretches tonal expectations. Rogers matches the harmonic ambiguity with just enough rhythmic asymmetry to keep the music fittingly unsettled. The text, a useful substitution for the ubiquitous "Adam lay ybounden," presents a theology more consistent with contemporary thought, focusing on redemption from brokenness rather than the strained substitutionary atonement of the other medieval text. The musical language draws the listener in throughout the brief carol, and Rogers employs hemiola effectively in the refrain, varied voicings, and intensifying melismas. The refrain moves through one textbook example of a German augmented-sixth chord, and this musical cliché pulls slightly against the originality of the language. Interesting anthem pairings for readings related to the fall can feel few and far between. This offering expands the choice with an excellent option.

Timothy Rogers. *Sinful Adam*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020566, 2017), 5 pp., \$3.30.

This anthem, another Advent carol by Timothy Rogers that deals with original sin, uses contemporary poetry by former King's College choral scholar Robin Morrish. The poet sang under Boris Ord and David Willcocks and went on to a career encompassing music (as violinist and orchestral conductor) and literature (at the King's

School in Canterbury, Marlborough College, and Tonbridge School). The theology is, interestingly, more old-fashioned than the medieval text of the previous anthem reviewed. This largely diatonic tune and conventional arrangement is a cheery option for a response to readings related to the fall from grace. The simplicity of the organ accompaniment and frequency of unaccompanied sections also makes this a good choice for combined organist-directors.

Joshua Pacey. *Remember, O thou man*, SATB, unacc. (Encore Publications, 020525, 2016), 8 pp., \$3.30.

If this setting is characteristic of Pacey, whose birth year is a frighteningly recent 1995, it augurs well for his career and the expansion of choral repertoire with a new generation of solid music. Pacey studied music at Clare College, and he has already won a number of composition competitions. He has extensive background as a singer, having started as a chorister at Winchester Cathedral. His setting of *Remember, O thou man* opens with tone cluster chords voiced in typical pandiatonic fashion. As soon as the expectation of a generic white-note piece is established, Pacey moves in very different directions, adding strong chromatic spice and reclaiming the tonal landscape for his own purposes. Sopranos and basses divide a couple of times, yet the four-part homophony isn't simple. Pacey's innovative harmonic language moves quickly, requiring singers to maintain keen alertness. Melodic tritones and twisting lines tracing linear cross-relations pose plenty of challenges. For choirs willing to take the time, this version of a familiar Advent text is a terrific addition to the repertoire.

Carl Jackson. *An angel came to Nazareth*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020492, 2015), 5 pp., \$3.30.

Robin Morrish, author of the *Sinful Adam* text, provides an Annunciation text that makes more than passing reference to Sabine Baring-Gould's paraphrase of the Basque carol. Like *Sinful Adam*, the theological approach is standard, perhaps even old-fashioned. The original tune is a bouncy, rollicking carol with effective ritornello effects in

the organ. The simplicity of the choral parts, frequency of unaccompanied passages, and modest organ part makes this another candidate for organist/directors. The engaging tune and brisk pacing makes this a solid choice for any choir of any size or sophistication.

June Nixon. *Gabriel's message*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020527, 2016), 6 pp., \$3.30.

Nixon is characteristically imaginative in her approach to Baring-Gould's text and the Basque melody. A gentle descending line in the organ sets the stage for an unaccompanied first verse with a few expert changes in the harmonization that, matched with the relaxed pacing, brings a refreshing view of the familiar carol. The organ provides only interludes between unaccompanied verses one and two, then it accompanies sopranos with piquant effect. The music builds to a strong final verse with lower voice melody and two-part soprano descant. The organ reduces quickly, making way for a final unaccompanied echo of "Gloria" that fades into a whisper.

Robert McCormick. *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*, SSATB, unacc. (Encore Publications, 020429, 2012), 2 pp., \$2.60.

This simple, very straightforward setting of Wesley's text wastes no time, and while it breaks no new ground, it also provides an option useful in many Advent contexts. The music is entirely Aeolian without a single chromatic or tonal inflection. Sopranos sing the outer verses in unaccompanied melody. Lower voices join the soprano melody in verse two with a wordless, sustained accompaniment. The third verse melody is given to soprano and tenors in octaves with first sopranos, altos, and basses in a wordless accompaniment that steps up the motion and intensity. Altogether, the four verses comprise a compact setting that furnishes many rewards beyond the small amount of effort needed to learn the notes.

Bryan Kelly. *On Christmas Night*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020452, 2013), 7 pp., \$3.30.

Kelly's arrangement reflects the composer at his sassiest. His hallmarks, such as accented dissonances, crunching

harmonies, and a seemingly effortless compositional craft, all combine to extraordinary effect here. A jaunty organ introduction makes way for the first verse by unaccompanied choir. The organ re-enters with a modified repetition of the opening, leading into the second verse where off-beat acciaccatura chords propel unison voices, first treble then bass. The verse smoothly shifts from F major to A-flat with a surprise but no awkward jolt. The following verse responds by entering in B-flat. Throughout all this peripatetic motion, the logic seems undisturbed. Each harmonic turn merely heightens the unbridled joy. The fourth verse returns to a stable F major with playful running accompaniment and unison voices. A daring "Amen" ends the piece with a sforzando bang. For all the harmonic hijinks, the setting is of only moderate difficulty for the choir. This arrangement was featured in the 2016 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, and it is sure to become a staple in the repertoire.

Mark Swinton. *The darkest midnight in December*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 20541, 2016), 5 pp., \$3.30.

This haunting carol, of ambiguous Irish or English origin, has gained some greater exposure after its inclusion on New York Polyphony's debut album, *I sing the birth*, in an arrangement by the ensemble's bass, Craig Phillips (under the pseudonym Alexander Craig). A flexible beat pattern, freely mixing triple and duple meters, yields an improvisatory feel to the tune, while its unrelenting minor mode lends a plaintive mood. Mark Swinton composed this setting for the Bath Abbey choir, and it sensitively renders the text and tune through typical carol voicings. Swinton's care in treating the source material elevates the piece to profound effect. The organ accompaniment is an equal partner, and his registration suggestions do much to flesh out the character of the organ's role. The full choir ends the piece with an unaccompanied fifth verse, drawing the piece to a hushed close with the intimate image of "the God of love in Mary's arms!" In a season that can become bombastic and spill over into the saccharine, this gentle carol

arrangement can provide some needed relief while retaining a spark of quiet exaltation.

Philip Moore. *In dulci jubilo*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020477, 2014), 11 pp., \$4.20.

Moore uses R. L. Pearsall's translation of the German text in all its macaronic splendor, with the free-wheeling alternation of Latin and English increasing the sense of spontaneity. Moore is frequently adventurous with his harmonies and energetic with his rhythm, and both qualities are in full force here. While never threatening the home key of G major, Moore inserts borrowed chords from other keys, tonicizes other key areas, and flavors the piece with spicy chromatic touches. The organ part is, however, very accessible, and the choir sings the melody through most of the arrangement. True four-part choral harmony makes its first appearance in verse four for an unaccompanied stanza with more conservative harmony. The last verse poses Choir II singing the melody against Choir I singing a four-part descant with the words of "Nova, nova, Regis curia." The entire arrangement is long on excitement and fun and only moderate in its difficulty. It would make a great upbeat anthem for services of lessons and carols or a festive offertory on Christmas Eve.

Edward Higginbottom. *Angels, from the realms of glory*, satbSATB div., unacc. (Encore Publications, 020543, 2016), 11 pp., \$4.20.

This atmospheric take on *Gloria* and the associated James Montgomery text is an effect piece rather than a true carol setting. It requires a large choir to sustain its expansive chord voicing. The opening tempo marking is "Dreamy and distant," and the motion is predictably lackadaisical. Fragments of the melody appear in disjointed fashion with tertian chords repeating "Angels, angels..." The pacing varies smartly, building into moments of true sustained momentum while maintaining the pensive atmosphere. A final lengthy arabesque on the "Gloria" refrain with voices spilling over each other brings the piece to a jubilant crescendo with a final homophonic cadence on "in excelsis Deo."

Sarah MacDonald. *The holly and the ivy*, SSS, org. (Encore Publications, 020551, 2017), 9 pp., \$4.20.

This entertaining rhapsody on the traditional carol is also something of an effect piece, incorporating gently aleatoric elements, several solo passages, and choral accompaniments built on overlapping descending scales. As an inside joke, MacDonald has observed that the series of augmented sixth chords in verse four are an ironic wink toward Brexit (i.e. Italian, German, and French augmented sixths in quick succession in an English carol). The organ accompaniment provides solid support for the voices as well as contributing a few solo touches. This piece would be fun for children, provided that the ensemble is large enough and comprises solid singers. The music is largely diatonic (although it modulates several times), and individual lines are not difficult. The main challenge is keeping the very similar parts independent and moving alongside each other. Large treble choirs or women's ensembles would enjoy this imaginative setting.

Richard Lloyd. *Childing of a maiden bright*, SATB, org. (Encore Publications, 020528, 2016), 7 pp., \$3.30.

This spirited arrangement of a Medieval tune makes for a great carol. The melody dates from the eleventh or twelfth century, while the text is slightly later, from the fourteenth century. A bicinium organ introduction reappears in varied form between verses as a ritornello. The first verse is sung by unison treble verses, and the bass voices take over for the second verse. The third is four-part unaccompanied harmony, and the last is alto-tenor-bass melody with soprano descant. The conventional format doesn't feel ready-made or stale. The unfamiliar tune and Lloyd's direct presentation make this a serviceable and delightful carol. It taxes singers little yet makes a grand effect. Given the fine organ accompaniment and predictable structure, this anthem is a great candidate for combined organist-director, useful in carol services or as a festive anthem in other contexts.

Instrumental Music Reviews

BRIAN E. HARLOW

James Abbington, ed. *King of Kings, Volume 3: Organ Music of Black Composers, Past and Present* (2017, GIA Publications, Inc., G-9377), \$27.00.

Volumes 1 and 2 of *King of Kings* were released almost ten years ago in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Together they include music by such distinguished composers as Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Florence Price, Fela Sowande, and George Walker. Volume 3 is a welcome successor to these excellent collections with a particular emphasis on living composers, including some of the best-known black church musicians and educators today. Now is a good time to order this new release (or all three volumes) and learn some new music to present — whether for Black History Month, for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day weekend, or for use at any time.

With one or two exceptions, the music is equally useful for church services or recitals and is of moderate difficulty. Three gentle settings of hymn tunes and three animated settings of Spirituals are well suited for organ voluntaries. Postlude on *Go Tell it on the Mountain* by Norah Duncan IV is not difficult and makes an appealing postlude for a Christmas Eve family service. Opening with unison flourishes and fanfare motifs, it presents the refrain in a stately manner, the verse with flowing triplets on a softer registration, and finally a syncopated accompaniment with the melody on a solo reed leading to a final toccata. It also includes two half-step modulations in the gospel style. *Toccata on Good News* by AAM member Carl Maultsby is another fiery postlude. Opening with fanfares and flourishes, the majority of the piece employs repeated-chord toccata figurations that require a

relaxed technique and incorporate the melody of *Good News*. Although the piece modulates up a whole step through more fanfares, it concludes in the original key. The harmonic rhythm is slow despite the perpetual motion of sixteenth notes. Driving rhythms based on a second spiritual, *Ain't That Good News* propel the piece to a final fanfare. André Thomas' Fantasy on *Walk Together, Children* transfers a pianistic gospel style to the pipe organ. A partial registration of flutes with tremulant (I'd probably include a 2') evokes the Hammond organ. Excitement is generated by repetition of similar figures throughout. Written in a style familiar from Thomas' choral music and suitable for a postlude, it includes an active pedal part and harmonies dominated by seventh chords. Another fine postlude is *Jubilate* by Fela Sowande, one of the most celebrated African composers of art music of his generation. Born in Nigeria in 1905, he studied and lived in London and later moved to the United States. His piece incorporates a Nigerian melody over an ostinato in the central section. Hymn preludes include *Bread of Heaven* by William B. Cooper, organist of St. Philip's and St. Martin's Episcopal Churches in Harlem, New York City; *His Eye is on the Sparrow* by Carl Haywood, a leading church musician (another AAM member) and Director of Choral Activities at Norfolk State University in Virginia; and *Prelude on I Am Thine, O Lord* by Monte Thomas, a Detroit organist with a D.M.A. from the University of Michigan. The Cooper piece is in the late-Romantic style with harmonies that become more and more adventurous during the development section. The latter two incorporate seventh-chords characteristic of traditional gospel music but use them in different ways. Thomas's piece is harmonically rich; for example it includes an extended circle of fifths sequence using seventh chords. Haywood's version of *His Eye is on the Sparrow* is wide-ranging, increasing in energy and dynamics as the piece progresses before suddenly breaking off into a tranquil ending.

The non-hymn-based works in this collection are especially well crafted. Trevor Weston grew up in the choir of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue

and is a gifted composer of choral and organ music who understands how to write effectively for the instrument. *Variations on a Theme by Ellie* was written for the wedding of Ellie Weston Forbes. The accompaniment is based on parallel intervals—sometimes thirds, sometimes fifths, sometimes sixths, supporting a gentle melody based on seconds and thirds. A scherzo-like middle section leads to a climax with a chant-like melody in the pedal. After this the original theme is presented up a half-step and then in the tonic with chromatic alterations. It is a well-unified composition that would also be useful as a prelude. Uzee Brown, Jr.'s *Churchyard Chatter* uses serial techniques to evoke the hubbub and gossip of a churchyard. Despite the title, I don't see this as piece for performance at a liturgy, but as an enjoyable recital piece. It is brief and not overly difficult, though it needs careful preparation and articulation.

This book is presented in a convenient spiral binding on good quality paper and includes biographical notes about each composer as well as biography of the dedicatee, Wendell P. Whalum, for many years a professor at Morehouse College and organist at several Atlanta churches. Also included are the tables of contents for Volumes 1 and 2 of *King of Kings*. Editor James Abbington writes, "It is our hope that this collection will increase appreciation for the work of these composers, inspire new compositions for the organ, assist organists in their work of enhancing worship... and ensure the continued prominence of the organ as the king of instruments in the worship and praise of the King of Kings!" I commend GIA for their advocacy of these important composers and encourage us all to represent the full breadth of our church when we are selecting music for worship.

Recording Review

MARJORIE JOHNSTON

All-Night Vigil, Op. 37: Sergei Rachmaninoff. Peter Jermihov, Conductor; Glorie Dei Cantores, Richard K. Pugsley, Director; joined by members of The St. Romanos Cappella, The Patriarch Tikhon Choir, The Washington Master Chorale; Richard K. Pugsley, Producer; Keith O. Johnson, Recording Engineer and Mastering (Paraclete Recordings, 2017 Arts Empowering Life Foundation, Inc., paracletepress.com), \$28.99; \$24.21, Amazon.com; see Apple Music and other audio streaming options.

This revered a cappella work is commonly referred to as "Rachmaninoff Vespers," but Rachmaninoff himself called it *Glavneysbiya pesnopeniya "Vsenoshchnogo Bdeniya,"* meaning "The Most Important Hymns of the *All-Night Vigil*." It's a grouping of liturgical hymns and canticles from two services, Vespers and Matins. They are combined into the All-Night Vigil that is meant for Saturday evenings or for the eve of major feasts in preparation for the Divine Liturgy the following morning. Of course, the *All-Night Vigil* does not fit practically into sacred services and it is now known as a concert piece. Some believe it should be reserved only for professional choirs with spectacular intonation and exceptionally low basses (plus imports). Low basses travel all over their respective regions to perform this piece with different ensembles, and are known as "Octavists."

The other approach—the one taken for this recording—puts the focus on authenticity. This disc boasts a fair number of professional singers combined with singers for whom the Divine Offices of Christian life are a daily practice. This is very much in line with the première performance

of the work, sung by the Moscow Synodal Choir, and conducted by Rachmaninoff's friend and classmate, Nikolai Danilin, in 1915. The highly respected Musica Russica edition of Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* even offers an Audio Diction CD to improve the quality and integrity of all performances, whether professional or amateur.

Rachmaninoff was not known for his choral catalogue, and his other large, a cappella sacred piece, the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Op. 31), left him dissatisfied. When he left Russia in 1917, he turned his attention away from composing to concertizing as a pianist and to conducting. (I'm guessing that a few AAM members may have heard Rachmaninoff or known people who heard him in recital during the first half of the twentieth century). This change of course, soon after the completion of the *All-Night Vigil*, further distinguishes it as an important opus in the composer's body of work.

Ten of the fifteen movements are based on Greek, Kievan, or Znamenny chants. (Znamenny is known as a system of pitch notation for Orthodox chant; it is based on the word *znamya*, meaning "sign"). The remaining five movements (nos. 1, 3, 6, 10, and 11) are freely composed with such expertise about the range and style of ancient chant, that they are indistinguishable from the chant-based movements. In recent program notes on the work, Richard E. Rodda noted that Rachmaninoff's friend, Joseph Yasser, called these five movements "a conscious counterfeit of the original."

Diction is paramount when singing such rich, sonorous music or it all morphs into a lush, but indistinct sound. Surprisingly, the choir's diction sounds the slightest bit muffled on this recording, and I tried it on three sound systems. However, based on the Russian-sounding names of the singers on this disc and the artists involved in its production, I suspect this is the result of the acoustics in which it was recorded, or the placement of the choir. The intonation is reliable, and there are only a few times when one is reminded that this is not a fully professional choir. All of the rubato and the dynamic nuances are well handled

and musically delivered. Soloists Mariya Berezovska, mezzo-soprano, and Dmitry Ivanchenko, tenor, have substantial careers, including soloist positions with the National Opera of Ukraine in Kiev. They are superb on this recording, as is the professional-quality bass Vadim Gan, who intones the chant lines intended for a deacon.

The artists and administrators involved in producing this recording are extremely dedicated. I admire Richard Pugsley's varied talents, including his tireless work as Director of Gloriam Dei Cantores. I've had pleasant email exchanges with Paraclete Recordings Label Manager, Sr. Genevieve Cleverly, and I've been learning more about Mo. Peter Jermihov, an American conductor specializing in Russian music. A few of my former colleagues at the Chicago Symphony played under his direction in the "Millennium Symphony" for a symposium about ten years ago, and he is known for his commitment to the East-West cultural exchange that many artists in that city support. His liner notes for this CD affirm his scholarship

and his enthusiasm, and were a pleasure to read.

Many factors must be addressed when offering the *All-Night Vigil*, among them: diction coaching, intonation, tempo choices (not noted by the composer), and—as Mo. Jermihov points out—an understanding of the liturgical context. As an AGMA union singer, who has sung the work several times in performance, I listened to this recording with a critical ear and I consider it more than worthy of sharing with my AAM colleagues.



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