

Arthur Honegger's *King David*

Francis Poulenc's *Gloria*

Performed July 2, 1997

In 1921 the Swiss playwright René Morax was searching for someone to write incidental music to his play *Le Roi David*, with which he intended to reopen his Theatre du Jorat in the village of Mézières in the Swiss Alps. At the recommendation of the conductor Ernest Ansermet, he turned to a young and relatively unknown Arthur Honegger. Honegger immediately agreed to the project since it afforded him the opportunity to be a "Biblical" composer, and he completed the twenty-seven musical episodes in two months. The music was an instant success, firmly establishing Honegger's reputation as a composer. Honegger combined the music with a narrative written by Morax linking the musical numbers together and presented *Le Roi David* in concert form as a "symphonic psalm" in 1923, which is the form in which it is invariably performed today. The use of the narrative to connect musical sections evidently appealed to Honegger and he employed it in a number of his subsequent choral works.

The original scoring of *Le Roi David* is for a very small orchestra of sixteen players, that being the forces available at the time in Mézières. And because Honegger originally intended *Le Roi David* as incidental music, most of the individual sections are very brief and are written with broad, theatrical gestures. Honegger turned these necessities into advantages. Individual instruments are prominently displayed, as is the trumpet in No. 17, which adds a very unusual contrast and color to a unison, anthem-like choral setting. The chorus is used in unison and antiphonally as well as in parts to vary the color. Honegger writes with great economy as well, for example suggesting a very Middle Eastern march with just two measures between the verses of No. 17. Even in the *Dance before the Ark*, which is the longest and most fully developed section, there are very abrupt changes in mood. Especially effective are the unexpected modulations which occur with the entrance of each new voice in the beautifully lyrical alleluias which close Nos. 16 and 27.

The narrative provides a rather sketchy account of the Biblical story of David. When the prophet Samuel, last of the judges of Israel, grew too old to administer his office, the people asked him to choose a king to rule over them. Samuel was offended, for he considered that the request reflected badly on his tenure as judge. The Lord, however, directed him to anoint Saul, a younger son in a minor house in the minor tribe of Benjamin. Saul initially had no desire to be king, but he soon discovered that he had an aptitude for kingship. He was a pragmatic ruler who trusted more in his own judgment than in the Lord's instructions as delivered by Samuel, which led to his downfall. Instead of killing every living thing in an enemy town as he had been directed, he allowed his men to take the best of the flocks as spoils. Samuel upbraided Saul, telling him that he had lost the Lord's favor and that the kingship would be taken from him. Then Samuel

departed, having been told by the Lord to anoint an even more unlikely candidate, David, whom he finds singing while tending sheep (No. 2, *The Song of David, the Shepherd*).

After Samuel departs, Saul begins to suffer from fits of depression. Thinking that music might help, Saul's advisors summon David. His songs do soothe Saul and he becomes a favorite at the court. Saul appoints him his armor bearer, which is how David finds himself with the Hebrew army encamped against the Philistines (No. 3, *Psalm: All Praise to Him*). David persuades Saul to let him meet the challenge of the Philistine champion Goliath, stunning him with a stone from his sling and then cutting off Goliath's head with his own sword. David returns in triumph (No. 4, *Song of Victory*; No. 5, *March*), with the people shouting that Saul has killed thousands and David ten thousands. This hyperbole is not lost on Saul, who begins to grow jealous of David's popularity, both with the Hebrews and within the royal family. He sends David on increasingly dangerous missions in the hope that he will be killed, and finally tries to kill David himself with his spear, but David is saved (No. 6, *Psalm: In the Lord I put my faith*).

David flees from Saul and seeks refuge with Samuel (No. 7, *O had I wings like a dove*). Saul pursues David, but is met by Samuel with a rather dour prophecy on the transitory nature of earthly power (No. 8, *Song of the Prophets*). David escapes to the desert, refusing to take up arms against Saul, and eventually seeks asylum among the Philistines, who, amazingly enough, grant it. The Philistines have gathered a large force against the Hebrews and Saul goes to meet them, arraying his army on the hillside of Gilboa. David had initially accompanied the Philistines, but they sent him away at the last moment, fearing treachery on his part. The Hebrew army prepares for battle, praying to the Lord (No. 11, *Psalm: God, the Lord shall be my light*), but Saul is privately worried. Desperate for reassurance, he goes in disguise to a necromancer and demands that she conjure up the spirit of Samuel, who had died in the interim. To her horror she does succeed in conjuring up the extremely angry shade of Samuel, who prophesies Saul's defeat and death. After the battle, a Philistine soldier takes Saul's crown and bracelets to David, who mourns the death of Saul and the defeat of the Hebrews (No. 14, *Lament of Gilboa*).

After two years of fighting, assassinations and negotiations, David has finally managed to unite the Israelites under his kingship (No. 15, *Song of the Daughters of Israel*). He has won several military victories, the most important being recapturing Jerusalem from the seemingly invincible Jebusites, who have held the city for many years. He establishes Jerusalem as his capital and there is a triumphant procession of women, priests and soldiers through the city gates as the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the city, preceded by David, who dances before it (No. 16, *The Dance before the Ark*). This section ends with an angelic prophecy that David's son Solomon will finish the temple and reign over Israel in peace.

David has now reached the height of his achievements (No. 17, *Song: Now my voice in song upsoaring*), but unfortunately he does not exercise the same judgment and moral probity in success that he did in adversity. He glimpses Bathsheba, the wife of his captain Uriah, bathing and is consumed with lust for her (No. 18, *Song of the Handmaid*). When she becomes pregnant, David arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle and marries

Bathsheba. The Lord sends the prophet Nathan to reproach David, who repents (No. 19, *Psalm of Penitence*) but nevertheless must be punished. Nathan prophesies that the child will die and that the sword will never again leave David's house. David prostrates himself, praying and fasting for nine days and nights that the Lord will spare his child, but to no avail (No. 20, *Psalm: Behold, in evil I was born*). There follows rape, madness and fratricide among David's children and his son Absalom finally raises an army to force David from the throne. David is forced to flee Jerusalem (No. 21, *Psalm: O shall I raise mine eyes unto the mountains?*). David gives his troops instructions that Absalom is in no wise to be harmed, but in the ensuing battle, Absalom is caught by the hair in an acacia tree and killed by David's general Joab (No. 22, *The Song of Ephraim*), much to David's sorrow.

Restored to power, David manages to offend the Lord again by ordering a census of the people, as if they were his own possessions instead of the chosen people of the Lord, and three days of pestilence is visited upon the whole land (No. 25, *Psalm: In my distress*). David, now old and weary, instructs Nathan to anoint his son Solomon as king and then dies. David's story ends with an angel paraphrasing Isaiah's allegorical Messianic prophecy of a flower blooming from David's stem.

See Michael Moore's [program notes for the Poulenc *Gloria*](#).

Program notes copyright © 1997 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. All rights reserved

[**Program Notes by Michael Moore**](#)