

Heaven on High

Performed December 13, 2008

Today's holiday concerts bring together several diverse works, all of which were inspired by Martin Luther's beautiful Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch (From Heaven Above.)* These include Felix Mendelssohn's rarely performed cantata of the same name, excerpts from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, and a setting of the hymn by Mendelssohn Club founder W. W. Gilchrist. There is also the premiere of a setting of the medieval carol *Resonet in laudibus* by Philadelphia composer Anthony Mosakowski, a reprise of audience favorite *The Dream Isaiah Saw* by Pittsburgh composer Glenn Rudolph, and of course, a selection of traditional carols.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was one of the most extraordinary figures of the sixteenth century: monk, priest, scholar, theologian, professor, linguist and translator, writer, religious reformer, hymnist and devoted husband and father. He was educated at the University of Erfurt, receiving a bachelor's and master's degree in philosophy in preparation for studying law, but his career took an abrupt turn in 1506 when he suddenly decided to become an Augustinian monk. Following his ordination, he was sent to the University of Wittenberg, where he earned a doctorate in theology. His career progressed rapidly: he was appointed to the faculty at the University of Wittenberg in 1513 and made district vicar for the Augustinians in 1515. Two years later, his career path took another abrupt turn when he posted his famous *95 Theses* on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. On their face, they were an attack on the sale of indulgences (promises of remission of sin and its attendant punishment), which had reached scandalous proportions in Saxony, but they also contained the foundations of a challenge to the Catholic Church's authority. Luther's *Theses* and his subsequent writings, in which he rejected a number of Church teachings and traditions as having no scriptural basis, were widely disseminated thanks to the recent innovation of printing, and found a receptive audience, especially in the German states. His defiance of Church authority was the spark that ignited the Reformation and had a profound effect on both the religious and political history of Europe.

Luther created a new worship service that encouraged more active participation by the congregation, and in particular congregational singing, which was all but absent in the Catholic services of the day. To that end, he wrote and published more than 36 hymns, including the Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch*, which may have been written for his own son. It was meant to be performed as part of a masque or play. The first 5 verses, which represent the announcement of Christ's birth, were sung by an adult dressed as an angel. The next 9 verses, which represent the response to this news, were sung by children. The final verse, a hymn of praise, was sung by everyone. First published in 1535, the hymn took its form and original melody from a popular song of the day, *Ich*

komm aus fremden Landen her (I come from foreign lands). It was republished in 1539 with the familiar melody in use today.

The translations of *Vom Himmel hoch* used throughout are those of Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878), who translated and published more than 120 German hymns. They are singing translations, meant to match the meter of the original German, but are both faithful and wonderfully poetic, and have become the standards used in many hymnals today. In addition to her translations, Winkworth was active in ministering to the poor and sick, was a strong supporter of women's education, and assisted in the founding of Bristol University College in 1876, which was the first college in the UK to admit both men and women equally.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1842) was an enormously talented and versatile composer, conductor and performer. He was the grandson of the famous Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who strongly promoted Jewish assimilation into German culture and society. Mendelssohn's father took this to its logical conclusion, converting the family to the Lutheran faith when Felix was a young boy and adopting the additional surname Bartholdy, which was the name of a family estate.

Mendelssohn began studying with Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Singakademie, when he was eight. He began attending rehearsals, eventually joining the chorus as a boy alto, switching to tenor when his voice changed. The Singakademie was unusual in that it promoted the choral music of the Baroque period, especially that of J. S. Bach, which had largely been forgotten. Zelter taught Mendelssohn composition and theory, drilling him in counterpoint, fugues and canons after the style of Bach, whose music had a profound influence on Mendelssohn's compositional style. When Mendelssohn was 17, he persuaded Zelter to allow him to mount a revival of Bach's monumental *St. Matthew Passion* with the Singakademie, a work which had not been performed since Bach's time a century earlier. After three years of preparation, Mendelssohn conducted the landmark performance in 1829. It was a tremendous success, firmly establishing Mendelssohn as a conductor and sparking a revival of interest in Bach's choral music that has endured to this day.

Mendelssohn was given a copy of a Lutheran hymnbook while in Vienna in 1830. He was struck with the beauty and power of Luther's hymns and immediately conceived a project to compose a series of cantatas based on the hymns. He began work on *Vom Himmel hoch* in October of 1830 and completed it the following January. The cantata remained unpublished during his lifetime and it is not clear if it was ever performed, although he did play through some of the cantatas privately for friends. Although he was only 21 when he wrote *Vom Himmel hoch*, it is by no means an early work. He had come into his mature style at a young age, producing unquestioned masterpieces since his teens (the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written when he was sixteen and the *Octet for Strings* followed a year later) and was in full command of his compositional technique. During the time that he was writing *Vom Himmel hoch*, he also completed such diverse works as his *First Symphony*, the wonderfully atmospheric *Hebrides Overture*, the bravura *G-minor Piano Concerto*, the secular cantata *Die Erste*

Walpurgisnacht, the first volume of his piano pieces *Songs Without Words*, and the sketches for both the *Italian* and *Reformation* symphonies.

Mendelssohn deliberately chose Bach as his model for sacred cantatas, and the music clearly shows Bach's influence in such things as the prominence of the hymn tune, which appears in all three choral movements, the wonderful bass counterpoint which accompanies the baritone solos, and the use of long vocal pedals. But the brilliant orchestration and beautiful melodies of the baritone and soprano solo movements is pure Mendelssohn at his finest.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was born into a family of notable musicians. His father was court trumpeter for the Duke of Eisenach and director of Eisenach's civic orchestra, and his uncle and older brother were both well-known organists. His first musical training was from his father, who taught him the violin and perhaps harpsichord. He also attended the Latin School at Eisenach, where Luther had been a student a century before, and attracted attention for his fine treble voice. He continued his organ studies with his brother Johann Christoph, but his training in composition was haphazard. He was largely self-taught, through the practical expedient of copying manuscripts of composers like Froberger and Pachelbel. He obtained his first position as a church organist in 1703 at the age of 18. He held a series of church and court appointments over the next twenty years, continually moving to positions which offered greater musical possibilities, larger salaries and fresh starts with new employers. Bach could be strong-willed, stubborn, intemperate and dismissive of musicians who did not meet his exacting standards. Congregations complained that his unusual harmonizations of hymn tunes made them impossible to sing; his disparaging comments about an oboist resulted in a fist-fight in the streets; his letter of resignation as court organist for the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar was so strongly worded that the Duke threw him in jail for a month before releasing him from his duties.

In 1723, he took up the post of Cantor (Director of Choirs and Music) in Leipzig, a post he was to hold for the remainder of his life. He was responsible for the music at all four of Leipzig's main churches, musical education of the students at St. Thomas School, direction of the municipal orchestra, and later, direction of the Collegium Musicum, an ensemble associated with the University of Leipzig which gave regular concert performances. In addition to these duties, Bach set himself the task of composing a cycle of cantatas for each Sunday in the liturgical year, and completed two such cycles in his first two years in Leipzig, nearly 120 cantatas. During his tenure there, he composed an astounding five complete cycles of cantatas, almost 300 in number. His relationship with the town council, however, was no less fractious than at his previous appointments. By this time, however, he had achieved a considerable reputation both as a composer, a virtuoso organist with an extraordinary improvisational ability, and an expert in organ construction, and had begun to receive honors like being named Honorary Court Composer to the Elector of Saxony, all of which afforded him a certain leverage in dealing with his municipal employers.

Bach composed the *Christmas Oratorio* in 1734. Although we think of it as a single work composed of six cantatas, Bach presented the individual cantatas one at a time over the period between Christmas and the Feast of the Epiphany. Bach recycled material from two secular cantatas composed in the previous year: *Sound, you drums! Resound, you trumpets!* (BWV214), written for the birthday of the Princess of Saxony, and *Hercules at the Crossroads* (BWV213), written for the birthday of the Prince-Elector of Saxony. Most of the congregation would not have heard either cantata before. Bach probably enlisted the help of his librettist Picander (pen name of the poet Christian Friedrich Henrici) in selecting text that exactly matched the rhythms of the original texts. Picander had provided the librettos for those two secular cantatas.

The chorus No. 24 is the opening movement of the third cantata, and it shows a little playfulness on Bach's part. It opens with brilliant trumpet fanfares and timpani which are echoed by the chorus and which belie the words of the text: "*Herrscher des Himmels, erhöre das Lallen, lass dir die matten Gesänge gefallen*" – "Lord of Heaven, hear our halting voices, let our feeble songs be pleasant in thy sight." The chorus No. 21 appears toward the end of the second cantata. It is set to the words the angels sang on that first Christmas night, "*Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will.*" Bach sets Luther's *Vom Himmel hoch* several times throughout the *Christmas Oratorio*. The chorale No. 9 closes the first cantata and presents the hymn tune in a relatively straightforward fashion, with each line punctuated by trumpet fanfares. The chorale No. 23 closes the second cantata. With its 12/8 meter, it has a wonderfully pastoral feel, very appropriate for a cantata that relates the story of the angel announcing the birth of Jesus to the shepherds.

The fourth version of *From Heaven Above* in this section is Mendelssohn Club founder William Wallace Gilchrist's 1898 setting. Gilchrist was a talented singer, organist, composer and conductor and one of the few prominent 19th century American musicians who was trained solely in this country. His wonderful gift for melody is displayed in this beautiful unison carol.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel is a medieval setting of the "O Antiphons," which were recited during the week before Christmas. Each antiphon contains a title for the Messiah: *O Emmanuel (God with us)*, *O Rex Gentium (King of the Nations)*, *O Oriens (Morning Star)*, etc. The first letters of the titles spell out "*ero cras – tomorrow I shall come,*" a typical medieval play on words. Louis-Claude D'aquin (1694-1772) was a French organist, harpsichordist and composer known especially for his virtuosity and improvisational skill. He was a child prodigy who played for Louis XIV at the age of 6, was appointed organist at Petit Saint-Antoine in Paris at age 12, and later outplayed Rameau to win appointment as the organist at Saint-Paul. The *Echo Nowell* was originally an organ piece, published as one of his *Noel Variations*.

Philadelphian Anthony Mosakowski has composed in a wide variety of formats, but is especially interested in electroacoustic and choral music. His choral music includes a setting of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*, a Latin mass for choir and Javanese gamelan and a setting of the St. John Passion entitled *The Passion for Good Friday*.

Mosakowski received his bachelor's and master's degrees in composition from Temple University and a doctorate in composition from the University of Durham in the UK, where he also directed the new music ensemble and the Durham University Chamber Choir. He has taught at West Chester University and is currently a music teacher and choral director at Villa Maria Academy High School in Malvern, where he conducts the Concert Choir, Madrigal Singers, and Handbell Choir.

The composer has provided the following notes: “*Resonet in laudibus* is a new setting of one of the oldest traditional Christmas carols. The original carol text and melody are known from a 14th-century German gradual and appear in many variants in both Latin and German, including the well-known *Joseph lieber, Joseph mein*. I have chosen to set two of the best-known Latin verses. In the first verse, the sopranos carry the melody, leading the choir in a lively, chorale-like texture with some polyphonic episodes, while the horn weaves its way between the vocal parts both reinforcing and embellishing the choral harmonies. During the first verse, there are some melodic hints at the original *Resonet* melody in both the horn and vocal parts. These hints foreshadow the appearance of the full melody in the horn as a cantus firmus in the second verse, first in longer, then in shorter note values, during which time the choir has a written-out repeat.”

Glenn Rudolph has been active as a performer, conductor and composer in the Pittsburgh area since 1978. A graduate of the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, he has been a core singer and Conducting Assistant with the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh under Robert Page and an Assistant Conductor with the Pittsburgh Camerata under Gayle Kirkwood. He served as tenor soloist and composer-in-residence at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and is currently choir director at Grace United Methodist Church in Natrona Heights. *The Dream Isaiah Saw* was commissioned by the Bach Choir of Pittsburgh in 2001. The text is taken from *Lions and Oxen Will Sleep in the Hay*, a poem by Thomas Troeger paraphrasing Isaiah's vision of universal peace and harmony. Rudolph was at work on the piece when the tragic events of September 11 unfolded. This gives an added poignancy to the music considering the appropriateness of the text, and *The Dream Isaiah Saw* is dedicated to those who lost their lives in that tragedy. Musically, the piece is constructed around a percussion ostinato that represents the presence of God. The choral parts gradually come into synchrony with the percussion, representing the realization of Isaiah's vision.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) was one of the most remarkable and enigmatic composers ever. He developed many of the techniques used in contemporary music, including polytonality, polyrhythms, and the creative use of dissonance for its own sake decades before they were popularized by Stravinsky. His music was largely ignored during his lifetime and he eventually abandoned music as a profession, becoming an insurance executive instead. His exquisite, unison hymn *A Christmas Carol*, written in 1897, combines his wonderful gift for melody with his love of unusual rhythmic patterns.

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