

# Honegger *King David* Wright *Vox Humana*

**Performed March 8, 2008**

There are few Biblical stories which offer the dramatic possibilities of the story of Saul and David. It brings together three of the most fascinating and fully drawn characters in the Old Testament: Samuel, prophet and last Judge of Israel, a stern, prickly traditionalist who privately blamed himself for Saul's shortcomings; Saul, the first King of Israel, a born leader, brilliant tactician, skilled administrator and shrewd politician who in the fullness of his pride substituted his own judgment for that of the Lord and thus lost the Lord's favor; and David, Saul's successor, charismatic, impetuous, passionate, a rare combination of poet, musician and warrior, whose own pride was tempered by a close and deeply personal relationship with the Lord. René Morax turned to that story for his epic play *Le Roi David*, and he commissioned a young and relatively unknown Arthur Honegger to provide the incidental music. Honegger responded with a remarkable score which matched the dramatic sweep and energy of the story and firmly established Honegger's reputation as a composer. And continuing a Mendelssohn Club tradition of commissioning new music to be paired with masterworks, Mendelssohn Club presents the world premiere of *Vox Humana* by Philadelphia composer Maurice Wright.

Versatile composer Maurice Wright has written music ranging from chamber music to opera to film scores and video animations. His style reflects his diverse interests, which include both ancient and modern music, acoustics and computer technology. He has received commissions from such outstanding ensembles and organizations as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Emerson String Quartet, the American Brass Quintet and the Berkshire Music Festival. He is the recipient of awards and grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Fromm Music Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and his compositions have been recorded on the New World, CRI and Innova labels. Wright currently holds the position of Laura H. Carnell Professor of Music and Composition at Temple University's Boyer College of Music and Dance, where he also co-founded the Interactive Arts and Technology Laboratory and the Presser Center for Creative Music Technology.



*Vox Humana* is set for chorus and bass soloist with electronic accompaniment. While electronic music affords the composer access to musical effects which would otherwise be impossible to achieve, it is often difficult to realize in live performance. The electronic portion is often pre-recorded and the conductor must follow the tape, which can work against the flexibility of expression which is the hallmark of a live performance. Wright adroitly deals with this issue. While the basic electronic framework is pre-loaded into the

computer, it is called up from the keyboard in response to the conductor's cues. In addition, the sound of the chorus is continuously sampled and used to adjust the electronic sounds. This allows for a performance which is not only flexible and nuanced, but also is tailored to the sound of the ensemble and the acoustics of the hall. The composer has provided the following program notes:

“Vox Humana” is the name of an organ stop that simulates the human voice. Here the title refers to the united voice of a people weary of conflict who pray for peace. This commission is part of the “Song of Peace” project, which marks the fifth anniversary of the United States’ invasion of Iraq. Singers around the world participate by performing a setting of words that call for peace. According to the organization ([www.songofpeace.org](http://www.songofpeace.org)): “Song of Peace seeks to redirect public attention from the concept of war to the concept of peace, using music as the medium. The campaign is non-religious and non-political, and is not focused solely on the war in Iraq: it is a plea for peace for people affected by violence in Afghanistan, Burma, Congo, Darfur, Palestine, even the U.S. – and so many other places around the world.”

The two texts spring from vastly different cultures: Reformation Germany, and Taoist China. Martin Luther asks God to fight on our behalf, and to give peace and prosperity to all. In “Peace” (Hexagram 11), the *I Ching* teaches us that peace arises when heaven and earth unite, guided by a ruler who aids the people. These texts share a mindset that looks for order and calm in the times of chaos and shock.

The listener will hear three different kinds of computer sounds in this short work. First, the noise of random numbers, which can sound like a gentle wind, or, when filtered, focus to create a sustaining pitch. Then one hears short, intense sounds, which result from injecting a sharp impulse into a resonant system. The third family of sounds forms when the computer “listens” to the singing voices of the chorus, and modifies the vocal sounds to create a sound similar to an organ pipe. The common link is the use of filters, whose resonant emphasis transforms one kind of sound into another. The computer processes the choral sound as the chorus sings, and the result is sometimes surprising, even to its composer. The tonal language of the work draws on ratios and overtones to generate the all-inclusive chromatic collection of notes, and then to unite harmonic progressions through common tones.

This year marks the centenary of the opening of the Theatre du Jorat in the village of Mézières, just outside Lausanne, Switzerland. The theater was founded by Swiss playwright René Morax, along with his set-designer brother Jean and the composer and conductor Gustave Doret. Its design was highly unusual for a time when theaters tended to be ornate affairs. It was built entirely of wood in a style which harmonized with its rural surroundings (it is still affectionately called the “sublime barn”) and its interior was designed with acoustics and sight lines in mind. With a season that ran



*René Morax with Arthur Honegger*

from late spring through summer, it functioned as a sort of festival theater, showcasing plays written by Morax, and was initially staffed with amateur actors, musicians and stage crew.

The theater had been closed during the war years and Morax had planned a gala re-opening in 1921 featuring his newly written Biblical epic, *Le Roi David*. Music had always been an important component of performances at the Theatre du Jorat, but Morax had inexplicably waited until the last minute to engage a composer. At the recommendation of Stravinsky, who happened to be staying in a neighboring village, and the conductor Ernest Ansermet, Morax approached Arthur Honegger, who quickly accepted even though the play's opening was now less than four months away. Honegger began to set psalms for the chorus even before reading the play and completed the twenty-seven musical episodes in just two months. The play premiered on June 11, 1921 with the composer conducting the orchestra and chorus. It was an instant success, firmly establishing Honegger's reputation as a composer, and he immediately began to consider how to present the music in concert format. He combined the music with a narrative written by Morax linking the musical numbers together to create a "symphonic psalm" which premiered in 1923.

Honegger was born in 1892 in Le Havre, France, to Swiss parents. Although he maintained close ties with Switzerland, he spent most of his professional life in Paris and became an integral part of the avant-garde musical scene there. He was far from an unknown composer when Morax approached him with the *King David* commission. He was one of Les Six, a group of young composers who had gathered around the iconoclastic composer Erik Satie and the absurdist playwright Jean Cocteau. The name came from a clever title for a feature article which was meant to compare them to the Russian Mighty Five. The comparison was not very apt, for unlike the Russian Five, Les Six did not really share an esthetic or stylistic philosophy. They did collaborate as a group on several projects, but by 1921 the composers had begun to go their separate ways.



Honegger's original scoring for *King David* is for a small orchestra of sixteen players, comprising winds, brass, percussion and one string bass, that being the forces available in Mézières at the time. And because the music was intended as incidental music, most of the individual sections are very brief and are written with broad, theatrical gestures. Honegger turned these limitations into advantages. He continually varies the instrumental and choral forces to change the color and texture of the music. Individual instruments are featured prominently. With typical Gallic economy, he suggests moods and settings with short musical phrases. Honegger's musical style was greatly influenced by Stravinsky, which can be seen in the energetic rhythms of the music and the creative use of dissonance and polytonality. But even greater is the influence of Bach, which pervades the entire work. The orchestra often plays a rhythmic or melodic ostinato to accompany the chorus. There is a strongly chromatic flavor to the music, with modulations and chord

progressions occurring at half-step intervals. Bach's influence comes together most clearly in the concluding section, which opens with a wonderful chorale-like tune which resembles Bach but is pure Honegger. There is orchestral counterpoint accompanying the alleluias and a complex polyphonic texture as the chorale melody, the various alleluias, and the soaring solo soprano line are combined in a brilliant conclusion. Honegger's score is dramatic, colorful and intensely lyrical, and is one of the unquestioned choral masterpieces of the twentieth century.

Because Morax's narration provides a rather sketchy account of the Biblical story, some elaboration may be in order. Israel in the 11th century B.C.E. was governed by Judges, prophets raised up by the Lord. The people, believing that the lack of administrative authority placed them at a disadvantage, petitioned Samuel, the last of the Judges, to appoint a king. Samuel was somewhat offended by the request, since he felt it reflected badly on his tenure as Judge, and he had secretly hoped that Judgeship might become a hereditary office, blind to the fact that his son was venal and corrupt. Samuel must have felt privately vindicated when the Lord directed him to anoint Saul, a younger son in a minor house in the most junior tribe of Benjamin. Saul initially had no desire to be king, but he soon found that he had an aptitude for leadership. If Samuel thought that Saul would be a malleable protégé, he was soon disappointed. Buoyed by military successes in which the Lord delivered his enemies into his hand, he began to ignore the Lord's instructions communicated through Samuel, and the Lord finally withdrew his favor. Samuel departed Saul's court, instructed by the Lord to anoint an even more unlikely candidate, the young boy David, whom he found in the fields, singing and tending his sheep (No. 2, *The Song of David, the Shepherd.*)

While Saul managed to keep the fractious tribes of Israel united under his rule and to keep Israel's enemies at bay, he had begun to suffer fits of depression and madness. Thinking that music might help, his advisors summoned David. His songs did soothe Saul and David became a favorite at court. Saul appointed him as his armor bearer, which is how he found himself with the Hebrew army encamped against the Philistines (No. 3, *Psalm: All Praise to Him.*) David persuaded Saul to allow him to face the Philistine champion Goliath, and against all odds he slew Goliath after stunning him with a stone from his sling. David returned in triumph (No. 4, *Song of Victory,*) with the people cheering that Saul had slain thousands and David tens of thousands. This hyperbole was not lost on Saul, who grew jealous of David's increasing popularity. Saul's own son Jonathan idolized David, and his daughter Michal fell in love with David and eventually married him. Saul gave David command of his troops and sent him on increasingly reckless missions, which David always successfully completed and which only increased his popularity. In a fit of madness, Saul tried to kill David with a spear, but David was saved (No. 6, *Psalm: In the Lord I put my faith.*)

David fled from Saul and sought refuge with Samuel and the company of prophets in the desert (No. 7, *Oh, that I had wings like a dove.*) Saul pursued David, but was met by Samuel with a rather dour prophecy on the transitory nature of earthly power (No. 8, *Song of the Prophets.*) David escaped into the desert, refusing to take up arms against Saul even when Saul was delivered into his hands. He eventually sought refuge with the

Philistines, who, amazing enough, granted it. The Philistines had grown uneasy at Saul's increasing military power, and put together a large force to challenge him at the hillside of Gilboa. Not trusting David's loyalties, the Philistines sent him away. Saul deployed his troops, who prepared for battle by praying to the Lord (No. 11, *Psalm: God the Lord shall be my light.*) Saul, however, was privately worried. Desperate for reassurance, he went in disguise to a necromancer, the Witch of Endor, and directed her to conjure up the ghost of Samuel, who had died in the interim. To her unspeakable horror, she succeeded in raising the shade of a very angry Samuel, who prophesied Saul's defeat and the destruction of his house. The battle played out as Samuel prophesied. The Israelites were defeated and Saul and Jonathan were killed. A soldier took Saul's crown and bracelets to David, who mourned the death of Saul and the defeat of the Israelites (No. 14, *Lament of Gilboa.*)

After two years of infighting, assassinations and negotiations, David finally managed to unite the Israelites under his rule, defeat the Philistines and retake Jerusalem, which had been held by the Jebusites for more than a generation (No. 15, *Song of the Daughters of Israel.*) He made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem with a procession of women, priests, and soldiers, and he himself danced with abandon before the Ark of the Covenant (No. 16, *Dance before the Ark.*) David's impetuosity had already begun to sow the seeds of his downfall. Michal upbraided David that cavorting in front of the Ark wearing nothing but a loincloth was undignified behavior for the king. In a fit of anger, David banished her from his sight and refused to have anything further to do with her, even though an heir uniting the house of David and the house of Saul would have gone far to solidify his position as king. This section ends with the angelic prophecy that David will not accomplish his desire to build a temple for the Ark, but rather that the task will be given to his son, who will rule Israel in peace.

With the recapture of Jerusalem, David had reached the height of his accomplishments (No. 17, *Song: Now my voice in song upsoaring.*) Sadly, he did not exercise the same judgment and moral probity in success that he did in adversity. He glimpsed Bathsheba bathing and was consumed with lust for her (No. 18, *Song of the Handmaid.*) When she became pregnant, he had her husband Uriah sent to the front lines to be killed so he could marry her. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to reproach David, who repented of the evil deed (No. 19, *Psalm of Penitence*) but nevertheless had to be punished. The Lord decreed that their child would die and that the sword would henceforth never leave his house. David prostrated himself before the child's room, fasting and praying for seven days and seven nights that the Lord's punishment might be averted, but in vain (No. 20, *Psalm: Behold, in evil I was born.*)

David had taken many wives, after the custom of the time, and there was friction between the children of these various unions. David's first-born son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, and when David refused to punish him, Tamar's brother Absalom vowed revenge. He slew Amnon and raised an army which forced David to flee Jerusalem (No. 21, *Psalm: Shall I raise my eyes unto the mountains?.*) In the ensuing battle, Absalom was caught by the hair in an acacia tree and slain by David's pragmatic general, Joab, much to David's sorrow (No. 22, *The Song of Ephraim.*) With the country reunited, David

acknowledged that the people were the true source of his strength (No. 24, Psalm: *Thee will I love, O Lord.*)

Restored to power, David managed to offend the Lord yet again by ordering a census of the people, as if they were his possessions rather than he being their servant. David pleaded to be punished alone, since his was the transgression, but the Lord visited the people with three days of pestilence (No. 25, Psalm: *In my distress.*) Old, weary, and worn down by his tribulations, David instructed Nathan to anoint his son Solomon as king. David's story, and the music, ends with an angel paraphrasing the allegorical prophecy of Isaiah that the Messiah shall come like a flower blooming from David's stem.

Mendelssohn Club has a long history with Honegger's *King David*. Its last performance of the piece was with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Charles Dutoit at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts in 1997. Its first performance of the work, in 1937, was also a collaboration with the Philadelphia Orchestra and conductor Fritz Reiner, and introduced Philadelphia audiences to a young Rise Stevens the year before she made her debut with the Metropolitan Opera.

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