

Notes on the Program

by James Bagwell

Last month, *The New York Times* ran an article by Ethan Bonner entitled “Find of Ancient City Could Alter Notions of Biblical David.” The dateline was Khirbet Qeiyafa, Israel:

Overlooking the verdant Valley of Elah, where the Bible says David toppled Goliath, archaeologists are unearthing a 3,000-year-old fortified city that could reshape views of the period when David ruled over the Israelites. [...] The five-acre site, with its fortifications, dwellings and multi-chambered entry gate, will also be a weapon in the contentious and often politicized debate over whether David and his capital, Jerusalem, were an important kingdom or a minor tribe, an issue that divides not only scholars but those seeking to support or delegitimize Zionism.

Three years ago, the *Times* also carried a piece about a different archeological site, this one in East Jerusalem. Steven Erlanger wrote:

The find will [...] be used in the broad political battle over Jerusalem—whether the Jews have their origins here and thus have some special hold on the place, or whether, as many Palestinians have said, including the late Yasir Arafat, the idea of a Jewish origin in Jerusalem is a myth used to justify conquest and occupation.

The fact that King David remains a subject of debate in archaeology as well as politics suggests that his importance extends beyond scriptural accounts of his activities. Indeed, the debate is an ongoing battle that has caused considerable damage on many fronts. Since it centers on a figure whose actual historical existence may be tenuous, at this point we are left only with what we have: biblical accounts of a rising power, and a king with considerable political, military, and artistic attributes. A great story, with implications both ancient and modern.

Almost all of our knowledge about King David comes from four books in the Old Testament, or the Tanakh: I and II Samuel, I Kings, and Chronicles. David’s reign represents the formation of a coherent Jewish lineage, but he was also an important prophet who said, “The spirit of the Lord spoke by me and his word was on my tongue” (II Samuel 23:2). David also looms large in the New Testament, with the emergence of Jesus Christ, who is described as “the son of David.” David’s story is one of adventure, sorrow, and victory. Whatever may be genuinely true about him, he has been a figure of immense importance to Jewish and Christian history and theology.

David has also been the subject of several important works of art, such as sculptures by Donatello (c.1430-1440), Andrea del Verrocchio (1473-75), Michelangelo (1504), and Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1624). In literature, especially in the 20th century, David’s life has been depicted in several novels, including Thomas Burnett Swann’s peculiar biblical fantasy novel, *How Are the Mighty Fallen* (1974), and Joseph Heller’s 20th-century interpretation of biblical events, *God Knows*. There are several film depictions of David, including King Vidor’s campy *Solomon and Sheba* from 1959 (starring Yul Brynner as Solomon and Gina Lollobrigida as the Queen of Sheba—typical of the inspired casting of late ’50s biblical treatments).

Then there is the enormous amount of music based on the biblical psalms that are attributed to David, including a large number of choral motets composed during the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. Popular culture has also referenced David, including one of Leonard Cohen’s most widely recorded songs, *Hallelujah* (“Now I’ve heard there was a secret chord that David played, and it pleased the Lord [...] the baffled king composing Hallelujah”). Less successful was an ill-fated attempt in 1997 to create a Broadway show, *King David*, with lyrics by Tim Rice and music by Alan Menken.

Tonight's concert takes up the vast subject of David musically, beginning with an English anthem by Thomas Weelkes, and followed by two shorter 20th-century works, by Norman Dinerstein and Randall Thompson. The centerpiece of the concert is Arthur Honegger's oratorio *King David*, one of the cornerstones of choral literature.

Considered one of the most gifted English madrigalists, **Thomas Weelkes** (1576-1623) was also an important composer of English church music. He spent most of his life as a church musician, first at Westminster College. Sometime between 1601 and 1602 he was appointed organist at Chichester, only to be dismissed in 1617 for public drunkenness, which caused a scandal. However, his early years as a composer, during which he produced two volumes of English madrigals, were extremely fruitful. *Hosanna to the Son of David*, although impossible to date precisely, was likely composed during his time at Chichester. Weelkes does not directly quote the New Testament account of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9) but excerpts three verses and adds the Latin phrase "Hosanna in excelsis Deo." This decidedly non-Anglican text, coupled with the music's survival in four secular manuscript collections, suggests that the composer was writing for some courtly event. Scored for six-part chorus, this piece might remind the listener of the rich sonorities heard in the Venetian choral works of the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

When David Heard is perhaps the best-known work of American composer **Norman Dinerstein** (1937-1982). Dinerstein studied composition with a number of significant American composers, such as Lukas Foss, Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt, but considered the composer Arnold Franchetti, who was born in Italy and spent much of his life in the United States, his most important teacher. In addition to composing, Dinerstein taught composition at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, where he served for a time as Dean. *When David Heard* was composed in 1975 for the Hartt Chamber Singers, and was a winner of the 1976 Brown University Choral Competition. Dinerstein wrote: "The text of *When David Heard* is taken from the second book of Samuel and deals with King David's grief over the death of his son Absalom. The lines are simultaneously both personal and universal, and the intention of this setting is to incorporate both of these elements; the choral techniques used to achieve this end range from the directness of monodic passages to the complexity of eight-part textures." Like Thomas Weelkes, Dinerstein incorporates a rich harmonic palette, in this case to depict the horror of the death of a child. The piece is a deeply personal and heartbreaking composition.

Composer **Randall Thompson** (1899-1984) was a prominent figure in American choral music in the 20th century. In addition to his choral works, which include the popular *Alleluia*, he composed three symphonies and two string quartets. *The Last Words of David* was commissioned in 1949 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in honor of Serge Koussevitzky's 25th anniversary as Music Director. The piece takes its text from II Samuel 23:3-4 and exists in a number of versions including one for male voices, one with orchestra, and one with band. The most popular version is for piano accompaniment, which is what will be performed tonight. Typical of Thompson's deep understanding of choral music, the text declamation in this piece is enormously clear and direct. The "Alleluia" near the end is especially effective, using a hushed Gregorian chant-like melodic figure set contrapuntally. Thompson concludes the piece with the chorus singing "Amen" in block chords, while the accompaniment restates the principal musical idea heard in the beginning.

Swiss composer **Arthur Honegger** (1892-1955) worked within a considerable number of genres, including music for opera, ballet, and orchestra (especially well known is his symphonic piece *Pacific 231* from 1923). Honegger also made important musical contributions for the then "new media" of film and radio. He was initially associated with the French group of composers known as *Les Six*, which is curious, since he had little sympathy for the aesthetic they claimed. He especially loathed the work of their leader, Satie. Stylistically, Honegger did not pursue a purity of style. His essential aim

was to be “an honest workman [trying] to produce an honest piece of work,” as he wrote in the introduction to his opera *Antigone* (1927). As a result, he incorporates a variety of devices in his works, including Gregorian chant, jazz, twelve-tone techniques, and Protestant hymns. As a young man he heard the French musician André Caplet conduct a number of Bach cantatas. Honegger was especially taken with Bach’s chorales, which had a significant influence on him, and many of his works make references to chorale tunes, especially the trumpet part in the Second Symphony, and, most effectively, here in *King David*.

In 1921, the Swiss playwright René Morax (1873-1963) asked Honegger to compose music for a play based on the Old Testament account of King David. In its original version, the piece took more than four hours to perform, and contained multiple speaking roles and only a limited amount of music for chorus, soloists, and orchestra. In 1923, a reduced version was introduced, with only one narrator and the music playing a more central role. The subtitle “Symphonic Psalm” was later added to this version, which is being presented this evening. The work is scored for chorus, winds, brass, piano, harmonium, and percussion, in addition to soprano, alto, and tenor soloists.

King David consists of three large sections that follow the major events of David’s life. The first part centers on the dichotomy of hope and despair. The prophet Samuel describes God’s rejection of Saul and the emergence of a more powerful leader named David. The chorus, representing the nation of Israel, then sings in praise of this ruler-to-be. (In *King David*, Honegger assigns the chorus a number of specific roles, similar to Bach’s use of the chorus in his Passion settings.) Goliath’s entry is signaled by a short instrumental fanfare, and the chorus announces victory, to the accompaniment of the timpani. Next, David’s closeness with God is expressed in settings of four of his psalms. The first part of the oratorio comes to a climax with the evocative “Incantation of the Witch of Endor,” and ends with the “Lament of Gilboa,” where the vocal writing resembles Middle Eastern wailing songs.

Part II consists of two movements: an aria for soprano solo over a choral ostinato sung by the women, and the longest movement of the work, “The Dance Before the Ark.” This extended movement consists of a variety of musical styles, most notably the “Alleluia,” in which elements of Baroque style are reinterpreted through 20th-century ears.

Part III opens with music that suggests the early musical influence of Lutheran chorales on Honegger. Two of the oratorio’s lushest movements, “The Psalm of Penitence” and “Behold, in Evil I was Born,” are linked by similar melodic contours, creating a sense of culmination. In the final movement, “The Death of David,” Honegger proclaims David’s death by using the same “Alleluia” melody that closed Part II, but this time combined with a chorale-like melody. The whole work ends with the sense of joy hinted at in the beginning of the oratorio.