

## Notes on the Program

by Christopher Shepard

In the classic western distribution of instrument families—winds, brass, strings, percussion—there is some confusion about where the piano fits in. One need only open the lid on a piano and see all the strings to understand that the sound of the instrument comes from the strings vibrating. But as many of us learned in music class, the piano is also considered a percussion instrument because its sound is initiated when the hammers strike the strings. The Hornbostel-Sachs system helps clarify a little bit more. This taxonomy, which was codified in 1914 in order to accommodate the rising field of ethnomusicology, divides all instruments into four categories: aerophones, chordophones, membranophones, and idiophones (which produce sound by vibrating themselves). This system places the piano in the chordophone—string—category.

Wherever you feel the piano belongs, it is undeniable that the combination of piano and percussion produces a particularly effective and colorful ensemble. Even for those in the “piano as string instrument” camp, there is no doubt that the piano is at least a first cousin of the percussion family when heard alongside mallet instruments and the familiar battery of orchestral percussion instruments. Somehow, in this combination, the percussive and angular qualities of the piano are highlighted, and the more lyrical aspects of the instrument recede a bit from view.

In this evening’s concert, we present works written for choir with solo piano, four-hand piano, piano with percussion, and even a work that includes the harp, which might be considered the purest form of the piano—the strings alone, stripped of hammers and resonating soundboard. In this program, we are reminded that the piano is far more than just a tool for the choral rehearsal as a choir prepares for a choral-orchestral or *a cappella* (unaccompanied) program.

Although **Leonard Bernstein** became a household name for his career as a conductor, television presenter, and composer of Broadway musicals, he really wanted to be known as a composer of serious music. To that end, he composed many classical works, including symphonies and short operas, but it was his outstanding theatrical compositions, especially *West Side Story*, for which he was best known. Bernstein took a sabbatical leave from conducting the New York Philharmonic in the 1964-65 season, in order to focus more on “serious” composing. In the end, he didn’t produce any significant large-scale works during that year, but he did accept a commission from Chichester Cathedral in England to produce a setting of psalms for the cathedral’s Three Choirs Festival in the summer of 1965. That work has become one of the staples of the choral repertoire, a setting of sections of six psalms in their original Hebrew.

The cathedral’s dean, Walter Hussey, wrote Bernstein, “I think many of us would be very delighted if there was a hint of *West Side Story* about the music.” Perhaps this is what makes the *Chichester Psalms* so popular; the choral work combines both the playfulness and the lyricism of Bernstein’s most beloved stage work. In fact, the second movement includes more than just a hint of *West Side Story*: the men’s part in the center of the movement was originally written for the musical’s prologue, but it was later discarded.

At the end of his sabbatical year, Bernstein wrote a poem that appeared in the *New York Times*, which explained his year’s activities. He included this about the *Chichester Psalms*:

These psalms are a simple and modest affair,  
Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square,  
Certain to sicken a stout John Cager  
With its tonics and triads in E-flat major.

But there it stands—the result of my pondering,  
Two long months of avant-garde wandering—  
My youngest child, old-fashioned and sweet,  
And he stands on his own two tonal feet.

In our age of recorded music, it is sometimes difficult to remember the importance of music-making in the home in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No Jane Austen novel is complete without a musical soirée in which a well-trained young woman plays or sings for the assembled friends and family, a scene repeated through much of the era's literature. Piano duets were an important part of this bourgeois music-making. There are arrangements of countless symphonies from the period, designed for people to be able to experience the music that they loved from the concert hall in their own home. Although this repertoire seems to have been primarily recreational, there are examples of piano duets (and duos—using two different pianos) that entered the concert repertoire as well.

**Johannes Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes*** hold a special place in the choral repertoire as the earliest significant work for choir and four-hand piano, a genre that wouldn't really come into its own until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Brahms served as the conductor of several choirs throughout his life, and left to posterity a large amount of outstanding choral music—partsongs, motets, and of course the major choral-orchestral works. He published the first set of *Liebeslieder Waltzes* in 1869, a setting of eighteen poems by George Friedrich Daumer. Their great success is due largely to the folk-inspired musical idiom of the music, which used the exuberant Ländler dance and the Viennese waltz form as their points of departure. The melodies are graceful and simple, and eschew the kind of chromaticism that is so evident in many of Brahms' other compositions.

An English composer who has achieved great success particularly in the field of contemporary opera, **Jonathan Dove** has been praised for the accessibility of his music, the beauty of his vocal writing, and his ability to create colorful effects with small forces. His opera *Flight*, commissioned by the Glyndebourne Festival, has been well received in Europe, America and Australia, enjoying more than a dozen different productions. Dove brings the same sense of scope and color to his choral music, an oeuvre that includes an anthem written for the annual service of Lessons and Carols at storied King's College, Cambridge.

The London Symphony Chorus commissioned Dove to write *The Passing of the Year*; that choir gave the premiere of the work at the Barbican Centre in London in 2000. Edition Peters, Dove's publisher, later commissioned a new version of the work, originally accompanied only by piano, for its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is that version, for double chorus, two pianos, and percussion, which is performed this evening. Following a long literary allegorical tradition, the work is a song cycle that uses poetry about the changing of the seasons as a metaphor for the passing of our own years as we age. Dove uses poems by some of the greatest English-language poets—Blake, Dickinson, Tennyson, and others—in constructing this attractive and moving work.

The set of pieces that opens the second half of our concert uses piano accompaniment without percussion. Broadly speaking, these short works share an “American” musical language, alternately lyrical and rhythmic, all of them setting American poetry, and all but one written by American composers. “**Circus Band**” is an arrangement of one of **Charles Ives'** songs dating from the 1890s, a quickstep march that possibly recalls an annual visit by a travelling circus to

Ives' hometown of Danbury, Connecticut. **Samuel Barber** and **Gwyneth Walker**, though separated by more than a generation, are both known for the lyrical beauty of their compositions. Barber paid a certain price for this in his lifetime, since he was writing in a time when avant-garde composers were at the forefront of the musical elite. Time has been kind to Barber, however. One of the most sensitive composers for the voice, his operas, solo songs, and choral music have only gained in popularity since his death. Gwyneth Walker, a Connecticut native who is now strongly associated with Vermont, where she has lived for several decades, is a favorite of choral musicians. These two pieces are among her most popular choral works, beloved for their beautiful melodies and delicate textures. The only non-American work in this set is by **Phil Jameson**, whose "**Night Journey**" is a setting of Theodore Roethke's poem about travelling across America on a Pullman car in the dead of night. In keeping with Dessoiff's mission to nurture young choral musicians (as we do through our Singing Scholars program), we present this work by a very promising young Australian composer whose works have already been performed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The premiere performance of "Night Journey" was conducted by Simon Carrington at the Hotchkiss Summer *Portals* program in 2010, when Jameson was only 17.

The only piece on this program that does not fit the theme of pianos and percussion is **Henryk Górecki's "Totus Tuus"** ("I am wholly yours"). We include this *a cappella* work to mark the passing of one of the most highly regarded composers of recent years, whose *Symphony No. 3*, recorded by the London Sinfonietta and Dawn Upshaw in 1992, was an international sensation. Like his Polish compatriot Pope John Paul II, Górecki was a devout Catholic, and he wrote "Totus Tuus," a setting of John Paul's motto, to celebrate the Pope's visit to Warsaw in 1987. Alongside John Tavener and Arvo Pärt, whose *Passio* we performed earlier this year, Górecki's music is seen as an example of "holy minimalism."

In 1988, *New York Times* critic Alan Kozinn called **David Conte's *Invocation and Dance*** "a sparkling hymn to life" after hearing the New York premiere of the original men's choir version given by the New York City Gay Men's Chorus. Commissioned by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus two years earlier, *Invocation and Dance* stands alongside other important pieces of art, literature, and theatre from the decade of widespread deaths from AIDS in the arts community. The work is not only a testament to that era's bewildering sense of loss, but is also a defiant celebration of the lives lost. For this work, Conte turned to a powerful text by Walt Whitman taken from the *Death Carol* in "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd." Conte refashioned the piece for mixed choir in 1989. Rather than shrinking from death, the text welcomes death as the final step in a larger cycle—life, joy, love, and death: "Approach, strong Deliveress! / When it is so—when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead." In Conte's setting, the final word—*life*—wins the epic battle.