

## Program Notes

Though best known for his late oratorio *Elijah*, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847) showed an interest in sacred choral music at a very early age. At the age of ten, he began study of theory and composition at the Berlin Singakademie with its principal, Carl Friedrich Zelter. There the young composer first encountered works of J.S. Bach and later learned the *St. Matthew Passion* from a manuscript copy passed around among his friends. Though the work was considered unplayable by many of his contemporaries, in 1829 Mendelssohn, with Zelter's permission, conducted the academy ensembles in the performance of the Passion that catalyzed the Bach revival. Later in 1829 Mendelssohn began the years of travel around Europe that capped his thorough education. In Rome, he made a special point of attending services at St. Peter's Basilica for the full Holy Week of 1831. His letter to Zelter later that spring contains pages of detailed description of the music he heard—he praised worthy performances of the best music but he minced no words in criticizing music and singing which he found to be inadequate to the solemn occasion.

I cannot help it; it does irritate me to hear the most holy and beautiful words sung to such dull, drawling music. They say it is *canto fermo*, Gregorian, etc.; no matter. If at that period there was neither feeling nor the capacity for writing in a different style, at all events we have the power to do so now, and certainly one cannot find this mechanical monotony in the words of the scriptures. They are all truth and freshness, and, moreover, expressed in the simplest and most natural manner. Why then make them sound like a mere formula?

Over the following two decades Mendelssohn carried out his convictions in numerous sacred works for Latin, German, and English liturgies, as well as for concert performance.

Mendelssohn wrote his 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm in the spring of 1837 while he and his bride Cécile were on their honeymoon near Freiburg. The Psalm's opening movement, "Wie der Hirsch schreit" ("As the hart longs"), is a tapestry of rich invention. The head motive of the arching melody introduced by the altos reappears in succession as the sopranos, tenors, and basses enter. Though the character of the alto melody might lead one to expect fugal treatment, the motive begins a different melodic line in each voice. The resulting texture of overlapping vocal lines coalesces again and again in a chordal statement of the text "so schreit meine Seele, Gott, zu dir" ("so longs my soul for thee, O God"). The next two movements are both arias for soprano [in this performance sung alternately by the tenor and soprano sections of the chorus], the first ("My soul thirsts after God") slow and lyrical with a reed melody in counterpoint, the second ("For I would have gladly gone out with the people") lively, declamatory, and supported by a three-part women's choir. The fanfare-like fourth movement for full choir ("Why so sorrowful, my soul?"), with its repeated cry "Harre auf Gott!" ("Wait for the Lord!"), anticipates the music of Mendelssohn's 1840 *Lobgesang* symphony.

In the summer of 1843 King Friedrich Wilhelm IV appointed Mendelssohn as Director of the royal Berliner-Domchor (Cathedral Choir). With this ensemble in mind, Mendelssohn wrote several works for double choir. Psalm 43 ("Richte mich, Gott," op. 78, no. 2) was composed in January 1844 and revised the following March. "Heilig" was written in October 1846 as part of a larger work, never completed, to be titled *Die deutsche Liturgie (The German Liturgy)* and was first published in an anthology of the Berliner-Domchor's repertoire which also included works of Lassus, Schütz, and J.S. Bach. Psalm 43, "Heilig," and Psalm 100 for four-part choir ("Jauchzet dem Herrn alle Welt," also composed in January

1844) show Mendelssohn's keen awareness of his Renaissance and Baroque antecedents. They contrast massed choral effects (note especially the gradual accumulation of the grand proclamation "Heilig!") with passages of imitative counterpoint and call-and-answer antiphony.

Mendelssohn accepted conducting engagements in London for May through July 1844. In anticipation of that trip, he wanted to write a sacred work for an English audience. In late January 1844, Mendelssohn composed *Hear My Prayer* for soprano, chorus and organ to an English paraphrase of Psalm 55 by his friend William Bartholomew. R. Larry Todd writes that Mendelssohn "modeled his composition on the English verse anthem, with its alternating solo and choral writing, and had studied 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century examples of Purcell, William Croft, and others." After its premiere in January 1845 in a concert organized by Bartholomew, *Hear My Prayer* enjoyed tremendous success in England.

In mid-July 1844, the composer left London for Germany to conduct more concerts. In August, he was able to vacation at Soden. During that sojourn he learned of the attempt on the life of the king, and on 15 August composed "Denn er hat seine Engeln befohlen über dir" (to verses from Psalm 91: "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways"), which he sent to Berlin upon completion. This *a cappella* double chorus—later incorporated into *Elijah*—"approached the ideal of 'pure,' contemplative church music favored by the king. with antiphonal blocks of euphony, clear syllabic declamation of the text, and careful control of the dissonances" (R. Larry Todd).

The name of Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger (1839-1901) is not well known to American concert goers, yet his music is so well loved by influential German and Austrian musicians that there now exists a 50-volume critical edition of his complete works in score. One of the editors of that edition gives us a glimpse of Rheinberger's style by suggesting that rather than regarding the composer as "a lesser Brahms," we should think of him as "a South German Fauré."

A child prodigy who began playing organ publicly at the age of seven, Rheinberger began studies at the Munich Conservatory in 1851, eventually mastering counterpoint and fugue, as well as composing over a hundred works by 1859, when he finally deemed one good enough to be published as his Opus 1. At the end of his studies, he stayed on at the Conservatory, growing into one of its most legendary teachers. Hans von Bülow said "Rheinberger is a truly ideal teacher of composition, unrivalled in the whole of Germany and beyond in skill, refinement and devotion to his subject; in short, one of the worthiest musicians and human beings in the world." Among Rheinberger's students were Humperdinck, Wolf-Ferrari, Furtwängler, and the Americans Horatio Parker and George Chadwick.

As a composer, Rheinberger is best known today by organists and Catholic choirmasters. However, his output of secular songs and ballads for solo voices and/or choir is at least as large as his body of work for the church. And for his texts, Rheinberger turned to some of the same German poets whose verse had been set by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms. The poem *Die Nacht* by Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857) attracted Rheinberger's attention in 1859, when he set it as a simple strophic song for voice and piano. Twelve years later, the composer revisited that setting, transforming it in nearly every respect: harmonically, formally, and in terms of scoring and overall length. The solo voice became a four-part choir, and the accompaniment was rescored for a chamber ensemble of violin, viola, 'cello, and piano, whose delicate figurations evoke the hushed sounds of the nocturnal forest. The later version of *Die Nacht* is also harmonically resourceful: though a composition in D-flat major, it modulates to E major just before the fourth stanza's reference to the dawn ("the stars rise up and descend, when shalt thou come, morning wind").

As part of his duties at the Court Church of All Saints in Munich, in 1881 Rheinberger composed eleven motets, including the four which were published as Op. 133. Like many of his Catholic colleagues (Anton Bruckner among them), Rheinberger's instinct in composing for the church called for the harmonic language of his instrumental and secular vocal works. Nevertheless, from his earliest days in

Munich he was aware of the Cecilian movement, which advocated reformation of Catholic liturgical music after the “excesses” of the Viennese classical composers. The Palestrina style of 16<sup>th</sup>-century counterpoint was held up as an ideal; understandably, creative musicians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century regarded that model as an artistic straitjacket. So Rheinberger sought a middle ground, remaining mindful of liturgical requirements, while subtly manifesting his stylistic individuality. With the six-voice motets of Op. 133, Rheinberger clearly had the Palestrina model in mind (perhaps most notably in the second motet, *Meditabor*), yet each motet is--as wrote Theodor Kroyer--“a paragon of six-voice composition, nurtured in utmost freedom.”

The *Stabat Mater* Op. 138 originated in a detail of Rheinberger’s generally poor health throughout most of his adult life. For many years, he suffered a disability of his right hand, making composition increasingly difficult. His hand broke out with an open ulcer in the first half of 1884. Then in the summer he received therapy at the Wildbad Kreuth, greatly easing the pain in his hand. Rheinberger revealed to his wife that he had made a vow to the Mother of God that if his health improved, he would compose a *Stabat Mater* (his second). Of this setting, Sebastian Hammelsbeck has written that

the second setting is essentially a liturgical work, which does not draw undue attention to itself either by excessive length or by highly decorative features. Instead of the virtuosic combination of modern and ancient musical styles it is in a purified sacred idiom which has incorporated elements of all these styles, and which only the harmony of the day kept distantly in touch with the events outside the church....

Perhaps with a glance over his shoulder toward the Cecilians, Rheinberger composed an entirely unsentimental devotional work, which by its very restraint conveys an expression of the utmost reverence.

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