

PROGRAM NOTES

From his tenth through his sixteenth years, Maurice Duruflé (1902 - 1986) studied organ and choral directing at a choir school in Rouen, France, where he also assisted his organ teacher in services at the cathedral. The choral tradition of singing Gregorian chant at the Rouen cathedral made a life-long impression on Duruflé. By 1920, the young musician was studying organ (including that very French art of improvisation) with Charles Tournemire in Paris. After further studies with Louis Vierne, Duruflé entered the Paris Conservatoire, finally joining the composition class of Paul Dukas, where Olivier Messiaen was a fellow student.

From 1924 to 1947, Duruflé composed only instrumental music for the organ, orchestra, piano, and chamber ensemble. When he finally turned to choral music, it was to write the work for which he is best remembered today, the Requiem, opus 9, a masterpiece based on Gregorian chant melodies, and considered by many worthy to stand alongside the Requiem by Gabriel Fauré. About his Requiem, Duruflé wrote the following:

This Requiem is entirely composed on Gregorian themes from the Requiem Mass [that is, chants for the Requiem found in the *Liber Usualis*, compiled by the monks of Solesmes, France]. Sometimes the text has been respected as a whole, with no intervention from the orchestra, which plays a supporting role or comments on the proceedings, or sometimes I am inspired or even completely carried away, as for example in certain developments suggested by the Latin text, notably in the Domine Jesu Christe, the Sanctus, or the Libera me.

Generally I have above all sought to enter into the particular style of the Gregorian melodies and have been compelled to reconcile as far as possible the Gregorian Rhythm, as established by the Benedictines of Solesmes, with the requirements of modern barring. As far as the musical form of each of the movements of the Requiem is concerned, it is inspired by the form of the liturgy. The organ has only an episodic part to play. It intervenes not to support the choir, but only to underline certain accents or to bring momentary relief from the too human sounds of the orchestra. It represents the idea of peace, of faith, and of hope.

Duruflé's reference to the orchestra's "too human sounds" speaks volumes about his approach to the Mass for the Dead: serene expressions of consolation and hope are the norm, so that the few manifestations of personal grief and terror have an especially striking impact, as in the climax of the Domine Jesu Christe ("libera eas de ore leonis" – "deliver us from the lion's mouth"). In keeping with that norm, the harmonic and instrumental color with which Duruflé clothes the borrowed Gregorian chant melodies has much more in common with the impressionist Debussy than with the romantic requiem composers Berlioz and Verdi.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) studied composition with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music in the early 1890s while he made his living playing the trombone in opera and concert orchestras. In the late 1890s, because of his growing fascination with Hindu literature and philosophy, he found time to learn Sanskrit and translate twenty hymns from the Rig Veda, one of the four ancient holy books of the Indian religion which preceded Hinduism. In 1903, Holst gave up the trombone to compose full-time, but was soon forced to make his living teaching, first at St. Paul's Girls School in 1905, then adding duties at Morley College for Working Men and Women in 1907. He derived great pleasure from performing the English madrigal and choral literature and the music of J.S. Bach with the choirs of these schools. Expressing a sentiment many choral singers will corroborate, Holst wrote to his close friend and colleague William G. Whittaker about one of the Whitsuntide festivals he organized in the town of Thaxted:

I realise now why the Bible insists on heaven being a place (I should call it a condition) where people sing and *go on singing*. We kept it up at Thaxted 14 hours a day. The reason why we didn't do more is that we were not capable mentally or physically of realising heaven any further. . . . Music—being identical with heaven—isn't a thing of momentary thrills or even hourly ones. It's a

condition of eternity. As a girl in Thaxted said to me, "The great point of all this is that there is no reason why it should ever stop."

Though he often complained about having time for composition only on Sundays and during the month of August, there is no question that he gained from his school choirs a special understanding of writing music for choral singers. The four *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* for four-part women's voices and harp are a case in point (on tonight's program, the women of Chora Nova will perform the second and fourth of the four hymns). "Hymn to the Waters" spins a lilting melody over an irregular meter of four plus three beats. To the score of "Hymn of the Travellers," Holst added an explanation: "the God invoked in this hymn is the Guide of travellers along the roads of this world and along that leading to the next." That hymn's four verses feature an exotic modal melody in quintuple meter. Holst composed another set of four Rig Veda settings for male voices, of which the men of Chora Nova will sing the first two. "Hymn to Agni" (the god of fire) alternates unaccompanied declamatory melodies with harmonized gestures of praise in the full men's chorus, moving from the key of G through the keys of E-flat and C-flat before returning home to G. The word "soma" in the title of "Hymn to Soma" names a plant associated with the warrior god Indra; the juice of the plant is thought to have been drunk before battle. A.E.F. Dickinson described Holst's setting as "a rural pseudo-philosophic patter song," with contrasting jaunty and formal phrases.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) completed his *Chichester Psalms* for mixed choir, treble soloist, and orchestra in 1965, and soon after prepared the version for keyboard, harp, and percussion accompaniment we will hear tonight. The work's title honors the Cathedral of Chichester in Sussex, England, which commissioned the work for the festival held there each summer with the choirs of Winchester and Salisbury Cathedrals. The psalms Bernstein set in the work's three movements are the Hebrew texts of Psalms 100, 23, and 131, respectively, with interpolations of passages from Psalms 108, 2, and 133.

The *Chichester Psalms* is an uncomplicated and joyous manifestation of faith. The opening choral invocation from Psalm 108 demands "Awake, psaltery and harp!" A prescient psalmist might have continued with the words "temple blocks, rasps, and bongos," for Bernstein draws on all the resources of his musical language, including his music for the Broadway stage, to craft these songs of praise. Indeed, one of the melodies in the *Chichester Psalms* began life as a song later cut from *West Side Story*, and two others came from a never-completed musical version of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

After the choir's invocation, the first movement continues with a setting of Psalm 100 ("Make a joyful noise unto the Lord") as a wild dance in 7/4 meter—"in the Davidic Spirit," as Bernstein wrote in a letter to the Dean of the Cathedral of Chichester. In the second movement, the treble solo sings the 23rd Psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd") to a melody of childlike innocence (not without its blue note, however!) which is echoed by canonic imitation in the women's voices. The dreamlike atmosphere of this music is brusquely interrupted by the men's voices singing a rapid and sharply accented setting of the beginning of the second Psalm ("Why do the nations rage...?"). The women's choir re-enters, unperturbed by the violent outcries of the men, with the conclusion of Psalm 23 ("Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies").

The third movement opens with an anguished reharmonization for instruments alone of the choral invocation which opened the work. In his letter to the Dean of Chichester, Bernstein wrote that "there is a crisis; the tension is suddenly relieved, and the choir enters humbly and peacefully singing Psalm 131, complete, in what is almost a popular song (although in 10/4 time!)." At the end of this psalm, the choir sings a prayer for peace from the first verse of Psalm 133, a hushed restatement of the music with which the *Chichester Psalms* began.

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