

## PROGRAM NOTES

The works of Richard Strauss (1864-1949) most often performed today are the masterfully scored tone poems for full orchestra—composed between 1886 and 1903 (the gigantically orchestrated *Alpine Symphony* of 1915 stands as an isolated late example)—and the successful operas (the last thirteen of fifteen)—with masterful scoring supporting brilliant vocal writing—completed between 1905 and 1941. It is perhaps surprising then to learn that Strauss's earliest successes were with works he composed for a smaller ensemble of woodwind and brass instruments totaling thirteen players. His *Serenade for winds* (1881) attracted the attention of the legendary Hans von Bülow, conductor of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, one of the finest ensembles in Germany. Following his wind players' performance of the *Serenade* in February 1884, von Bülow asked Strauss for another work for the same ensemble. Strauss fulfilled the request with his *Suite*, Op. 4. In November 1884, after the Meiningen players had learned their parts, von Bülow asked Strauss on very short notice to direct a performance of the *Suite*, thereby launching the young composer's conducting career. Six months later, von Bülow appointed Strauss assistant conductor at Meiningen. The *Suite's* opening movement—a "Praeludium" reminiscent of Mendelssohn—is a stately yet charming sonata form with a very brief development section. Aside from the confident handling of the ensemble and the idiomatic instrumental writing, the piece hardly presages Strauss's late style.

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), best known for his ten symphonies of epic scale, nevertheless composed a number of more tightly constructed compositions for the church. Bruckner's earliest musical experiences were the choral and organ music he heard in services at the Augustinian monastery of St. Florian (near Linz, Austria), where he later became a chorister and, still later, the organist. His musical schooling included thorough study of the choral and organ works of Bach, and he remained involved with music for the church as organist of Linz Cathedral from 1856 to 1868 and organist at the Imperial Chapel in Vienna from 1868 until his death. From 1855 to 1861, Bruckner undertook exhaustive study of harmony and counterpoint with the Viennese theorist Simon Sechter. Thanks to Sechter, the music of Palestrina became a significant additional influence on Bruckner's mature church music style.

The earliest work on this evening's program is Bruckner's *Aequale* in C minor, composed in 1847 at the age of 23. According to *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, an *aequale* (*aequale* in Latin) is "a piece for voices or instruments all of the same type, especially one for trombones written for a funeral or other solemn occasion." In 1812, Beethoven wrote three equali for four trombones. Perhaps Bruckner's essay was modeled on those earlier works.

Bruckner's motet *Ave Maria* has its origins not only in the church but also in the tradition of secular male choral societies which flourished in Germany and Austria throughout the 19th century. While organist at Linz Cathedral, Bruckner conducted a *Männergesangverein* that bore the name *Liedertafel Frohsinn* (the "cheerfulness" glee club). Bruckner composed *Ave Maria* early in May 1861, immediately after the completion of his study with Sechter. The motet was first performed at the Linz Cathedral as part of a concert celebrating the founding of the *Liedertafel Frohsinn*; the distribution of the motet's voices across four men's parts and three women's parts suggests that the glee club was joined by a small women's choir at the premiere. This early masterpiece opens with the pure sound of F-major triads in the women's voices. Men's voices initiate a modulation to the distant bright chord of A major, with which the entire choir sings the word "Jesus." The full choir concludes the motet with a development of the opening material.

Bruckner composed his second Mass (in the key of E minor) in the autumn of 1866, on commission from Bishop Franz Josef Rudigier, who wanted a mass for the consecration of the Votive Chapel of the new cathedral then being built in Linz. Due to delays in construction, the mass was not premiered until 29 September 1869 (Michaelmas Day). There is some disagreement among scholars about the reason for the mass's wind instrumentation: whether it was occasioned by what was essentially an outdoor performance at an unfinished cathedral, or whether it was an intentional return to an more austere pre-classical model of music in the church (for example, the music that the Gabrielis wrote for the cathedral of San Marco in Venice). Whatever the reason, Bruckner clearly intended the E-minor Mass for liturgical use: he did not compose the first lines of text in the Gloria and the Credo, instead leaving those incipits to be sung by the precentor in Gregorian chant. Of the music in this mass, Rüdiger Bornhöft has written that

...the uniqueness of the E-minor Mass resides in its blend of the ancient Palestrina style and a modern nineteenth-century treatment of its instruments. With this work, Bruckner successfully combined several styles in exemplary fashion and with consummate mastery into a unified whole. The expressive orchestral writing has largely been subsumed in the sound and the compositional fabric, not least because of the remarkable scoring: a four- to eight-voice mixed chorus accompanied by fifteen wind and brass instruments (without flutes or tuba). These timbral prerequisites left an indelible mark on the character of the entire work.

Bruckner dedicated his 1879 motet *Os justi* to Ignaz Traumihler, the music director at the Abbey of St. Florian and an enthusiastic member of the Cecilians, the nineteenth-century movement that tried to return church music to its roots in plainchant and the *a cappella* purity of the Palestrina style. Composed for the feast of St. Augustine (the patron saint of St. Florian), *Os justi* is in the Lydian mode (on the piano, this mode would comprise a white-note scale beginning on F), another link to the plainchant repertory. According to Duncan Ferguson, in *Os justi* "other trademark Bruckner qualities are here in force: points of imitation, dynamic contrast, and pauses for breath (as much for the listener as for the performers)." The motet concludes with a plainsong *Alleluia*.

In 1885, Bruckner interrupted work on his Eighth Symphony to compose *Ecce sacerdos* for the thousandth anniversary of the Diocese of Linz. His use of trombones with the choir and organ continues a tradition in Austrian and German church music which, again, can be traced back to the Gabriellis in Venice. These instruments offer their most overt support to the chorus during its declamatory passages at the opening of the work and at the text "Ideo jurejurando" ("Therefore by an oath"), where Bruckner's bold juxtapositions of triads, built on roots a major third apart, create startling harmonic contrasts. Interspersed with these declamations are choral passages which emulate sacred works of earlier eras: polyphony and, ultimately, plainsong.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) composed *Gesang der Parzen* ("Song of the Fates") in July 1882. The last of three of his works for chorus and orchestra with texts inspired by Greek antiquity, *Gesang der Parzen* sets the monologue of the Priestess from Goethe's play *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. The Priestess speaks of the unbridgeable gulf between mortals and immortals, and of the inevitable human suffering caused by the arbitrary judgments of the gods. In Brahms's setting, the key of D minor is further darkened by the six-part chorus in which there are two alto parts and two bass parts. The instrumental introduction features a three-note figure (short-short-long) that is varied rhythmically throughout the work. The choir's opening stanza ("In fear of the gods shall ye dwell, sons of men") is a refrain that recurs between contrasting episodes, in the manner of a rondo. Two major-key stanzas only serve to heighten the grim mood of the minor key when it returns. Calum MacDonald has written that "late in life, Brahms was moved to produce one of his most powerful, compressed, and monumental expressions of tragic grandeur." Of the conclusion of *Gesang der Parzen*, MacDonald observes that "the coda is notable not only for its spine-chilling scoring but also for the extraordinary harmonic circularity by which it at last attains its final hollow, tenebrous D minor."

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