

## PROGRAM NOTES FOR MARCH 2024

### **Sulpitia Cesis** (1577-?) — *Cantemus Domino*

Sulpitia Cesis entered the convent of Saint Geminiano in Modena in 1593 at the age of 16. At 42, she published her only known work, a volume of *Motetti Spirituali* containing 23 motets for 2-12 voices. This set of pieces was primarily written for nuns to perform and enjoy in their own convents. At the time, a number of restrictions controlled what instruments were allowed in convents, although these rules were not always enforced. Cesis did have access to instruments and was known as an excellent lutenist.

The text for *Cantemus Domino* was adapted from the hymn of praise sung by Moses and the Israelites after the parting of the Red Sea, found in the book of Exodus. Emotionally, the piece moves between joy, thankfulness, reverence, triumph, and resolve. A section in triple meter signifies dancing in joy. Expansive places with longer note values denote gratitude and reverence, while sections with faster note values indicate excitement for a new life.

The setting of the text "*iste Deus meus*" (this is my God) shows the unity of many people feeling the same personal connection to God all at once. The final iteration of "*et exaltaboeum*" (and I will exalt Him) builds into an expansive final cadence that combines resolve, triumph, praise, and reverence - all in one statement.

### **Christina Whitten Thomas** (b. 1979) — *Take Peace*

Christina Whitten Thomas is particularly committed to writing for the voice and is passionate about working with contemporary poets and original texts. Her works have been performed throughout the United States, including premieres at Carnegie Hall, the Lincoln Center, and the Disney Concert Hall. Seraphim has sung a number of her pieces and commissioned *The Deceiver* from her in 2018.

Thomas wrote "Take Peace" when she was still in high school, and it was her first published piece. She writes, "Upon reading this poem, I was immediately taken with the universal relevance of its timeless message. The text is simple and straightforward, yet it touches the soul and encourages us to look at life from a different angle. The music for the first two stanzas is a contemplative invitation to personal reflection. As the text explains 'there is radiance,' the chorus expands in range and intensity, stressing the word 'glory.' The chorus returns to an intimate level as the words 'take peace' are repeated, reinforcing the message. The first stanza returns at the end, a tranquil reassurance that peace resides within each of us."

In researching the text, the composer found evidence it may have been written by Ernest Temple Hargrove (1870-1939). It is unknown why it was published in 1911 under the name of Fra Giovanni, a 16th century monk.

**Edie Hill** (b. 1962) — *We Bloomed in Spring*

Edie Hill wrote *We Bloomed in Spring* in 2014, during her time mentoring young composers through The Schubert Club's Composer Mentorship program. A winner of multiple awards, fellowships and grants for her compositions, she counts mentorship as integral to her life as a composer.

The lyrics for this piece come from a translation of a text by the 16<sup>th</sup> century nun, mystic, writer, and reformer, Teresa of Ávila. She experienced visions and mystical episodes that inspired her to write extensively about contemplative practices. Teresa used the metaphor of "watering a garden" for the practice of mystic prayer throughout her writings, and so the metaphor of earth-bound souls as flowers in her poem "We Bloomed in Spring" follows easily. She calls life and death "apparent," implying they are mere illusions that will fade away when the soul fully realizes it is not a separate thing from God and thus cannot truly die.

Hill's setting for double SATB choir is soft, alternating sections of delicate polyphony with places where the full choir comes together to underline a thought. In the polyphonic sections, newly entering voices continue and build on the voices that came before, creating a sense of growth and continuity among the eight parts. The mood is contemplative, with moments of mystical joy.

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) — *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*

JS Bach needs little introduction. Considered one of the greatest composers of all time, he can claim credit for over 1,000 pieces of music including the *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*, the *Brandenburg Concertos*, and the *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*.

Bach's writing was inherently instrumental, rather than vocal, which can make it quite challenging for singers! This double choir motet is no exception, requiring every voice to operate in an instrumental manner, at times with the ferocity of a violin's bow, the precision of a trumpet's valve, or the intensity of rolling timpani.

The first movement is an exuberant setting of the first three lines of Psalm 149. It opens with the first choir introducing the spirited melodic material at the very outset, and the second choir providing the choral foundation for the theme. These roles are swapped between the two choirs throughout the movement until the sopranos introduce the fugue theme "*Die Kinder Zion*" (the children of Zion), completing the movement with a faithful statement of praise to the mighty King.

**Maurice Duruflé** (1902–1986) — *Gloria* from *Messe 'Cum Jubilo'*

Maurice Gustave Duruflé was a French composer, organist, musicologist, and teacher, best known for his setting of the Requiem Mass. As a child chorister, he developed an early and deep appreciation for the sound of the organ and a love for Gregorian chant. Duruflé's professional career was cut short when he suffered severe injuries in a car accident in 1975, from which he never fully recovered.

One of few liturgical works for baritone voices, *Messe 'Cum Jubilo'* was originally scored for full orchestra, but Duruflé also created a version with organ accompaniment. His setting of the "Gloria" begins with intense and explosive chords on the organ and the singers in the higher parts of their range. The calmer middle section is a reverent prayer for mercy, and the final section builds to an exuberant and glorious conclusion. Duruflé's fusion of Gregorian chant with 20th century French impressionistic harmony creates a compelling combination that seems both ancient and modern at the same time.

### **C. Hubert H. Parry (1848-1918) — *There is an Old Belief* from *Songs of Farewell***

Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry was an English composer, writer, and teacher. He was influential in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century revival of English music. At the time of his *Songs of Farewell*, Parry was president of the "Music in Wartime" committee which he had helped found in 1914 to provide opportunities for professional musicians to serve the war effort by giving concerts in hospitals, camps, and the like. However, according to Herbert Howells, the war was "a scourge that cast a devastating shadow over Parry's mind and heart."

The six *Songs of Farewell* are considered his choral masterpiece and give us a glimpse of this private man who sensed that his own life was drawing to a close. *There is an Old Belief*, written for six voices, requires tight dynamic control, and its beautiful text by Scottish literary critic John Gibson Lockhart (1774-1854) spins a vision of life "beyond the sphere of grief." The work's ethereal close depicting "eternal sleep" shows why Parry was the most influential choral composer of his generation.

### **Ivo Antognini (b. 1962) — *Hope is the Thing with Feathers***

Swiss-born Ivo Antognini has been composing and improvising at the piano since childhood. Since 2006, he has devoted himself almost exclusively to composing choral music. His works have been performed throughout Europe and the USA, and several have won international awards.

Antognini's *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* is a setting of the Emily Dickinson poem by the same name, written around 1861. In the poem, hope is represented by a bird that sings within the human soul, continuing its song through and despite the storms of life. Antognini dedicated his musical setting to a friend who fell seriously ill during the first wave of Covid but ultimately survived and recovered. He uses unusual harmonic patterns which evoke the feeling of being untethered, lost or adrift in the storms of life - when hope is needed the most. The sections describing the calming singing of the bird have more traditional harmonies that seem by contrast more comforting.

### **Trevor Weston (b. 1967) — *Lauda*** Text by Angelo Geter

Two of Trevor Weston's pieces performed by Seraphim in previous seasons, *Visions of Glory* and *Magnificat*, prompted Jennifer Lester to ask him to set Angelo Geter's poem, *Praise*. Geter

describes how he came to write this poem ". . . around Christmas time. I was in the midst of mourning and grieving some loved ones. When I was walking, I remembered feeling that in the midst of hard times and as negative as this world can seem at times, you still have to praise things. So this poem focuses on praising the things you should praise, and also praising the things you shouldn't, such as being a headstone or not being in a police report. So that was the inspiration behind this poem. Praising in the midst of all this chaos."

Weston writes of his composition, "My first response to the poem was the ironic joy that we sometimes have to face in life; happiness stemmed from avoiding common threats to our emotional and physical well-being. The poem also reminded me of the *Benedictus es, Domine*, a canticle I remember singing often for Morning Prayer services as a boy soprano. *Praise* impressed me as a twenty-first century version of the *Benedictus*. Thankfulness for avoiding gun violence is a reality for many people in our country. Geter's poem masterfully addresses this issue along with many other current concerns. "

Weston explains, "I chose the Latin word for praise, *Lauda*, as the title of my work to connect Geter's poem to a long tradition of songs of praise in the Christian musical tradition." In the work, a baritone soloist is featured throughout the piece, a nod to the nature of Geter's spoken-word performances, but also, as Weston notes, "is similar to the antiphonal settings of canticle texts." The soloist and choir trade words and melodies back and forth like a conversation, each completing the other's thoughts, though the soloist carries the weight of the deeper thoughts. Hearing the choir sing "praise the casket/praise the bullets/praise the trigger" is unsettling and can only be redeemed by the soloist's completion of the full thought which takes it in an unexpected direction.

The music changes constantly, giving the impression of the poet's walk on that day near Christmastime, his thoughts going in all different directions and his mood changing and developing as he comes to the resolution to continue "Praising in the midst of all this chaos."

### **Franz Biebl (1906-2001) — *Ave Maria (Angelus Domini)***

Franz Biebl was a German composer who primarily wrote for choral ensembles. He served as choir director at a Catholic church before being drafted into the military in World War II, during which he was captured and detained as a prisoner of war. After his release, he served as organist and choirmaster of a local parish and composed many works and arrangements for the local choirs.

Biebl composed his *Ave Maria* sometime before May 1959, when it was performed for a May-time devotional to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The work did not attract much attention in his native Germany until it was brought to the US. Once the esteemed vocal ensemble Chanticleer made it part of their repertoire, the piece gained popularity and became a choral standard internationally.

The text for Biebl's *Ave Maria* has two sources: the Angelus, a prayer commemorating the Incarnation of Christ, and the Ave Maria. The Angelus verses are set as chant-like melodies delivered by unison male voices, while the refrain is set for double choir. Each time they enter, the two choirs engage in a kind of call and response that resembles overlapping waves. The

piece builds to a climax for the final “Sancta Maria,” gaining in intensity and urgency, concluding with the final joyous “Amen.”

### **Sarah Quartel** (b. 1982) — *How Can I Keep from Singing?*

Sarah Quartel is a Canadian composer and educator whose works have been featured in many recordings and radio programs internationally. She writes for children and youth as well as adults, connecting her work as a composer and educator.

The original tune for "How Can I Keep From Singing?" was written by American Baptist Minister Robert Lowry (1826 – 1899), who also wrote "Shall We Gather at the River?" The lyrics were written by Anna Bartlett Warner (1827–1915). The song was popularized by Pete Seeger, an American folk singer and social activist during the McCarthy era. His version modifies much of the explicitly Christian wording of the original and adds an additional verse by Doris Plenn, and it is this later version that Quartel uses.

Her a cappella arrangement for treble voices opens with an intimate solo verse underlining the simple hopefulness of the text. The rhythmic repetition of “how can I keep from singing?” after this opening brings out the excitement and inspiration inherent in the phrase and begins a cycle of changes through the verses taking the mood through joy and thoughtful tenderness, and culminating in a truly jubilant ending.

### **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847) — *Verleih uns Frieden*

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, now known widely as Felix Mendelssohn, was a German organist, conductor, and composer of the early Romantic period. A child prodigy, he began taking piano lessons at six, made his first public concert appearance at nine, and wrote his first twelve symphonies in his early teens. After a long period of denigration following his death motivated by growing anti-Semitism (his works were banned by the Nazi regime), his music is now frequently performed.

*Verleih uns Frieden* (Grant us Peace) is one of eight chorale cantatas Mendelssohn wrote based on Lutheran hymns, and the only one he decided to publish. The text, though not the melody, is taken from a hymn by Martin Luther, which is a German version of the Latin chant *Da pacem, Domine* (Grant us peace, Lord), adapted from Bible verses found in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and Psalm 72.

Mendelssohn’s setting features an instrumental introduction that sets the mood for the piece. The melody is introduced in the lower voices. The upper voices then repeat the melody, while the lower voices sing a countermelody. After a short instrumental interlude, the melody and text is repeated a third time, but this time with the richness of four-part chorale-like harmony. The piece ends similarly to how it began, with a gentle instrumental tag instilling a feeling of the longed-for peace.

**Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** (1875–1912) — *Magnificat* from *Morning and Evening Service in F*, Op. 18

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was an English composer, conductor, and political activist. Born in Holborn to an English mother and a father originally from Sierra Leone, he identified as Anglo-African. During his first tour of the US showcasing his popular *The Song of Hiawatha*, he was invited by President Theodore Roosevelt to visit the White House, a rare event at the time for a man of African descent. His music was widely performed during his lifetime, and he enjoyed great support from the African American community.

The Magnificat is a text attributed to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and is found only in the Gospel of Luke. One of Christianity's most ancient (and provocative) hymns, it is a song of praise, faith, and revolution. Coleridge-Taylor's setting for choir and organ opens in exuberant celebration, calming when referring to God's holiness and mercy. For the more subversive section of the text, the music introduces an undercurrent of disquiet and discontent, a call to action. In the reference to the promise made to Abraham, the music becomes hymn-like and the organ accompaniment sparse. The celebratory mood returns for the "glory be" section, creating an ecstatic song of praise at the end of the piece.