

# Bach: *Magnificat*

## Haydn: *Te Deum* Mozart: *Regina Coeli*



Sunday, November 23rd - 7pm

### Program Notes

On this program we present three sacred works by three of the great masters of musical composition. One work, the *Magnificat* of J.S. Bach, is quite well-known, one is only modestly familiar, Haydn's *Te Deum*, and the third will likely be new to many ears, Mozart's *Regina Coeli*. Each in its own way is a hymn to Mary: the *Regina Coeli* very directly so, the *Magnificat* being her words, and the *Te Deum* by virtue of being a hymn of praise in honor of a Mary, the empress Maria Theresa. From a musical perspective, the three pieces are connected through the use of counterpoint, the interweaving of different musical voices. We hear the mature Haydn, composing a double-fugue in the style he learned from the oratorios of Handel, the young Mozart flexing his compositional muscles experimenting with newly learned styles, and Bach the master displaying his formidable skill, intellect and passion. But at a more fundamental level, each of these pieces is an expression of joy, joy which still flows off of the page as glorious sound more than two hundred years later.

#### Haydn: *Te Deum*

When Haydn returned to Austria in 1795 he was the most famous composer in Europe. The death of his longtime employer had allowed him to break free from his provincial reputation and become an international star. He had just completed his second extended visit to London, where, among other things, he wrote his last six symphonies. Though his fame now rests mostly on his symphonic works and string quartets, he spent his final years in Austria focused on music for voices, which he thought of as his finest works, including he two large oratorios, *The Creation* (1798) and *The Seasons* (1801), and six mass settings.

The Empress Maria Theresa, wife of Holy Roman Emperor Francis II, and a great patron of the arts in Vienna requested a piece of music from Haydn, which he supplied in the form of the *Te Deum* in C. The work was first performed in the fall of 1800 in Eisenstadt, at the country home of Haydn's longtime employer, the Esterházy family.

The *Te Deum* is a thoroughly choral work: apart from a brief orchestral introduction and a few short interludes the chorus is constantly singing. Even so, it is a mark of distinction that Haydn is able to set this long text to such concise yet expressive music. The words of the *Te Deum* are a Christian hymn,

likely written in the 4th or 5th centuries, and part of the daily service of matins in the Catholic church, though it is also used on festive occasions. There is some speculation that Haydn's setting was performed for Lord Nelson upon his return from victory over Napoleon (when Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass* was also premiered).

The winds and violas, accompanied by strong chords from the brass and violins, present the opening motive, which is next taken up by the chorus in unison. Rather than developing this motive as he would have done in his symphonic works, Haydn follows the meaning of the text and uses its rhythm to spin out into new music. For the successive lines of text listing the multitudes – apostles, prophets, martyrs – who are praising God, Haydn writes music where the choral parts overlap one another with increasing harmonic complexity, indicative of a crowd of worshipers. Haydn brings back opening motive for the text “Tu rex gloriae,” helping to delineate the structure of the text.

The middle section of the piece, beginning with the text “Te ergo quaesumus” (we therefore beseech thee), is set apart with a unison blast from the orchestra. This is followed by very new music, in the minor mode, soft, chromatic and slow, for the text referring to the blood of Christ. This passage is brief, though, and is succeeded by a return to the fast, bright character of the opening music. The energy builds towards the last two lines of text, which Haydn sets as a double fugue. The sopranos sing the first line to a florid, ascending melody while the altos present a countermelody for the second line with a strong opening syncopation. The male voices take these up as well, and the fugue takes off. The syncopated figure becomes more prominent, culminating in an alternation between the voices and the orchestra, and the piece comes to a close with a fanfare from the brass and drums.

#### Mozart: *Regina Coeli*

Mozart wrote his *Regina Coeli* in Bb after returning to Austria from a European tour, but in very different situation than the elder Haydn would find himself in later. This piece, the second of his three settings of this text, is the work of the sixteen-year-old Mozart who had spent much of his childhood and early teens studying music with his father, Leopold, and traveling throughout Europe performing as a prodigy. On these

trips, the young Mozart met many of the leading musicians in Europe, including J.C. Bach, son of J.S., and was exposed to the differing national styles. Even at this young age he had already had his first operatic successes with several works performed in Milan.

The text of the *Regina Coeli* is one of several so-called Marian antiphons which praise Mary, the mother of Jesus, and which would have been included in worship at Vespers as well as at other times during Easter season. Mozart wrote this piece to be performed in services in his hometown of Salzburg.

The first movement begins with an exposition by the orchestra which is then repeated with the chorus joining in. Several thematic ideas, all joyous, are introduced in a quasi-improvisational manner that was common to the classical style. Following the pattern of sonata form, the music modulates to a different key for a contrasting middle section in which several different tonalities are introduced before a return to the opening material for the closing section.

The second movement begins again with a long statement from the orchestra, but this time it is the soprano soloist who takes up the serene melody on its repetition. The influence of the Italian operatic style is readily apparent in the embellishments in the vocal line and the long melismas (where many notes are sung for one syllable). Rather than simply declaiming the text, it is as if the soprano is reveling in the joy of the resurrection she describes. After two brief affirmations from the chorus, the tempo slows considerably as the soprano turns to the final line of text, the supplication to Mary. Here the music is even more graceful, as the soprano line intertwines with the violins. Perhaps the young Mozart was experimenting with the kind of vocal and instrumental cadenza-like writing he would later use for the “Et incarnatus est” of his *Mass in C minor*. The third movement is in a quick triple meter and is joyous throughout as the soprano and chorus alternately proclaim “alleluia.”

## Bach: Magnificat

In June of 1722, the post of Kantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig became open following the death of Kuhnau. Over the next seven months, a number of musicians applied for the job, and several were offered the position. Telemann, perhaps the most famous living German composer of the time, was the first to decline because he couldn't get out of his contract in Hamburg. Several other musicians either were denied or turned down the offer, often because of their unwillingness or inability to fulfill one of the duties of the post, to teach Latin. Near the bottom of the list was a little-known organist employed in Cöthen, Johann Sebastian Bach. He agreed to hire a deputy to teach Latin, and by spring of 1723 the Leipzig town council grudgingly agreed to appoint him the new Kantor.

Bach's various duties included directing the choir of boys from the boarding school, directing musical activities at the univer-

sity, and providing music for the town's four principal churches. He immediately began composing cantatas, the principal music in the worship service, at an astounding rate, amassing nearly three-hundred in the course of a decade. It was at the beginning of this feverish burst of sacred music composition that Bach wrote his *Magnificat*, originally in Eb Major (BWV 243a). The piece was first performed on Christmas day of 1723, his first Christmas in Leipzig. Between that day and January 9th, Bach also premiered six new cantatas. It is not known whether this original version was performed again, but Bach returned to it in the spring of 1733 and undertook revisions. He transposed the music down a half-step, most likely to accommodate the kind of trumpets prevalent in that area, altered some of the flute parts, and generally cleaned up the composition with some smoother harmonic progressions. It is this revised version, BWV 243, which we perform today.

The *Magnificat* is one of the most important texts in Christian liturgy. It is the first of three canticles taken from the biblical Gospel of Luke, where Mary rejoices with her cousin Elizabeth after having learned of her pregnancy from the angel Gabriel. The text would have been sung at the end of every service of Vespers. In the Lutheran tradition of Bach's time, it was usually sung in German by the congregation at most services, but in Latin by the choir on major occasions.

Bach divides the text into twelve movements, alternating among solo arias, duets, trios and full choral movements, while also varying the instrumental accompaniment, from a full orchestra including trumpets and timpani down to just a simple continuo group of cello and organ. In each movement the character of the music closely matches the meaning of the text. Though this work is considerably shorter than either of his Passion settings or the *B-Minor Mass*, the variety and conciseness of the text allowed Bach to compose in a number of different styles, from the more old-fashioned fugues and canons of the choral movements to the almost operatic writing in the arias.

After the boisterous opening movement, the first aria is given to one of the two sopranos. The florid vocal writing and light string accompaniment of the “Et exsultavit” are in stark contrast to the plaintive oboe and somber mood of the third movement, “Quia respexit,” sung by the other soprano soloist. Bach ingeniously reserves the final two words of this section of text, “Omnes generationes,” for the chorus to sing as the fourth movement, representing all the generations who will call Mary blessed. Each entrance of the main motive comes right on the heels of the previous entrance, and as the motive is passed around from voice to voice it makes a stepwise ascent, culminating on the dominant key of the movement. From there the choral voices present the motive in rapid succession, one on top of the other, to bring the movement to a close.

The next lines are given to the bass soloist, joined only by the low continuo instruments, in something of a duet between voice and cello. The sixth movement duet between the tenor and alto parts is set above a slowly pulsing triple meter which gives this

song of mercy a yearning quality. The full orchestra and chorus return to describe the strength of God in the seventh movement, culminating in a representation of the dispersal of the proud as the voices are scattered about.

Bach gives a musical portrayal to the text of the eighth movement as the tenor's voice descends quickly representing the mighty falling, only to ascend again for the raising of the humble. The countertenor sings the ninth movement to the accompaniment of two flutes so that there are three lines of music which wrap around one another. For the tenth movement, the sopranos and the countertenor voices intertwine with slow, chromatic music. Above this Bach gives to the oboes in long notes the melody of the German version of the Magnificat. Though it is stretched out over the whole movement, the Leipzig congregation would certainly have recognized this incorporation of the common hymn tune.

Bach uses a traditional form, the canon, to represent the history of Abraham in the "Sicut Locutus est." The final movement begins with full orchestra and chorus declaiming "Gloria" followed by an intricate, contrapuntal passage, beginning in the bass voices and ascending through the choir. This is repeated three times before, at the text "Sicut erat in principio" (as it was in the beginning), Bach returns to the music from the opening movement to close the piece.

*-notes by Warren Puffer Jones*