**Program Notes**

*Das Mörike-Chorliederbuch* by Hugo Distler to texts by Eduard Mörike (1804-1875)

This collection of part-songs (unaccompanied choral song), completed in 1939, was officially premiered at the “Festival of German Choral Music” in Graz during the rise of the Nazi regime. Hugo Distler was a devout Christian and a sensitive musician whose reputation was spreading as the leader of a movement seeking renewal of Protestant musical traditions. Though Distler was likely a deeply conflicted participant, he was featured at the Festival as a respected, promising, and Aryan young composer; he was the sole composer at the event to be honored by a concert dedicated solely to his works. He also conducted the performance to acclaim.

His earlier musical success was based principally on sacred compositions, most notably for the organ. He had enjoyed appointments as organist and cantor in parishes of increasing size and importance, leading to a University lectureship at the Württembergische Hochschule für Musik in Stuttgart in 1938 in music theory, musical form and choral conducting.

Though officially a member of the Nazi party, he was not an active one; he avoided being mustered into the Wehrmacht six times through the intervention of high-placed friends. Nonetheless, he was not immune to strong pressures to conform to the Nazi nationalistic ideals. He was compelled to compose a secular work for chorus, as choral music was considered to be an ideal mechanism for propaganda by the Nazi cultural leaders. He believed, as did many of his closest colleagues, that the composition of this collection would help keep him safe from the authorities.

In 1937 he found access to secular inspiration in the poems of the Swabian Romanticist J.C.F. Hölderlin. Their language of simplicity and humorous drollery with its “elemental rhythmic drive and freedom...[exhibiting] subjectivity and individualistic, characteristic expressivity“ intrigued him. A member of his chorus, a descendant of the poet, gave a volume of Mörike’s poems to Distler at a celebration of the composer’s birthday. Of Mörike’s place in German literature, Mary Garland writes, “…the 20th century has recognized a special niche, shared by no other, in which the popular and homely encounter the subtle and refined.” (*The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, 2nd ed.)

Distler’s choice of poems for this choral collection ranges from hiking songs to dramatic ballads, reflecting the many aspects of mid-19th century Swabian culture captured in Mörike’s poetry. Though Hugo Wolf had earlier composed sensitive settings of many of these poems as Lieder, Distler was unabashed about taking a new and distinctive approach to them in the choral idiom unique to him.

And most critics took no offence at his audacity, instead lauding his revivification of the speech rhythms of Mörike’s poetry, much of which had come to be considered an embodiment of the Germanic ideals of the regime, due to its roots in provincial life. *Der Feuerreiter* was often singled out as an exceptional accomplishment; by popular demand, its initial performance at the Festival was immediately reprised.

I chose tonight’s selections from *Das Mörike Chor-Liederbuch* (The Mörike Choral Songbook) to include examples of the varied poetic content, textures, voicings, and compositional features of Distler’s style. All are grounded in the rhythm and timbres of the German language. In fact, in his preface to the collection, Distler explains that his unusual metrical approach to barring and the absence of dynamic markings are necessitated by the dictates of the poetic language itself. Nonetheless, the composer brings to bear many familiar historical techniques, often from the “toolbox” of earlier sacred music genres. You will hear canonic, homophonic, double chorus and polyphonic textures; fauxbourdon; dramatic declamation; emphatic dissonance; word painting; contrapuntal complexity; hemiolas; strophic structure; tonal ambiguity; intervallic symbolism and rhythmic strength. Hence, the frequent appellation of Distler as a “creative historicist.”

Do read the translations carefully, as they provide your best window into these masterful songs, so seldom heard by English-speaking audiences in live concert.

* Dr. Debra Lenssen

*I went then, till I came to the Delectable Mountains. So I went up to the mountains, to behold the gardens and orchards, the vineyards, and fountains of water; where also I drank, and washed myself, and did freely eat of the vineyards. And standing by the Highwayside were shepherds feeding their flocks.* – John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress from this World to That which is to Come* (1678)

**Ralph Vaughan Williams**, no servant of organized religion in general and who described himself as agnostic, was absorbed with the subject matter of Bunyan’s great allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress* over a 40-year period. Between incidental music for the work in 1909 for two soloists, chorus and strings, and the four-act opera with epilogue appearing in 1951, there were two other settings issued whose music was incorporated into the opera. Of these, *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains* was first aired in 1921 and published in 1925, later forming part of the opera’s Act V. Before World War I, Vaughan Williams had spent some time gathering and studying folk music from the west of Britain, influencing his Pastoral and Sea Symphonies. Given his predilection for landscape, it is not surprising that he selected the episode of the Delectable Mountains for an extended scene: the possibilities to use folk song melodies in his orchestrations to express endless sunshine, clear air and proximity to the heavens, in addition to birds and flowers and placid herds, would have been enticing. With the 6/8 meter setting of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” midway through the scene, a lilting, sicilienne pastorale, it is also not surprising that Vaughan Williams pays homage to the many such pastorales by composers as familiar as Händel.

There is much more of substance in Vaughan Williams’ scoring, displaying careful attention to the implications of the Bunyan text. His music for *Shepherds* conveys a suspended time, that of the Delectable Mountains as waystation of undetermined length, a time of sweetness and tranquility. The scene opens and closes with a long, seemingly unmeasured viola melody in the pentatonic with repeated short phrases that never resolve, suggesting a lingering and hesitation without urgency or ambivalence, like a bird high in the sky borne on small wind gusts. Woodwind melodies likewise extend over barlines, like the ebb and flow of breezes, sunbeams and wisps of clouds, or larks soaring. Recitatives are unmeasured; canons on folk tunes extend simple ideas; lingering on the dominant implies infinite suspension of time; small shapes of first-inversion or second-inversion chords in the strings – in triplets or groups of five – suggest a gentle hovering without grounding (no tonic). In the final section in 3/2, the bass note E (third in the scale), use of triple meter and triplets within the meter suggest the perfection of heaven, but all is in pentatonic, again without a strong sense of a tonic which would signify the ground, earthiness, reality. The shepherds, guardians of tracts of land, begin most of their entries clearly on the tonic, which implies their place on the ground and their firm faith, and they always sing in triple meter when making reference to the Celestial City.

But there is always the dichotomy between heaven and earth, the unknown and known, the present and future, and to express this dichotomy Vaughan Williams employs bitonality. Its first appearance is the Second Shepherd’s reference to the unknown distance to heaven, where the lower strings appear against one of the folksong-like woodwind melodies. Thereafter, bitonality -- never particularly jarring because Vaughan Williams always uses the first- and second-inversion chords referred to above, never with a strong tonal sense -- conveys not only the juxtaposition of celestial and earthly beauty, but also hesitancy and uncertainty over the final and irreversible step to the heavens. Only where the Pilgrim displays his firm intention to get to Paradise (“Fain would I be where I shall die no more”) does the orchestra play in a single, tonically centered mode. At the conclusion of the piece, after the celebrations of heaven and earth have waned, the shepherds go back to business, to await the next pilgrim, whenever he may come.

Prolific English composer **William Byrd** spent much of his life in the service of the church, during the reigns of monarchs Henry VIII, Mary, Elizabeth and James. Religious and political affairs in England during that time were in constant disarray, as the statewide Catholicism turned to Anglicanism and back and forth depending on the religious persuasion of the king or queen and his/her consort. It is likely that Byrd served in the Chapel Royal as a chorister during the reign of Mary, a Catholic married to Philip II of Spain and Hapsburg emperor. In his 20s he was organist of Lincoln Cathedral, but in 1575 he had taken up the prestigious post of Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, working as organist and composer, an indication of the esteem in which he was held by the monarchy despite his Catholic leanings. The year 1575 marks the beginning of a 21-year patent – a monopoly -- on publishing music granted by Queen Elizabeth to Byrd and Tallis, his teacher, and, subsequently, leaseholds on parcels of land that ensured not only a steady stream of income but also sufficient royal favor to enable him to write Catholic music without fear of being thrown in jail. Despite these lucky circumstances, he and members of his family were subject to frequent fines for failure to attend Anglican services.

Today’s music by Byrd comes from two collections of Catholic music entitled *Cantiones Sacrae*, intended primarily for private performance. Some Catholic gatherings were clandestine, others, particularly at large family estates, much less so. But in the 1590s there was little doubt that performances of Byrd’s motets took place unheralded. Publication may have ensured that posterity would treat them more kindly, perhaps in bigger church settings by professional choirs, as had been the practice in the time of Queen Mary. Our performance tonight takes on the intimacy of the private devotion, with all singers far to the front of the chancel behind the viols.

While commentators have written about the sense of exile depicted in his Lenten motets, an expression of how persecuted and reviled the Catholic community may have felt during Elizabeth’s henchmens’ purgings, Byrd’s music for Catholic observance can also express exuberant rejoicing and hope amid desolation like its Protestant counterparts, music he wrote in order to remain in favor not only to the royals but to the far more critical political appointees. Byrd’s patent on publishing permitted the appearance and dissemination of *Cantiones* *Sacrae 1575*, followed some years later (after publication of Anglican music preferable to the crown) by two more volumes of *Cantiones Sacrae*. Many of the motets in *Cantiones Sacrae 1589* and *1591* are based on psalm texts, but Byrd’s practice is to use only a few verses of the given psalm to make his point. Such is the case with “Ne Irascaris, Domine” from the 1589 collection. Careful use of vocal register, counterpoint and homophony distinguish and characterize individual lines, even words, with the chordal “Zion deserta facta est” standing out in the major mode in F, a practice in common with continental use in penitential psalms and lamentations by composers such as Lassus.

The motet last on our program, “Infelix Ego,” sets a portion of a lengthy meditation on the penitential psalm 51, “Miserere mei,” by the 15th-century friar Savonarola, whose initial pleasant welcome in the houses of the Medici soon ran out and he was imprisoned, tortured and forced to recant his beliefs, and finally burned at the stake. His meditation, published while he was in prison, circulated widely around Europe and was set to motets by Josquin and Lassus, among others, which in turn were circulated in printed collections in England. A setting in the vernacular by William Mundy appeared in the late 1500s as a verse anthem for countertenor and viols, “Alas, poor wretch,” but Byrd’s motet on the Latin version of the text, written even later, clocks in more than twice as long as Mundy’s. The difference lies in Byrd’s use of polyphony to express the text as opposed to the stricter solo/refrain structure of Mundy’s verse anthem. Like “Ne Irascaris, Domine,” Byrd employs counterpoint and homophony, vocal register, canon, and block chords for various expressive use, but there is also a masterful control of harmonic broadening to characterize a sense of impending doom in the third portion of the piece, culminating in the plea for mercy uttered by those about to be executed, “Miserere mei!” For Byrd the devout Catholic, a reminder, though not assurance, of salvation is appended in one of the most surprising and magical moments of *Cantiones Sacrae*, over the word “misericordiam,” God’s loving kindness.

-- Cheryl K. Ryder