

New Amsterdam Singers
Clara Longstreth, Music Director
David Recca, Assistant Conductor
Nathaniel Granor, Chamber Chorus Assistant Conductor
Pen Ying Fang, Organ

Jubilate Deo

Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612)

And the Song Am I

Abbie Betinis (b. 1980)

New York Premiere

Brass Quintet: Josh Frank, Katie Miller, trumpet; Benjamin Herrington, James Rogers, trombone; Eric Davis, French horn

Quatres petites prières de St. François d'Assise

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Salut, Dame Sainte

Tout puissant, très saint

Seigneur, je vous en prie

O mes très chers frères et mes enfants

Men's voices

Robert Thorpe, tenor

David Recca, conductor

Sing with the Spirit

Randall Thompson (1899-1984)

From The Garment of Praise

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Double chorus

Robin Beckhard (Dec. 12), Rachel L'Heureux (Dec. 14), soprano

Barbara Zucker-Pinchoff (Dec. 12), Allison Gish (Dec. 14), alto

Scott Wilson (Dec. 12), Nate Mickelson (Dec. 14), tenor

Rick Bonsall, bass

Intermission

O Lieber Herre Gott

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)

Irish Lullaby for the Christ Child

Gaelic, arr. Steven Sametz (b. 1954)

Charlotte Levitt (Dec. 12), Allison Gish (Dec. 14)

Jennifer Hault, harp

Nova, nova, ave fit ex Eva

Williametta Spencer (b. 1932)

Women's voices

Seven Joys of Christmas

Kirke Mechem (b. 1925)

Jennifer Hault, harp

The Joy of Love: This is the Truth

Kate Leahy, soprano

The Joy of Bells: Din don! Merrily on high

The Joy of Mary: Joseph dearest, Joseph mine

The Joy of Children: Patapan

The Joy of the New Year: New Year Song

The Joy of Dance: Fum, fum, fum!

The Joy of Song: God bless the master of this house

Jubilemus deo salutari nostro

Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (b. 1963)

Brass Quartet
Chamber Chorus

Christmas Cantata

Daniel Pinkham (1923-2006)

Quem vidistis pastores

O Magnum Mysterium

Gloria in excelsis Deo

Brass Quintet

PROGRAM NOTES

In today's program of sacred choral music from the Baroque and twentieth/twenty-first centuries, you will hear brilliance in the fanfares, reverence in the prayers, nostalgia in carol settings, noble simplicity in chorales, complexity in fugues, and, above all, dance-like rhythms in both Baroque and newer music.

Giovanni Gabrieli lived at a crossroads in time, at the end of the Renaissance and at the beginning of the Baroque period. His Venice was that of Bellini, Titian, and Tintoretto: a luxurious capital, an environment of visual splendor where the colorful exteriors of buildings were reflected in the surrounding canals. The famous Byzantine cathedral, San Marco, was the center of Venetian life, and the position of organist there was a coveted one. Gabrieli held that post from 1584 to 1612, and wrote sixty-two symphoniae sacrae, as well as many canzonas and sonatas, inspired by the rich acoustics of San Marco's domed cathedral.

In the Renaissance, little distinction was made between vocal and instrumental style. A motet written for voices could alternatively be played by a group of viols or by a brass ensemble. Yet Gabrieli had far more interest in instrumental color than his predecessors, and scholars think that many of his vocal works were performed with instruments doubling the vocal lines. The festive nature of *Jubilate Deo*, from a 1597 collection, suggests that it was probably conceived for a grand occasion, with brass choirs accompanying the voices.

While one often thinks of the Venetian antiphonal style as a simple matter of choir against choir, much of Gabrieli's music was written for eight or more independent lines in a complex, constantly changing texture. The practice of contrasting large blocks of sound with smaller ones, which later formed the concerto grosso, is found in *Jubilate Deo* as well as in many other Venetian works. The motet opens with contrapuntal entrances of a stepwise melody that recurs throughout the piece as a refrain or ritornello. Near the end the meter changes to a fast, dancelike triple pattern to illustrate the text "in laetitia" ("with gladness"). The editor has included a short intonation for organ, by Gabrieli, preceding the choral portion, which introduces the concert, the piece, and the pitch.

Abbie Betinis has had a remarkable career. Her music has won a steady stream of performances throughout the United States and abroad. Not yet 35 years old, she has been commissioned by more than 40 music organizations, from community choruses and colleges to the Dale Warland Singers. Today's program includes the seventh work by Betinis that NAS has sung in the past eight years. In 2008 she was commissioned to write a fanfare for a large choral festival, and chose to use a brass quintet and a poem by Lily A. Long from *The Singing Place*, published in 1912. *And the song am I* starts quietly, with muted brass, gradually getting faster and more impassioned, as the chorus sings of "weaving the world anew with the singing throng."

The beloved French composer **Francis Poulenc** was also successful at an early age. But his early music was most often connected to the theater or ballet. As Nick Jones writes in his booklet accompanying an all-Poulenc Robert Shaw disc, "That Poulenc, the cheeky bon vivant, should evolve into one of our century's most celebrated composers of sacred choral music was not predicted by anyone, least of all the composer himself."

Poulenc's *Quatre Petites Prières de Saint François d'Assise (Four Short Prayers of Saint Francis)* for unaccompanied male choir were composed in 1948 for the monastery choir at Champfleury, where Poulenc's grand-nephew was a monk. The simple, rustic prayers (which Poulenc set in French translation) have been treated with complementary simplicity in a restrained style reminiscent of chant, much like the early *Litanies* for women's voices. The composer observed in a radio interview, "Certainly I venerate Saint Francis, but he intimidates me a bit. In any case, in setting his marvelously touching little prayers to music, I wished to perform an act of humility. Thus, in the fourth piece, for example, a simple tenor solo is heard at the beginning, like a monk leading his brothers to prayer."

Just as Betinis's work conjures "the singing place," both **Randall Thompson** and Bach (in passages from psalms) invoke singing, whether a "new song," a song with trumpets and harp, or singing "with the understanding." I wanted to precede Bach's *Singet* by Thompson's *Sing with the Spirit*, "because each uses the stirring phrase, "Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord."

Randall Thompson may be the most familiar of American choral composers. His style is conservative, based on Renaissance models and on the German masters. Unlike many American composers, he has never used folk melodies of any kind. Thompson's major work, *Requiem*, was written in 1958 for double choir *a cappella*. The fragment we sing today is part of *The Garment of Praise*, which is one movement of the *Requiem*.

J. S. Bach's motets stand at the peak of his choral writing, and *Singet dem Herrn* is perhaps the first among equals. When Mozart went to Leipzig in 1789, he was so impressed by a performance of the work that he asked for a copy. The work was possibly written for a memorial service for the Queen of Poland in 1727. While fiercely complex and a contrapuntal *tour de force*, the motet is graceful, exuberant, and life-affirming. It is also the most difficult of any of Bach's motets to perform, requiring both agility and stamina to negotiate long, florid lines.

Singet dem Herrn has five sections, with different architecture and choral texture for each. The opening plays choir against choir, with each overlapping, answering, and elaborating the other's musical lines. The next section is a fugue, in which fugal entrances in one choir are heard against simpler background music in the other. Eventually both choirs join in the fugue, which winds up with a thrilling call to praise God with drums and harp. Then Bach shifts gears to a contemplative movement that he labels *Aria*, for solo quartet, in which a chorale is heard in alternate phrases with quiet four-voice commentary. Bach may have referred explicitly to the queen in this section. The text, "Blessed is he who, firm and fast, relies on you and your grace," could well describe Queen Christiane Eberhardine, who had refused to renounce her Lutheran faith for Catholicism as her husband had done to gain the throne of Poland.

In the fourth section a festive psalm is sung in true double-chorus alternation. Finally, the choirs join forces in a whirlwind triple-meter fugue on the text, "Let all that hath breath praise the Lord." The dancing subject begins with the basses, continues through each voice, and recurs, interspersed with celebratory Hallelujas, until the sopranos culminate with an ecstatic leap to a high B-flat, and the dance is done.

In 2013 the renowned Bach scholar and conductor, John Eliot Gardiner, published his monumental work *Bach, Music in the Castle of Heaven*. In his discussion of *Singet dem Herrn*, he calls it the most orchestrally conceived of all Bach's motets, and finds it the "meatiest and most technically demanding of Bach's double-choir motets." He is impressed with the dance origin of much of the writing, and says that, "for all its elegance, its dexterity, and its complexity, the music has primitive, pagan roots."

Heinrich Schütz was the most important German composer of the early Baroque, renowned for his choral music. This ranges from the large scale *Musicalische Exequiem*, which NAS sang last March, to music for small ensembles. He wrote a large set of sacred concertos, called *Kleine geistliche Konzerte*, in 1636. He lamented, in the foreword to that collection, that music had been crippled by the continuous warfare which impoverished the church and court chapels. *O Lieber Herre Gott* from this collection is written for two equal voices (solo or choral) with continuo. This is an Advent piece, anticipating the coming of Christ, who will be received with joy. Just as Gabrieli moved to fast triple time at the joyful phrase, "in laetitia" ("with gladness"), so does Schütz at the words "mit Freuden" ("with joy").

Steven Sametz is a much-performed composer, as well as a conductor and a professor at Lehigh University. His *Irish Lullaby* for the Christ child, written in 1995, uses a text adapted from a Gaelic poem. A harp accompanies this work for women's voices, with a soprano solo and a descant above the chorus's melodies.

Williametta Spencer is a West Coast composer, scholar, and pianist who has composed music for varied forces. She has written a great deal of choral music, much of it commissioned. *Nova, nova, Ave fit ex Eva* is based on a macaronic (language-mixing) text from the 16th century alternating Latin and English. The words begin Gabriel's annunciation to Mary, and play on the similar letters of "Ave" (hail) and "Eva" (Eve). Spencer sets the six short verses for three-part women's chorus, accompanied only by a triangle on the refrains.

The American composer **Kirke Mechem** has written nearly 200 works in almost every form, including symphonies, operas, chamber works, and a great deal of choral music. His opera *Tartuffe* is one of the few American operas to enter the international repertoire. *The Seven Joys of Christmas*, composed in 1964, uses carols and traditional songs from England, France, Germany, Spain, and Japan in four-voice arrangements with harp accompaniment. Among the familiar carols used are *Ding, Dong, Merrily on High*; *Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine*; *Pat-a-Pan*; and *God Bless the Master of this House*. The finale weaves five carols simultaneously into a bright tapestry of song; this device is called a quodlibet.

New Amsterdam Singers has included a work of the Finnish composer **Jaakko Mäntyjärvi** in each of our last three concerts. He has achieved world-wide attention for his choral music, which ranges from the tragic (*Canticum Calamitatis*) to the humorous (*Pseudo Yoik*). The text of today's work, *Iubilemus Deo salutari nostro*, is the medieval liturgy (Psalm 95:1-4 with a non-Biblical interpolation) of St. Henry, patron saint of Finland. The work is written for chorus and brass quartet. Some of the harmony is tonal, some modal, but the refrain, heard three times, is a bi-tonal Alleluia: the brass in C-major, the singers in E-flat major/minor.

Today's program is book-ended by cantatas with brass. **Daniel Pinkham's** *Christmas Cantata* (1957) is subtitled *Sinfonia Sacra* in clear homage to Gabrieli. Born in 1923, Pinkham studied at Harvard University and at Tanglewood; among his composition teachers were Piston, Honegger, Copland, Barber, and Boulanger. A prolific composer, he has written symphonies, concertos, electronic music, film scores, and a chamber opera, in addition to many choral works.

Pinkham's cantata shows his debt to Gabrieli in the combination of brass with chorus, the use of ritornello, and jaunty rhythms. Pinkham draws a striking contrast between question and answer in the familiar "Quem vidistis, pastores?" text. The question ("Whom did you see, shepherds?") is posed in stern angular blocks. The answer comes in quick fragments with jazzy syncopated brass obbligato, as if the shepherds are talking hastily, out of breath, in great excitement. "O Magnum Mysterium" is a serene, mystical, and modal second movement. The last movement takes the form of verses separated by the angels' refrain, "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The angels are first heard from a distance, and come nearer in each succeeding refrain. Pinkham's combination of Baroque form with twentieth-century harmonic and rhythmic touches produces one of the liveliest of Christmas choral works.