

# *Touch the Angel's Hand*

**Performed October 19, 2002**

## **Agnus Dei**



César Franck (1822-1890) is one of an improbably large number of French composers who were organists by profession and who retained posts as church organists throughout their career, a group which also includes Saint-Saëns, Fauré and Duruflé. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire where he won first prizes for piano performance at the age of fifteen and organ performance at nineteen. After graduation he took the post of organist at St. Clothilde, which he held for rest of his life and where he developed a reputation not only for his improvisational skills but also as a teacher. He eventually returned to the Conservatoire as a professor of organ, where one of his students was Louis Vierne, who himself became a renowned performer and teacher. And in a musical "six degrees of separation," Vierne in turn taught Lili Boulanger and Maurice Duruflé, both of whom are represented in this program.

Franck's reputation as a composer took somewhat longer to establish. He was influenced by Bach, and his interest in harmonic structure and absolute music was somewhat at variance with the French romanticism then in vogue. This Agnus Dei is from Franck's 1861 *Mass in A*, an unusual work scored for three voices (soprano, tenor and bass), organ, harp and contrabass.

## *Touch the Angel's Hand*



*Touch the Angel's Hand* was commissioned and premiered by Mendelssohn Club in 1994 in a program which paired it with the Philadelphia premiere of Benjamin Britten's *The Company of Heaven*. Cynthia Folio is well known as a composer, performer and educator. She currently serves as associate professor and chair of music theory at Temple's Esther Boyer College of Music, where she received the Lindback Foundation Award for Distinguished Teaching. She has served as composer-in-residence at the Yaddo Artist Colony and at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and has won numerous awards for her compositions. As a flutist, she performs regularly both as a soloist and with such groups as the Network for New Music and the Hildegard Chamber Players.

The text of *Touch the Angel's Hand* is taken from Fra Giovanni's *Letter to a Friend*. Fra Giovanni Giocondo (1435-1515) was a Franciscan monk and a true Renaissance man — an accomplished artist, scholar, architect and writer. But it is his 1513 letter to Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi which has outlived all his other accomplishments, a remarkable and inspirational message of hope and reassurance.

Folio has arranged the text into five stanzas which correspond to sections in a musical arch form. The chorus enters softly with unison entrances which unfold into closely set chords. The music becomes increasingly expansive until a climax is reached in the third stanza with syncopations in the chorus laid over a wonderful jazz riff in the strings. The music calms as the soprano solo enters with long, soaring phrases. The piece ends quietly with the women's voices, interwoven with each other, slowly rising upward as if reaching toward heaven.

## *Two Psalms*



Few composers had to struggle as much as Gustav Holst (1874-1934) to become successful in their profession. Holst suffered from weak eyesight, asthma and something like carpal tunnel syndrome in his right hand, which made practicing the piano extremely painful. He was twice unsuccessful in obtaining a scholarship to the Royal College of Music and instead took several organist and choirmaster positions, and even composing and staging an operetta at one of them. His success in that endeavor sufficiently impressed his father that he borrowed the money to pay Holst's tuition at the Royal College. Holst eventually won a scholarship, but the stipend was so small that he did not have enough money to rent a piano for his lodgings, and he completed all his composition and theory classes without the benefit of a keyboard. His early compositions, influenced both by Wagner and by his interest in Hindu mythology, failed to attract much attention. The pain in his hand finally forced him to give up the piano and he took up the trombone instead (a curious choice for an asthmatic!) to supplement his income by playing in bands and orchestras. Holst finally achieved some measure of financial stability in 1905 when he obtained a teaching position at St. Paul's School for Girls, a post he was to hold for the rest of his life and which afforded him more freedom to compose.

Holst had developed an interest in English hymns (he contributed hymns and co-edited *The English Hymnal* with Vaughan Williams in 1905) and in the music of early English masters like Morely and Purcell. Both interests are evident in his 1912 *Two Psalms*, set for chorus, organ and string orchestra. *Psalm 86* opens with a simple hymn tune sung in unison, which contrasts with the strict counterpoint of the ensuing orchestral interlude. An *a cappella* section features a freely moving tenor solo set against the hymn tune, now harmonized for the women's voices in a style reminiscent of Purcell. It ends with a grand unison statement. *Psalm 148* is set to one of the most beautiful and recognizable of all hymns, *All Creatures of Our God and King*. The tune, *Lasst uns erfreuen*, first appeared anonymously in the 17th century *Geistliche Kirchengesänge*, and Vaughan Williams had provided a harmonization for *The English Hymnal*. Unlike most hymns, it is customarily sung in unison, and Holst takes advantage of the harmonic ambiguity that affords to provide a variety of harmonizations, set against an extended fantasia on the "alleluia" theme.

## *Pie Jesu*

Today we associate the name Boulanger with Nadia, the influential teacher, but it was her younger sister Lili (1893-1918) who gathered most of the musical acclaim during her

lifetime. She was a genuine musical prodigy who astounded Fauré by sight reading some of his songs at the age of six. When Nadia entered the Paris Conservatoire, Lili accompanied her, auditing Vierne's organ classes at six and Fauré's composition classes at nine. In 1913 she became the first woman to win the prestigious Prix de Rome. Her poor health and the outbreak of World War I initially prevented her from studying in Rome, but she maintained a steady stream of composition and with her sister helped organize a relief effort to support families of musicians who had been conscripted into the army. She resumed her studies in Rome in 1916, but her health failed and she was forced to return to Paris, where she died tragically young at the age of 25.

*Pie Jesu was Boulanger's last composition, written shortly before her death in 1918. Already too weak to write, she was forced to dictate the music. Given the circumstances of its composition, there is an especial poignancy to this piece, with its text taken from the requiem mass (Merciful Lord Jesus, grant them eternal rest) and the quietly reassuring music with which it concludes.*

## ***Requiem***

*As a boy, Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986) studied at the Rouen Cathedral choir school until he was sixteen before moving to Paris to study organ with Vierne. At 17 he became assistant organist at St. Clothilde, Franck's old church. He entered the Paris Conservatoire where he proved to be an outstanding student and performer, systematically winning first prizes in composition, harmony, organ, accompaniment and counterpoint. After graduation he briefly served as Vierne's assistant at Notre Dame until he was offered the post at St. Étienne-du-Mond, a position he held for the rest of his playing career. He was a brilliant organist who had an extensive performing career. He premiered Poulenc's Organ Concerto in 1939 and advised the composer on registrations. He joined the faculty of the Conservatoire in 1942, where he served as professor of harmony. Between his demanding concert and teaching schedule and his self-critical nature, he only composed about a dozen works. A serious automobile accident in 1975 ended his performing career and he never fully recovered from his injuries and he died in 1986.*

*Growing up in the Rouen Cathedral choir, Duruflé was immersed in Gregorian chant, and he frequently used it as the basis of his later compositions. Chant, or plainsong, derives from the earliest music of the Catholic church and was used for the liturgical texts in the celebration of the mass and the divine office, prayers said daily by priests. Chant is monophonic, i.e. having a single vocal line, and is sung without harmonization or accompaniment. The underlying text was the most important element in chant. Rather than having a fixed metrical pattern to which the text was fit, chant was sung in continuous phrases, with inflections reflecting the natural phrasing of the text. There was generally one note per syllable, but important words or syllables were emphasized by being stretched over multiple notes, called melismas. The uneven length of the lines of text coupled to the regular pronunciation of Latin words produces the characteristic irregular cadence of chant and provides a strong motive force which propels the music forward.*

*As chant evolved, vocal lines became increasingly florid and disconnected from the underlying text. By the sixteenth century the polyphonic music of composers like Palestrina had almost completely supplanted chant in the liturgy. Gregorian chant languished until 1827, when a young priest named Prosper Guéranger raised sufficient money to purchase an abandoned monastery at Solesmes, where he intended to revive the Benedictine monastic way of life. A key goal was restoration of Gregorian chant, and the monks at Solesmes began an immense, and ultimately successful, scholarly effort to recover and collect manuscripts, to rediscover the authentic performance practices and to reintroduce chant into the liturgy.*

*Duruflé was working on a set of organ pieces based on the Gregorian chants for the requiem mass when he was asked by his publisher to provide a Requiem. He adapted and enlarged this earlier work, completing the Requiem in 1947. In 1961, he rescored the work for small orchestra, which is the version performed in this concert. Concerning the Requiem, Duruflé wrote,*

*"This Requiem is entirely composed on the Gregorian themes of the Mass for the Dead. Sometimes the musical text was completely respected, the orchestral part intervening only to support or comment on it; sometimes I was simply inspired by it or left it completely, for example in certain developments suggested by the Latin text, notably in the Domine Jesu Christe, the Sanctus and the Libera. In general, I have sought above all to enter into the characteristic style of the Gregorian themes. Therefore, I have done my best to reconcile, as far as possible, Gregorian rhythm as it has been established by the Benedictines of Solesmes with the demands of modern meter...*

*"As for the musical form of each of these pieces, it is generally inspired by the same form presented in the liturgy. The organ's role is merely episodic: it intervenes, not to support the chorus, but solely to underline certain accents or to replace temporarily the sonorities of the orchestra which sound all too human. It represents the idea of peace, of faith and hope."*

*Duruflé used a number of techniques in setting the Gregorian chant. He often begins a vocal line on an off beat or with a syncopation, and he continually changes the meter from measure to measure, all of which diffuses the "strong beat-weak beat" feeling of strict metrical music. He often contrasts word accents and musical accents. Some chant melodies are harmonized; others are presented as canons, and some are given counter melodies.*

*The most recognizable part of the requiem mass is surely the Sequence, whose Dies iræ text presents such graphic images of the end of the world and the last judgment. Liturgically, it serves as a reminder about the transitory nature of earthly existence. Musically, it offers a rare opportunity for musical drama. Perhaps that is why the requiem appealed so strongly to opera composers like Berlioz, Mozart and Verdi. It was Fauré who broke with tradition and composed a requiem which omitted the Sequence entirely, concentrating instead on consolation and acceptance rather than on dramatic content. Duruflé followed Fauré's model closely, setting and omitting the same text and even assigning solos to the same movements. The resulting works, however, are quite different.*

*The Introit opens with a murmuring in the strings like flowing water, giving the feeling that the listener has come upon a work already in progress. The chant is initially presented by the men's voices with the women offering a wordless countermelody. The Introit flows seamlessly into the Kyrie, where the chant is presented as a canon, joined by the trumpet playing a beautiful chorale-like melody.*

*The Offertory unfolds in short episodes. It opens with the chant melody, but moves away from chant for the most dramatic music of the Requiem, with repeated exhortations to "deliver us from the lion's mouth" and the wonderfully dissonant phrase "cast us not into darkness." The mood calms as the text changes to one of more reassurance, entreating God to remember his promise of deliverance made to Abraham and his descendants, ending with a beautiful duet in the women's voices.*

*The Sanctus again opens with the chant music, beautifully harmonized. The hosannas are set as a long processional, punctuated by the march-like beat of the timpani and building in intensity to a huge climax. The Sanctus ends quietly as the women's voices return to the chant melody. The Pie Jesu may be the emotional high point of the Requiem. Set for mezzo-soprano solo, it demonstrates the wonderful possibilities for harmonization that Gregorian melody can provide.*

*The Agnus Dei opens with the chant in the vocal line and a lush countermelody in the orchestra. It ends with a beautiful harmonization of the final phrase "grant them rest," using a whole tone cadence which is loosely derived from chant. The Lux aeterna opens with a melody adapted from the chant in the orchestra, which is then picked up by the soprano line, with the other voices providing a wordless accompaniment as in the opening Introit. The movement ends with unison voices singing on a single pitch, set over moving, lullaby-like block chords in the orchestra.*

*The Libera me is traditionally sung after the mass as the casket is sprinkled with holy water before being taken out of the church. It returns to the Dies irae text briefly, but the overall mood is one of supplication. As in the Offertory Duruflé breaks this section into short vignettes of contrasting mood. And like Fauré, Duruflé divides this text between baritone solo and chorus. The Requiem ends with In Paradisum, traditionally sung at graveside. It opens softly with an angelic chorus of sopranos, moving to a divisi chorus of slightly dissonant chords, ending quietly on the text "may they have eternal rest."*

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**[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)**