

Voices of the Last Seal

Performed March 8, 2003

This evening's program represents quite a departure from the traditional concert presentation. It is conceived as a synthesis of sound and space, light and motion, creating a continuous and seamless musical experience. Musical selections of disparate styles and periods are connected together in a conscious effort to blur stylistic distinctions. The pivotal work of the evening is Robert Moran's haunting *Voices of the Last Seal*, music specifically composed to take advantage of a reverberant space like this newly renovated Philadelphia Cathedral. In fact one could say that the performance space itself plays a central role in this evening's concert, both visually and acoustically.

The musical program opens with the simplicity of Gregorian chant and moves through organum and polyphony, music of increasing complexity, culminating in Bruckner's thickly textured Romanticism, accompanied by trombones and organ. This musical arch is completed as the path is then reversed, moving through the deceptive simplicity of the Moran until the program concludes with the same chant with which it began, the arch now becoming a circle. During the course of the performance, the chorus is positioned at various locations throughout the cathedral, at one point even encircling the audience. Even the connecting music, written specifically for this concert by Moran, is thematically tied to the concepts of sound and space. And there are subtexts to the musical selections, conceptual leitmotifs if you will, which also serve to unify the musical experience.

One of these unifying themes is plainsong or chant, which derives from the earliest liturgical music of the Church. The opening chant is *Viderunt omnes*, a text taken from Psalm 98 and used liturgically as the Gradual (prayer between the Epistle and Gospel) for Christmas. Chant is monophonic, that is having a single vocal line, and is sung without harmonization or accompaniment. The underlying text, taken directly from the Scriptures, was the most important element in chant. Rather than having a fixed metrical pattern to which the words were fitted, chant was sung in continuous phrases, with inflections reflecting the natural phrasing of the text. Generally there was one note per syllable, but important words or syllables could be stretched over multiple notes. The uneven length of individual lines of text coupled to the regular pronunciation of Latin words produced an irregular cadence to chant which served to propel the music forward. And since chant was originally intended for congregational singing, it tended to be both simple and tuneful.

As chant evolved, vocal lines became increasingly florid and disconnected from the underlying text. By the Renaissance it had largely been superseded by the more complex polyphonic music and disappeared from liturgical use. Gregorian chant languished until 1827 when a young priest named Prosper Guéranger purchased an abandoned monastery at Solesmes in France, and petitioned the pope to allow him to revive the Benedictine monastic way of life. This included resurrecting chant, and the monks at Solesmes began an immense scholarly effort to recover and collect manuscripts and to restore the original

performance practice. They were so successful that chant has once again become an integral part of the liturgy and chant recordings by the Benedictines at Santo Domingo de Silos in Spain have even broken into the top ten charts.

The next step in musical evolution was the development of organum, in which multiple vocal lines or voices were used. The vocal lines were again based on chant melodies, but were initially harmonized in parallel fourths or fifths. By the time of Perotin in the twelfth century, however, organum had become much more sophisticated. The chant melody was given to a single voice, the cantus firmus, but the syllables were stretched out to the point where the chant was only recognizable by inference. Up to three moving, highly rhythmic parts were overlaid on top of the cantus firmus. While each individual voice might harmonize with the cantus firmus, they often provided some very dissonant moments when sung together.

Perotin was the greatest master of organum and one of the few composers who attempted four-part organum. He was also the first composer to consider the relationship between the moving parts, developing such devices as imitation and exchange of parts between voices, all of which became staples of later polyphony. The upper voices each have short, distinctive rhythmic patterns. All four voices come to a consonance at the end of each rhythmic pattern and they come to more sustained consonance at each change of syllable. *Viderunt omnes* is one of two extant four-part organa composed by Perotin. The text and the underlying chant is the same as the opening plainsong, but have been so elongated that by the end of the piece we have only gotten through the first two words of the chant!

The first of Robert Moran's connecting music is heard as the chorus rearranges itself for the Palestrina. This music is based on the processional chimes heard in the first act of Wagner's *Parsifal*. The old knight Gurnemanz is leading Parsifal on a mystical journey to the Grail Castle, and as they slowly cross the stage the backdrop is rapidly scrolling behind them, as if the world is changing even though they have hardly moved themselves. Parsifal remarks on this and Gurnemanz replies, "You see, my son, here time becomes space."

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) was one of the greatest and most prolific composers of Renaissance polyphony, writing complex music for four independent, equal voices. This reflected not only an evolution in musical style but also the new humanism of the Renaissance. As musicologist Wilfred Mellers put it, monophony 'is man in relation to God; polyphony is man in relation to his fellow man.'



In addition to polyphonic music for single choir, Palestrina also composed more than 70 works for double choir, like the motet *Stabat mater*. This anonymous poem first appeared in the 13th century and has been attributed to many writers, and set by many composers.

The version heard this evening, however, is Palestrina as seen through the eyes of Richard Wagner.

Despite Wagner's fame and influence, he earned a very poor living as an opera composer and was frequently only one step ahead of his creditors. In 1843 he accepted the post of second *Kapellmeister* at the court of the King of Saxony in Dresden in an attempt to find some financial stability. His duties included conducting orchestral and opera performances and composing music for court functions, and his arrangement of Palestrina's *Stabat mater* dates from this period. Unfortunately Wagner became caught up in the revolutionary fervor which swept Europe in 1848 and he made a series of inflammatory speeches in Dresden favoring the establishment of a representative government. Wagner was by no means the ringleader of the revolutionary movement, but when order was finally restored by the Prussian army a warrant was issued for Wagner's arrest. He fled Dresden and escaped to Switzerland on a false passport.



In Wagner's edition of the *Stabat mater*, the notes are all still Palestrina's, but he divides each choir into a solo quartet, a small semi-chorus, and the full chorus, and he adds quite a bit of dynamic shading as well. The double chorus would have sung from opposite sides of the church in Palestrina's time, and Wagner's division of the musical forces into six ensembles offers enhanced opportunities for spatial separation.



Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) is a remarkable study in contrasts: a diffident and self-effacing man who never overcame his image as a naïve peasant; a compulsive student who collected certificates and diplomas until he was forty; a virtuoso organist with a legendary skill in improvisation; and a composer of some of the most intricate and richly textured music. Bruckner also joins together two of our recurring themes. Educated in an Augustinian monastery and professionally active as a church musician for much of his career, he had an abiding love of chant, which he in fact incorporated into all three motets heard this evening. And Bruckner idolized Wagner, almost to an embarrassing degree. The three motets presented here span a forty-year compositional period but nevertheless well represent his approach to sacred music, combining elements of chant, polyphony, antiphonal music and his own densely harmonized Romanticism.

Transitional music is again heard as the chorus moves to encircle the audience for the Moran. This time the music is a chromatic modulation derived from the wanderer's theme from Wagner's *Siegfried*.

Composer Robert Moran should be familiar to Mendelssohn Club audiences: the chorus has commissioned and premiered three pieces by Moran including the critically acclaimed *Requiem: Chant du Cygne*, which Mendelssohn Club has also recorded on the

Argo label. Moran studied composition with Hans Erich Apostel, Luciano Berio and Darius Milhaud. His early music included city-works, where he marshalled multiple ensembles and thousands of performers across the entire cities of San Francisco, Bethlehem, PA, and Graz, Austria. He enjoyed a very successful collaboration with Philip Glass on the opera *The Juniper Tree*, and his catalog of compositions includes a variety of choral music, songs, opera, orchestral music and ballet. *Stimmen der letzten Siegel* (Voices of the Last Seal) was premiered in Munich in 2001 in a performance which served as the inspiration for this concert; it has also been used as dance music in its American premiere at Indiana University (Bloomington).

The text of *Voices of the Last Seal* are well-known quotes from King Ludwig II (the Mad) of Bavaria (1845-1886). He ascended the throne in 1864 as a nineteen-year old who was unprepared to face a rapidly changing political landscape. After an ill-advised decision to stand with Austria against the rising power of Prussia, he was maneuvered by the wily and ambitious Prussian chancellor Bismarck to ally Bavaria with Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War and to nominate the victorious Kaiser Wilhelm as emperor of a united Germany, crowning him in Versailles with his own hands in 1870. Bavaria was able to maintain its independence, but Ludwig was profoundly disillusioned with the entire experience and withdrew from his official duties. He retreated into the fantasy world of German heroic legend and began to populate it with a series of elaborate castles which he had constructed. If Ludwig was an indifferent monarch, he was a superb builder. His castle Neuschwanstein (which served as the model for Cinderella's castle in Disneyland) boasted running water throughout, modern plumbing and forced air heating. His castle at Linderhof included a fabricated grotto, taken from one of the scenes in *Tannhäuser*, which was illuminated with dozens of blue floodlamps, the first electrification project in Bavaria. (And Ludwig's blue lighting is echoed in the blue lighting for this performance.)

Ludwig had been fascinated with Wagner ever since hearing *Lohengrin* as a teen, and when he acceded to the throne in 1864 he immediately invited Wagner to Munich, discharged all his debts, and placed him on a stipend. Wagner, ever his own worst enemy, immediately alienated the Bavarian nobility with his imperious manner and his penchant for meddling in state affairs. But his undoing was his scandalous and highly visible affair with Cosima von Bülow, daughter of Franz Liszt and wife of the conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow. Highly visible, that is, to everyone but the naïve Ludwig, who had a very courtly, chivalrous concept of love. When he found out the true nature of their relationship, he was furious and expelled Wagner from Bavaria, although he continued to support the composer financially for the next twenty years.

In 1886, Ludwig's ministers, frustrated by the monarch's erratic behavior, inattention to duties of state and the vast expense associated with his building spree, had Ludwig declared unfit to rule, removed him from the throne and placed him under virtual house arrest at Castle Berg. Six days later, Ludwig's body was found floating in Lake Starnberg, and the circumstances of his death remain a mystery to this day.

Voices of the Last Seal is a symmetrically constructed work. It opens with a simple melody played by four celli which seems to repeat over and over, but is actually subtly different at each hearing, like the contemporary equivalent of a ground bass. Harp and chimes are gradually added. It has a dreamy, hypnotic quality perfectly suited the text, which is transparently layered on top of the cello music.

It is the middle section which really explores the relationship between sound and space. It consists of a long, five-octave arpeggio on the harp, repeated continuously. The singers and instrumentalists can freely join in this arpeggio, matching a single pitch when it is struck by the harp. The selection of which pitch to sound and its duration are at the discretion of the performers and will be different each time the arpeggio is repeated. The effect is an ever-changing cloud of chords which seems to hover over the audience and move about as the sound travels through the encircling chorus.

The final section echoes the first, but with the text interspersed with a wordless hum. The voices eventually converge on the hum as the music softly fades away. The program ends as it began, with the *Viderunt omnes* plainsong chant.

Program notes copyright © 2003 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. All rights reserved

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