

PROGRAM NOTES: “The Agony & the Ecstasy,” the West Village Chorale, February, 2013

“Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us— maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity—releases us from the coil of ourselves.”

—Ken Wilbur

Penitence is a religious concept somewhat out of fashion in the twenty-first century. And let me say, emphatically, that I think that is, for the most part, a good thing. I say for the most part, because there are certainly people in the world who could do with a soupçon more penitence in their lives—members of congress, for example? But I do not believe anyone should waste a moment lamenting the decline of self-flagellation, hair shirts, extreme fasting, confessionals, or any of the more maudlin and destructive forms of “mortification of the flesh” that were once an almost ordinary part of spiritual practice. But in this season of Lent, the idea of giving up even some small vice or pleasure, as a spiritual exercise, seems to many outside the Christian faith tradition (and even some inside it) somewhat self-aggrandizing, or simply strange. In order to fully appreciate and understand the music that forms the backbone of this faith tradition, I think we must place ourselves, as much as possible, inside the mind of the ordinary citizen of the time and place, namely Medieval Europe, from which it grew.

And inside the understanding of the time that world was, quite literally, flat. The universe revolved around a flat earth, above which, just beyond the clouds, existed a literal heaven. And beneath their feet, literally subterranean, was hell. In Medieval art, when demons are pictured

crawling out of the muck and mire of the earth to drag wayward souls off to their just desserts, it is not metaphorical. Hell was believed to be just below us, and if one was not careful, the veil that separates the living from the tormented would prove to be scant protection. When ninety-five percent of Europe's population lived in abject poverty, with an average life expectancy of little more than thirty years, in conditions that are almost impossible to grasp in the modern Western world, the church was the absolute arbiter of right and wrong, myth and reality, and good and evil. So the concept of penitence was not of an abstract spiritual practice, but—in the face of an eternal suffering that was believed to be all too real—an act of sincere and sometimes desperate hope.

That sincere and desperate hope is a common denominator between the music of the Medieval and Renaissance church and the traditional spirituals that grew out of the suffering of African Americans under slavery. And there is a clear and direct line of influence from the hymns and choral traditions of both the Catholic and Protestant churches that made their way to America, then working their way into the musical traditions brought here by slaves. They eventually fermented into the rich legacy of work songs and spirituals, which themselves gave birth to many—and influenced many other—modern American musical forms and styles, beginning with ragtime, through Tin Pan Alley and jazz, musical theater, soul, blues, and rock and roll.

In between each of the standard works heard tonight, we will also perform an arrangement of a traditional spiritual. Essentially, these are every bit as much “composed” pieces as the others in the program, inspired by their source material in the same way Hugo Distler uses a traditional German chorale, “Ein Lämmlein Gott,” in the conclusion of *Fürwahr*, and rewrites it to suit his own purposes. When composers take on the task of arranging a spiritual, they are tapping into a well-spring of a kind of folksong that is completely unique to the United States. The term spiritual evolved from the King James translation of a passage from Ephesians, “Speaking to

yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,” and first came into use in the 1860’s, to describe the improvised choral traditions of various African American communities. The manner in which many spirituals employ a call and response technique, where one voice or section outlines a melody which is echoed by the other parts, goes hand in hand with the preaching tradition of those churches, where the minister would call out and the congregation was expected to respond, often accompanied by music or just rhythm. As an expression of the state of mind of an oppressed people—a kind of thinly veiled public protest art, and an example of the transformative power of communal song—spirituals are, in the estimation of many, our nation’s most precious artistic legacy.

It is a sometimes misplaced and overused stereotype that all great art is born of suffering, but there is a clear marriage between the suffering of different peoples and the deeply spiritual and penitential music that resulted and that we explore tonight. But as Ken Wilbur suggests, I believe that if there is value in penitence, it is in the sense that it reminds us not only of our own failings and disappointments, but more importantly that “the riches and glories of another realm” are not merely aspirational, or only to be found in the afterlife, but are instead made manifest whenever we grasp for what lies beyond the here and now: when we paint, when we write, when we dance, when we improvise, and certainly, when we sing.

A fair amount of obscurity surrounds the history of Gregorio Allegri’s famous setting of Psalm 51, the “Miserere.” Composed sometime in the 1630’s for the first of three Tenebrae services (vigils celebrated in darkness during Holy Week) for the choir of the Sistine Chapel, the work was closely guarded by the Vatican for many years, and publishing was strictly forbidden. But in one of those rare, fanciful-sounding anecdotes of music history that is probably actually true, a fourteen-year old Mozart heard the work performed once, went home, and promptly transcribed it note for note from memory. He subsequently gave the transcription to Dr. Charles Burney, a British historian, who published it in spite of the ban. When Mozart was again

received at the Vatican, he might well have been excommunicated for this act of musical smuggling, but he was instead lauded for his musical genius. How much of that famous story is literally true is impossible to say for certain, but it is backed up by a fair amount of documentation, including Mozart family letters; and, myth or not, it is simply too wonderful a tale to dismiss.

In later years, the work was again transcribed, by Mendelssohn and Liszt among others, and certain elements of another “Miserere” setting by Sistine Chapel composer Tommaso Bai were incorporated into published editions, making the origin of the music we know today murky at best. But however much of the “Miserere” is Allegri’s original, versus interpolations added by his various transcribers, is essentially irrelevant. What remains is an astonishingly beautiful piece, based on phrases of Gregorian chant, harmonized and then elaborated. The verses of the psalm are set as a kind of litany, in a poly-choral style (meaning more than one choir performing in alternation), growing out of the tradition started by Giovanni Gabrieli, in Venice, in the late 1500’s. The five high C’s assigned to the solo soprano are one of the singular glories (and potential quagmires!) of the choral repertoire.

Hugo Distler’s (1908–1942) entire life is a somewhat existential embodiment of the search for spiritual peace that we are exploring in tonight’s program. He struggled with issues of depression and had the grave misfortune of living in Germany at a time in history when such issues were both frowned upon and exacerbated by current events. It is a matter for debate whether or not his eventual suicide, at the age of thirty-four, was directly or indirectly brought on by his overwhelming fear of and conflicts with the Nazi regime, or if in fact his own mental distress would have, as a matter of course, led to the same sad end. Quotes from his correspondence, from the last years of his life, are illustrative and chilling:

“One suffers periodically from wretchedness these days!” (1940)

“I suffer increasingly from a chronic despondency that borders on depression and is certainly a result of the irritating war of nerves. There are no words to describe how horrible the present and the near future look for us.” (1941)

“We will have to face the fact, even if it is enough to drive us insane, that within the next year or two our glorious Germany, with its singular urban culture, is going to be transformed into a large heap of rubble. Woe betide those who are to blame for it!” (1941)

“It is good that people like us have a consolation that many have to do without today: the certainty of the unassailable realm that, thank God, is not of this world. I suspect more and more that with this realm Christ did not merely mean a life after death, but rather one in which we can find comfort at all times. May he fortify us in this belief against all the horror that might be awaiting us.” (1942)

“Until now I believed that God was with me, but now I believe that he has forsaken me.”  
(November 3, 1942, upon receiving his mobilization order, the day he took his own life)

If Distler’s music is particularly imploring, moving, startling, even tortured, it is not just some abstract expression but the manifestation of a very real fear, and an ever-present suffering.

Musically, Distler’s greatest influences were Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) and Johannes Brahms. One need not stretch the imagination to hear the links between the twisting, highly chromatic phrases of the middle section of Brahms’ “Schaffe in mir, Gott” and a similar central passage in Distler’s “Fürwahr,” and while we are not performing Schütz in this program, in “Die mit Tränen,” a motet by his contemporary and stylistic soul mate, Johan Schein, it is similarly easy to hear the compositional elements that Distler absorbed into his own, albeit more modern and ascetic, compositional style. In his manipulation of small, carefully constructed motivic kernels, spinning them out through seemingly endless modulations and augmentations, he creates a work of great complexity and extraordinary emotional content, yet made up of only a few, spare elements.

There is one two-note motive, the first two notes of the piece, a rising minor second, sung first by the altos, which forms the entire musical basis for nearly two thirds of the piece—melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically!—which is supplemented by the very terse and tightly constructed fugue in the central section, on the words “Aber um unsere Misserat willen ward er verwundet (But for our misdeed he was wounded).” After a literal restatement of the opening section, the work is capped off by an elegiac setting of the seventeenth-century chorale tune “Ein Lämmlein geht,” ending with “The punishment was given him, that we might have peace,” words that take on particular poignancy in the light of Distler’s own tragic story.

Schein’s setting of another familiar Lenten text, from Psalm 126, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy,” comes from a point in German musical history when composers were first embracing the idea of writing music for the church in their native tongue. This is one of the many cultural outgrowths of the Protestant Reformation, which would sweep all of Europe to varying degrees, but which musically had the greatest impact in German-speaking lands and in England. The very particular speech rhythms associated with the German tongue, in contrast with Latin, allowed the works of German composers to take on the rhythms and cadences of the words, and led to musical characteristics that could, arguably for the first time, be identified with individual nations and regions. So the music of Schein and Schütz and, later, Bach, sounds “German,” in part because of how the spoken language inflects the compositional language. A certain angularity, an emphasis on syncopation and off-beat rhythms, and a penchant for chromaticism (music and harmony based on half-step intervals) were to become characteristics associated with German music from the Renaissance onward. This motet begins with just such a chromatic, twisting musical line, which leads to a more lyrical, energetic statement, leaping up on the word Freuden (joy), then shifting quickly into a passage in fast three-quarter time to highlight the repetitions of the word. Finally, in the conclusion, the chromaticism of the opening is fused with the joyful spirit of the middle into one resounding statement of hope.

To say that Brahms's motet "Schaffe in mir, Gott" was influenced by similar Renaissance and Baroque works by the likes of Schein, Schütz, and Bach is a little like saying Lady Gaga was influenced by Madonna: quite unnecessary and apparent! Like so many of the earlier works Brahms admired and studied, this motet is also in five parts (two sopranos, alto, tenor, and bass). But unlike those works, in this one Brahms changes the scoring three times during the piece: for the central imitative section, he uses a straightforward SATB texture; for the lovely passage on the words "Tröste mich wieder mit deiner Hülfe (Give me the comfort of thy help)" he alternates men's and women's voices in three parts, and for the conclusion, he reverses the five-part texture of the opening to SATBB. All this shifting of textures subtly illuminates and heightens the progressive moods of the text, creating an additional layer of drama and emotional impact in a relatively brief composition.

But what is really going on, almost unnoticed in the midst of the musical flow, is a peerless mastery of contrapuntal techniques, the likes of which no one but Bach could equal. The opening twenty-five bars feature a canon, in which the sopranos sing the theme twice, in exactly the amount of time it takes the basses to sing the very same tune once through, while the three inner parts sing fragments of the same canonic tune. In the following minor-key section, the tenors begin a fugue, which the other three parts also sing in their first entrances, and simultaneously he introduces a second fugue subject, which all four parts also sing. He then inverts the first subject and combines it with the second, then inverts both subjects and combines them, and then manages to combine the original subject with the inverted second, all in the span of about fifty measures. He follows this with yet another canon, at the seventh, and a final fugue, on yet another new subject, to close! This complexity of means is almost entirely imperceptible to the casual listener. What you experience is a beautifully wrought evocation of a psalm, in three main sections—a lush opening, followed by a darker emotional center, topped off by a joyous, energetic finale. But such is the extraordinary mastery of Brahms's careful study of Renaissance

contrapuntal styles, incorporating them so fluently and effortlessly, that instead of labored technique, all one hears is beautiful music.

“The Quiet Mind” was written a couple of years ago, for my students at the Dalton School, and performed at last year’s Graduation Ceremony at the Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center. I was inspired to write this piece while watching, of all things, an episode of *The Tudors* on Showtime. Henry Cavill (need I say more?), portraying the Duke of Suffolk, asks to read Howard’s poem, which he has supposedly just scribbled down in a mood of profound disgust over the state of the world. I thought the text was so lovely, I immediately looked it up, knowing nothing of its provenance. I discovered that Howard was a prolific writer and led an interesting and, typical of those surrounding the Tudor court, quite dramatic life. What struck me most about this poem, and drew me to set it to music, was how modern the text seemed. How timeless the idea that, amidst the pursuit of happiness, which all too often seems to translate into the search for material success, it is the basic need for contentment, connection, and fulfillment in our interpersonal affairs that truly defines whether or not we are ultimately happy: “Wisdom joined with simpleness, the night discharged of all care, the riches left, not got with pain.” And to go back to Ken Wilbur’s wonderful statement, that which “undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us.”

As we reach the conclusion of this musical/spiritual journey, we are about to commit heresy. I hope you will forgive us, those of you who might adhere to a strictly traditional Lenten practice. One is not, as you probably know, supposed to utter the word “Alleluia” from Ash Wednesday until Easter, when it bursts forth repeatedly in hymns and chants to remind us that the season of penitence is over. From Wikipedia: “The Hebrew word *Halleluya* as an expression of praise to God was preserved, untranslated, by the Early Christians as a superlative expression of thanksgiving, joy, and triumph.” Bearing that in mind, when I first listened to Eric Whitacre’s *Alleluia* last year, it struck me as the most melancholy and introspective setting of the text I had

yet encountered. And as such, I thought it would make a very lyrical, nontriumphalist conclusion to this concert of music delving into the search for spiritual peace, release, and a quiet kind of joy.

Whitacre himself acknowledged the somewhat unexpected nature of his use of the word as follows:

“I’m not an atheist, but I’m not a Christian either, and for my entire career I have resisted setting texts that could be used in a liturgical context. However, after spending the 2010 Michaelmas term at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, singing with Dr. David Skinner and his marvelous Chapel choir, I began to see the deep wisdom in the liturgy. I found myself suddenly open to the history and the beauty of the poetry, and it was the single word *Alleluia*—‘praise God’—that most enchanted me. So I transcribed “October,” a work I originally wrote for wind symphony, for a cappella voices, using only that single word.”

Which turns out to be a tiny bit untrue, as he concludes the work with “Amen”, but that’s a small point. What matters, I think, is the autumnal quality of the original piece, beautifully translated into the choral medium, which lends the work an at times ethereal, meditative, melancholy, and ultimately hopeful spirit. And so it is that a word that usually connotes joy and thanksgiving and even triumph—a word that, like Voldemort, should not even be named at this place and time—somehow seemed just the right word to end this spiritual journey: from penitence to hope, despair to release, suffering to eternal life. Big concepts, full of contradictions and, probably for many of us, widely disparate feelings about our own lives and our place in this world. But without that sometimes difficult journey, where would we be going in such a hurry, and why? If, as Wilbur contends, great art can help us suspend “the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future,” then hopefully our journey today is another small step on that long path to a more “quiet mind,” a little closer to “wisdom joined with simpleness.”

White Eagle (ca.1840–1914), chief of the Ponca Indians, leaves us with this wisdom:

“When you are in doubt, be still, and wait; When doubt no longer exists for you, then go forward with courage. So long as mists envelop you, be still; Be still until the sunlight pours through and dispels the mists—as it surely will.”

—Michael Conley