

J.S.Bach (1685-1750)

Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden BWV 225

Scored for four choral voices over an organ continuo, *Lobet den Herrn* based on the 117th Psalm is the final and sixth motet surviving from J.S.Bach's oeuvre. The origins of the motet (coming from *mot* = word) are as old as the birth of organised polyphony, with the addition of words to the harmonic embellishment of episodes in plainsong called a 'clausula'. Remaining strictly within the bounds of sacred music, the popularity of uninhibited vocalising resulting from the motets during the 13th Century called down a worried reaction of restrictive anathemas from church leaders alarmed at the sanctity of the chant becoming diluted: "Sometimes thou mayest see a man with an open mouth.. to imitate the agonies of a dying man, or the ecstasies of such as suffer" (truly some aspects of humanity remain immortal!). Of course this often related to the secular use of chant becoming versified and popularised in an age before mass *media* or popular entertainment, though the basis of the motet and its roots in Gregorian chant remain throughout the development of its style, even until the 19th and 20th centuries. The High Renaissance, through the contrapuntal perfections of the Flemish composers such as Josquin des Prez, later Orlando Lassus and finally brought to fruition by Palestrina (who to this day remains a model of classical counterpoint), developed a method in which recognisable threads of chant could be employed as the basis for each new section, which in itself developed the most expressive and intense imitation. This contrapuntal standard became even more refined in Palestrina's so called 'Parody Masses' in which an entire motet could be embedded in further embellished polyphony.

J.S.Bach's resort to this medium in an age when other composers were absorbed in the rise of opera, is from one angle necessarily archaic. However the resources of the churches at his disposal, allied with his own propensity for exulting in the development of received forms led him and his Baroque language of the late 17th /early 18th century into a robust and vivid emotional language entirely new to the motet idiom. One aspect of Bach's genius is immediately apparent in the restrained but deeply inherent nature of the word-painting. For example in the instrumental nature of the choral-writing: the opening 'trumpet' motifs giving a wonderfully orchestral flavour to the composition, while the Finale in the guise of an *Alleluia* releases the shackles of the muscular duple (2) time into an exuberant compound (3) time as if we too had finally reached the world of the angels themselves. The inheritance too of the Renaissance motet can be found in various aspects of the piece: each new section is heralded by a motivic entry in the sopranos, thereafter working in fugal imitation downwards through the choir; the introduction of homophonic sections ("Denn seine Gnade") into the polyphonic writing was common to the 16th century composers, while the addition and development of imitative voices based around an original motif harks even further beyond, to the plainsong-inspired innovations of the 13th century.

*Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden,
und preiset ihn, alle Völker!
Denn seine Gnade und Wahrheit
waltet über uns in Ewigkeit.
Alleluja!*

from Psalm 117

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594)

Missa Brevis arr. J. S. Bach

The borrowing, copying interchanging and adapting of models, particularly as a means towards learning and inspiration, was common and very dear to the Baroque composers. In the modern restless striving for originality this is less understandable, and yet J. S. Bach who famously copied manuscripts of his contemporaries as a youth to the point of excess at which his elder brother Johann Christian locked up the music cabinet(!) continued to eagerly write out contrapuntal models from the past as well as more innovative concertos from the Italian school of Vivaldi or Telemann, transcribing for different instruments and altering various aspects of texture and performance detail as befitted a more 'modern' performance. Of course the process of copying yielded valuable repertoire, in addition to the acquisition of musical knowledge and experience. (Bach was required to provide music for numerous masses and extra services, as were any Kappelmeisters of the period.) The confident adaptation of historic music does however sit uneasily with our less creative, history-conscious age. An adaption of an unknown Italian violin concerto for harpsichord is one matter, but the contrapuntal embellishments of Pergolesi's exquisite *Stabat Mater* or instrumental doubling of Palestrina's vocal writing is quite another! Perhaps for this reason, Bach's arrangement of the first two movements of Palestrina's *Missa Sine Nomine* have only recently emerged into publication, guarded by the sanctity of his own name. The arrangement itself is very straightforward: the pitch is raised slightly from the original and the six vocal lines are scored to be doubled by brass instruments with the addition of a continuo keyboard and string bass line.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Bachianas Brasileiras No.9

Written in 1945, the Bachianas Brasileiras ("Brazilian Bach pieces") No.9 represents the last of the series of works grouped under this title. Villa-Lobos who spent most of his working life in the growing cities of Brazil with limited opportunities for foreign travel, balanced his own instinct for indigenous Brazilian music with an academic appetite for the modern European achievements in counterpoint and harmony. Both sides of his nature were strengthened and deepened by experiences in his early life: growing up as a youth in Rio following his father's death and having to earn a living in theatre and cinema orchestras, he escaped in 1905 and indulged an energetic appetite for travel in the 'dark' interior of Brazil. Though accounts from this time are romanticised and unreliable, Villa-Lobos was through necessity exposed to the roots of the Portuguese, African and American-Indian music which made up the folk-music culture. On the other side of his nature, the decision to write serious compositions was further excited through encounters with Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* and the beginning of a life-long friendship with the pianist Artur Schnabel, who encouraged the young composer to travel to Europe, in particular to Paris where he met the fashionable *avant-garde* figures of his day: Varese, Picasso, Copland (to whom the Bachianas Brasileiras No.9 is dedicated) and in return making a strong impression with his own compositions on the Parisian public.

The set of 'Brazilian Bach pieces' achieves a highly successful amalgamation of the two sides of Villa-Lobos' musical character, wedding the formal, compositional techniques of J.S.Bach's style to the free rhythms and exotic harmonies of colourful Brazilian music. Presented as a Prelude and Fugue the opening movement of No.9 is described as 'Vagaroso

e mistico', followed attacca by the Fugue which is set in a complex 11/8 tempo divided throughout into 5/8 + 6/8. While such techniques represent a completely 'new', *avant-garde* adaption of Bachian elements, Villa-Lobos writes with serene confidence for six-part choir, the resulting contrapuntal richness being described in the scoring as for "Orquestra de Vozes".

Mauricio Kagel (1931-2008) **Chorbuch für Vokalensemble und Tasteninstrumente**

Mauricio Kagel, who died last year in Cologne, has become one of the key figures in contemporary music of the last 50 years. Born from a complicated racial mixture of German (Prussian) and Russian Jews, his parents emigrated to Buenos Aires in the 1920s. Born in 1931 Mauricio studied philosophy and literature in Buenos Aires (one of his professors was Jorge Luis Borges), but he remained self-taught as a classical composer. His search for answers in this field led to a meeting with Pierre Boulez who persuaded him to move away from the restricted musical society of South America and pursue a career in Europe. An initial attempt to study in France was rejected and in 1957 on receiving a DAAD student award he moved to Germany where apart from excursions to the USA to fulfill teaching posts, he remained for the rest of his life.

Certainly his social background contributed to the feeling of 'latent alienation' which Kagel experienced as an emigre living in Germany in the 1950s. In spite of, (or perhaps because of) his peculiar ability in the fields of theatre and film and the blend of both with music, he was accepted in to the Summer courses at Darmstadt where the experimentation in electronic scores, coupled with the purist serialist philosophy of Stockhausen seems to have both attracted and repelled him. Whilst forging close links with the Darmstadt school and lecturing there from 1960-66 and from 1972-76, he later commented on the narrow historic perception of many *avant-garde* composers who chose to remain in ignorance of other composers rather than challenge their own beliefs. Many aspects of received practice and society 'norms' were exposed to his intellect as an outsider, a newly-arrived musician from the musical provinces, so that by far the greatest drive behind his creativity becomes a sharply-defined sense of humour, "a weakness for anarchic situations that can be conveyed artistically and musically": In *Finale* for chamber ensemble, the conductor is instructed to stage a heart attack, while in *Divertimento* for the same forces, the conductor experiences a carefully choreographed rebellion from the musicians, who force him to leave the stage.

All Kagel's works are meticulously conceived and notated, with the music itself being composed at the highest technical level. The theatrical elements are never left to chance and account is taken of visual and physical elements so that the composition is entirely complete as a work of theatre. In this sense Kagel has revolutionised the theatrical in the field of contemporary music, setting a level in clarity of notation and seriousness of intent, in spite of the humour ever present in his work. Das Chorbuch makes use of chorale settings (Protestant hymns) with an inventive accompaniment in harmonium and piano, juxtaposing keyboard interludes with choir episodes, commentating freely through the vocalists, often deconstructing the Bach originals and reconstructing them to form new versions! While the collection as a whole is large (53 numbers in total) this performance makes use of just 12 numbers, assembled in accordance with the written instructions to make a concert performance.

1. O mensch beweine
2. Das neugeborne Kindelein
3. Nun komm den Heiden Heiland

4. Der du bist drei in Einigkeit
5. Puer natus in Bethlehem
6. Ich freue mich in dir
7. Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig
8. Ein feste Burg
9. Christ lag in Todesbanden
10. Christus der uns selig macht
11. Das walt mein Gott
12. Es ist genug