

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 30, December 1-2, 2018
Subscription Concert No.4
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Welcome to the 2018 edition of one of Madison's beloved community traditions, "A Madison Symphony Christmas." This program moves from classical styles in the first half to more popular music of the season after intermission: with some cozy holiday favorites, a bit of Venezuelan Christmas music, some new arrangements of familiar carols...and a rockin' Gospel finale! We welcome two fine vocal soloists, soprano Cecilia Violetta López who makes her Madison Symphony Orchestra debut at these concerts, and a longtime Madison favorite, baritone Kyle Ketelsen. As always the program features three great choral groups from Madison, the Madison Youth Choirs, the Mount Zion Gospel Choir, and our own Madison Symphony Chorus. We are also proud to feature two of the MSO's own, violinists Leann League and Xavier Pleindoux.

Our opening work, *Angels We Have Heard on High*, had its origins as an anonymous French carol, but was adapted as an English carol in about 1860 by an Anglican bishop, James Chadwick. It is heard here in an arrangement by Mack Wilberg, director of the famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Sweet solo voices begin this version, which continues with five increasingly grand verses and a stirring coda.

In 1717 George Friderick Handel (1685-1759) moved to England to compose and produce opera. For nearly two decades, Handel was the most successful impresario in England, but by the 1730s, Italian opera had gone out of fashion, and Handel turned increasingly to the English oratorio. His oratorios—dramatic renderings of Biblical stories familiar to his English audiences—were enormously successful, and their popularity endured and grew long after Handel's death. *Messiah* of 1741 is, of course, Handel's most enduring "hit," but it is somewhat unusual among his oratorios in that his text is a pastiche of direct quotes from the King James version of the Bible. "For Unto Us a Child is Born" is one of the finest of the oratorio's choruses and the centerpiece of the Christmas section—though like many of his oratorio numbers it was actually recycled from an earlier work: in this case, a thoroughly secular Italian cantata.

The *Christmas Oratorio* by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was written in Leipzig for the Christmas season of 1734-35. Not really an "oratorio," in the

dramatic sense of *Judas Maccabeus* and other contemporary works by Handel, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* is instead a series of six connected cantatas for Christmas Day and the feasts that follow it. Like many of the numbers in the *Christmas Oratorio*, the aria "Grosser Herr, O starker König" ("Great Lord, O mighty king") from the first cantata, is in fact a reworking of an earlier piece. In this case, Bach borrowed the music from an occasional piece of about a year earlier, a birthday cantata for Maria Josepha, Electress of Saxony. The aria is transformed here to an emotional song to the baby Jesus. It is set in the three-part form of contemporary operatic arias. The opening section begins with a trumpet solo that winds sinuously around the baritone's aria. This music is suitably exultant in style, but the second section, focusing on the humble circumstances of Jesus's birth, is more restrained. The aria ends with a repeat of the opening section, allowing both soloists to ornament their lines.

In 1717 Bach joined the musical establishment of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen. Though Cöthen itself was a rather dull provincial town, the Prince was a true music-lover and maintained a fine musical establishment, including a few excellent soloists and a small orchestra. Bach served as *Kapellmeister* in Cöthen, and much of his surviving orchestral music dates from his time there: including most of the "Brandenburg" concertos, most of his orchestral suites, and two surviving violin concertos. It is likely that his two-violin concerto was written for Cöthen though Bach may well have composed it years later in Leipzig, after he became the city's chief church musician. We'll probably never know for sure as Bach's original manuscript of the concerto has not survived, but we do know that in 1730 or 1731, the concerto was played by Leipzig's *Collegium musicum*, a group of amateur and professional players that Bach directed. Bach follows a well-established Italian form in this concerto, in which two lively outer movements surround a more introspective slow movement. The central movement (*Largo, ma non tanto*) heard here is a lovely and delicately interwoven dialogue between the two solo lines, supported by a gently pulsing accompaniment.

We continue with a pair of works that feature the Madison Boychoir. The music of Englishman John Rutter (b. 1945) has appeared on nearly all of our Holiday concerts in recent years, and this program is no exception. Here, children's voices sing his *Angel's Carol*, a joyous song with the refrain "Gloria in excelsis Deo." *Gesù Bambino* is the work of Pietro Yon (1886-1943). Born in Italy, Yon emigrated to New York City in 1907, where he held a series of prestigious posts, eventually serving as organist at St. Patrick's cathedral from 1927 until his death. Yon was admired as a virtuoso performer, and composed dozens of works for the organ. His catalog of works also includes an oratorio, nearly two dozen masses,

and many smaller choral and keyboard pieces, but his best-known composition by far is the Christmas song *Gesù Bambino*, composed in 1917. It is heard here in an arrangement for children's choir and solo baritone.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) 16-month stay in Paris in 1778-79 ended when his father asked him to return to Salzburg, to take up the position of court organist for the archbishop. A dutiful son, Mozart returned, even though there is evidence that relations between the archbishop and the precocious composer were strained at best. Mozart chafed at the provincial nature of the Salzburg musical establishment and by late 1780 had left Salzburg forever. Despite the tradition-bound musical requirements of the Salzburg chapel, however, Mozart's Salzburg years produced some of his finest religious works, including the *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore* of 1780, the second of his settings of a Vespers text. The most famous of the work's movements, the soprano solo *Laudate Dominum* (Psalm 116), is also the most secular in style. In this movement, Mozart lifts the bassoon from its traditional role as part of the continuo to provide a quiet obbligato to the soloist. He uses the chorus to comment on the soprano's thoroughly operatic lines.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) composed sacred music throughout his short career, and produced an impressive number of sacred works—primarily Latin works, though he also wrote several works in German and at least one Psalm setting in Hebrew for one of Vienna's synagogues. The best known of these are his six complete settings of the Latin Mass. Most of them, written for his home parish at Lichtental are rather modest, but the *Mass No.5 in A-flat major* is very much in the grand tradition of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven—a large concert work, lasting three quarters of an hour, for chorus, four vocal soloists, and full orchestra. Schubert composed it in 1819, but revised it extensively in 1826 as part of an unsuccessful application for a position at the Imperial court. While he did not get the gig, Schubert was apparently quite pleased with the Mass, which he referred to as his *Missa Solemnis*. Here, we present the opening and closing choruses from the *Gloria* movement, beginning with “Gloria in excelsis Deo”—a thoroughly joyful choral acclamation above an energetic orchestral accompaniment. One of his revisions in 1826 was a new chorus on “Cum Sancto Spiritu”—the closing section of the *Gloria*. Austrian masses usually include a fugue at this point, and Schubert's chorus is no exception: this is a rousing double fugue that continues with unrelenting energy until the final Amen.

As always the finale to our first half is the concluding “Hallelujah” chorus from Part II of Handel's *Messiah*. While this familiar and exuberant chorus is actually

the conclusion of the Easter section of the oratorio, it has long since become the standard part of the Christmas season as well. Feel free to sing along if the spirit moves you!

We turn to the more popular side of Christmas music in the second half, beginning with a composition by Mack Wilberg (b.1955). Wilberg recorded his *A Christmas Roundelay* with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in 2011. It is a brisk processional piece set in a lively 7/8 rhythm. While the overriding mood is the sheer joy of the holiday season, this writer hears just a hint of Hollywood Western movie music as well! We follow this with a moving Christmas song by Michael W. Smith (b. 1957). Smith is a star of Contemporary Christian music—a winner of several “Dove” awards, a sought-after songwriter, and a popular singer in his own right. (Members of the Madison Symphony Orchestra performed with him in his appearance here last year.) His *All is Well*, written in 1989, is a wonderfully simple setting of words by Wayne Kirkpatrick that is well-suited to this emotional arrangement for soprano and children’s voices.

The text of the well-known *Sussex Carol (On Christmas Night All Christians Sing)* was first published in 1684 by an Irish bishop, Luke Waddinge, though it is possible that Waddinge merely printed a hymn already in circulation. The carol was certainly part of the folk tradition in Britain, and it circulated with a few different melodies. The now-universal tune for the *Sussex Carol* was transcribed in about 1900 by the English song-collector Cecil Sharp and his student Ralph Vaughan Williams. Vaughan Williams heard this melody from a woman in the English county of Sussex, and published it as the *Sussex Carol* in 1919. It is heard here in an arrangement for by Bob Chilcott, which transforms it into an ebullient and rhythmically dynamic dance in 7/8.

The popular Venezuelan singer and songwriter Hugo Blanco (1940-2015) wrote his children’s song *Mi burrito sabanero* (“The Little Donkey from the Savannah” – also known as “The Little Donkey from Bethlehem”) in 1972. The original song channeled the infectious rhythm of *joropo*—folk music of the vast grassland that stretches across Venezuela and Columbia—but the song has proven to be endlessly adaptable in a variety of styles. It became popular across Latin America in a 1974 *cumbia*-style recording by the children’s group La Rondollita, but since then has been recorded in Mariachi style, by Salsa bands, in a pop-style version by the Columbian star Juanes, and in Reggaeton remixes. The arrangement heard here was created by Glenn Garrido, conductor of the Houston Latin American Philharmonic. It begins with a rather solemn introduction and march, before cutting loose into a lively accompaniment to this delightfully childlike song.

Next comes a pair of cheerful Christmas songs that came out of the Great Depression. *Winter Wonderland* was a 1934 collaboration by lyricist Richard Smith and composer Felix Bernard, and a No.2 hit that year for the Guy Lombardo orchestra. The song, with its cozy, sentimental imagery of snowmen and cold winter walks—and warming by the fire afterwards—had tremendous staying power and was a hit for both Perry Como and the Andrews Sisters in the 1940s. Since then, it's never left the list of holiday standards. *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* was written in 1932, a collaboration between composer J. Fred Coots, and lyricist Haven Gillespie. The song was not introduced until the Holiday season of 1934 by radio star Eddie Cantor, but it was popular as soon as it hit the airwaves. This durable song sold millions of records for singers from Bing Crosby to Gene Autry to Perry Como to the Andrews Sister, and even inspired an animated television special in 1970. Fast forward to 1995... For one of its early "Holiday Spectacular" concerts in 1995, the Madison Symphony Orchestra commissioned Jazz arranger Frank Mantooth to create an updated version of the song for that season. Mantooth's arrangement, building on a choral arrangement by Kirby Shaw, was premiered in December 1995 by the Madison Boychoir. Mantooth later adapted the piece for the larger Madison Symphony Chorus: a swingin' take on this Holiday classic!

This year's A Madison Symphony Christmas ends, as we have for the last several years, with works featuring the Mount Zion Gospel Choir. Their set opens with in original song by their director Leotha Stanley, *4 is for Christmas Happiness*. The choir and orchestra follow with two other Stanley arrangements. *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* is an anonymous English carol that dates from at least the 18th century (it was first published in 1760). Though he was respected in his day as a composer of operas and ballet scores (including the well-known *Giselle*) Adolphe Adam (1803-1856) is known to American audiences almost exclusively for his Christmas carol *Cantique de Noël*. Written in 1847 as a setting of a two-verse Christmas poem by Mary Cappeaux, this carol was later adapted by J. S. Wright as a three-verse English carol, *O Holy Night*.

And then, friends, it's *your* turn to sing!

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