SPEAKING IN MANY TONGUES

MUSIC OF

ROBERT JONES • THOMAS TALLIS & ELLIOTT GYGER

BLUE HERON RENAISSANCE CHOIR
Concert at Monadnock Music Festival tomorrow, July 31
Blue Heron sings much of this program (Jones, Tallis, and Sarum chant), plus a response by Taverner and a set of English works by Tallis, tomorrow evening at 8 at the Peterborough Town House in Peterborough, New Hampshire, presented by Monadnock Music. For information contact Monadnock Music at 603 924-7610 or 800 868-9613, or visit www.monadnockmusic.org.

Next season's dates
Blue Heron's 2004-05 season includes concerts on November 28 and April 16-17, with programs of 15th-century English and 16th-century Spanish sacred music and secular song. To be sure you receive notice of these concerts, sign up for our mailing list today, visit our website (www.blueheronchoir.org), or send us a note at info@blueheronchoir.org.

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This evening’s concert opens with Thomas Tallis’s vivid evocation of the events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-3). In Tallis’s work, the tenor, the sixth voice to enter, sings a slow-moving plainchant melody (a cantus firmus) whose inexorable progress is barely discernible amidst the clamor of six other voices which clash against each other rhythmically and melodically, creating abundant false relations. Tallis’s Loquebantur varia linguis makes an apt introduction to a program which sets the dense polyphony of composers writing five centuries ago next to that of one writing today, with a sixteenth-century Mass based on a plainchant cantus firmus (in this case the chant Spes nostra, the antiphon to the fifth psalm at Matins on Trinity Sunday) next to a twenty-first-century Kyrie based on a plainchant from the same ancient Sarum tradition (the English rather than the Roman or Gregorian repertoire). The three tongues of Elliott Gyger’s trilingual Trisagion will have to stand for the multitude of tongues spoken by the apostles at Pentecost.

With this performance of the Missa Spes nostra by Robert Jones, Blue Heron pursues its exploration of music from the Peterhouse partbooks, a set of manuscripts copied around 1540 that contain an extensive repertoire of sacred polyphony from the years just prior to the Reformation in England. The partbooks may have been prepared by a scribe at Magdalen College, Oxford, for use at Canterbury Cathedral, which was refounded in 1541 as a secular cathedral following its dissolution in 1540 as a monastic institution. The repertoire of the partbooks has long posed a challenge to those writing the musical history of England in the years just prior to the Reformation, for large-scale Marian antiphons and long festal masses written in an ornately melismatic style were supposedly rapidly falling out of use in the later years of Henry VIII’s reign; and yet this is precisely the sort of music the Peterhouse scribe copied in great quantity. In this respect Jones’s long and florid Mass is entirely typical.

The Peterhouse partbooks contain thirty-nine unica (works surviving in one unique source), as well as about a dozen other works whose concordant sources are incomplete. The tenor partbook and several pages of the treble book of the Peterhouse set are missing, with the consequence that virtually none of its contents is known today, except for those pieces that survive in other sources. For its performances of the Peterhouse repertoire, Blue Heron relies on the scholarship of the English musicologist Nick Sandon, who has devoted three decades to this material. Professor Sandon’s dissertation is the standard work on the topic, and he is currently in the process of polishing his brilliant and idiomatic reconstructions of the incomplete Peterhouse music and publishing them in Antico Edition. Since our first concert in October 1999 we have sung his reconstructions of music by Aston, Taverner, Ludford, and Jones.

As for Robert Jones himself, virtually nothing is known about his life except that he was a singer in the Royal Household Chapel from at least summer 1530 until about 1534. The Missa Spes nostra and a Magnificat (which Blue Heron performed in January 2003) survive only in the Peterhouse partbooks; these works, and the bass part of a three-voice song, are all that remain to us of the work of a highly skilled and inspired composer. Like the Magnificat, the Mass is full of supple melody and jubilous harmony. Drawing on the musical grammar and vocabulary Jones shared with his contemporaries like Tallis and Taverner, it is at the same time the unique creation of a mature composer with an unmisfakably distinct individual voice, singing out to us from across a divide of more than four and a half centuries.

—Scott Metcalfe

Trisagion 1521 (2003)
Kyrie ‘Gloria tibi Trinitas’ (1998)

The Trisagion and the Kyrie are the only two fragments of Greek text to have continued in regular use in the Western Church. The Kyrie is very familiar as the first section of the Ordinary of the (otherwise entirely Latin) Mass. The Trisagion (literally “thrice holy”) is one of the most common prayers in the Orthodox liturgy, but survives in the West only in one specific context: the refrain for the Reproaches on Good Friday. With such concise, formal texts, designed for ritual use, the challenges faced by a composer are not so much about expressive interpretation as about musical symbolism and structural elegance.

Both these settings were made for particular concert occasions. Trisagion 1521 was first performed by Harvard’s Ensemble 1521 as part of a Lenten chant program. I chose to expand the bi-lingual presentation traditional in the Reproaches to three languages – Greek, Latin and English – as well as writing for three voices (tenor, baritone, bass) in order to mirror the text’s threefold design. The piece starts by presenting a different musical idea for each language in turn, in a consistent three-part texture. In the second section the three ideas are presented as duets, and in the third section as single lines; the order of presentation varies, and there is increasing overlap between one idea and the next. A fourth voice (alto) enters for the final section, which acts as a tranquil coda. The three languages move from angular juxtaposition at the start of the piece to harmonic convergence at the close. Kyrie ‘Gloria tibi Trinitas’ was written for a concert by the Sydney Philharmonia Motet Choir, featuring John Taverner’s Mass of the same name. As a Sarum rite Mass Ordinary setting, the Taverner work lacks a Kyrie. My work does not attempt any imitation of Taverner’s style, but does use the same unusual vocal distribution – SATTBB, with a “gymel” (two-part division) for one section in the sopranos – and is entirely based on the same chant. The most unconventional aspect of my Kyrie is that the usual three sections are not presented successively, but cumulatively. The first Kyrie is a rich six-part harmonization built around the chant in the alto register, carried in turn by tenors, altos and sopranos. The altos and tenors then sing a reduced version of the same music, over which the divided sopranos sing the Christe to an ornamented version of the chant transposed up a fifth. Both of these layers continue as the second Kyrie is sung by the lower voices to a series of phrases in close canon, based on rhythmically energized fragments of the chant melody. The considerable textural and dynamic variety reflects the wide range of moods that may be read into the simple prayer for mercy.

—Elliott Gyger
Loquebantur variis linguis apostoli, alleluia, magnalia dei. Alleluia.

Introit


Kyrie Deus creator omnium tuus, ymnos nostris pie eleyson.


Extents transitions

All were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak of the great works of God. Alleluia.

Benedictus Deus creator omnium, alleluia, gloriam tuam. Amen.

Credo Credo in unum deum, hominem solo factum, homo factum ex Maria virgin, et homo factum de spíritu sancto. Amen.


Gloria Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all of good will. We praise you. We bless you. We adore you. We glorify you. We give thanks to you for your great glory.
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A violinist and a conductor with a repertoire extending from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth, Scott Metcalfe is concertmaster of the Trinity Consort in Portland, Oregon, and a member of the ensemble La Luna. Besides Blue Heron, he also directs the Renaissance choir Convivium Musicum. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in the historical performance practice of music at Harvard University.

Martin Near, countertenor, has studied composition at New England Conservatory, and was trained at Saint Thomas Choir School in Manhattan. Mr. Near sings with the Choir of Church of the Advent, and is also active as a composer in Boston. He currently studies voice with Mark St. Laurent.

Cheryl Ryder, a co-founder of Blue Heron Renaissance Choir, is a long-time member of the Choir of the Church of the Advent and has edited a number of Renaissance motets used by that group. A music major at Wellesley, she is also a member of the American Chemical Society and took first place in Boston University's 2001 business plan competition for the proposed nanotechnology startup launched a few months later as Nantero, Inc.

Carol Schlaikjer spent most of her adult life in Europe. She studied early music at the Schola Cantorum in Basle, sang with various early music ensembles—most notably Sequenzia—and raised a wonderful daughter, all while exporting used cars to Poland after the fall of the Iron Curtain. She is thrilled to be a member of Blue Heron and to work with such an amazing group of musicians.

Aaron Sheehan, tenor, is now enjoying his third season singing with Blue Heron. Other groups that he has appeared with include Theater of Voices, the Handel and Haydn Society, Fortuné Wheel, and Liber un/Usualis. He also keeps an active teaching schedule with students from Brown University and New England Conservatory's Extension School.

Mark Sprinkle has sung with a diverse list of ensembles and conductors, most recently appearing as a soloist with Concerto Palatino in Jordan Hall and in performances of Monteverdi’s 1610 Vespers in the Emerson Majestic Theater with Grant Llewellyn. He has appeared at the Bergen Music Festival in Norway and at the Monadnock, Vancouver, and Edinburgh Music Festivals, and was a fellow of the Britten-Pears Institute. He has sung with Blue Heron for the past four years.

Praised for his “consummate artistry” (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette), baritone Summer Thompson is quickly becoming much sought after on the concert as well as the opera stage. Among the highlights of recent seasons were his Carnegie Hall debut in Messiah with the Masterwork Chorus, appearances in Britten’s Death in Venice and Rossini’s Il Viaggio a Reims with the Chicago Opera Theater, and performances in the title role of Monteverdi’s Orfeo with Contemporary Opera Denmark. His upcoming engagements include Messiah with Apollo’s Fire conducted by Richard Egarr, the role of Apollo in Opera Boston’s production of Alceste, and Bach’s Mass in B Minor with the Masterwork Chorus.

Mezzo-soprano Daniela Tosić, a native of Yugoslavia, is a founding member of Tapestry, a female vocal ensemble, and the vocal and instrumental quintet Hourglass. She also performs regularly with La Donna Musicale and the ensemble Balmus. Ms Tosić has recorded for Telarc and MDG.

Charles Turner is a composer, singer, and software engineer who lives in Danvers, Massachusetts. He also sings with Cantata Singers of Boston and is a member of the New Opera and Musical Theater Initiative. Currently he is busy composing a chamber opera loosely based on the Noh play Sotoba Komachi.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our sincere thanks to those people who have so generously supported the efforts of Blue Heron Renaissance Choir. Many thanks to Emmanuel Church in Boston, Trinitarian-Congregational Church in Concord, and First Church in Cambridge, for providing us with rehearsal space. And thanks to WGBH, 89.7 FM in Boston, which is recording tonight’s concert for future broadcast.

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