

NSCS – The Music of Thomas W. Jefferson!

Welcome to the North Shore Choral Society's collaboration with Dr. Thomas W. Jefferson! Many NSCS fans will recognize Thomas from his performances with us on our Missa Gaia programs. Thomas is an outstanding pianist and a generous musician. I am fortunate to get to work with Thomas for the School of Music, Art, and Theatre at North Park University in Chicago. What has always captivated me about Thomas is the way he can so easily move from playing difficult piano repertoire in standard notation, to playing Gospel, Jazz, and Contemporary Worship styles from chord charts and by ear. In addition, today you'll get to hear his genius as a composer and arranger. His eclectic musical background and influences are clearly heard in his music. The singers in the NSCS and I have found learning his music to be very rewarding, and we're excited to share it with you today!

Not all of the pieces on the program are written by Thomas W. Jefferson. We've included a couple of pieces with the same texts as those written by Thomas—both contrasting and complementary at the same time. The fourth movement of Johannes Brahms' (1833-1897) *A German Requiem* is standard repertoire for large choruses and is a favorite of the NSCS. We will perform it today with NSCS accompanist Sharon Rich Peterson as our orchestra and in an English translation of the original German, to more easily line up with the new version Thomas has written for and dedicated to the NSCS. Another choral favorite is "Ave Maria" by German composer Franz Biebl (1906-2001). This piece sandwiches the first part of the Angelus chant from Catholic liturgy between repetitions of the glorious, soaring Ave Maria (Hail Mary) refrain.

We will also sing the two pieces that first brought the NSCS and Thomas W. Jefferson together—"Ubi Caritas" (combining traditional Catholic chant with African folk music, drumming, and a fantastic piano part!), and the stirring "Sound Over All Waters" featuring Felicia Patton, both by Paul Halley (b.1952). We'll close the concert with Chicago composer and conductor Keith Hampton's "My God Is an Awesome God." Thomas first met Dr. Keith Hampton when Thomas had newly arrived in Chicago in 1987. Since then, the two of them have collaborated consistently. Thomas has played for

many of Keith's choirs including the Chicago Community Chorus and the Keith Hampton Singers. Keith brought Thomas on board to score gospel music for Keith's company, Dr. KT Productions, Inc., and they have developed a close friendship. It is an honor to close our concert by bringing together the NSCS and Thomas W. Jefferson, performing Keith's exciting composition.

~ Julia Davids

How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place is an elaborate concert setting of psalm 84 that moves beyond the typical refrain-verse psalm setting used for Catholic liturgy. Rather, this setting is a grand and glorious song of praise that reminds us that it is a blessing to worship in God's lovely temple and sing endless praises unto him: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts." This marvelous text is readily associated with Brahms' beautiful setting from his *A German Requiem*, which this composer cites as inspiration for his own rendition, exemplified in the melodic leaps and rising lines in the lyrical refrain. Also worthy of mention are the subtle syncopations throughout the piece which point more to African American musical influences.

Each verse is scored differently to highlight the distinct theme mentioned in each stanza: (1) the beauty of God's house and longing to be in his presence—sung in unison; (2) the people of God are blessed as they praise him daily and seek his protection—sung unaccompanied by cantor and choir; (3) the desire to be near to God where even the sparrow and the swallow find safety—sung by unaccompanied male voices. After the third verse, instead of going back to the refrain, we are taken to the bridge section: "How Lovely; how lovely; How lovely, Lord!" Here, the music reflects a feeling of contemplation and longing to return to the courts of the Lord. Finally, the refrain recurs, by way of a dramatic key change, and joy and peace are restored as the piece moves to a glorious end.

Missa Brevis came about after years of writing and arranging music for liturgical use in the Catholic Church and represents my first attempt at composing a multi-movement work for concert performance. Work began on my "little mass" around 2010 and was actually completed in 2017. This performance represents the premier of the work in its entirety, although

“Lamb of God” was first performed a few years ago at North Park University for the annual Hymn Festival. The work was inspired by and bears some similarity to Robert Ray’s highly acclaimed *Gospel Mass* which I have performed countless times. As with Ray’s work, *Missa Brevis* represents a marriage of African American music characteristics with the Ordinary of the Catholic Mass. The work is scored for SATB choir and piano (with optional bass, drums, and synthesizer). In addition, the music is composed in a way that easily allows for a gospel or jazz vocalist. *Missa Brevis* consists of five movements: Kyrie, Glory to God, Apostles’ Creed, Holy, Holy, and Lamb of God. The text is taken primarily from the 2011 English translation of the Mass, with additional text of an improvisatory nature typically found in spirituals and gospel music. The movements are independent of each other and can be performed separately.

I. Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy) The opening movement to the mass is a jazzy Kyrie with a Latin rock feel. As in Ray’s Kyrie movement, the text alternates between Latin and English—in this case, coinciding with the way the melody switches between F minor and the parallel major key of F major. An interesting feature in the Kyrie is the a cappella *vocalise* which serves as an interlude between the refrain and instrumental section in which a jazz piano solo is featured. Voices enter one by one at the final refrain in Kyrie, creating a dramatic effect where all voices come together on the sustained quartal harmony. The movement ends quietly as the choir sings “Kyrie Eleison” to melodic material from the piano introduction.

II. Glory to God is a contemporary gospel setting of the Gloria, celebratory in character, and infused with refreshing jazz harmonies and idiomatic chord progressions. Syncopated rhythms and unison singing feature prominently in this movement which give a declaratory quality to the vocal lines. An interesting feature in the refrain is the triple repetition of phrases such as “Glory to God,” and later “and on earth peace to people.” The expression of jubilation in the refrain is exemplified in the last line: “people of good will” which is sung polyphonically.

III. Apostles’ Creed (I Believe) “Yes, I believe,” sung over a plagal cadence, is how this dramatic setting of The Apostles’ Creed ends. Similarly, the movement begins as quietly, but unaccompanied, with text sung in a chant-like fashion. The writing within the first half of the piece incorporates

colorful harmonies and subtle dissonances that highlight the text. In dramatic fashion, instruments enter for the first time as the choir sings, “On the third day he rose again from the dead.” From this point on, the music builds all the way to the second half, where the mood and style are starkly different—characterized by driving rhythms, jazzy harmonies, and a soulful vocal delivery. The tenors and basses proclaim the message, sung to a pentatonic melody, as treble voices ring out the refrain: “I believe!”

IV. Holy, Holy In a mellow tone is how this movement begins: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts!”—sung by the tenors, then echoed by full choir in harmony. This joyful and energetic setting of the Sanctus is cast in a jazz-gospel mold, with plenty of rhythmic energy and drive to lift your spirits. In the middle section, the upper voices (SAT) are featured: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Here, the block chord movement in the choral writing mimics a brass section. The music builds to an ecstatic high in the final section where joyful strains of “Hosanna in the highest” fill the air.

V. Lamb of God is a prayer supplication set to a melody that is quiet and reverent in mood. The rolling sixteenth-note accompaniment creates a contrasting and supportive backdrop to the choral writing. The beautiful main theme is introduced in the opening refrain, where the first half of the text is sung in unison and the remaining half in harmony. In the brief section that follows, each voice sings a line of text in counter-point with all voices coming together on the phrase: “sins of the world.” Next, is a climactic second refrain in which soprano voices sing a rousing counter-melody against the main theme by alto voices. With each repetition, the music modulates by half step for dramatic effect. The movement ends with a joyful exhortation and plea: “Jesus Lamb,” “Precious Lamb,” “Holy Lamb,” “Righteous Lamb,” “Grant us your peace!”

There is a Balm in Gilead is one of the most beloved of African American Spirituals and has been performed in a variety of settings and arrangements—from gospel solo to a capella choral piece—and heard everywhere from the church to the concert stage. This arrangement is from my collection *Let it Shine: Spirituals for Piano, Vol 2*, and was fitted with a choral introduction for this performance. It would have been easy to simply arrange this spiritual in a gospel style, but that has been done so many times

before; and I felt that the peaceful quality of the melody begged for a calmer, more serene approach. The spiritual is based on the biblical text from Jeremiah 8:22, where the prophet asks: "Is there no balm in Gilead ... is there no physician there?" Appropriately, the piano enters with a very impressionistic oscillating pattern in the right hand (after the choral introduction) comprised of the whole tone scale which also outlines the melody. The harmonically ambiguous opening sets up a beautiful, contemplative mood that mirrors the rhetorical question posed by Jeremiah. It isn't until several bars later that the piece finally settles into the key of G major, as if to say: "Jesus is the balm to heal all our wounds!" After the verse, the refrain returns, this time in the key of E-flat major played in block-chords over a drone-like pedal note and a rolling accompaniment built in fourths. The piece gently shifts back to the original key for a final statement of the refrain, again reharmonized, followed by a short cadenza before coming to a quiet end.

Ave Maria was composed in commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Novena at Our Lady of Sorrows Basilica. This prayer to Mary has been set to music numerous times but rarely in a way such as this. From the very beginning, one is easily captivated by the beautiful melody that rises and soars above a lilting 12/8 accompaniment that has a light gospel feel. Delicate, rich harmonies are incorporated throughout for effect and to enhance the prayer's text. One particularly moving section is where in the text "Jesus" is repeated three times—each time to a different harmony. The music reaches an emotional climax on the phrase: "Now, now at the hour of our death!" Here, the mood is one of indescribable peace, as the music quietly ends with a silent "Amen."

Psalms 32: I Turn to You, Lord is one of my favorites among the psalm settings I have composed. The haunting melody in the refrain has a somewhat solemn mood because it's in a minor key. However, there is an underlying joy and contentment that is expressed in the music. The psalm text, taken from the Lectionary, deals with themes such as penitence, forgiveness, and reconciliation—that are expressed through lyricism and sensitive harmony. The emotional climax happens at the second refrain, after the key change, where the psalmist proclaims in utter submission: "I turn to you, I turn to you, my Lord!" Then the music moves into a vamp-like section in which

'rhyming couplets'—commonly used in spirituals and gospel music—are used to express situations that require us to turn to the Lord for help: "in times of trouble, when you don't know what to do, when you feel discouraged, and there's no one to talk to."

~ Thomas W. Jefferson