Good Friday music: Cleveland premieres at Trinity Cathedral and First Lutheran, Lorain

By Daniel Hathaway

Two area churches will be marking Good Friday, the most solemn day in the Christian calendar, with Cleveland premieres. The Trinity Cathedral Choir will offer a 7:30 pm sacred concert conducted by Todd Wilson featuring the first local performance of Estonian-born composer Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, and the choir of First Lutheran Church in Lorain will sing liturgical settings of the *Solemn Reproaches of the Cross* and the *Passion according to St. John* newly composed by music director and cantor Brian Wentzel at a service beginning at 7 pm.

“I was casting about in my mind for something a little bit different”, Todd Wilson said over the phone last week, “having done the Bach *St. Mark Passion* last year and John Stainer's *The Crucifixion* the year before”. After talking to colleagues who had programmed the work before and noted that it had been a terrific experience both for performers and listeners, he decided on Arvo Pärt's striking setting of the passion story from the Gospel of John.

Pärt's work was in sketch form when the composer left Estonia in 1980; he completed it in Austria in 1982, but it waited until 1989 for publication. The summation of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style — the mystic-al, chant and bell-inspired minimalism for which Pärt initially became famous — *Passio* has been recorded several times, most notably by Paul Hillier and the Hilliard Ensemble. “I'm very simpatico with Pärt's music, and it works well for our voices, who are attuned to this kind of singing”, Wilson says, adding “and who realize in this case it's not all about them. They have to sing well but not present any egos in the process”.

In Pärt's passion narrative, the role of the Evangelist is taken by four singers — at Trinity by Sian Ricketts, Elena Mullins, Jacob Sonnenberg and Mark Bitikofer — who are divided into pairs of voices, one of which sings a melodic part, the other a harmonizing part. Four instruments join them: at Trinity on Friday, violinist Mary Beth Ions, oboist Thomas Moore, cellist Linda Atherton and bassoonist Mark DeMio. Two soloists (Jonathan Cooper as Jesus and José Gotera as Pilate) each have their own musical material.
The effect of the whole 70-minute work is meditational and hypnotic. “This is not fire-
works or rah-rah, but it's music that is deeply worthwhile. If listeners come and give
some concentration to it, they'll come away amply repaid”, Wilson believes. “But from
the performers' and even the director's point of view, it's a very taxing piece. I'm not sure
I've ever dealt with a piece where you seem so mentally tired at the end”.

Wilson plans to set the stage for the passion setting with three motets the Trinity Choir
has recently sung during Lent, Poulenc's *Vinea mea electa*, Bruckner's *Christus factus est
pro nobis*, and Jane Marshall's *None other Lamb*, a setting of words by Christina Rosetti
with a cello solo by Linda Atherton, followed by a Brahms organ prelude on the “Passion
Chorale”. “The Brahms is in a minor; that will set up the riveting first chord of the Pärt”.

In Lorain, First Lutheran's music director Brian Wentzel is carrying on the great tradition of Lutheran cantors by
composing music tailor-made for his local forces, which
in Lorain includes a thirteen-voice choir and a celeb-
rated North German-style organ by John Brombaugh.
“Looking back,” he said in a phone conversation last
week, “things pile up — a hymn verse here or an intro-
duction there — and now I suppose I've written a couple
hundred pieces, all what Hindemith called *Gebrauchs-
music* or 'music for practical use'. It's a way to really fit
things to the situation at hand”.

“The Reproaches are a small thing based on an intonation formula, but they're very ef-
fective. The words have always been part of the Good Friday service, and it seemed a
shame just to speak them. The passion is the longest piece I've written — about half an
hour”.

In composing his own setting of St. John's Passion, Wentzel built on the tradition of me-
dieval plainchant as well as later Lutheran settings. “I did a research project for my mas-
ter's degree on the singing of scripture lessons. There was always a special tone for the
passion story with the evangelist on a higher pitch and Jesus on a lower. My setting,
which grew over a couple of years, has Jesus and Pilate as soloists singing a modern,
modal formula I made up. The crowd scenes are short pieces framed by seven variations
on a 17th century hymn interspersed as reflections like Bach chorales, but on a much
smaller scale”. That's an idea he got from the 20th century cantor and composer Hugo
Distler, who was himself influenced by the passion settings of Heinrich Schütz. “The
framing verses are all different; the fourth is in a Renaissance style with points of imita-
tion, there's one for women alone, one for men alone, one in canon; a variety of treat-
ments reflecting the mood”.

With Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and (usually) an Easter Vigil to manage
during the span of a week, it's always interesting to ask busy church musicians about their
plans for Easter Sunday.
“Easter will be kind of a regular service”, says Wentzel, who was about to sit down and compose some congregational responses for the Easter Vigil. “On Easter and Christmas eve, the weight of the occasion takes care of things. As long as we sing Jesus Christ is risen today with full organ, there's no need to do anything really intricate!” For organ music on Easter Day, he'll play Samuel Scheidt's variations on Christ lag in Todesbanden interspersed with plainchant sung by the choir, and Jan Pieter Sweelinck's Hexachord Fantasia — pieces which will reappear on his Sweelinck's 450th Birthday Concert on May 20.

“For Easter?” Todd Wilson replies, “we'll have a sensational brass group with Michael Sachs and Richard Stout from The Cleveland Orchestra and their students from CIM — fancy brass stuff on hymns and Widor's Surrexit pastor bonus, a quite wonderful Hollywood piece where everybody gets to scream their heads off in glorious fashion — and Stanford's Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem. And a quite shameless version of the Widor Toccata with some really good brass parts that make it a lot splashier.”

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