

Notes ~ Translations ~ Texts
Vassar College Women's Chorus - April 2, 2022

Antonio Vivaldi spent much of his time teaching at the Ospedale della Pietá, a Venetian social center that housed and educated orphaned children in 18th-century. In an unusual twist, the Pietá trained girls and young women in music, looking very much like a modern-day conservatory. The head of the program, Francesco Gasparini hired private instructors to train the students in various instruments. The ensemble (chorus and orchestra) performed regularly and earned a stipend. Their work was so rewarding that many stayed at the Pietá for decades, creating intergenerational ensembles with performers ranging in age from 9-80! Vivaldi wrote many works for these female musicians, the *Beatus vir* being a clear example: a four-part setting for chorus and soloists of sopranos and altos. (No tenors and basses in sight!) This joyful setting was likely written to develop the chorus and soloists' skills and would have been written with specific soloists in mind.

Beatus vir, qui timet Dominum:
In mandatis eius rolet nimis.
Potens in terra erit semen eius;
Generatio rectorum benedicetur.
Gloria et divitiae in domo eius;
Et justitia eius manet in saeculum saeculi.
Exortum est in tenebris lumen rectis:
Misericors, et miserator et justus.
Jucundus homo qui miseretur et commodat.
Disponet sermones suos in iudicio:
Quia in aeternum non commovebitur.
In memoria aeterna erit justus.
Ab auditione mala nontimebit.
Paratum cor eius sperare in Domino;
Confirmatum est, cor eius:
Non commovebitur,
Donec despiciat inimicos suos.
Dispersit, dedit pauperibus:
Justitia eius manet in saeculum saeculi,
Cornu eius exaltabitur in gloria.
Peccator videbit, et irascetur;
Dentibus suis fremet et tabescet.
Desiderium peccatorum peribit.

*Blessed is the man who fears the lord:
He delights greatly in his commandments.
His seed will be mighty on earth;
The generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in his house;
And his righteousness endures for ever and ever.
Unto the upright there arises light in the darkness:
He is gracious, full of compassion, and righteous.
Good is the man who has compassion and lends.
He will guide his affairs with discretion:
Because he will not be moved for ever.
The righteous will be in everlasting remembrance.
He will not be afraid of evil tidings.
His heart is fixed, trusting in the lord;
His heart is established:
He will not be moved,
Until he gazes at his enemies.
He has dispersed, he has given to the poor:
His righteousness endures for ever and ever,
His soul will be exalted with honour.
The sinner will see it, and will be grieved;
He will gnash with his teeth,
And melt away.*

--King James Bible

And I saw

I had the pleasure of meeting Tim Takach many years ago when he visited with the acclaimed ensemble *Cantus* for a performance in Skinner Hall. When I discovered he was a composer, he sent me a number of different pieces, one of which was "And I saw." We performed this in 2013-2014 and it was an instant "hit" with the Vassar Women's Chorus. That sentiment has not changed in 2022.

The poetry comes "Canticle of the Babe" written by Josephine Preston Peabody. Her poetry shows influences of Shakespeare, Robert Browning, and Christina Rossetti, and has been described as being "marked by delicacy, clarity, and a certain otherworldliness."

From Canticle of the Babe

III.

(And our eyes were opened; eyes that had been holden,
And I saw the world, and the fruits thereof.
And I saw their glories, scarlet-stained and golden,
All a crumbled dust beneath the feet of Love.
And I saw their dreams, all of nothing worth;
But a path for Love, for Him to walk above,
And I saw new heaven, and new earth.)

- *Josephine Preston Peabody (1874-1922)*

Virgil Thomson: Seven Choruses from the Medea of Euripides (1934)

Virgil Thomson studied at Harvard University and later in Paris with the acclaimed teacher, Nadia Boulanger. In 1934 Thomson, still living in Paris, was asked to write music for the tragedy *Medea*, by the Greek playwright Euripides (480-406Be). *Medea* is an ancient Greek tragedy written by Euripides, first produced in 431 BC. *Medea*, a former princess of Colchis is married to Jason who leaves her for a Greek princess of Corinth. In response, *Medea* murders Jason's new wife and her own sons. This is far from a simple story. Passion, rage, revenge, pride, gender, and injustice are a few of the themes explored in this play. In fact, Euripides' treatment of gender is perhaps one of the most sophisticated to be found in the works of any ancient Greek writer.

I first discovered Virgil Thomson's "Seven Choruses" in the choral library at Vassar College. His compositional style in this piece is marked by conventional harmonies, clarity, and simplicity. Although an exceptionally interesting and beautiful piece, it is not performed very often. Thomson's setting pushes the boundaries of what is possible for female singers. The vocal demands for the outer voices are unusual with a range from D3 (D below middle C) up to C5 (high C). We have chosen to support the lowest voices by using continuo organ in certain sections of the work.

Seven Choruses from the Medea of Euripide

O Gentle Heart

O gentle heart,
O noble heart,
O heart of gold and fire!
What destiny could keep that heart from finding its desire?

The raging sea, the mighty tide were crossed for Jason's sake.
Rejected now and cast aside, for Jason let it break.
Ye who seek virtue here pass by.
Greece has forgotten virtue's name.
Here only grief, the stony lie are found, and lust and shame.
And here wails one who has no home in earth or air or anywhere.

Love, Like a Leaf

Love, like a leaf before the wind,
Lust of the flesh, consuming fire,
 on us, dread archer, never bend the arrows of desire.
That love in which an equal part
True woman holds with honest man,
Boon of the mind as of the heart, grant us, O Cyprian.
We know thy sorrow, homeless one,
Whom shalt thou call or whither flee?
What haven under heav'n, a exile, waits for thee?

O, Happy Were Our Fathers

O, happy were our fathers when to mighty gods in olden days akin
Greece bore the muses nine.
O, happy land that Venus smiled upon,
Thrice happy land breathed on by love,
Thrice happy land of Arcady.

But thou that wouldst destroy thine own,
 how shall these Sacred Waters ferry thee
 or gentle breezes waft thee home?

By all thou holdest dear, a hear,
How wilt thou steel thy hand to do the murd'rous deed?
How wilt thou turn thy heart to stone?

Weep For the Little Lambs

Weep for the little lambs that die.

Weep for the early slain.
Weep for the bride so soon to lie in golden robes of pain.
Weep for Medea.
Weep for her who wields the flashing knife.
Weep that a mother's hand should stir to take her baby's life.

Go Down, O Sun

Go down, O sun, in blood and hide from us the cloud of woes that
breaks on Jason's head.
For Creon's daughter let fall our tears,
For one so young and beautiful and dead.

Behold, O Earth

Behold, O earth, and thou, bright sun,
Turn not away.
Phoebus Apollo, hear thy children's cry.
Behold whose hand would slay.

Almighty Flame, they bleed who call thee sire.
Rain down thy fire before this deed be done.
No mortal arm should dare to harm the children of the sun.

These are thine own, maternal one; these thy blood.
Shall all thy love, that harvest sown in blood and tears,
go feed this wild desire.

Beware the fire of them that rule on high.
Forbear, forbear.
The gods give ear to innocents that die.

Immortal Zeus Controls the Fate of Man

Immortal Zeus controls the fate of man,
decreed him love or grief.
Our days, the echo of his will resound in fury,
or pass in nothingness away.

Peace Upon You, Jerusalem [psalm 122 (121)] was written in 2002 and dedicated to the commissioner of the work, Aarne Saluveer and the ETV Girl's Choir, who premièred it in 2003 in New York, as part of the concert programme of the national convention of the American Choral Directors Association.

Psalm 122 (121) is one of the fifteen psalms of the Song of Ascents expressing the joy and gratitude of pilgrims reaching the Holy City. This joy is also heard in the vibrant and vivacious sound picture of the four-voice a cappella choral piece. Peace upon you, Jerusalem was not composed using the tintinnabuli

technique, but Pärt's music is very text-centred, with each verse pair in the psalm having its own musical colour and mood, expressed through individual details. (*Program note.*)

I rejoiced that they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of Yahweh.”

At last our feet are standing
at your gates, Jerusalem.

Built as a city,
in one united whole.

There the tribes go up of Yahweh,
a sign for Isareal to give thanks to the name of Yahweh.

For there are set the thrones of judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
Prosperity for your homes.

Peace within your walls,
Prosperity in your palaces.

For love of my brothers and my friends
I will say, “Peace upon you.”

For love of the house of Yahweh our God,
I will pray for your wellbeing.

Refuge

For me, singing has often been an expression of joy, but also a comfort during times of uncertainty or fear. In “Refuge,” the piano frantically races out of control as the cello becomes the voice of heartache and despair. As the poetry unfolds, the choir sings of crushed dreams, confusion, and a yearning for help. But through singing, we can turn our eyes from the surrounding darkness, and lift our voices to offer comfort, beauty, and hope.

- Elaine Hagenberg, compsoer

Refuge

From my spirit's gray defeat,
From my pulse's flagging beat,
From my hopes that turned to sand
Sifting through my close-clenched hand,
From my own fault's slavery,
If I can sing, I still am free.

For with my singing I can make
A refuge for my spirit's sake,
A house of shining words, to be
My fragile immortality.

- Sarah Teasdale (1884-1933)

“I just lightning” is a whirlwind of sound and energy. The percussion part was composed not simply for the color and sound but for the physicality and choreography of the actual playing. You will see our beloved Frank Cassara, adjunct artist of percussion, moving swiftly from instrument to instrument. Larsen relies on the use of chant and aleatoric elements (chance) where the performers are left to realize the music. A large portion of the piece is unmetered requiring deep concentration from the performers. Described as riveting, extroverted, and vigorous, “I just lightning” exudes strength and represents an important contribution to the repertoire for treble choruses.

Larsen writes: *The text for this one-movement work for women's voices and percussion is an adaptation of a chant recited at a Mushroom Ceremony of the Mazatec Indians of Mexico. The chant evokes the Divine Spirit with a supplication for healing; in the case of this piece of music, the supplication is for healing and bringing strength to the spirit. I have used a double translation, from the Mazatec to Spanish by Eloina Estrada de Gonzalez and from Spanish to English by Henry Munn. The work was commissioned and premiered by MUSE: Cincinnati's Women's Choir, Catherine Roma, conductor on May 26, 1994 at the Northern Kentucky University Greaves Auditorium, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

We had the great honor of meeting Libby Larsen a few weeks ago in a zoom call to discuss her “I just Lightning.” It is fair to say that after this meeting, Ms. Larsen has a dedicated fan club at Vassar! Ms. Larsen exudes joy and self-confidence and clearly has no intent to slow down her creative work. She is composing and working with the best performers in our field, and she is loving every minute of it.

I just Lightning

(from “Woman Who has Sprouted Wings”)

I just lightning, dice
I just shout, dice

I just whistle,
I am a lawyer woman, dice
I am a woman of transactions, dice
Holy Father, dice
That is his clock, dice
That is his lord eagle, dice
That is his opossum, dice
That is his lord hawk, dice
Holy Father, says, dice
(Holy Mother, says)
I am a mother woman beneath the water, dice
I am a woman wise in medicine, dice
Holy Father, dice
I am a saint woman, dice
I am a spirit woman, dice
She is a woman of light, dice
She is a woman of the day, dice
Holy Father, dice
I am a shooting star woman, dice
I am a shooting star woman, dice
I am a whirling woman of colors, dice
I am a whirling woman of colors, dice
I am a clean woman, dice
I am a clean woman, dice
I am a woman who whistles, dice
(I am a woman who looks into the insides of things, dice)
I am a woman who investigates, dice
I am a woman wise in medicine, dice
I am a mother woman, dice
I am a spirit woman, dice
I am a woman of light, dice
I am a woman of the day, dice
I am a Book woman, dice
I am a woman who looks into the insides of things, dice

Translated from the Mazatec to Spanish by Eloina Estrada de Conzalez and from Spanish to English by Henry Munn.