

Choral Treats 2

In this edition we go through a bit of an emotional wringer. The composers Giovanni Gabrielli (1557 - 1612) and Zoltán Kodály (1882 - 1967) will take you up, and deeply down, before reviving you. Count on it.

We start with Gabrielli's Christmas motet O Magnum Mysterium. You've heard the expression "wall-to-wall sound." Gabrielli effectively created wall-to-wall sound with his sacred double choruses — the continuous sound of the second chorus cutting in on the reverb of the first and vice versa. I sang one season of O Magnum and was mightily impressed being amid the sumptuousness.

Kodály will take you first to a gypsy camp, people wandering about looking for a homeland. Then he will take you to a basement to hunker down through a bombing raid while composing his Missa Brevis – nothing as serious as not being able to get a haircut, you virus victims must understand. In his Mass, I hear the drone of the bombers overhead, and yet the music is hopeful and has a severe beauty.

Gabrielli, thankfully, brings us out of the doldrums with his Omnes Gentes. Further comments on these four pieces below. But now the music:

O Magnum Mysterium 4:15

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orEwwkLnqZ4>

O great mystery and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord lying in a manger!
Blessed Virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord. Alleluia!

Kodály Esti Dal 4:37

The following video provides an amazing, a cappella, touching, outdoor flash mob performance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b055cHvLgtk>

In this folk song, we pray ourselves to sleep.

When I led a small choir singing this, I looked at several translations so that we could carry the meaning and spirit into English. I settled on the following — my own rendering — because it accomplished the above and also fit the music the best.

“Night closed on me by the forest. My head rests upon my coat. I have put my hands together — asked the good Lord, give us shelter. We have had enough of wand’ring; we have had enough of hiding, of living in a foreign land. Let the good Lord grant a good night. Let Him send His holy angel. Let Him strengthen our heart’s dream. Mm.”

And next, a wartime Mass:

Missa Brevis time 35:4

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOUR3fbG2dY>

The Missa Brevis is a choral adaptation and amplification of an organ Mass written in 1942. The work as we now know it was completed in 1944 while Russian and German troops were warring over the possession of Budapest; it requires a solo quartet as well as a full chorus, and may be accompanied by either organ or orchestra. ~ Sacred Music Vol. (5:4, 1968).

In the last days of January 1945, the Russian troops cleared entirely the city of Pest from the Germans. The most bitter fighting, however, continued on the other side of the river, in Buda, until the middle of February. The surviving population of the city emerged from the cellars where they lived during the seven weeks of the most savage, 24-hours-a-day bombing and shelling, only to find their town half destroyed and the streets littered with corpses. Kodály lived through this hell in the cellar of the Opera house, after his flat has been partly destroyed by an aerial attack earlier in the war. It was against this background the Missa Brevis was completed early in 1942. - Extract from Kodaly: Missa Brevis by Matyas Seiber. Cambridge UP, 1947.

Finally, a joyous Gabrielli ...

Omnes Gentes 4:15 (Psalm 47)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLGgLfzYF0>

O clap your hands together all ye people: O sing unto God with a voice of melody.
For the Lord is high, and to be feared: he is the great King above all the earth.
He hath subdued the people under us: and the nations under our feet.
He hath chosen his inheritance for us: the excellency of Jacob, which he loved.
God is gone up with a merry noise: and the Lord with the sound of the trump.
O sing praises, sing praises unto our God: O sing praises, sing praises unto our King.
For God is the king of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding.
God shall reign over the nations: God sitteth upon his holy seat.
The princes of the people are gathered together with the God of Abraham:
for the mighty ones of the earth are highly exalted.