

Music Notes for April 28, 2024

The service music during the Easter season includes the Presentation Hymn (Alleluia, give thanks to the Risen Lord), the Sanctus by William Mathias (1934-1992) and the Fraction Anthem ("The disciples knew the Lord Jesus") by Mark Sedio (b. 1954). Mathias was born in Wales and was a musical prodigy who began playing the piano at age 3 and composing at age 5. He has an extraordinarily large musical output has written works for choir, organ, and orchestra, including symphonies and operas. His anthem "Let the people praise thee" was written for the wedding of Charles and Diana in 1981 and was televised to an audience of over 1 billion people. The Sanctus is from the "Communion Service Series III," published in 1976. Sedio is Director of Music at Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and also serves on the music staff at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul.

The Psalms during Easter will be sung using settings that were composed by Peter Hallock, longtime organist and music director of St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle, WA.

Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter. The prelude today is based on the hymn tune "Meditation," which will be sung as today's communion hymn, "O God unseen, yet ever near." The prelude was composed by Leo Sowerby, one of the greats of American organ composition and performance, and long-time music director at St. James Cathedral here in Chicago.

The opening hymn is "Hail to the Lord's Anointed," sung to the sprightly German tune "Es flog ein kleins Waldvögelein." The text is a rendering of Psalm 72 by the Scottish author James Montgomery (1771-1854). Montgomery wrote many psalm-based texts, but this is probably his best and most well-known today. His parents were missionaries to the West Indies who died there while he was in boarding school. The melody is German folk tune that was first published in an early-seventeenth-century manuscript collection from Memmingen, Germany. It later became a setting for Christopher Wordsworth's "O Day of Rest and Gladness" in George R. Woodward's Songs of Syon (1910 edition).

The anthem today is "Peace be to you," based on the text from John 20:21-22. The piece is written for two-part (equal) choir and organ. It is from the composer's eight-part motet "Lay a Garland," and has a lovely duet texture with lots of suspensions. The composer, Robert Pearsall (1795 – 1856) was a self-taught English Romantic composer and lawyer. Pearsall practiced law until 1825 when he went to Germany for his health, where he took up composition. He became engrossed in the English madrigal school during a visit back to England in 1836 and his fame rests on 60 or more fine madrigals and part-songs, in addition to works for both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. He was also an accomplished translator.

The closing hymn is the beloved "Love divine, all loves excelling," sung to that favorite of Welsh hymn tunes, "Hyfrydol." This hymn is considered by many to be one of Charles Wesley's finest texts, and it is one of his most popular hymns. It is believed that his first line was inspired by a line from a John Dryden poem used in Henry Purcell's opera King Arthur, which begins, "Fairest Isle, all Isles excelling, Seat of Pleasures and of Loves."

The hymn is in fact a prayer: through the incarnated Christ, we pray for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and ask that we would never be separated from the love of God in Christ, who works in us and through us until our time on earth is done.

Today's postlude is the well-known "Toccatà in F," by the Danish organist and composer Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707). Buxtehude was born in Helsingborg, at the time part of Denmark by now part of Sweden. He held many positions as organist, but his last one (from 1668) was at the Marienkirke in Lübeck, Germany. In 1673 Buxtehude set up a series of evening musical performances, known as Abendmusik, which attracted musicians from diverse places and remained a feature of the church until 1810. In 1703 G.F. Handel traveled to Lübeck to meet Buxtehude and the organist offered Handel the position, but on the stipulation that Handel marry his eldest daughter! Handel declined and left town the next day. In 1705 J.S. Bach famously walked a distance of more than 250 miles from Arnstadt to Lübeck to meet the organist and hear the Abendmusik. Bach stayed for three months to "comprehend one thing and another about [Buxtehude's] art."