

Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists

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Jonathan Sells conductor

Henry Purcell (1659–1695)

Hear my prayer, O Lord (1682) · text: Psalm 102 from the Book of Common Prayer (1662) 3'

Funeral sentences for Queen Mary (1695) · Book of Common Prayer 10'

- i. Man that is born of a woman ii. In the midst of life we are in death iii. Thou knowest, Lord

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf, BWV 226 (1729) · Romans 8; Martin Luther 8'

Johann Christoph Bach (1642–1703)

Lamento: Ach, dass ich Wassers g'nug hätte · after Jeremiah 9, Psalm 38, Lamentations of Jeremiah 1 8'

Johann Sebastian Bach

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied, BWV 225 (1727) 13'

- i. Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied · Psalm 149
ii. Wie sich ein Vater erbarmet · hymn by Johann Gramann (1487–1541)
iii. Lobet den Herrn in seinen Taten · Psalm 150

INTERVAL

Purcell

Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei (1680) · after Psalm 3 6'

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)

Dixit Dominus (1707) · Psalm 110 40'

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| i. Chorus: Dixit Dominus | vi. Chorus & soli: Dominus a dextris tuis |
| ii. Aria (alto): Virgam virtutis tuae | vii. Chorus: Judicabit in nationibus |
| iii. Aria (soprano): Tecum principium in die virtutis | viii. Chorus & soli: De torrente in via bibet |
| iv. Chorus: Juravit Dominus | ix. Chorus: Gloria |
| v. Chorus: Tu es sacerdos in aeternum | |



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ENGLAND

Hear my prayer, O Lord, Henry Purcell's setting for double chorus of the opening verse of Psalm 102 wrings extraordinary emotional impact from the mere two lines of its text. The simple opening plea is layered, then chromatically enriched. Feelings of pain and anguish are created by the rise in vocal pitch and volume, as well as by the intensity of the suspensions – where pitches are sustained against a clashing note before being resolved by a sideways step.

That same richly chromatic writing is present in the **Funeral Sentences**, written for the funeral of Queen Mary II in March 1695. The three short vocal works, bookended in the original ceremony by two solemn marches for four trumpets and drum, contain rich examples of word-painting. This amplification of the text by appropriate musical shapes, textures and harmony ranges from the relatively simple (the melodic ascent and fall on the words 'he cometh up and is cast down') to the complex, textures and bracing dissonances accompanying 'bitter pains of eternal death'. The consolatory final section, 'Thou knowest, Lord', was sung at Purcell's own funeral later that same year, and has been included in almost every British royal and state funeral since, including that of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022.

Though they are still music for grand funeral services (probably those of Leipzig's dignitaries), Bach's motets (of which we hear two tonight) offer a notable uplift in style and tempo. The nuanced contrast between the Anglican and Lutheran attitude to death and its ceremonial obligations might be exemplified by the concluding text of **Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf** ('The Spirit helpeth our infirmities'), written by Martin Luther himself: 'sweet comforter, now help us, the happy and consoled'. The Anglicans grieve and remember the dead as they bid them farewell; in the Lutheran faith, death is seen as a blessed transition from physical to eternal life with God, a release from earthly travails ('we here valiantly struggle, through death and life, to reach you'). Bach's music for voices and small group of instrumentalists consequently send the departed on their way with vivacious statements of faith, music of celebration as much as consolation, inspiring Bach toward dazzling polyphonic invention every bit the equal of that in his sacred behemoths the Passions. In around eight minutes, this work breezes through a triple-time imitative dance, a stern fugue and a sumptuously harmonised chorale.

Ach, dass ich Wassers g'nug hätte ('Oh that my head were waters') by J.S. Bach's older cousin Johann Christoph Bach is an outpouring of grief in which the singer laments that they will never have enough tears to weep for their own sins. These tears cascade gently, shared in a richly chromatic duet between alto voice and solo violin.

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied ('Sing unto the Lord a new song') is the grandest of Bach's motets. It is complex yet joyously affirmative, intricately and ingeniously crafted for double choir without ever losing the direct emotional impact of the text, with its frequent allusions to rejoicing, music and dancing: in the midst of death we are very much alive. In the opening dance-like chorus, one choir directly exhorts us 'Singet' whilst the other decorates the word with florid melisma (one syllable to many notes – very many in this

case). A rollicking fugue emerges, the initial exhortation still scything through the texture. A contemplative chorale follows decorated by melodic flourishes. The two choirs are both in opposition – in that they sing very different music – and yet unified in extolling God's tender mercy. The finale, like the opening movement, is akin to an instrumental prelude and fugue. With dizzying vocal lines and thrilling 'call and response' effects, each choir seemingly drives the other to new heights, like two jazz musicians throwing riffs at each other across the room.

Purcell's **Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei** ('Lord, how are they increased that trouble me') balances the anxiety at the strength of opposition arrayed against the believer with the solace that faith can bring. The music consequently alternates between the soloist's tremulous foreboding and the collective strength of the full ensemble. It was – rather incongruously by modern tastes – arranged for large choir and full symphony orchestra for the 1929 Three Choirs Festival by Edward Elgar. The work is so harmonically adventurous for its time that Elgar was reputed to have asked whether the source material he was working from contained misprints.

The twin inspirations of Handel's new surroundings of Rome and the fire and fury of Psalm 110 gave rise to **Dixit Dominus** ('The Lord said'). The words laud the power of God to defeat and subjugate his enemies, and Handel's setting for five-part choir, five soloists and strings amplifies the psalmist's violent – at times downright bloodthirsty – imagery with astonishing vigour and invention. Handel's exposure to Italianate style (and not least the crack choristers of the eternal city) engendered a florid vocal writing and vivid colour palette to complement his firm Germanic grounding in counterpoint.

Handel's writing is notoriously demanding, occasionally – like Bach – treating choral singers as virtuoso instrumentalists, notably in the intricacy and sustained energy of the opening and closing movements. But he knows when to let them – and us – breathe; the dramatic changes of pace and mood so effective in his later oratorios are well deployed here. After the opening's noisy acclamation (the word *dixit*: 'said') repeated with all the insistence of Bach's earlier *Singet*), the serenity of the second movement's alto aria quietly radiates the confidence of the text. The sublime soprano duet of the penultimate movement follows the ferocity of judgement with the spoils of victory – the balm of drinking from a brook. The sudden increase in tempo in the concluding Gloria propels us toward the final amen like a musical shot of adrenaline.

Handel the dramatist loses no opportunity to reinforce the text with musical word-painting. In the third movement, the solo soprano's *splendoribus* ('splendours') is given an exquisite decorative twist. In *Judicabit* the music does indeed splinter and fragment on the word *ruinas* ('ruins') and shortly afterwards *conquassabit* ('shatter') is a sequence of percussive, jabbing blows – or perhaps the victor's mocking laughter. The sheer compositional panache on display must have been quite the calling-card for Handel who had arrived in Italy from northern Germany only the previous year, a precocious newcomer. He was a mere 22 years old.

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Soprano

Rachel Allen, Zoë Brookshaw*,
Eloise Irving, Lucy Knight,
Charlotte La Thrope, Chloë Morgan*,
Emily Owen, Theano Papadaki,
Rebecca Ramsey, Cressida Sharp

Alto

Francesca Biliotti, Sarah Denbee,
Annie Gill, Hamish McLaren,
Reginald Mobley*, Tim Morgan

Tenor

Rory Carver, Thomas Herford,
Hugo Hymas*, Tom Kelly,
Edward Ross, Will Wright

Bass

Robert Davies, Tristan Hambleton,
Jack Lawrence-Jones, Thomas Lowen,
Florian Störtz*, George Vines

* soloist

Violin 1

leader: Boyan Čičić
Davina Clarke, George Clifford,
Rachel Stroud, Sarah Bealby Wright

Violin 2

Sophia Prodanova, Sophie Simpson,
Will Harvey, Will McGahon

Viola

Thomas Kettle, Joanne Miller,
Sagnick Mukherjee, Dan Shilladay

Cello

Felix Knecht, George Ross, Pedro da Silva

Bass

Rosie Moon, Kate Brooke

Organ

James Johnstone

Harpsichord

Paolo Zanzu

Bassoon

Philip Turbett

Theorbo

Pablo FitzGerald

Surtitle translations

J.S. Bach motets: Richard Stokes
Handel Dixit Dominus and J.C. Bach Lamento: King James Bible
Purcell Jehova, quam multi: Book of Common Prayer