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The Evolution of Sacred Soli from Oratorios: Baroque Period to the Twentieth Century

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**THE EVOLUTION OF SACRED SOLI FROM
ORATORIOS:
BAROQUE PERIOD TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Holly M. Chesnut



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Oratorios:
Baroque Period to the Twentieth Century*

*Holly M. Chesnut
April 11, 2005*

*The Evolution of Sacred Soli from
Oratorios:
Baroque Period to the Twentieth Century*
by
Holly Chesnut

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
A brief history of the oratorio	5
The Baroque Era: The Oratorio Begins	8
Bach, <i>St. John Passion</i>	9
Handel, <i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	13
The Classical Era: Oratorio in transition.....	16
Haydn, <i>Stabat Mater</i>	17
Mozart, <i>Mass in C Minor</i>	19
The Romantic Era: The Oratorio is romanticized.....	22
Rossini, <i>Stabat Mater</i>	23
Fauré, <i>Requiem</i>	25
The Twentieth Century: Return to Sacred Roots.....	29
Vaughan Williams, <i>Hodie</i>	30
Barber, <i>Prayers of Kierkegaard</i>	33
Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	37

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate briefly the evolution of musical styles and characteristics found in sacred soli from oratorios over the course of the Baroque Period to the Twentieth Century. The author chose eight representative arias for examination in this project, with two arias being chosen for each of four periods, the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Twentieth Century, selected because of the prominence of both the composer and the aria in the context of choral history.

The thesis is divided into four basic sections, the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Twentieth Century. The author will discuss historical influences from each period as background information for more specific examination of the representative pieces. Each aria will be discussed with regards to specific qualities of the larger work from which it is taken, its function within this work, musical styles and characteristics found within the aria inherent to the period, and any qualities making it unique to the style or period. When appropriate, musical examples will be included to demonstrate specific instances of unique musical characteristics. By examining these characteristics, the author intends to establish an evolutionary path of sacred solo literature.

The Oratorio

The qualities that constitute an oratorio are continuously debated by scholars. As defined by Grout, the oratorio is a “composition for solo singers, chorus, and instruments usually dramatic and on a biblical or religious subject.” (799) To simplify the oratorio to its most basic components, Pahlen defines the oratorio essentially as “opera without theater.” (Pahlen 9) Much uncertainty is encountered by scholars when attempting to categorize choral forms such as Masses, Requiems, and Magnificats. Whereas some scholars solidly classify the Passion as an oratorio, others consider it to be only a *form* of the oratorio. If one examines the history of the oratorio, it is easy to understand why the defining qualities of this choral form are ambiguous.

Origins

The oratorio has its roots in not one, but several choral and dramatic genres. In the Middle Ages, passion and mystery plays were performed in the streets or at churches, depending on the nature, (either sacred or secular), of the performance. Portrayals of the legends of saints also drew the public’s attention, incorporating both historical and fictional characters. Through these idioms, the dramatic performance of religious stories was already developing in its most rudimentary stages by the end of the Middle Ages.

By the early Baroque period, sacred productions that included narrative, dialogue, and meditation, but were not intended for stage performance were being used in the Catholic Church. Spiritual plays and passions were performed, along with the religious folk songs called *Laude* that were sung in praise of Mary and the saints. (Pahlen 9) Toward the middle of the 17th Century, works of this type became known as *oratorios*, because they were usually performed in the part of the church known as the oratory, (Latin for prayer room). The libretto of an oratorio at this time was in Latin (*oratorio latino*) or Italian (*oratorio volgare* [vernacular]). (Grout 289)

The oratorio became popular during this period largely because of changes in musical forms of the day. The prominence of polyphony in vocal music gave way to homophony and the development of figured bass. With the advent of this new form, it was possible for the first time to have longer, vocal solos with accompaniment. This

paved the way for the development of large-scale works such as operas and oratorios which were dependent upon the dramatic effect of the vocal solo. (Pahlen 10)

During the 17th Century, a typical oratorio was a work that included a narrator, chorus, soloists, and orchestra. The oratorio usually told a religious story, with dialogue between the soloists who represented actual characters. The choral sections of the oratorio both advanced the story and provided dramatic, narrative, and meditative effect. These productions were rarely staged. (Grout 290)

The Oratorio Flourishes

The oratorio spread throughout Italy and then through Western Europe, adopting new characteristics as it progressed across the continent. As each composer fitted the oratorio to his own configuration, the properties that defined the oratorio became increasingly more indistinct. Although sacred texts were still widely used as the libretto for oratorios, secular texts were also popular. The oratorio left the sacred arena of the church and became a concert piece. In Protestant Germany, during the 18th Century, Bach's Passions represented the newest form of the oratorio, with a more elaborate setting of Christ's death than ever before. Handel became the father of the English oratorio, bringing numerous religious stories to life in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Both Mozart and Haydn experimented with different forms of the oratorio, including the Mass and Stabat Mater. By the Romantic Era and throughout the Twentieth Century, so many different forms of the oratorio existed that almost any unstaged work combining orchestra, chorus, and soloists could be considered an oratorio. According to Pahlen:

... the oratorio has assumed so many forms that it can now be employed for virtually any intellectual content or social purpose. It can be either sacred or secular, can take its subject matter not only from the Bible or the lives of the saints, but can also depict historical figures; it can convey weighty thoughts, can be accusatory, controversial, can report completely factually or be given over to pure feeling. It can, from a purely technical standpoint, accept large forms or small; give a prominent role to the orchestra or leave it out entirely; focus on the chorus or reduce its importance to only a filler role, or even ignore it completely. (11)

Through the works of Barber and Fauré, we see the continued transition of the oratorio into the Twentieth Century, where Vaughan Williams and Barber compose pieces entirely unlike the earliest oratorios.

For the purposes of this thesis, each of the following works will be considered a *form* of the oratorio. Although the title of each piece may not include the word oratorio, it is categorized as such according to the definition stated in the introduction: that an oratorio is “composition for solo singers, chorus, and instruments usually dramatic and on a biblical or religious subject.” (Grout 799)

Baroque Period

1600-1750

The Baroque Period brought with it styles of ornamentation, exaggeration, and an emphasis on the affections. “Just as seventeenth-century philosophers left behind outmoded ways of thinking about the world and proposed new explanations, musicians expanded their vocabulary to meet new expressive needs.” (Grout 254) Composers developed basso continuo and “with the chordal structure articulated so clearly, dissonance was recognized less as an interval between two voices than as an individual tone that did not fit into a chord. Chromaticism followed a similar development, from experimental forays on the one hand, to freedom within an orderly scheme on the other.” (Grout 259)

Although still regulated by the church, musicians in the church experienced unprecedented freedom in the size of choirs, types of compositions, and musical characteristics available to them. As the church’s grip loosened, forms of music such as the passion became more poignant and realistic. The size of the performance grew beyond two priests chanting the text between one another to entire choirs singing in polyphonic settings of the horrors of Christ’s crucifixion. With Bach’s *St. John Passion*, the passion genre would progress far beyond the realms of its predecessors, into an idiom where church combined with drama to present a hybrid of opera and sacred literature.

As Bach explored the limits of the passion, Handel was busy introducing a new idiom in England. Having been unsuccessful with Italian opera, he instead turned to the English oratorio. Less expensive and more appealing to a wider audience than opera, Handel discovered this unexplored genre and exploited it. Over the course of his career, Handel wrote over thirty oratorios and became a prominent composer of English music. However, whereas prior oratorios were church idioms, Handel’s compositions were meant for the concert stage, and not all of them were sacred. Handel transformed the function of an entire genre, as exemplified in *Judas Maccabaeus*. (Grout 524)

Johann Sebastian Bach
1685-1750

Ich Folge dir gleichfalls

from
St. John Passion
(BWV 245)

Original title: *Passio secundum Johannem*

Original Language: German

Origin of text: Excerpts from Chapters 18 & 19 of the Gospel according to St. John; from Barthold Heinrich Brocke's poem "Der für die Sünde der Welt gemarterte und sterbende Jesus ("Jesus Martyred and Dying for the Sins of the World")

First performance: April 7, 1724 (Good Friday) in the church of St. Nicholas in Leipzig

Translation of text:

Ich Folge dir gleichfalls
mit freudigen Schritten
und lasse dich nicht
mein Leben, mein Licht.
Befördre den Lauf
und höre nicht auf,
selbst an mir zu ziehen,
zu schieben, zu bitten.

I follow you also
with joyful steps
and leave you not,
my life, my light.
Hasten the flow
and stop not
to draw me to yourself
to lead, to intercede.

Discussion of the work:

The *St. John Passion*, utilizing soloists, choir and orchestra in a two-part form that incorporates forty musical numbers, was composed as the first work for Bach's new position at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany in 1723. The work includes chorales, a duet, arias, recitatives, and narration. As in the Greek drama, the chorus functions as a reflective and narrative entity. The dramatic nature and basic components of this work, however, liken it more to an opera than an oratorio. Because opera was not yet dominant in Germany, the Church was "the nursery of musical culture." (Dickinson 285.) The *St. John Passion* employed every technique of operas written during this time, and lacked only staging to be considered a different genre entirely. For Bach, who avoided opera his entire life, the *St. John Passion* certainly had a foot in the operatic door.

Although not designated as such in the title, the *St. John Passion* is considered a form of the oratorio for this discussion. A passion is a musical form that tells the story of Christ's suffering before his crucifixion. It is interesting to note that beginning in about 1735, Bach did designate several works as *Oratorium*, including the *Easter Oratorio*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and *Ascension Oratorio*. The reason for titling these works oratorios but not the passions, is unknown, as is his interest in the form. Not until the early eighteenth century did the term *oratorio* or *Oratorium* become widely used to identify the specific musical genre. (Smither 171)

Discussion of the aria:

Several unique aspects of *Ich folge dir gleichfalls* will be examined in the following discussion, including the text, language, and musical devices. The text, as mentioned above, is part of Brocke's poem and expresses Simon Peter's feelings as he is following Jesus, who is being led away to his crucifixion. The significance of the language is that rather than being confined to Latin and Italian, as with the Roman Church, the Lutheran Church used the vernacular, German. Not only did this make the Church service more accessible, but it also made the music heard at the Church easier to understand. Thus, through the use of vernacular language, the oratorio form grew more popular with the general public.

The image shows a musical score for an aria. It consists of two staves: a vocal line on top and a piano accompaniment on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (F major or D minor), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The lyrics are: "schie-ben, zu bit - ten, selbst an mir zu zie hen, zu lead - me. to call - me. Thy pres - ence to draw me, to". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some chords and rests.

Figure 1- Mm. 92-95

As illustrated in the above example, the musical devices Bach used in this aria include both those typical of the period as well as more progressive techniques. The aria

is in triple meter, with a solo flute serving as a duet partner for the soprano. Typical of Bach's contrapuntal style, both the soprano and flute lines are very active, constantly moving around, underneath and over one another, sometimes creating a startling chromaticism.

The light theme enters in B-flat major, reflecting the text "joy-lightened footsteps." When the text changes to become more pleading ("Hasten the flow and stop not...") the key modulates to g minor to show this change of character. All these are typical devices of the period. However, two sections of the piece have an obtrusively misplaced sound. At the end of each section beginning "Befördre den Lauf...", Bach writes the leap of a tri-tone followed by a treacherous g minor scale, which becomes more chromatic as it ascends to its apex.

The image shows a musical score for a section of an aria. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major). The piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The text is: "bit - ten, selbst an mir zu zie - hen, zu schie - ben. call me. Thy pres - ence to draw me, to lead me." The music features a treacherous g minor scale in the piano accompaniment, which becomes more chromatic as it ascends to its apex.

Figure 2- Mm. 60-64

In this section, Simon Peter is asking God to lead him and guide him, audibly through the treachery and hardships of life. One more unusual aspect of this aria is its overall nature of lightness and cheerfulness in the face of what is to come. At this point Peter believes that he will be able to follow his Lord to whatever fate awaits him. The chromatic sections of this aria foreshadow the truth.

The *St. John Passion* accomplished several things for the oratorio genre. First, it emphasized the new form as part of the Lutheran Church under a very successful composer. The public could view a modern-day mystery play in their very own place of worship, complete with the grandeur of soloists, orchestra, and choir. Also, the *St. John Passion* used chromaticism frequently, which solidified this new musical device in the church. Bach established dissonance as a legitimate musical device with potential for the expression of human emotions in new and powerful ways. The *St. John Passion* further

established the popularity of the oratorio with the public, and set a standard for future composers.

George Frideric Handel
1685-1759
From Mighty Kings
From
Judas Maccabaeus

Original Title: *Judas Maccabaeus*. An Oratorio

Original Language: English

Origin of text: The libretto is by theologian Thomas Morell, based on the book of the Maccabees and the twelfth book of Josephus' *Anitquities of the Jews*

First Performance: April 1, 1747 at the Theatre Royal at Covent Garden

Text:

From mighty kings he took the spoil,
and with his acts made Judah smile;
Judah rejoiceth in his name,
and triumphs in her hero's fame.

Discussion of the work:

Judas Maccabaeus is an oratorio in the most recognizable form. The story is Biblical, and includes soloists, choir and orchestra. Having firmly established the oratorio tradition in London, Handel wrote *Judas Maccabaeus* for political reasons. During his career in London, the Scottish monarchy seriously threatened the ruling house in England. When victory was decided at the battle of Culloden (April 16, 1746), Handel presented to his prepared work, *Judas Maccabaeus*, as praise for the leaders of England.

Handel's English oratorio differed from the German version in several ways. First, let us remember that Handel turned to the oratorio only after having composed opera for the vast majority of his life. Also, his oratorios were meant solely for the concert stage, and incorporated not only the English styles, but also German and French as well. (Grout 413) He employed the chorus as a tool to comment and reflect on the present action, much like a chorus in Greek drama.

Discussion of the aria:

From Mighty Kings is a typical song of praise from this work. It speaks of the great acts of the King of the Jews, who are now victorious. It is in a typical da capo aria form, with an A section followed by a contrasting B section and then an ornamented

return of the A section. However, there are several distinct differences between the da capo aria of Bach's period and the more evolved one of Handel's. With the return of the A section, the performer is given liberties to compose her own ornaments. Florid, Italianate, ornamentation is typically used, a far cry from the relatively conservative ornaments of Handel. Not only does this style lend itself to operatic traditions, but to the evolving form of the aria as well.

Note the simplicity of the text. During this period, the music (especially the vocal line) was the most important element. Although the text is relatively short, Handel uses the simplicity of the libretto to concentrate heavily on the virtuosity of the vocal line. With such florid vocal writing, there is no need for complicated, emotional text.

This aria exemplifies operatic influence in Handel's music at its height. It is preceded by a recitative in operatic style with accompaniment. The da capo form of the aria is typical of the operatic forms at the time, as is the vocal writing in the aria. The mood of this piece is set by the regal orchestral introduction followed by the stately vocal entrance.

No. 34. ARR.—"FROM MIGHTY KINGS HE TOOK THE SPOIL."

The image shows a musical score for an aria. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system is an instrumental introduction for the piano, marked *Andante* and *f*. The second system is the vocal entrance, also marked *Andante*, for an **ISRAELITISH WOMAN.** The lyrics "From might - y kings he" are written below the vocal line. The piano accompaniment continues with a *p* dynamic. The score is written in a key with one sharp (F#) and a 3/8 time signature.

Figure 3 – Mm. 1-6

In measure 17, Handel exploits the agility of the voice with sixteenth-note figures. Obviously written for the concert stage, this section shows off the voice, as did the operas of the period.



Figure 4 - Measure 17

The aria continues in this fashion, with a concentration on the virtuosic abilities of the voice. This aria and work are significant for two reasons. First, Handel changed the role of the oratorio by bringing it to the concert stage and forever exposing it to secular influence. Second, Handel's florid operatic writing is prevalent in the aria, demonstrating the close proximity of opera and oratorio at the time. The pervasive operatic styles in the aria lend a heightened sense of drama to the oratorio, and the use of the English language made it popular with a wider audience than ever before.

Classical Period

1750-1820

The Baroque and Classical Eras overlapped during a period in the early eighteenth century known as the Enlightenment, which completely transformed people's views of themselves. The class system of nobility and peasantry that had been prevalent in the Baroque period and earlier was gradually deteriorating and making way for a new middle class. People began to rely on themselves as individuals rather than follow the dictates of the church and upper class. There was an emphasis on reason and knowledge above everything else, which allowed for less rigorous divisions between classes. With the invention of the pianoforte, music was now available more widely in the home, rather than only experienced occasionally in the concert hall. The emerging middle class viewed themselves as equals, and this sense of equality and balance transferred to the music of Haydn and Mozart.

The term *Classic* originates from Roman and Greek art:

at its best, music reached a consistently high standard, possessing the qualities of noble simplicity, equilibrium, perfection of form, diversity within unity, seriousness, and freedom from excesses of ornamentation and frills. (Grout 426.)

Certainly, this describes the music of Haydn and Mozart. Leaving behind the ornamentation of the Baroque and concentrating instead on balanced phrases, clean writing styles, and emphasis on the resolution of dissonance to consonance, both composers epitomized the Classical era.

In this discussion, each aria is a setting of the Catholic liturgy, but neither work is meant for the church. While both are still dramatic choral works, they differ from the oratorios of the Baroque period in that there are no specific characters. However, since they still fall within the realm of the oratorio definition previously given, they are classified as such for the purpose of this discussion.

Franz Joseph Haydn

1732-1809

Quis non posset

from

Stabat Mater

Original Title: *Stabat Mater*

Original Language: Latin

Origin of Text: The text is traditional Latin from the Roman Catholic liturgy

First Performance: 1770s at Paristenkirche in Vienna

Translation of text:

Quis non posset contristari,
piam Matrem contemplari,
dolentum cum filio?

Who would not be saddened,
contemplating Christ's mother
sharing her Son's grief?

Discussion of the work:

The *Stabat Mater* is a Roman Catholic hymn originating in the 13th Century that describes the suffering of the Virgin Mary at the crucifixion of Christ. The text is poignant and Haydn's setting includes a myriad of emotions felt by the Virgin Mother during the crucifixion of her Son.

Discussion of the aria:

During this age of Enlightenment, emotional expression was especially important, as demonstrated in this aria. In *Quis non posset*, Haydn incorporates expressive use of intervals as shown in the following example. Although the text is relatively short, Haydn

con - tem-pla-ri. do-len - tem, do - len - tem cum fi - li - o? Quis non pos - set

Figure 5 Mm. 5-6

uses tonal devices as well as chromaticism to represent the mother's grief. The theme is presented once in its entirety and demonstrates the Mother suffering with her Son in a highly chromatic passage in measure 5.

This theme of chromaticism continues throughout the aria, wherever the text is about the Mother suffering with her Son. The theme, presented once, now explores text painting with the word "contemplari" (to think). Haydn spreads this word over two measures with melismatic material in triple meter.



Figure 6 - Mm. 12-13

The theme continues to repeat throughout the aria, in varying keys, to represent the range of feelings of the Mother, anger, distress, pain, anguish, and hope for the future of her Son.

One unusual aspect of this aria is the page of purely instrumental music beginning at measure 25. The instrumental music lasts until measure 35, during which time the instrumentalists repeat what has been sung and elaborate on it. This complete absence of the soprano in a solo aria for an extended period of time is evidence of the growing role of instrumental music in both the sacred and secular arena. In this case, the instruments act not as accompaniment, but as the soloists themselves. This growing importance of the instrumental music along with the textual painting in this aria clearly set it apart from earlier oratorios. As more dramatic elements creep into the arias within oratorios, we see increasing departure from original forms and the exploration of new techniques.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

1756-1791

Et incarnatus est

From

Mass in C Minor, K 427

Original Title: *Missa C moll*

Original Language: Latin

Origin of Text: The text is taken from the five parts of the Ordinarium Missae

First Performance: August 25, 1783 in St. Peter's Church in Salzburg

Translation of text:

Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto

Ex Maria Virgine:

Et homo factus est.

and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost
of the Virgin Mary;

and was made man.

Discussion of the work:

Mozart composed this work for four solo voices, orchestra, and four- to eight-part mixed choir. Although never finished, Mozart's *Mass in C Minor* is considered by some to be his most important Mass. He wrote the Kyrie, Gloria, and Sanctus with Benedictus, but completely omitted the Agnus Dei and only completed the Credo to "Et incarnatus est." The reason for leaving the work unfinished is unknown, although it is suspected that Mozart may have simply filled in the rest of the work with parts of other works for the performance. (Pahlen 243-244)

Discussion of the aria:

One important aspect to examine in this aria is its form. Unlike the distinct da capo forms of both Bach and Handel, this aria follows no strict regulations of form. While there is a definite return of the A section later in the aria, the material between the A sections is almost developmental. It meanders through melismatic phrases and chromatic sequences that differ each time they are presented. There are definite themes, but there are also indefinite passages wherein the soprano, in a truly operatic style, demonstrates the multiple virtuosities of the aria. The form, although not evolved to a sonata form just yet, remains in the da capo realm, being classified as ABAB with an extended cadenza.

As noted in Haydn's "Quis non posset," again we see evidence of the growing

influence of instrumental music. The introduction alone in “Et incarnatus est” lasts from Measures 1 through 19, when the soprano enters with a simple theme, characteristic of Mozart’s early vocal works.

After the entrance however, Mozart writes music for the soloist filled with elements of his later style. Not only are the phrases lengthier than others in his vocal writing, but the chromaticism prevalent in this work can only point to the approaching Romantic era.



Figure 7 - Mm. 64-65

Unlike earlier works wherein Mozart melodies were clean, simple, and perfunctory, this aria is filled with chromatic passages. These chromatic passages and lengthy phrases again demonstrate word painting and the growing importance of the text.

Also notice the high register in which this piece lies. In “Et incarnatus est,” one of Mozart’s most common devices is a leap upward from as much as an octave. Again, Mozart is using musical devices to demonstrate the importance of the text, which speaks of three important religious figures: Holy Ghost, Virgin Mary, and Christ. By dwelling in the upper regions of the soprano register, Mozart demonstrates the holy nature of each of these figures, and their lofty position in the Catholic Church.



Figure 8 - Measure 60

Though none of the writing is disjunct, or tonally unstable, Mozart is clearly pushing the boundaries of this music with the chromaticism, leaps, high register, and long phrases. We find that the only logical step now is to the Romantic era.

Romantic Period

1815-1910

From the Classical Period's small attempts at exploration of new forms, the Romantic Era gave way to more expression and less adherence to the musical rules of form and harmony. There was a public infatuation with exoticism, heroicism, and longing for the infinite. The public, led by artists of the day, was pushing boundaries of convention and exploring new possibilities of individual expression. The goal of painters and poets alike was the expression of pure emotion.

For the musical world, this trend was no different. "Romanticism in music is not so much a collection of style traits as a state of mind that enabled composers to seek individual paths for expressing intense emotions, such as melancholy, yearning or joy." (Grout 543) Musical devices such as text painting and chromaticism peaked during this time, as did all manner of tonal experimentation. Composers used larger orchestras, choirs, and concert halls, which in turn called for more instrumentalists as well as singers with larger voices. An emphasis on the dramatic prevails during this time, accompanied by the continued expansion of harmonic possibility as demonstrated by Gioacchino Rossini in the following work.

Compared to the flamboyant Italian style of Rossini, Gabriel Fauré's music seems much cooler and more controlled. Fauré's music is a hybrid of both the Romantic and Hellenic styles (663), as we shall see in his "Pie Jesu."

Gioacchino Rossini
1792-1868
Inflammatus et accensus
from
Stabat Mater

Original Title: *Stabat Mater*

Original Language: Latin

Origin of text: The text is traditional Latin from the Roman Catholic Liturgy

First Performance: January 7, 1842 at the Salon Ventadour in Paris

Translation:

Inflammatus et accensus
per te, Virgo, sim defenses
in die iudicii.
Fac me cruce custodiri,
morte Christi præmuniri,
confoveri gratia.

Inflamed and in flames
through the Virgin I am defended
in the day of judgment.
May I by the cross be guarded
by the death of Christ made safe,
by Thy eternal grace.

Discussion of the work:

This work, composed for orchestra (larger than that of the Classical period), choir, and four solo voices, the *Stabat Mater* is one of the most controversial pieces in the history of sacred music. After its first performance, some composers and audiences claimed the work was too opera-like. Indeed, the work is one of great magnitude, and the dramatic nature of the work does raise questions about the true difference between oratorio and opera. However, critics such as Pahlen recognize the style of the *Stabat Mater* as simply being true to the style of Rossini. He claims:

A composer's style is his hallmark, and the more distinctive it is, the stronger his musical personality. No composer would deny his own style when writing in a new genre; at most, he might modify some characteristics to better suit his style to the occasion. (Pahlen 279)

Again, as before in the history of the oratorio, we find that it is simply nothing but unstaged opera. The controversy surrounding the *Stabat Mater* however, was unprecedented in music history. A guardian of sacred music, Pope Pius X expressly forbade the performance of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* in 1903, branding it unsuitable for the church because of its operatic nature.

Discussion of the aria:

The “Inflammatu et accensus” of this work exemplifies the use of Rossini’s operatic style. The heavy, busy accompaniment of the aria coupled with the occasional entrances of a full choir demand that this aria be sung by a dramatic soprano. From the very beginning, the aria sounds very similar to any vengeance aria in a dramatic opera. The accompaniment is desperate and hurried, and the soprano responds with an entrance on a high G.



The image shows a musical score for Measure 14. It consists of three staves: a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line starts with a high G note, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The piano accompaniment is highly rhythmic and busy, featuring many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The lyrics "In - - - flam" are written below the vocal line.

Figure 9- Measure 14

The aria continues in its dramatic nature, employing chromaticism, dramatic trills, and huge crescendos to the very end, when the soprano sings the final statement twice, both times holding forth on a high C.

In the “Inflammatu,” the first soprano, supported fortissimo by the chorus and orchestra, twice rises to high C. Is this story not a drama? Why, then, not express it with all means available to the musical dramatist? (Pahlen 280)

Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* represents the pinnacle of operatic influence in sacred literature. One can hardly argue with the style in which it was composed given the nature of the text, but one can certainly argue about the appropriate venue for such a controversial work.

Gabriel Fauré

1845-1924

Pie Jesu

from

Requiem

Original Title: *Requiem*, Op. 48

Original Language: Latin

Origin of text: Mass for the Dead of the Catholic liturgy (Missa pro defunctis)

First Performance: January 16, 1888 in the Church of the Madeleine in Paris

Translation:

Pie Jesu Domine,
dona eis requiem
sempiternam requiem.

Holy Jesus Lord,
give them rest,
eternal rest.

Discussion of the work:

Unlike Rossini's "Stabat Mater," Fauré's "Requiem" embodies exactly the opposite ideals. Rather than expressing ultimate emotion with his work, Fauré chooses instead to characterize this work with simple structure and sounds. The expression of balance and clarity throughout this work convey a truly sacred nature. Suckling ventures to say that the *Requiem* is:

...what hardly any of the great composers' masses had been in the century elapsing since Mozart-it is suited to the liturgical use, and does not ask to be a concert work. And moreover it neither limits itself by dispensing with part of the musical language available for secular compositions, like the English Victorians, nor does it sound inappropriate by using it, like the church music of Rossini. (172)

This work is unique to the Requiem mass form because of its omission of certain movements. There are no Benedictus or Dies irae movements. The omission or addition of movements in masses, requiems, or other religious setting is not uncommon. However the omission of the particular "Dies irae" movement calls into question its very nature. In the Catholic Church, the "Dies irae" is the day of reckoning, when all souls are judged. Without a "Dies irae," and because of the serene, trouble-free "In Paradisum" at the end, scholars question the true nature of the work. Without a final judgement and with a Purgatory that is relatively care-free, can this be considered pagan rather than Christian? Suckling writes that Fauré's interpretation of the "Requiem" is not so much a religious

difference as much as it is a progressive new concept in a musical setting. He compares Fauré's interpretation as a new concept, that, as in all other cultures, must be investigated and "purged of superstition" before they could be accepted. (178) The *Requiem*, writes Suckling, is simply a different version of the mass for the dead.

Death, then, as a comforter rather than a summoner; as a curtain descending upon life rather than a fulfillment of it; as the sleep for which Macbeth longed after life's fitful fever, rather than the entrance to a world of new strenuousness where they rest not day nor night; all this seems to me to be conveyed by the illusionless tranquility of Faure's *Requiem*.
(Suckling 178)

Thus, in Fauré's *Requiem* we see two very different concepts. One is the type of music itself. For this piece, Fauré's use of Hellenic sounds is prominent. However, although the sounds are ancient Greek concepts, the nature of the setting of the *Requiem* is called into question. Again, we see a composer branching out to new ideas, this time by keeping the music at its earliest roots.

Discussion of the aria:

In *Pie Jesu*, Fauré creates the synthesis of two types of writing: Romantic and Hellenic. The first style is typical of this era: extensive use of the bass range and intense expression of emotion. The second, however, is a style of writing whose roots reach to antiquity. The Hellenic style is one of balance, clarity, and serenity that closely resembles the nature of Greek art. (Grout 663)

The Hellenic style was one studied in the early Baroque Period by the Florentine Camerata, a group of musicians, artists and philosophers in Florence, Italy who studied both modern and ancient artistic methods. Although they had relatively few examples of ancient Greek music, one of the members, Girolamo Mei (1519-1594), was impressed with the Greeks' effect on listeners using a simple melody. This melody, whether sung solo or with accompaniment, "...exploited the natural expressiveness of the rises and falls of the pitch and the register of the voice, and of changing rhythms and tempo." (Grout 359) The effectiveness of a single melody, much like the Greek style, is seen in the soprano line.

“Pie Jesu” opens simply, with concentration on the solo soprano line supported very delicately on the bottom by chordal accompaniment. The balance and clarity of this first line is typical Hellenic style.

The image shows the first three measures of the musical score for "Pie Jesu". It consists of three staves: a vocal line for soprano and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line begins with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a half note C5, and a quarter note B4. The lyrics "Pi - e Je - su Do - mi - ne," are written below the notes. The piano accompaniment starts with a piano (*p*) and dolce marking. The right hand plays a series of chords, while the left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The first measure has a whole note chord, and the following two measures have half-note chords.

Figure 10 – Mm. 1-3

In the next passages as well, continuing with the same text, we find Hellenic serenity in the calm eighth note accompaniment figures in the instrumental sections.

The image shows measures 17 and 18 of the musical score. The vocal line has a whole note rest in measure 17, followed by a half note G4 in measure 18 with the lyric "Do -". The piano accompaniment continues with a steady eighth-note accompaniment in both hands. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a consistent eighth-note pattern. A *dolce* marking is present above the vocal line in measure 18.

Figure 11 – Mm. 17-18

At the beginning of the “sempiternam” text, we see the first signs of more urgent emotion. The accompaniment is more tonally active, and the lush low sounds of the orchestra are used.

After this section, we return to the simple Hellenic sounds of the A section once more. The aria ends with the serene accompaniment eighth note figures from before, and a feeling of calm. It is clear that through the synthesis of modern and ancient musical techniques, Fauré is exploring every aspect of the oratorio. With “Pie Jesu,” he demonstrates neo-Hellenic sounds with Romantic colors and elements as well.

Twentieth Century

1900-present

The Twentieth Century is a hybrid of sorts. In the early part of the Twentieth Century, discouraged by world war and distress, artists and musicians alike expressed themselves in minimalist forms and foreign, cold sounds. The very nature of phrasing in music and the purpose of instruments were called into question. Composers such as John Cage (1912-1992) questioned the very definition of music, while artists like Salvador Dali (1904-1989) were painting pieces that hardly expressed the beauty of the world. Musicians and artists were describing the world in their pieces more realistically than ever before. The purpose of their expression was no longer to create something beautiful, but to describe the world as it really existed- cold, cruel, and fraught with disaster.

However, even in the seemingly hopeless world in which they existed, some composers still chose to express beauty and expression by using forms other than those of their contemporaries. The two composers in this section, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Samuel Barber, chose to return to ancient forms and ideas as the theme of their works. Although elements of contemporary styles (meandering tonality and emphasis of dissonance) remain in both works, the solo works of both Vaughan Williams and Barber return to their most fundamental roots.

Ralph Vaughan Williams

1872-1958

Song

*from
Hodie*

Original Title: *Hodie*

Original Language: Latin

Origin of text: from “Hymn on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” by John Milton

First Performance: September 8, 1953 at Worcester Castle

Text:

It was the winter wild, while the Heav`n born child
all meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies.
Nature in awe to him had doffed her gaudy trim,
with her great Master so to sympathize
and waving wide her myrtle wand,
she strikes a universal peace through sea and land.
No war, or battle’s sound was heard the world around.
The idle spear and shield were high up-hung.
The hooked chariot stood unstain’d with hostile blood.
The trumpet spake not to the armed throng;
And kings sate still with awful eye,
as if they surely knew their Sovran Lord was by.
But peaceful was the night where-in the Prince of light
His reign of peace upon the earth began.
The winds with wonder whist, smoothly the waters kissed,
whispering new joys to the mild ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave, while birds of calm
sit brooding on the charmed wave.

Discussion of the work:

This aria demonstrates Vaughan Williams’ concentrations on national music. He uses English literature and a simple, folk-sounding melody in *Hodie* to create a work that is almost magical. The extent to which the text is used is obtrusive compared to the use of secular text in previous works. In fact, the incredibly descriptive nature and the attention to the lush words in the text remind audiences of pagan rituals and old religions of the English countryside, not the stiff, boring stuff of which many sacred works are made. In this work, Vaughan Williams couples a healthy appreciation of word choice

with pastoral melodies. These two characteristics produce a work filled with “grace, mellow naïveté, and youthful exuberance.” (Kennedy 364)

Discussion of the aria:

The aria “Song” (It was the winter wild) demonstrates Vaughan Williams skill for setting text to music at its height. The aria begins with a pastoral accompaniment and the soprano enters with a simple melody.

Figure 12 – Mm. 5 - 8

This melody continues as the foundation for the following verses. It is simple, clear, and could easily be a snatch of some folk song. Together, with the fluidity of the words, a calming tone is achieved.

Underneath the soprano, the accompaniment undergoes several unusual chordal changes. In the very beginning, the aria starts in E-flat major, but modulates to an unexpected G Major for the soprano entrance. This trend continues, with unexpected accidentals and themes that don't quite fit into the key signature.

Figure 13 - Mm. 44-48

These seemingly misplaced accidentals add a mystical nature to the aria. When one considers the beginnings of sacred music, when the scarcest of musical experiments were carefully hidden inside the music, the music in this piece is no less than scandalous. Like Rossini's "Inflamatus et accensus," Vaughan Williams' "Song" is equally unusual in the sacred world. However, Rossini pushed the boundaries of sacred music by bringing in the most secular of musical ideas, whereas Vaughan Williams employs methods and language from the most ancient of times. The style of this solo is very successful. Kennedy comments " 'It was a winter wild' is a further demonstration that none of Vaughan Williams's imitators could approach the original in his ability to assume a pastoral style which never becomes sentimental but retains a slight astringency in its flowing triplets." (364)

Samuel Barber
1910-1981
Lord Jesus Christ
From
Prayers of Kierkegaard

Original Title: *Prayers of Kierkegaard, Op. 30*

Original Language: English

Origin of text: from the writings of Søren Kierkegaard: *Journals, Christian Discourses,* and “The Unchangeableness of God”

First Performance: December 3, 1954 at Symphony Hall

Text:

Lord Jesus Christ who sufferer'd all life long
That I, too, might be saved, and whose suff'ring still knows no end,
This, too, wilt Thou endure: Saving and redeeming me,
This patient suff'ring of me with whom Thou hast to do,
I, who so often go a stray.

Discussion of the work:

In *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, we see the ultimate departure from a typical sacred oratorio. Not only does Barber depart entirely from sacred text, he also uses styles from throughout history in the piece. Barbara Heyman writes:

In *Prayers* [of Kierkegaard] Barber has combined his neo-Romantic perspective with elements of twentieth-century, Baroque, and medieval practice in a magnificent fusion. The choral texture, often polychoral, alternates blocks of sound with rich contrapuntal writing—principally canon and passacaglia—sometimes in combination; rhythmic augmentation is employed frequently. (351)

Equally as important in this work is the text. The existentialist theologian Søren Kierkegaard was famous for his continuous internal battle with religious beliefs. In the text for this work, the nature of a questioning servant is exaggerated through text painting and musical devices as seen in the following aria. The text is highly distilled, as is the music Barber wrote for it.

Discussion of the aria:

“Lord Jesus Christ” is a perfect example of the fusion of the different musical styles of Barber. The soprano line is chant-like, reminiscent of Barber’s *Hermit Songs*, in

which the influence of monks is pervasive. The accompaniment is the factor of doubt in this aria. As Kierkegaard doubted his own religious beliefs, so too does the restless accompaniment challenge the soprano line's lyrical nature. The form of the aria has now evolved far past the da capo form, and into the realm of through-composed music. Each of these elements weaves in and out of the other to form a conglomeration of styles throughout the aria.

In the beginning of the piece, we first hear a haunting triplet-duplet theme that acts as an ostinato throughout the entire aria.



Figure 14 – Mm. 3-7

The soprano line is chant-like, simple and repetitive, imitating the oboe entrance in the beginning.

Figure 15 – Mm. 9-10

As the soprano line continues, the intervallic leaps become wider and the accompaniment becomes fuller. The soprano explores a wider range of notes as the text become more urgent. The chords underneath the soprano line change from hollow fifths and repetitive ostinato to clusters of dissonance and active eighth note patterns. In this way, Barber

transitions from the first simple soprano theme to sounds that are more Romantic and less medieval. The full range of the soprano voice is exploited as the text becomes more urgent and expressive.

The text in this aria is the foundation on which all accompanying factors are built. The accompaniment is sparse and repetitive, calling attention to the diversity of the soprano line. On especially important text, Barber augments the vocal line to emphasize words that involve endurance and prolonged suffering. The importance of the text finally climaxes on fortissimo A during the text “I who so often go astray.” In this passage, Barber uses wide leaps to demonstrate one’s departure from the religious path.

The aria ends with the soprano entreating the Savior, “Lord Jesus Christ, Lord Jesus Christ.” After this codetta, only the simple, haunting triplet-duplet theme and sparse accompaniment remain, with the attention still drawn to the previously sung text. The use of text as the primary focus of the aria with the accompaniment built around it is proof of the extreme evolution of the oratorio aria. No longer is the text of less importance than florid writing or dramatic accompaniment. To Twentieth Century composers, text was equally as important as other elements of vocal writing. This role change would transform vocal writing forever.

Conclusion

In hindsight, one can see that oratorio has come full circle. Beginning with its earliest predecessors, the mystery plays with their simple hymns and *Laude*, the oratorio has evolved from German Baroque polyphony to English operatic oratorio and Austrian classicism with Haydn and Mozart. In the 19th Century, oratorio left the church forever to live primarily on the concert stage as exemplified by Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. The Fauré *Requiem*, although part of the Romantic period, points the way to a new sensibility about sacred music. In the 20th Century, and especially in the examples discussed in this thesis, one can see the influences of not only the modern age, but also earlier, simpler times.

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