

MUSICAL PRAYER

MARK HILLIARD WILSON

St. James Cathedral Guitarist

Intermezzo, Op. 117, No. 1

Johannes Brahms
1833–1897

Notes by Mark Hilliard Wilson

While preparing for last month's Musical Prayer, the intensity of the smoke from the numerous forest fires around the West Coast of the US made the Covid-19 quarantine even more so challenging – I sought and found solace in the music of Gluck and excerpts from his opera Orpheus and Euridice. I curated a program around the story of Orpheus, losing his loved one, descending to Hades to retrieve her, and ascending with Euridice out of the darkness.

So what do I program after one has been to Hades and back?

The forest fire smoke was rough, the quarantine and limited- to no-contact with fellow humans for the last nine months has been rough, the lack of work or income is really hard. Our elections are so crucial and appear to be representing very different opinions on fundamental rights and institutions, and as I write Friday morning, November 6th, we are still awaiting the results of the election.

My program tonight is built around this first piece by Brahms. Despite the austere title this is one of the most intimate and healing of pieces that I can think of. I have thought about the power of lullabies and the intimacy felt when singing to little humans we care so much about. When and why do we stop singing in hushed tones to people we care so much about, offering comfort?

I can't sing tonight, but I have music that feels like lullabies for adults. In fact, as I looked further into the opening piece by Brahms, I found that the translation to his inscription to the work is originally from a Scottish lullaby:

Schlaf sanft mein Kind, schlaf sanft und schön! *Baloo, my babe, lie still and sleep.*
Mich dauert's sehr, dich weinen sehn. *It grieves me sore to see thee weep.*

Brahms wrote these intermezzi at the end of his life and dedicated them to the woman who might have been his one true, yet unrequited love, Clara Schumann. They are sublime pieces that express incredible joy and sorrow, as one just only is able to know at the end of a long journey.

Ossana

Iakovos Kolanian
b. 1960

The next piece is from the Armenian-Greek guitarist composer Iakovos Kolanian. His piece is subtitled “a religious dance,” but I could not help but notice the similarity between the word *ossana* and *hosanna*. Armenia is considered to be the first Christian nation, with the evidence being derived from a 4th century stele (a standing stone marking a tomb). The word *hosanna* (Latin *osanna*) or *hallelujah* is the exclamation of praise for our Savior. I was unable to find any original source material that this piece could be derived from, but it is my impression this is a preexisting melody, perhaps an ancient one, that is expertly set by the composer.

"Goin' Home" from *New World Symphony*

Antonín Leopold Dvořák
1841–1904

The story of Johannes Brahms' influence on Antonín Leopold Dvořák's success is not so well known. Dvořák was 33 when he first won the Austrian State Prize and moved from being a "relatively impoverished music teacher" to becoming a household name among classical music lovers. At the time, what we now call the Czech Republic, and was for most of my life Czechoslovakia, was a minor part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in fact, Dvořák was seen as quite the backwoods composer and a little long of tooth to boot. However, when Brahms saw his submission to the composition competition, he wrote: "[Dvořák] has submitted 15 compositions, among them symphonies, which display an undoubted talent...The applicant...deserves a grant to ease his straitened circumstances and free him from anxiety in his creative work." Before this Dvořák roomed with five other men and did not even own a piano.

At about the time Dvořák's new mentor Brahms was going off to a mountain village to write the set of *Intermezzi* featured in tonight's opening selection, Dvořák was invited to the United States to conduct, coach and offer advice on how to develop a distinctly American classical music. Dvořák was the director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City from 1892–1895. He was well-paid, and despite the rise of Jim Crow America, this Conservatory had an enrollment of Black American men and women that worked alongside white American men and women. Dvořák learned about American Spirituals from his assistant, the African-American composer Harry Burleigh. Dvořák wrote in a series of newspaper articles how rich American Classical music would be using African-American and Native American music as a foundation. Sadly, the institutions of higher learning were only able to do so much, or did nothing at all, and time moved forward without American Classical music being at the center of all of the many new genres that came from America: ragtime, blues, jazz, bebop, rock n roll and hip hop, all based in the African-American experience.

I chose the theme from the second movement of Dvořák's iconic *New World Symphony*, a theme named "Goin' Home" and used at moments to honor ones loved ones lives or even the joining of lives in marriage.

Sicilian Mariners Hymn: O sanctissima, O piissima

arr. Justin Holland
1819–1886

Justin Holland was a prolific composer, arranger, performer, teacher, and civil rights activist. Born in 1819 in Norfolk, Virginia to free parents, he was the first African-American classical guitarist. Tragically, his parents died when he was 14, and he left Virginia in 1833 to work in Boston. It was there that he made the acquaintance of the Signor Mariano Perez, and studied the Spanish guitar with him. Holland eventually moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he married and had children and established a thriving life in teaching music to both white and black Americans. He worked with the Underground Railroad to liberate many enslaved in the South.

The *Sicilian Mariners Hymn* or *O sanctissima, o piissima*, (oh most holy, most loving) is a familiar hymn seeking prayers from the Blessed Virgin Mary. Its first known publication was in London in 1792, and there is no evidence that this melody comes from Sicily nor that mariners sang this. This does not detract from its comfort in familiarity and the joy in the invention of Mr. Holland's variations, which incidentally were written at about the same time as Brahms was writing his *Intermezzi*, and Dvořák came to the United States.

O sanctissima, o piissima, dulcis Virgo Maria! Mater amata, intemerata, ora, ora pro nobis.	<i>O most holy, o most loving, sweet Virgin Mary! Beloved Mother, undefiled, pray, pray for us.</i>	Ecce debiles, perquam flebiles; salva nos, o Maria! Tolle languores, sana dolores; ora, ora pro nobis.	<i>Look, we are weak and deeply deplorable; save us, o Mary! Take away our lassitude, heal our pains; pray, pray for us.</i>
Tu solatium et refugium, Virgo Mater Maria. Quidquid optamus, per te speramus; ora, ora pro nobis.	<i>You are solace and refuge, Virgin Mother Mary. Whatever we wish, we hope it through you; pray, pray for us.</i>	Virgo, respice, Mater, aspice; audi nos, o Maria! Tu medicinam portas divinam; ora, ora pro nobis.	<i>Virgin, look at us, Mother, care for us; hear us, o Mary! You bring divine medicine; pray, pray for us.</i>

Simple Gifts

Shaker hymn
arr. Ed Flower
(b. 19??)

The Shaker song *Simple Gifts* is attributed to Elder Joseph Brackett from 1848 in the Alfred Shaker Village. There are two competing stories to the origin of the song, one attributing it to a “Negro spirit” heard near Canterbury, New Hampshire, the other being that it is a “gift song” communicated to a Shaker from the spirit world. Aaron Copland popularized the melody with his setting at the end of his ballet that he wrote in 1944 for leading choreographer Martha Graham. It was in the ballet *Appalachian Spring* that the previously stated aspirations to find an American voice in Classical music found their success.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down, where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Intermezzo, Op. 119, No. 1

Johannes Brahms

Farewell to Stromness

Peter Maxwell Davies
1934–2016

I conclude the evening's prayer with two pieces, one more intermezzo by Johannes Brahms and then Peter Maxwell Davies. We conclude with music written in the wilderness – with Brahms, he wrote his last set of piano pieces in the remote Austrian mountain spa village of Bad Ischl, and with Peter Maxwell Davies we will hear *Farewell to Stromness*, a piece written just off of the remote Scottish islands of Orkney. Both pieces sing of a deep and abiding love of nature, simplicity, and the ability to build wonderful moments that reach for the stars with hearts warmed by the fires at home.

MARK HILLIARD WILSON brings joy and technical finesse to the listener while integrating music from diverse backgrounds and different ages with a compelling story and a wry sense of humor. Performing regularly at festivals and concert series, Wilson has distinguished himself as a unique voice with programs that feature his own transcriptions of both the well known and the obscure. Wilson's compositions for the guitar have been appearing on stages throughout the Northwest US and Canada for over 15 years. He works in is the relatively unexplored genre of an ensemble of multiple guitars as the conductor, composer, arranger, and music director to the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle. Wilson has taught at Whatcom Community College and Bellevue College.

Wilson's CD *El Sueno del Camino* is the product of a series of concerts he played along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Wilson has been busy promoting his latest CD, a Guitar Orchestra recording that features compositions for 10 guitars, inspired by the pilgrimage to Spain as well as pilgrimages closer to home: Chuckanut Drive and the Edmund Pettis Bridge. Since the start of 2019 he has produced concerts for the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle in fun and unusual venues for the classical guitar, such as the restored bar "The Rendezvous" in The Jewelbox Theater (built in 1932 as a movie theater); the experimental cafe theater Cafe Nordo; and the former Elliot Bay Book Company location in Pioneer Square. Solo engagements have taken him to numerous living rooms and gardens across Seattle through the organization Groupmuse. The summer of 2019, Wilson was engaged in 10 concerts over an 8-week spread, where he played solo concerts, a concerto written for him and the Octava orchestra, and a series of concerts in Portland with the soprano Jessica Israels and baritone Erik Hundtoft. Shortly after this, Wilson was the guest guitarist with the Sun Valley Symphony.

Wilson's work on a CD of Argentinian music featuring solo work and duo work with Stuart Zobel has been affected by the Covid-19 quarantine, and the same can be said of his work to release a CD of Good Friday music written by Nathan Jensen for the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle. The quarantine has not brought any of his work to a stop, but reoriented it: progress is still occurring and new skills are being acquired along the way!