

Florilegium Chamber Choir
November 2010

Guillome de Machaut (c. 1300 – April 1377)	<i>Sanctus</i>
Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa (March 8, 1566 – September 8, 1613)	<i>O vos omnes / Tribulationem et dolorem</i>
Charles Ives (October 20, 1874 – May 19, 1954)	<i>Psalms 90, 100, 150</i>
Igor Stravinsky (June 17, 1882 – April 6, 1971)	<i>Mass</i>

Machaut, Gesualdo, Ives and Stravinsky: a poet, a murderer, an insurance salesman and an expatriated Russian ballet composer of celebrity status who spent more of his life in Los Angeles than Russia.

These four are a far cry from the Palestrinas and Bachs of music history – the worker-bees of the musical canon whose professional positions compelled them to produce new work on a weekly basis (and in so doing, also happened to produce some of the most awe-inspiring settings of sacred texts). None of the composers represented here made their life's work in the church. Of the four, Charles Ives came the closest, working as a church organist until the age of 28 before leaving professional music to pursue a vastly more lucrative career in life insurance sales. And of this motley bunch, only Stravinsky received any recognition during his creative heyday for his work as a composer. Gesualdo, a nobleman, did not need a profession (nor did he need to produce any justification beyond his noble title for the very pre-meditated and very well documented murder of his wife and her lover), and was free to live his eccentric semi-reclusive life, organizing performances of his music for himself and the members of his court. Machaut was (or so I like to imagine) the Bob Dylan of 14th century France, on an unending tour of Europe with one royal court or another (save for about eight years in the 1330's when he settled into ecclesiastic roles), offering sung and semi-sung recitations of poetry for his royal patrons. During his lifetime, it was not his "composed music" that garnered him his notoriety, it was his troubadour-esque poetry. His rhythmically inventive verses of love, longing, and the wandering life were even cited by Chaucer as influential. (At the time of writing, I was unable to determine just how influential Dylan found Machaut's poetry to be.)

My hunch, of course, is that it is exactly *because* of their "outlier" relationship to the religious institutions whose spiritual views they nevertheless held close that they were able to infuse these sacred texts with such barn-burning fervor, that they were able to...

...Make a joyful noise...

The notion that God prefers a loud, raucous party to quiet piety is the notion that drives today's program. These four composers, each incredibly experimental in their day (hyper-modern, if you will), found different ways of getting at the joy within the noise, and getting at the joy of making noise. In this mode of expression, they each set themselves drastically apart from the scores of working church composers of their time...or, for that matter, of any time.

*...with the sound of the trumpet;
...with the psaltery and the harp!*

Just try to imagine the practically-minded J.S.Bach, Cantor and Music Director of Leipzig, showing up for his weekly service and demanding that on this particular week he required not only his usual organ and four-part choir, but an additional four-part children's choir AND "distant church bells" that must sound out gentle melodies on his cue, while the two choirs sing in two different keys and a rhythm that matches neither organ nor distant bells. Absurd, right? But Psalm 90, Ives' last and most ambitious psalm setting, calls for just those very elements (as does Psalm 100, though the scope of 100 is nowhere near that of 90). Each of Ives' psalm settings blend an expressive naiveté (not far afield from the allegorical morality plays of the middle ages) mixed with a wholly idiosyncratic harmonic language, a knack for inventive voice leading, charming stage effects, bizarre rhythm, and a hearty flair for the dramatic (ie: barn-burning fervor). The result is a pseudo-Wagnerian approach to Psalm setting that walks a very fine line between highly sincere expressivity and musical-dramatic-religious kitsch. Psalm 90, for example, opens with five measures of organ music, each measure introducing a *leitmotif* for the "characters" of the piece that are to return at appropriate moments in the text. Except, of course, the "characters" are not people, they are ideas: "The Eternities," "Creation," "God's Wrath Against Sin," "Prayer and Humility" and "Rejoicing in Beauty and Work" (a notion that would have resonated with Ives' Connecticut Methodist rearing). Of the ten settings he made of Psalm texts between 1898 and 1924 (spanning his entire compositional "career"), I find the three presented here to have an especially synergistic relationship between word and music; his noisy adventurousness finds full expression.

...with the timbrel and dance;

If Stravinsky's early ballets are the wild broncos of his imagination, we can think of the pieces of his middle period, including the Mass (1944-48), as his Lipizzaner stallions. The pieces of the 30s and 40s maintain all of Stravinsky's early calling-card characteristics, particularly his penchant for obsessively repeating small rhythmic ideas and his crunching harmonic language, but present these calling cards with refined grace and elegance rather than youthful exuberance. His early works run, furiously snorting and bucking across the steppes, while his delicate middle pieces canter gracefully and leap (astonishingly) on command. What fascinates me most about the Mass, then, is how it becomes more "raw" and "Russian" as it moves from Kyrie to Gloria to Credo to Sanctus. While the Kyrie is downright gentile, the Gloria and Sanctus contain long stretches of impassioned solo sections, single voices intoning calls reminiscent of Russian Orthodox chants, set over wordless echoes in the instrumental accompaniment. The Credo, a long unison string of his trademark thumping, primal dance rhythms, feels as though it could fit into one of the quieter moments of the *Rite of Spring*. In this context, the Agnus Dei is fascinatingly withdrawn and introspective, the voices and the accompaniment taking turns offering short off-set phrases. It is as though the composer caught his breath at the end of the Sanctus and remembered that he'd been writing "neo-classical" music for the last twenty years, and that his stomping "Russian" period was long behind him.

...with stringed instruments and organs!

Machaut's Notre Dame Mass of the mid 1360's, from which this Agnus Dei comes, is the first known mass ordinary set by a single composer, but is also Machaut's pinnacle achievement in polyphonic composition and one of the most fascinating works of the *ars nova* style. For all of its surface difference, it is very closely related to the Stravinsky, particularly in his use of small repetitive rhythmic ideas. Throughout the movement, the tenors and basses together create one slow, steady melody that passes back and forth between them. Similarly, the sopranos and altos alternate ornately embellished two and three-bar phrases of interlocking lines of their own. It is as though he took the organum practice of the preceding two hundred years and

“turned it up to eleven.” We still have droning pitch centricity, syllables stretched to incomprehensible length, and the contrast of two radically different melodic lines (one slow, one fast) but each of the two lines is energized by repeated rhythm and the trading hocket technique. The deliciously complex (yet wonderfully economic) whole sounds as modern, energetic, and inventive as anything Ives produced, and as exuberant and unrelenting as anything Stravinsky wrote. I can only imagine how such invention struck his original audiences; had the world heard anything quite like this before? As an interesting side note, Machaut was also the first composer to oversee the creation of a “complete edition” of his works (including his music), a privilege granted him as a kind of lifetime achievement award brought about by his renown as a poet.

*...upon the loud cymbals;
...upon the high sounding cymbals!*

And then there is Gesualdo, whose life and music, while not exactly joyful, per say, were certainly among the noisiest to come out of the Renaissance. Given the peculiarity of his language, which resembles virtually nobody else of that time (or any time), as well as an innate reclusiveness further aggravated by a lifetime of repressed guilt over the afore-mentioned murders, I can't help but wonder if the old saw that “any press is good press” worked wonders for Gesualdo's historical stature. Like Ives, there is simply nobody else who wrote in a similar style. Also like Ives, his language is marked by alternating passages of imitative polyphony, voices running themselves into marvelous dissonances, and passages of rhythmic unison, which I can only describe as “quirky.” All of Gesualdo's most challenging and harmonically inventive music came out of his period of self-imposed isolation. “O vos,” and “Tribulationem” are both the outcries of a troubled soul, but in the context of this program, I can't help but see them as a kind of reveling in his own sorrow, an albeit inexplicable triumph deep within his own lamenting.

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