

South Hadley Chorale

March 2009

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) – *Non più guerra!*
Trad. arr. Alice Parker (b.1925) – *Destructive Sword*
Nicholas DeMaison (b.1979) – *...urge relentless...*
Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) – *Mass no.2 in E minor*

The overarching theme of today's program finds succinct statement in the title of our opening piece from Monteverdi's 4th Book of Madrigals (1603): **Non più guerra, pietate!** Of course, we offer this first number with a wink of understanding, knowing that the "war" Monteverdi refers to is at once no war at all, and perhaps the worst kind of war we can imagine. A lover smitten, on the verge of falling out of favor (or perhaps he has never managed to gain favor to begin with) is depicted in decidedly martial language, and the madrigal opens, appropriately, in a rich 5-voice texture imitating an antiphonal fanfare of trumpets. But something curious happens 3/4ths of the way through the piece: Monteverdi's mood changes from that of the suppliant, of giving over (giving over *triumphantly* I might add), to she who has captured his heart ("...your prisoner who kneels before you"), and something new takes shape: a dark threat. "If you would have me die," if you would reject me, "perhaps I shall feel the pain, BUT it is YOU who shall bear the loss." At that moment the piece becomes something wholly different – rich with long sustained notes, Monteverdi drags us through an agonizing series of suspensions between the upper voices and leaves us, bearing the loss, in a coda that is essentially a tired, emaciated version of the opening.

What just happened here? Wasn't he in love? How did we move from the triumphant fanfares of love to the agonized suspensions of death and a cold, empty threat of, "I might be in pain right now, but you'll bear this forever"? There's something about the short text that is almost comic: we can picture poor naïve Romeo wailing and gnashing his teeth over the scorn of Rosaline. But *why* does this lover, who, a moment ago was on his knees, suddenly turn and make a stab for the last word? Moreso than the generalized concepts of war and peace, *here* is the crisis of the program today. I realized sometime in the middle of our rehearsal process that what this eclectic set of pieces on the first half share is some kind of engagement with this desire...this need for the last word, the need to *win* (and if not now, then to win *eventually*), the human need for *vengeance* that permeates across time and culture.

To confront the need for war is to confront the nature of vengeance. In Alice Parker's **Destructive Sword** (originally from the Civil War era "The Brethren's Tune and Hymn Book" of 1879) we find overt, direct questioning to this very end: "To punish crime, though justly due, shall vengeance ever burn?" Shall vengeance ever be satisfied? Parker provides a setting that moves from one voice, to a harmony of voices, to the outer edges of canonic possibility, and then snaps back into rhythmic unison, and harmonic stability, a gesture I interpret as one of hope and unity at the prospect of love acting as our guide. However, a disparity (a different type of disparity from the Monteverdi) exists between message of text and musical setting. The author has offered the only solution he can find to the unending need for retribution. "O may thy spirit's mighty sword our lusts subdue and slay." Truly, we make God in our own image. If only we could all be subjected to a wrath far greater than that we unleash upon ourselves, only then may love (real love, not the love of Monteverdi's protagonist) finally emerge as a guiding force for humanity. Personally, I *want* to take solace in Parker's beautiful setting of these words, but the words nag at me, and I remain troubled.

And so it is that the title of this program may just as easily have been ...urge relentless... The Bible, while full of passages dictating love, forgiveness, humility, and compassion, is also a font of prayers asking for enemies to be smote and plagues to be brought upon offending towns and peoples. Often, God is good enough to oblige us. ("To punish crime, though justly due...") The starting point for my own ...urge relentless... written this year at the request of the Chorale, was an old French Renaissance song known simply as *L'homme armé* (The armed man). The origin and use of this song are unknown. Was it a soldier's song or a marching song? Was it a song sung by townsfolk in time of war? Was it a less childish kind of nonsense song à la "London Bridges" or "Ring Around the Rosy"? Given the number of *other* pieces of music drawing on the melody from throughout Europe during that era, all we can assume is that it was an extremely popular little song.

So who is the armed man? By merging this melody with (admittedly re-worked) texts from a handful of Psalms dealing with war, I propose in this piece that the armed man is he who calls us to war. War today, as I understand it in and around our own lives, is not made by people. It is made by presidents, prime ministers, generals, and, less and less commonly, by congresses. *They* are the armed men. It is *they* who call us to don a coat of iron mail. It is *they* who are to be feared. Yet *they* are charged with the task of ensuring the sanctity of our liberty and our right to pursue happiness. Again, a disparity of terms. ...urge relentless... flows back and forth between the violent passions aroused by this disparity, and a repeated request to be lifted up out of the madness. (Liberate me, liberate me, liberate me.) At the end of the first half, I identify most with Whitman's epigraph to "Drum Taps," (part 110 of *Leaves of Grass*) - "Aroused and angry, I thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war. But soon my fingers failed me...and I resigned myself to sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead." In this act of reflection, Whitman quietly and gently stops the cycle of retribution.

And so the cycle ends. Now what?

Composed at the precocious age of 42 while he was an organist and choir director in Linz (Austria), Bruckner's **Mass no. 2 in E Minor** stands as his first mature masterpiece, and in the scope of his vast choral output, is rivaled, perhaps, only by his Mass no. 3 in F Minor. Why the Mass in E Minor as the corner stone of this concert? Many reasons, of course, but perhaps foremost because the piece is one of new beginnings. Written for Bishop Franz Josef Rudigier and the 1869 consecration of the new cathedral begun at his behest, it was, in many ways, a sort of coming-out piece for Bruckner, one of unusual compositional assertiveness from an often shy and insecure composer. It was originally intended for outdoor performance, which explains the curious coterie of wind instruments for accompaniment. Bruckner was a deeply devout, almost mystical Catholic, and his relationship to the Mass text is highly personal. In the course of the six segments, he takes us by the arm and walks us through a Wagnerian range of emotional highs and lows, and pours out the whole of his compositional capabilities to bring full expression to these words he knew so well. Over the past six months, I have done everything I can do to bring the choir into the love affair I have with this music, and while I am tempted to write volumes about this piece, I suspect it may be time to stop typing and invite you to fall in love as well.

How does the cycle of war and vengeance end? Perhaps we end it by forgetting...forgetting, and turning our attention elsewhere. It may be true that war is a uniquely human invention...

...but then, so is art.