

Program notes

'The Psalms of David cannot be well sung, save from the heart'
– Jean Calvin, *A tous chrétiens et amateurs de la parole de Dieu* (1543)

Because they are such a constant presence in the history of music, religion, and human feeling, the Psalms of the Jewish Bible offer a seemingly infinite number of creative possibilities to practitioners of the musical art. Originally sung, as far as we can determine, to the accompaniment of string (and sometimes wind) instruments, the Hebrew Psalms fulfilled several functions, both within and outside of the Temple, in the religious life of ancient Judaism.

King David is closely associated with the Psalms in the original Bible texts, but also all throughout the Christian era, as part of Christianity's poetic, musical, and visual history. We have chosen, in this program of psalmody, to present mainly music of the Renaissance, an epoch particularly rich for this body of religious poetry, and also the moment in history that witnessed the birth of Protestantism, first in Germany, and then spreading rapidly to other corners of Europe. Jean Calvin, the great French language reformer, sees David as the author of the Psalms. For Calvin, David is neither primarily shepherd nor king, but above all “a man, subject to the same tormenting passions as we. To find his way,” continues Calvin in his sermon, “he looks towards that which God shows him. He ponders and meditates.”

During this period of torment, the reformation of the sixteenth century, the Bible becomes, for believers, a spiritual testament, a direct liaison to God's intent. It is also, during the Renaissance, a book of wisdom, an inventory of things visible and invisible. “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord is speaking”-- this verse of Isaiah heads Olivetan's 1535 French Bible, prefaced by Calvin. Inspired in part by the humanist movement, vernacular translations of the Bible abound, their dissemination aided mightily by the invention of the printing press. And within the newly-central Bible, the Book of Psalms holds a place of honor among adherents of the Reformation, and among French Calvinists most specially. Whereas German and English Protestant song books included from the beginning other hymns beside the Psalms, the steadfast French speakers did not get around to adding songs for the Christian feasts to their Psalters until the eighteenth century!

The original French-Huguenot psalm, like its German-Lutheran counterpart, is a collective, sung prayer. Employing one single musical note per syllable, using the vernacular rather than Latin, and forgoing the typically Catholic/Ambrosian practices of antiphonality and melisma, the Reformers strove to create songs to be sung by all, in all circumstances – in congregational worship, in solitary or collective devotions at home, at work, on the battlefield, at the moment of martyrdom.

Calvin creates his first Psalter at Strasbourg, in 1539. Then, returning to Geneva, and with the help of French language poets Clément Marot and Théodore de Bèze, along with the help of musicians like Loys Bourgeois, he publishes a more complete set. Other musicians, most prominently Claude Goudimel, followed suit. Goudimel used the melodies of the Geneva Psalter, setting many of them several times, in different styles: simple chorale style for two to four voices, and in the more complex motet manner, for use at home. Of course, Calvin himself was intensely suspicious of music and its developments outside of Protestant services. “Music has a secret, incredible power to move the heart,”

he ruminates. He banishes instrumental music at church: the organ is “the bagpipe of the Devil....the human voice is far more excellent than all instruments of music; these are dead things.”

And yet, even a cursory examination of sixteenth century music publications shows that the separations among sacred and profane, reformed and “papist,” spiritual song and worldly melodies, both sung and danced, were by no means absolute or hermetic. Calvin's admonitions were largely honored in the breach. The widespread dissemination of “mixed” collections in numerous countries is a testament to their success. From the splendor of Dutch organ music to the collections of sometimes-racy secular tunes retrofitted with spiritual texts or Psalm paraphrases, we get a picture of European musical life considerably less purified, and puritanical, than what Calvin would have wished. You will hear some example of sacred/secular cross-pollination just before intermission. All sorts of people swam in the troubled waters of the Reformation, and their sometimes-risky choices, be they musicians or composers, kings or ministers, bankers or peasants, could be motivated by all sorts of impulses, both low, including those of a material or political nature, and high, though of a less austere spirituality than Calvin's.

The Reformers agree: music should render the text intelligible, and should not distract from the meaning of the words. And with this aesthetic they marked successive generations of creators, even many of those working for the Church of Rome. You will hear examples of a later musical manner, combining Reformation concerns with renewed musical experimentation, in the second half of our program.

If the English language compositions of Campion or Dowland (a secret Catholic), Byrd (another Catholic) or the Italianised German Schütz are full of the intense feeling that Calvin feared, they are executed with very great artistry. In the music of this later generation, extended gesture, *melisma*, chromaticism, and instrumental color help to “paint” the words of the Psalmist. These words, mainly sung in the vernacular rather than Latin, nevertheless are often set in the more demonstrative musical manner of the Mediterranean (and therefore Catholic) world. Whether intended for private use (lute, voice, string consort) or public ceremony (larger ensembles of instruments and voices), the intention of these compositions is to lead the performer or listener to a greater understanding of the text via the sensuous pleasure of musical discourse.

Obsessed by the notion of the “perfect church,” the Reformers of the sixteenth century continue and sustain the medieval idea of *reformatio*. Beyond the particularity of a specific time and place, their desire for historical continuity persists into our own day and our own continent, and has forever influenced the way in which psalms have been read, listened to, and interiorized. The voice of the Psalmist, by turns clamorous, plaintive, dulcet, or ecstatic, establishes a dialogue between mortal humankind and Eternity, searches for a personal relation to the Divine, and echoes the aspiration of the soul, for “all things are changeable, in heaven as on earth.”

We thank the distinguished poet Robert Alter, a recent translator of the Book of Psalms, for permission to use his beautiful English language versions.

Anne Azéma, 2009
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