

Rachmaninoff & Stravinsky

SCHERMERHORN SYMPHONY CENTER

LAURA TURNER CONCERT HALL

December 3, 2009, at 7 p.m.

December 4 & 5, 2009, at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Giancarlo Guerrero, *conductor*

Nashville Symphony Chorus

George Mabry, *chorus director*

Twyla J. Robinson, *soprano*

Bryan Griffin, *tenor*

Darren K. Stokes, *bass-baritone*

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Symphony of Psalms

Psalm 38

Psalm 39

Psalm 150

DOMINICK ARGENTO

Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe Suite for Orchestra  
(from the opera *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe*)

Introduction

The Valley of the Many Colored Grass

The Maelstrom

The Sepulchre

The Sea

Bryan Griffin, *tenor*

INTERMISSION

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

The Bells, Op. 35

Allegro, ma non tanto

Lento

Presto

Lento lugubre

Twyla J. Robinson, *soprano*

Bryan Griffin, *tenor*

Darren K. Stokes, *bass-baritone*

**IGOR STRAVINSKY**

Born on June 18, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia; died on April 6, 1971, in New York City

**Symphony of Psalms**

The Symphony of Psalms was commissioned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony, then under conductor Serge Koussevitzky. Stravinsky, who was living in France at the time, began the work in January 1930 and completed it on August 15, revising the score in 1948. Because Koussevitzky was indisposed, the world premiere that had originally been planned for Boston took place in Europe instead, on December 13, 1930, with Ernest Ansermet conducting the Brussels Philharmonic. The American premiere followed in Boston on December 19. The Nashville Symphony's first and only prior performance of the work was in April 1977.

*The Symphony of Psalms is usually performed with mixed chorus, although Stravinsky suggested a children's choir for the female voices if possible. (In practice, on his own recordings, he used a traditional four-part chorus.) In addition to the chorus, the score calls for 5 flutes (one doubling piccolo), 4 oboes, English horn, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 5 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, harp, 2 pianos, cellos and double basses.*

estimated length: 22 minutes

Stravinsky went through as many metamorphoses during his long career as Picasso did. He made a style of changing styles, shaking up his image with a variety of artistic makeovers — or that's how his contemporaries tended to view Stravinsky's seemingly restless shape-shifting. What had been the opulence of his breakthrough ballet *The Firebird* was replaced by a revolutionary "primitivism" and then, even more shockingly, a coolly "objective" attitude that appeared to do an about-face on the avant-garde, play-acting with 18th-century musical props.

Yet all of these phases are in fact stamped by Stravinsky's unmistakable voice, reflecting an untiring creative urge. With its interplay of stark, neoclassical economy and sacred texts, the Symphony of Psalms — one of the most fascinating masterpieces in Stravinsky's entire output — must have astonished its first audiences. Moreover, most of the music for which he was known up to that point was connected in some way with the theater.

The commission from Boston Symphony conductor Serge Koussevitzky was open-ended as to the form it might take. It was Stravinsky who opted for a choral-orchestral work setting excerpts from three of the Psalms. In the 1920s, he had begun to re-explore the Russian Orthodox faith in which he had been raised, composing an a cappella setting of the Lord's Prayer in 1926. Biographer Stephen Walsh suggests that the worldwide Depression — which forced a rude awakening from the giddy exuberance of the 1920s — may have left its mark, too.

Here is how Stravinsky inscribed his score: "This symphony, composed to the glory of GOD, is dedicated to the Boston Symphony Orchestra on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its existence." Sacred and secular are casually intermingled, the first of numerous indications that nothing is to be taken for granted with the Symphony of Psalms. Indeed, Stravinsky defies expectations on every level.

Despite the allusion to the genre of the symphony, the three-movement Symphony of Psalms is at a far remove from classical archetypes. The epic choral symphony as pioneered by Beethoven in his Ninth, moreover, finds its virtual antithesis in Stravinsky's compact structure and emotional reserve — the polar opposite of the hyper-expressive individualism that the preceding century had idolized.

Thus the sonic signature devised by Stravinsky leaves out whole layers of the expected orchestral apparatus. What's omitted is as important as what he uses: the absence of clarinets and upper strings removes the traditional source of what we hear as a "warm" blend with voices. Instead, a sense of division between the chorus and instrumental ensemble brings a unique and sometimes chilly clarity to the sound; it also engenders an austere beauty.

The use of Latin from the Vulgate translation of the Psalms is well-suited to this sound world. (Initially, Stravinsky had intended to set the texts in Old Church Slavonic.) An acerbic E minor chord, which sets the orchestral introduction to the first movement into motion, alternates with a rushing pattern of notes. The first movement proceeds as a march-like supplication from the chorus for divine assistance: lost humanity wandering in the wilderness. Stravinsky's music intensifies the prayer, ending in G major.

The sense of wandering continues in the second movement, now in the form of a double fugue (a fugue with two themes). The first theme is instrumental, while the second, in the chorus, works downward from sopranos to basses. Stravinsky describes this movement as an "overt use of musical symbolism" in three stages, setting three verses from Psalm 39 (which expresses a state of "waiting for the Lord") as "an upside-down pyramid of fugues." The architecture, Stravinsky observes, builds from the instrumental to the "next and higher stage" in the "human fugue." The climactic outburst in the final minute (the "third stage," corresponding to the psalm's "new song" of praise) "unites the two fugues."

To the words of praise from Psalm 150, the last movement presents this "new song" as yet another set of surprises in the Symphony of Psalms. Once again, Stravinsky defies expectations and avoids the sort of music conventionally associated with rejoicing, most obviously by his use of contrasting tempos. The distant serenity of the slow opening chorus yields to a faster passage based on an obsessively repeated rhythmic figure — the first music Stravinsky conceived for the piece, in fact. This faster music echoes *The Rite of Spring* (a reminder of the fundamental continuity amid all this composer's stylistic shifts). There are even hints of a circus atmosphere — another of the juxtaposition of opposites at the heart of the Symphony of Psalms.

The slow music returns, followed again by the fast intrusion. Stravinsky later wrote that the latter was meant to depict Elijah ascending to heaven with his horses and chariot. Its "agitation is followed by the calm of praise" in the final hymn, which "must be thought of as issuing from the skies." This concluding section traces a new repetitive pattern: three simple notes around which the chorus rotates in its praise, alighting on an unforgettably sounded chord of C major. Sweeping away all the preceding contradictions, this is Stravinsky's final, awe-inspiring surprise in the Symphony of Psalms.

## **TEXT FOR STRAVINSKY'S SYMPHONY OF PSALMS**

### **1. Psalm 38, verses 13 and 14**

Exaudi orationem meam, Domine, et deprecationem meam. Auribus percipe lacrimas meas. Ne sileas, ne sileas. Quoniam advena ego sum apud te et peregrinus, sicut omnes patres mei. Remitte mihi, prius quam abeam et amplius non ero.

Hear my prayer, O Lord, and with Thine ears consider my calling: hold not Thy peace at my tears. For I am a stranger with Thee: and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me a little that I may recover my strength: before I go hence and be no more seen.

### **2. Psalm 39, verses 2, 3 and 4**

Expectans expectavi Dominum, et intendit mihi. Et exaudivit preces meas; et exudit me de lacu miseriae, et de lato faecis. Et statuit super petram pedes meos: et direxis gressus meos. Et immisit in os meum canticum novrum, carmen Deo nostro. Videbunt multi, videbunt et timabunt: et aperabunt in Domino.

I waited patiently for the Lord: and He inclined unto me, and heard my calling. He brought me also out of the horrible pit, out of the mire and clay: and set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings.

And He hath put a new song in my mouth: even a thanksgiving unto our God.  
Many shall see it and fear: and shall put their trust in the Lord.

### 3. Psalm 150

Alleluia.

Laudate Dominum in sanctis Ejus.

Laudate Eum firmamentis virtutis Ejus.

Laudate Dominum.

Laudate Eum in virtutibus Ejus

Laudate Eum secundum multitudinem magnitudinis Ejus.

Laudate Eum in sono tubae.

Laudate Eum. Alleluia. Laudate Dominum. Laudate Eum.

Laudate Eum in timpano et choro,

Laudate Eum in cordis et organo;

Laudate Eum in cymbalis bene jubilantionibus.

Laudate Eum, omnis spiritus laudate Dominum.

Alleluia.

Alleluja.

O praise God in His holiness:

Praise Him in the firmament of His power.

Praise Him in His noble acts:

Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.

Praise Him in the sound of the trumpet:

Praise Him upon the lute and harp.

Praise Him upon the strings and pipe.

Praise Him upon the well-tuned cymbals.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.

Alleluja.

### DOMINICK ARGENTO

Born on October 27, 1927, in York, Pennsylvania; currently resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota

#### *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe*

*Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe* is a suite based on Dominick Argento's 1976 opera *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe*. Commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the suite was completed in December 1985. David Zinman led the Baltimore Symphony in the premiere on February 27, 1986. Argento dedicates *Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe* to Randolph S. Rothschild and Joseph Meyerhoff. This is the Nashville Symphony's first performance.

*Argento's score calls for offstage voice (tenor), 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, tom-toms, temple blocks, triangle, metal wind chimes, bell tree, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, wind machine, vibraphone, xylophone, harp and strings.*

estimated length: 18 minutes

Best known for his body of 13 operas, Dominick Argento is a dean of American neo-Romanticism. Even when incorporating elements of postwar modernism, he writes in an essentially tonal medium. His aesthetic credo is to remain “committed to working with characters, feelings and emotions.”

Argento often chooses literary sources for his operas, each of which has a notably distinctive flavor. He composed *The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe* between 1975 and 1976 to a libretto by Charles M. Nolte that is replete with experimental theatrical devices. Argento’s score depicts a phantasmagorical, surreal vision of the tormented writer, whose perceptions are distorted by drugs and alcohol. The opera’s narrative, framed by his mysterious death, traces a series of hallucinatory sequences in which Poe’s writings become intertwined with incidents from his own life, including the death of his young bride Virginia (Poe’s cousin, who was only 13 when they married). To his horror, Poe stands accused of desiring her suffering as a source for his creative drive before he himself dies during the opera’s imaginary journey on a ghostlike ship heading to Baltimore.

*Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe* (“The Tomb of Edgar Poe”) uses material from the earlier opera but is a self-contained suite of five interlinked sections. Argento takes his new title from a sonnet that French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé penned for a monument dedicated in 1875 at the site of Poe’s grave in Baltimore. French writers since Baudelaire showed a particular susceptibility to Poe’s influence, and Mallarmé’s “Le Tombeau” defended the poet as a prophetic voice against the slander of his enemies, who proclaimed him a hapless drunk.

Argento’s musical memorial, for its part, references Poe’s own poetry: specifically, “Annabel Lee,” the ballad Poe famously published just days before his death in 1849. Here, “Annabel Lee” serves as a poetic figure not only for Virginia, but also for her effect as a ghostlike muse for her husband. In the Introduction, to gloomy intonings deep in the orchestra, there emerges the melody of a moody ballad. The sepulchral contrabassoon underlying it exudes a wonderfully disorienting atmosphere. Sung as if from a distance (the score leaves the choice of singer open to soprano or tenor), this tune is threaded throughout *Le Tombeau*.

The second section’s title, The Valley of the Many Colored Grass, comes from a passage in the opera in which Virginia describes a vision of the world on the other side of death. It combines a brisk decorative figure in the woodwinds, first heard in the introduction, with a melodic contour that grows impassioned. After a brief tolling of bells, the music accelerates into a longer section, The Maelstrom. In the calm eye of the storm — which is also a figure for the “wind [that] blew out of a cloud by night / Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee” — the ballad-voice returns. Midway through, Argento builds the full orchestral ensemble into a frenzy of Richard Strauss-like realism.

Bells toll as, with dark coloring from the tuba, we are led into The Sepulchre, the piece’s fourth section. Argento’s treatment of the ballad is by turns mournful and exultant, with hints of a funeral march that imitate an ebb-and-flow effect. A lone trumpet lofts its melody in the final section, The Sea, expanding into a full orchestral peroration for the dead bride. A last iteration of the ballad echoes forth as the piece draws to its close.

### **TEXT FOR DOMINICK ARGENTO’S *LE TOMBEAU D’EDGAR POE***

#### **Taken from Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee”**

It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea:  
But we loved with a love that was more than love —  
I and my Annabel Lee;  
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven  
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling  
My beautiful Annabel Lee;  
So that her high-born kinsmen came  
And bore her away from me,  
To shut her up in a sepulchre  
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,  
Went envying her and me —  
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know,  
In this kingdom by the sea)  
That the wind came out of the cloud one night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love  
Of those who were older than we —  
Of many far wiser than we —  
And neither the angels in heaven above,  
Nor the demons down under the sea,  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling — my darling — my life and my bride,  
In the sepulchre there by the sea —  
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

**SERGEI RACHMANINOFF**

Born on April 1, 1873, in Semyonovo, Russia; died on March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California.

*The Bells, Op. 35*

In January 1913, Rachmaninoff began composing *The Bells*, based on a Russian translation of the poem by Edgar Allan Poe. He completed the score in August and conducted the premiere on December 13 of that year in Saint Petersburg. Rachmaninoff dedicated *The Bells* to conductor Willem Mengelberg and the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, with whom he had performed as piano soloist. This is the Nashville Symphony's first performance.

*In addition to the soprano, tenor and bass soloists and mixed choir, the score calls for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 3 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, tubular bells, glockenspiel, triangle, tambourine, cymbals, snare drum, bass drum, tam-tam, piano, celesta, harp, organ (ad lib) and strings.*

estimated length: 35 minutes

Edgar Allan Poe provided the inspiration as well for one of the most remarkable of Sergei Rachmaninoff's works — his unnumbered choral symphony *The Bells*. Indeed, the Russian composer treasured this as his favorite creation, even above the beloved pieces he wrote for himself as a piano virtuoso. He programmed it on the final concert he conducted, with the Chicago Symphony, in 1941.

Rachmaninoff was also highly partial to another of his choral works, the *All-Night Vigil* or *Vespers*, which he wrote two years later (in 1915). These scores embody different aspects of the rituals and sounds of his youth and of a long since vanished Russia. With Proustian vividness, Rachmaninoff could recall persistent memories of Russian Orthodox liturgies as a boy accompanied by his grandmother. While the piano may be the instrument that first comes to mind at mention of his name, the sounds of chant and tolling ceremonial bells were firmly lodged in his imagination. “The sound of church bells dominated all the cities of Russia I used to know,” Rachmaninoff observed in his memoirs. “They accompanied every Russian from childhood to the grave, and no composer could escape their influence.”

The connection between Poe and Rachmaninoff, however, was triggered by a third, anonymous party. In the winter of 1913, the composer was mailed a copy of Poe's “The Bells” in a translation by the Russian Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont. The letter arrived with an entreaty that Rachmaninoff consider setting this text, since he would find it congenial. Long after the fact, a friend and former fellow student of the composer revealed that the instigator had been a young female cellist, a fan of both composer and poet.

Poe's “The Bells,” possibly written in 1848, was published posthumously. It's often singled out as an ingenious example of onomatopoeia — the use of words to imitate the sounds being described. (The Russian title — *Kolokola* — is also neatly onomatopoeic, although Balmont's translation in fact inserts some lines that rather tame the terror central to Poe's vision and also reduces the amount of manic repetition found in the original.) Rachmaninoff adds a new dimension by exploring this resonance in musical terms, using timbre, text setting, various combinations of chorus and orchestra, and recurring thematic ideas.

Moreover, the four stanzas of Poe's original poem are dramatically contrasted. We find four different stages of a universal life course rung out, from birth to death. Rachmaninoff persuasively structures these as four distinct movements of a symphony, each characterized by a unique atmosphere and a corresponding sequence of signature bell sounds. Thus the opening Allegro concerns the optimistic and sweet sound of “silver bells.” In addition to the carefree joys of youth, these bells also foreshadow the “universal slumber” of death that is waiting beyond their promise. Rachmaninoff works this all-important duality into his score by contrasting the lighthearted timbres and mirthful music of the opening minutes — given to tenor and chorus — with a gently hummed, wordless choral passage to suggest the “generations past all number” who have gone before and remain as echoes. It's one of the most magical moments of *The Bells*. As the joyful mood returns,

Rachmaninoff also introduces a descending, softly rocking motif in the upper strings that will become a unifying device for the remaining movements.

This melodic idea is easy to notice, as it returns at the start of the slow movement and is woven into the warmly lyrical ode that follows, now given to soprano solo and chorus. Rachmaninoff builds to a midpoint of utter rapture — the scoring here omits percussion — and his harmonies are beguiling. The “golden” happiness of wedding bells is not entirely unclouded, however. Rachmaninoff’s music also conveys a sense of fateful, solemn ritual, even suggesting at moments a funereal aspect — a counterpart to the bride’s soaring raptures. The timbral balance of chorus and orchestra is particularly beautiful here.

Rachmaninoff conceives Poe’s stanza on the bells of alarm — which signal a nighttime fire — as an energetic scherzo at breakneck speed. Symbolizing the anxieties of adult life and approaching infirmity, these “brazen” bells ring in different superimposed cycles at the beginning. There is no solo voice, only the collective terror of the crowd to add to the din of panic. Even when the momentum subsides, the underlying sense of fear only re-pools, gathering for fresh outbursts.

Most extraordinary of all is the lengthy final movement. Rachmaninoff — like Mahler a few years before, in his Ninth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde* — looks to the model of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony (*Pathétique*). Tchaikovsky had introduced the radically unsettling idea of a slow movement to seal his last symphony — rather than a conventionally affirmative, fast-paced finale. So, too, Rachmaninoff, in following Poe’s description of the “mournful” bells whose “stern monody” rings out the fate of all, resorts to a slow finale (marked *lento lugubre* — “lugubriously slow”).

This movement of death knells, associated with the sound of iron, begins with a desolate orchestral introduction that features an inconsolable solo for English horn. The voice of the bass is most appropriate here, shadowed by the chorus, in the sort of melancholy music with which Rachmaninoff is often thought to be most at home. The music passes into a worried Allegro — notice the harsh reworking of the first movement’s “tolling” motif — and slows again, with another passage of choral humming. In the final pages, though, for orchestra alone, Rachmaninoff allows a consoling glimmer of transcendence.

—Thomas May is the program annotator for the Nashville Symphony and writes regularly about music and theater. His books include *Decoding Wagner* and *The John Adams Reader*.

### **TEXT FOR RACHMANINOFF’S *THE BELLS*, OP. 35**

**Russian poem by K. Balmont, adapted from “The Bells” by Edgar Allan Poe; English translation by Fanny S. Copeland**

I.

Listen, hear the silver bells!

Silver bells:

Hear the sledges with the bells,

How they charm our weary senses with a sweetness that compels,

In the ringing and the singing that of deep oblivion tells

Hear them calling, calling calling,

Rippling sounds of laughter falling

On the icy midnight air;

And a promise, they declare,

That beyond Illusion’s cumber

Births and lives beyond all number,

Waits an universal slumber — deep and sweet past all compare

Hear the sledges with the bells

Hear the silver throated bells;  
See, the stars bow down to hearken, what their melody foretells,  
With a passion that compels,  
And their dreaming is a gleaming that a perfumed air exhales,  
And their thoughts are but a shining  
And a luminous divining  
Of the singing and the ringing, that a dreamless peace foretells

II.

Hear the mellow wedding bells,  
Golden bells!  
What a world of tender passion their melodious voice foretells!  
Through the night their sound entrances,  
Like a lover's yearning glances,  
That arise  
On a wave of tuneful rapture to the moon within the skies  
From the sounding cells upwinging  
Flash the tones of joyous singing  
Rising, falling brightly calling; from a thousand happy throats  
Roll the glowing golden notes,  
And an amber twilight gloats  
While the tender vow is whispered that great happiness foretells,  
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells, the golden bells!

III.

Hear them, hear the brazen bells,  
Hear the loud alarm bells!  
In their sobbing in their throbbing what a tale of horror dwells!  
How beseeching sounds their cry  
'Neath the naked midnight sky,  
Through the darkness wildly pleading  
In affright,  
Now approaching, now receding  
Rings their message through the night  
And so fierce is their dismay  
And the terror they portray,  
That the brazen domes are riven, and their tongues can only speak  
In a tuneless jangling wrangling as they shriek, and shriek, and shriek,  
Till their frantic supplication  
To the ruthless conflagration  
Grows discordant, faint and weak  
But the fire sweeps on unheeding,  
And in vain is all their pleading  
With the flames!  
From each window, roof and spire,  
Leaping higher, higher, higher,

Every lambent tongue proclaims:  
I shall soon,  
Leaping higher, still aspire, till I reach the crescent moon;  
Else I die of my desire in aspiring to the moon!  
O despair, despair, despair,  
That so feebly ye compare  
With the blazing, raging horror, and the panic, and the glare,  
As your unavailing clang and clamour mournfully proclaims  
And in hopeless resignation  
Man must yield his habitation  
To the warring desolation!  
Yet we know  
By the booming and the clanging,  
By the roaring and the twanging,  
How the danger falls and rises like the tides that ebb and flow  
And the progress of the danger every ear distinctly tells  
By the sinking and the swelling in the clamour of the bells

IV.  
Hear the tolling of the bells,  
Mournful bells!  
Bitter end to fruitless dreaming their stern monody foretells!  
What a world of desolation in their iron utterance dwells!  
And we tremble at our doom,  
As we think upon the tomb,  
Glad endeavour quenched for ever in the silence and the gloom  
With persistent iteration  
They repeat their lamentation,  
Till each muffled monotone  
Seems a groan,  
Heavy, moaning,  
Their intoning,  
Waxing sorrowful and deep,  
Bears the message, that a brother passed away to endless sleep  
Those relentless voices rolling  
Seem to take a joy in tolling  
For the sinner and the just  
That their eyes be sealed in slumber, and their hearts be turned to dust  
Where they lie beneath a stone  
But the spirit of the belfry is a sombre fiend that dwells  
In the shadow of the bells,  
And he gibbers, and he yells,  
As he knells, and knells, and knells,  
Madly round the belfry reeling,  
While the giant bells are pealing,  
While the bells are fiercely thrilling,

Moaning forth the word of doom,  
While those iron bells, unfeeling,  
Through the void repeat the doom:

There is neither rest nor respite, save the quiet of the tomb!

## ARTIST BIOS

TWYLA J. ROBINSON, *soprano*

Twyla J. Robinson has consistently earned praise for her consummate musicianship, dramatic sensibility and ravishing vocal beauty. She has performed with many of the world's leading orchestras, including London Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Staatskapelle, the Cleveland Orchestra and Los Angeles Philharmonic, singing under such conductors as Bernard Haitink, Pierre Boulez, Franz Welser-Möst, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Michael Tilson Thomas. Regarding her performances of Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Pierre Ruhe of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said: "Soprano Twyla Robinson is a major catch. With perfect diction, crisply articulated consonants and a warm, wide vibrato, she purred and comforted.... Bliss."

Robinson begins the current season in performances of Zemlinsky's Lyric Symphony with the Rotterdam Philharmonic, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin. She opens the season of the Cleveland Orchestra in a gala performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Franz Welser-Möst and then joins Arizona Opera as Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*. She will perform a recital at Stephen F. Austin University in East Texas and will be heard in Mahler's Symphony No. 8 in Bochum, Germany. Further orchestra performances include Strauss' *Four Last Songs* with Rochester Philharmonic and Verdi's Requiem with National Symphony Orchestra.

BRYAN GRIFFIN, *tenor*

Tenor Bryan Griffin is a recent graduate of the Ryan Opera Center at the Lyric Opera of Chicago (formerly the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists). He made his Lyric Opera debut as Edmondo in Olivier Tambosi's new production of *Manon Lescaut* under Maestro Bruno Bartoletti, with Karita Mattila and Vladimir Galouzine. Griffin's other roles at the Lyric Opera of Chicago have been Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte*, Fenton in *Falstaff* and Tybalt in *Roméo et Juliette*.

Concert engagements for the 2009/10 season include Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Philharmonic Society of Orange County, the world premiere of Cary Ratcliff's *Ode to Common Things* with the Austin Symphony, Mozart's Requiem with the Phoenix Symphony, and a concert tribute to Irish tenor John McCormack, presented by Boston College. Griffin will also appear as Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore* with Toledo Opera.

In concert, Griffin has performed Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Sacred Music in a Sacred Space under Kent Tritle, Rachmaninoff's *The Bells* with Helena Symphony, and a premiere by Michael Torke with Grant Park Music Festival; he recently returned to Lincoln Center in New York City Ballet's presentation of Ravel's *Les Noces*.

DARREN K. STOKES, *bass-baritone*

Darren K. Stokes is a former ensemble member with the Ryan Opera Center at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Highlights of his career include debut performances of Rachmaninoff's *The Bells*, Op. 35 with the Grant Park Music Festival; Calkas (*Troilus and Cressida*) for Opera Theater of St. Louis; Ferrando (*Il Trovatore*) for Indianapolis Opera; Commendatore (*Don Giovanni*) for Eugene Opera; a return to the Lyric Opera of Chicago stage as a guest artist in *Porgy and Bess*; and Méphistophélès (*Faust*) and Parson Alltalk and Producer #2 (*Treemonisha*) with Opera Memphis.

Other important debuts include the Washington National Opera singing Jake in *Porgy and Bess*, Boston Lyric Opera and this month's debut with Nashville Symphony. Other distinguished organizations with which

Stokes has performed include Chicago Opera Theater, Ravinia Festival and the Cincinnati May Festival. A gifted performer on both the operatic and concert stages, Stokes has added 41 roles to his repertoire since embarking on a singing career in 2002 following a career in chemistry.

Handel's Messiah

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December 17, 2009, at 7 p.m.

December 18 & 19, 2009 at 8 p.m.

Nashville Symphony

Nashville Symphony Chorus

George Mabry, *conductor & chorus director*

Jennifer Casey Cabot, *soprano*

Theodora Hanslowe, *mezzo-soprano*

Scott Ramsay, *tenor*

Philip Cutlip, *baritone*

GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL

Messiah

Symphony

PART I

Accompagnato: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people

Air: Ev'ry valley shall be exalted

Chorus: And the glory, the glory of the Lord

Accompagnato: Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts

Air: But who may abide the day of His coming

Chorus: And He shall purify

Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive

Air and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion

Accompagnato: For behold, darkness shall cover the earth.

Air: The people that walked in darkness

Chorus: For unto us a Child is Born

Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)

Recitative: There were shepherds abiding in the field

Accompagnato: And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them

Recitative: And the angel said unto them

Accompagnato: And suddenly, there was with the angel

Chorus: Glory to God in the Highest

Air: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion

Recitative: Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd

Duet: He shall feed His flock like a shepherd

Chorus: His yoke is easy, and His burthen is light

#### PART II

Chorus: Behold the Lamb of God

Air: He was despised

Chorus: Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows

Chorus: And with His stripes we are healed

Chorus: All we like sheep have gone astray

Accompagnato: All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn

Chorus: He trusted in God

Accompagnato: Thy rebuke hath broken His heart

Arioso: Behold and see if there be if there be any sorrow

Accompagnato: He was cut off out of the land of the living

Air: But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell

Chorus: Lift up your heads

Air: How beautiful are the feet of them

Air: Why do the nations so furiously rage together

Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder

Recitative: He that dwelleth in heaven

Air: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron

Chorus: Hallelujah

#### PART III

Air: I know that my Redeemer liveth

Chorus: Since by man came death

Accompagnato: Behold, I tell you a mystery

Air: The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be rais'd

Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb, that was slain

### **GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL**

Born on February 23, 1685, in Halle, Germany; died on April 14, 1759, in London, England

#### *Messiah*

Handel famously composed the first version of *Messiah* in just a little over three weeks — between August 22 and September 14, 1741. The work's first official performance took place in the Great Music Hall in Dublin on April 13, 1742, following a public rehearsal on April 9. Handel continued to make changes to the score during numerous subsequent revivals of *Messiah*. The Nashville Symphony's first performance of *Messiah* took place in 1963.

*For these performances, conductor and chorus director George Mabry follows the Watkins Shaw edition of the vocal score, incorporating details from the Bärenreiter edition prepared by John Tobin. In addition to four vocal soloists and four-part chorus, these performances call for an orchestra of 2 oboes, bassoon, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings and continuo.*

estimated length: 2 hours and 20 minutes in performance, with a 20-minute intermission

The entire career of George Frideric Handel might be seen as an illustration of that favorite symbol of 18th-century England: the wheel of fortune. As a German who settled in London and wrote operas in Italian, his reputation reached delirious heights, but then the tide turned against him and Handel found himself on the brink of ruin. Still, he managed to reinvent himself by developing the English oratorio (essentially, opera without the costumes) and soared again.

Ironically, *Messiah* posed a new set of risks on account of its subject matter and initially threatened to alienate some of Handel's London audiences. Yet by the end of his life, *Messiah* was poised to take its place as *the* most representative of Handel's creations, eclipsing his other oratorios, his several dozen operas and his instrumental music. In fact, its never-waning popularity ensured *Messiah's* status well before the idea of a core repertory for classical music had emerged.

*Messiah* belongs to the crucial transition point in Handel's career when he shifted his focus away from the style of tragic opera (*opera seria*) on which his London career had largely been based. *Opera seria* was set to Italian librettos portraying mythological or historical figures and showcased the star singers of the era. By the late 1730s, it was becoming an unsustainable business model, thanks in part to the high costs of production, but also to a shift in public taste. After *Messiah*, Handel ceased writing Italian operas altogether and concentrated mostly on oratorios in English.

Oratorio originated in Italy at the same time as opera and similarly presents a kind of musical drama. But the stories it recounts tend to be biblical in nature, and they are performed without costumes or scenery. The chorus, too, which usually has a very minor role in the aria-centered *opera seria*, takes on a far more prominent role. "Oratorio" comes from the Italian for a hall of prayer, but by Handel's time works of this genre were performed in secular venues as a substitute for opera. Handel began introducing his style of English oratorio to the public in a string of works throughout the 1730s.

A neat definition of Handel's approach to oratorio appears in the preface to *Samson* (a "twin" to *Messiah*, on which the composer embarked just two weeks after completing the latter). An oratorio, writes *Samson's* librettist Newburgh Hamilton, is "a musical drama, whose subject must be Scriptural, and in which the Solemnity of Church-Musick is agreeably united with the most pleasing Airs of the Stage" — a genre, in other words, that can have it both ways. A sense of moral uplift comes with the entertainment value of opera (but without its expense and fussy, overpaid egos).

But this association with the sphere of secular performance generated some initial resistance to *Messiah*. Scholars continue to debate whether Handel composed the work specifically for the nine-month season that he was invited to spend in Dublin in 1741/42. In any case, after producing a highly successful subscription series of oratorio and opera there, he chose to cap it by giving the world premiere of *Messiah* in the spring of 1742. Despite its acclaim by the Dublin audience, back in London — where Handel introduced *Messiah* under the title "New Sacred Oratorio" in 1743 — it became the subject of controversy in a debate that raged in the press. *Messiah's* method of setting actual scriptural texts and delineation of Jesus within a secular genre that could be performed "for diversion and amusement" even triggered charges of blasphemy — although these were leveled against the secular context of the performances rather than Handel's music itself.

Within just a few years, the fretting subsided, and during his last decade, Handel conducted annual performances that became a highlight of the season. These were always given in the spring, at Eastertide. It was only after his death that the association of *Messiah* with the Christmas season took root. Handel also introduced changes at several of these revivals (substitutions or rewrites of arias, for the most part). They reflected practical performance conditions, taking into account the limitations or strengths of the particular soloists on hand. For example, for the revival of 1750 he had the castrato alto Gaetano Guadagni on hand and

recast “But who may abide the day of his coming” to include a dizzyingly virtuosic setting of the image of “a refiner’s fire” — one of many remarkable instances of Handelian word painting.

There is, simply put, no “gold standard” or final version of *Messiah*’s score, since it was so often altered. Add to this a rich but complicated history of performance traditions in the 250-plus years since the first *Messiah* — including a tendency to expand both choral and orchestral forces — and you can see that the first step in interpreting the work involves significant decisions about *what* precisely to perform. Recently, there has been a vogue to re-create a particular version as closely as possible. More typically, as in the performance we hear tonight, one of the scholarly editions published in the 20th century is used as the basis, with cuts usually made in the second and especially third parts.

Although we tend to think of *Messiah* as the quintessential English oratorio, its text represents an unusual approach to the genre. Librettist Charles Jennens juxtaposes extracts from both the Old and New Testaments to represent the basic narrative of Christian redemption. Rather than a biographical sketch of the life of Jesus, *Messiah* concerns the very idea of divinity becoming manifest in human history (hence the lack of a definite article — “*The Messiah*” — in its title).

There is very little dramatic impersonation of characters: The narrative is indirect and suggestive — and, as has been often noted, downright confusing to anyone not familiar with the implied events involving the life of Jesus. Jennens divides the libretto into three acts (although he calls them “parts”), much like the organization of a Baroque opera. Part One centers around prophecy and the nativity of Jesus, ending with his miracles. (This is the part of the oratorio most closely tied to the Christmas season.) Following its evocation of hope comes a taut version of the Passion story of sacrifice in Part Two. Part Three concludes with the implications of Christ’s redemption of humanity from the fall of Adam.

Yet Handel’s musical expression homes in on the universal emotions that underlie each stage of the Christian redemption narrative. He was above all a man of the theater, and his “operatic” genius for establishing the mood to suit a given situation is everywhere apparent. In opera, Handel typically accomplishes this through a lengthy chain of arias. The structure of *Messiah* deploys greater diversity: Part One establishes a pattern of recitative, aria and chorus, which then allows for further variation in the other two parts. Handel moreover draws on the gamut of international styles of his era, mixing highly wrought, thrilling counterpoint alongside simple Italianate lyricism and homophonic choruses. And with great economy of means, he presents an astonishing range of colors in his development of accompanying textures. Notice, for example, how he withholds the trumpets in Part One until “Glory to God” and then keeps them silent again until the “Hallelujah!” chorus at the end of Part Two (which, incidentally, refers not to the moment of Christ’s resurrection but to the triumph of redemption).

Consider, too, the compelling psychological range Handel explores, encompassing in Part One alone the fathomless darkness of waiting for a savior, the oasis-like calm of the instrumental “Pastoral Symphony” (*Pifa* refers to the music of shepherds) and the dancing exuberance of “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion.” Handel continually finds inventive ways to “paint” the words through music — witness the “straying” lines of “All we like sheep” — but subtler surprises are often hidden within as well. The same chorus shifts from a cheerful demeanor into the tragic minor when the consequences of human failure are addressed.

By the end of Part Three, amid all this variety, Handel has traced a trajectory that will later become familiar in the symphonies of Beethoven: the passage from darkness to enlightenment and final victory. Even after the seemingly unstoppable “Hallelujah!” chorus, there is glorious music yet to follow: the soaring certainty of “The trumpet shall sound” and the progression of the choral finale, with its fugal setting of “Amen.” As the voices weave their threads together, that final word becomes all-encompassing in its resonance — a serenely chanted, transporting “Om.”

—Thomas May is the program annotator for the Nashville Symphony and writes regularly about music and theater. His books include *Decoding Wagner* and *The John Adams Reader*.

# ARTIST BIOS

JENNIFER CASEY CABOT, *soprano*

Jennifer Casey Cabot's 2009/10 season includes the role of Giulietta in *Casanova's Homecoming* with Minnesota Opera, and performing as soloist in Verdi's Requiem with New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and Mahler's Symphony No. 2 with Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In 2008/09 she returned to the Metropolitan Opera roster and to San Diego Opera as Ellen Orford in *Peter Grimes*; she also debuted with Minnesota Opera as Konstanze in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and sang as soloist in Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass* and Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music* with Columbus Symphony Orchestra.

Cabot's concert repertoire includes performances of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Mahler's Symphonies No. 4 and No. 8, and Mozart's *Exsultate, Jubilate*, among others. Recently, she performed the role of Konstanze in a concert version of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* with National Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin. She has performed in concert with Megaron Orchestra at Athens (Greece) Concert Hall under Sir Neville Marriner; Masterwork Chorale in Mozart's Mass in C Minor with Saint Louis Symphony; and in Strauss' *Four Last Songs* and Villa-Lobos' *Bachianas Brasileiras*, both with Norwalk Symphony.

Cabot is featured on the Naxos label's eight-volume collection of Charles Ives songs in the "American Classics" series.

THEODORA HANSLOWE, *mezzo-soprano*

In 2009/10 Theodora Hanslowe again joins the roster of the Metropolitan Opera and performs Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with Sinfonietta of Riverdale. She sang Flora in *La traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2008/09 and for its Opening Night Gala, broadcast live to cinemas internationally. Recently, she performed the demanding title role in the final performance of Santa Fe Opera's American premiere of Kaija Saariaho's *Adriana Mater*; sang as soloist in Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass* and Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music*, both with Columbus Symphony Orchestra; in Reynaldo Hahn's *Tomorrow*, with Doug Varone and Dancers (Joyce Theatre, New York); and in Lawrence Dillon's *Still Point*, at Mannes School of Music.

In summer 2009, Hanslowe appeared as soloist with Salt Bay Chamberfest in a world premiere of songs by Pulitzer Prize nominee Tamar Muskal. On concert stages, she sang Haydn's *Harmoniemesse* at Berkshire Choral Festival and as soloist with such orchestras as Boston Symphony Orchestra (André Previn), San Francisco Symphony (Michael Tilson Thomas), St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Indianapolis Symphony (Raymond Leppard), the Huntsville and Dallas symphony orchestras, and Cathedral Choral Society at National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Hanslowe made her Carnegie Hall debut singing Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été* with St. Louis Symphony.

SCOTT RAMSAY, *tenor*

Scott Ramsay's 2009/10 season includes Ferrando in *Così fan tutte* at Arizona Opera, his return to Opera New Jersey as Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Fritz in *La Grand-Duchesse de Gérolstein* with Opera Boston, and Rodolfo in *La bohème* at Duluth Festival Opera. On concert stages, he appears as soloist in Verdi's Requiem with both Louisville Orchestra and Bel Canto Chorus in Milwaukee; and Mozart's Requiem with Music of the Baroque and with Pasadena Symphony Orchestra.

In 2008/09 Ramsay returned to Lyric Opera of Chicago as The Painter in *Lulu*, conducted by Sir Andrew Davis; sang Nemorino in *L'elisir d'amore* with both Michigan Opera Theatre and Opera Grand Rapids; Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette* with Syracuse Opera; Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and *Carmina Burana* at Berkshire Choral Festival; Lila Grier's *Songs from Spoon River* at Ravinia Festival; *Messiah* with Pacific Symphony Orchestra; and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Pasadena Symphony Orchestra. He also sang several Bach Cantatas with Bach-Collegium Stuttgart; an Opera Gala Concert and *Carmina Burana* with Springfield

Symphony Orchestra; Mozart's Requiem with Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra; and Verdi's Requiem with Berkshire Festival Chorus, conducted by Murry Sidlin, at the Terezín Memorial Commemoration in Prague.

PHILIP CUTLIP, *baritone*

In 2009/10 Philip Cutlip sings the title role in Glass' *Orphée* with Portland Opera; Zurga in *Les Pêcheurs de perles* with Minnesota Opera; Ariodate in *Senso* with Houston Grand Opera; Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* with Jacksonville Opera Theatre; and Tarquinius in *The Rape of Lucretia* with Toledo Opera. His 2008/09 season included Count in Utah Opera's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Zurga with Opera Columbus and Zoroastro in Handel's *Orlando* with Moscow State Philharmonic Society. He also performed as soloist in Haydn's *The Creation* with Phoenix Symphony; in *Messiah* with the Nashville, San Diego and Richmond symphonies; in Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with Choral Art Society of Portland (ME); in Mozart's Requiem with Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra; in Fauré's Requiem with Charlotte Symphony; in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Oregon Symphony; in Dvořák's Te Deum and excerpts from *Jacobin* with Chicago Symphony Orchestra; and in Bach cantatas with Frans Brüggen's Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. In addition, he made his Glimmerglass Opera debut as Glass' *Orphée*, and he made his return to the New York Festival of Song, to Gran Teatre del Liceu as Mandarin in *Turandot* and as Mathieu in *Andrea Chénier*, and to Seattle Opera as Marcello in *La bohème*.