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Women Anglican Composers

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In February 2018, I became the Interim Director of Music at St. John's Cathedral in Denver, a church with a healthy music program and one of the largest congregations in the Episcopal Church (USA). I had the privilege of working with Michie Akin, who joined me as Interim Associate Choirmaster. Michie had just retired from St. Matthew's Cathedral in Dallas and joined St. John's as a parishioner—a gift from God. My first instinct, and Michie's as well, was to program music that was well known, the center of the standard repertory. This would gain us some time and make the choir and congregation comfortable, but I quickly grew impatient with the steady stream of (mostly dead) white men. This was not a Civil War reenactment. I wrote my D.M.A. thesis on women composers for the organ, but I did not know the names of the women choral composers.

Screwing up my courage, I made the decision to have an Easter anthem by a woman to balance out the Vaughan Williams "Let All the World." Women were present at the first Easter and by God they would be there at St. John's, too. I googled "women composers Easter anthems" and came up with exactly one hit: Melissa Dunphy's "The Day of Resurrection." (See page 5.) With double choir, divisi, a cappella, tricky tonal shifts, and a mixed meter, there were several problems:

I did not know the piece.

I had never heard of the composer.

As an interim and a woman, I felt vulnerable to being judged by my selection.

Finally, I was not *sure* the piece was any good. Would it stand up to the core repertory or would people say, "Where did that piece come from? It doesn't belong."

Allow me to digress for a moment. Back in 1983, as a doctoral student at Stanford University, happily studying the organ music of Florence Price, Clara Schumann, Ethel Smyth and others, I sent an abstract of my project to the *Musical Quarterly*, hoping for a publication. In a hand-typed reply, I was informed that my interest in women composers was amusing, but it was not research. He, of course it was a he, the editor, suggested I study Beethoven. I have thought of that comment many times over the years and how misguided it is to assume we know all the great music.

In the February 2018 issue of the *New Yorker*, Alex Ross reported on the discovery of Florence Price manuscripts in the basement of her abandoned summer home in Illinois. Attempting to explain why this discovery is important, he addressed the concept of "The Classics":

...there's no doubt that the jargon of greatness has become musty, and more than a little toxic.... Harvard-based scholar Anne Shreffler, who wrote of instilling different values in her classes, said, "Instead of telling students it's great, you can say it's worth their while: historically fascinating, well crafted, genre bending, or just listen-to-this-amazing-moment-at-the-end. Rather than a religious icon." To reduce music history to a pageant of masters is, at bottom, lazy. We stick with the known in order to avoid the hard work of exploring the unknown.¹

Imagine a continuum of church music: on one end we have the loud, brassy, triumphant, and militaristic writing of Stanford, Parry, and the lot. The texts declare a great God of power and might. The singer stands in close proximity to all that glory, knowing the mind of God. The future is secure and pension funds robust. At the other end of the spectrum, we find mysticism, doubt, tales of birth and creation, and songs to Mary. It's not so loud, and the texts not so overtly patriarchal. Mary's *Magnificat*, the words of radical social upheaval, is a favorite.

51 ...he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted the humble and meek.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Women like Florence Price are welcome at the table. The future is a mystery, and there are no guarantees, no safety net. Life is held loosely in an open hand, and the singer clings to hope like a life raft.

Said another way, my church music continuum stretches from powerful to disenfranchised; justice for some and not for others; those in the center aisle and those occupying the furthest regions. Because women and people of color have been systematically excluded for so long, I am calling attention to this imbalance in our programming and mindset.

If we were playfully to admit to a secret recipe for Anglican music, it would be something like this:

- 1 cup Stanford (you may substitute Parry)
- 1 cup Palestrina (you may substitute Tallis or Attwood)
- ½ cup Howells (for naughty chromaticism and spice)
- ½ cup Living AAM and British composers (This is the good stuff.)
- and finally,
- Balance with
- 1 teaspoon Rutter
- 1 teaspoon Moses Hogan
- 1 teaspoon Jesus Christ the Apple Tree by Elizabeth Poston.

Our standard repertory, the high class “Tiffany box” product of the wealthy Episcopal Church, is overwhelmingly composed by white men, and because white men have overwhelmingly occupied the lucky end of that continuum, we are missing the voices of the exiled: women and people of color. I have limited my attention to works by women, *but the hunt for choral works by Black composers, equally important, requires an equally focused and dedicated search.*

I could talk at length about how the church has deliberately denied women participation in leadership, but I won’t. From St. Paul telling women to be silent to the invective poured on the Philadelphia eleven (the first women ordained as priests in the Episcopal Church USA in 1974) to the Bishop of London (1987) saying that female priests were a “virus in the bloodstream which could never be got out,”² on to the outrage showered on Richard Seal when he created a girls’ choir at Salisbury Cathedral in 1991, reversing Henry VIII’s 400-year-old ban on women singing in church. But, I’m here to talk about music. When I looked at Melissa Dunphy’s Easter anthem, all that old defensiveness rose up again. Maybe she is only amusing and not really worthy of performance? I fought down those fears and pressed on, ready to listen to what she had to say.

Back at St. John’s, Denver, Michie Akin was happy to try the Dunphy “Resurrection.” The piece took a good bit of rehearsal time and in the end, we had our staff singers take the middle section, so that it would stay in tune during the tougher modulations. When the Easter service was over, a male parishioner and wealthy donor to the music program, came up. “I loved that motet! I *know* you’ve sung it before, but I didn’t recall the name of that composer.” Thanks be to God. We had “passed.”

I found the next piece on Dr. Stephan Casurella’s website at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati. He had programmed Cecilia McDowall’s “Celestial Fire” for Pentecost. I wrote the composer to order a copy, and she emailed the whole score for me to study. The music was cool, but I panicked when I saw

the poetry by Denise Levertov. It begins “As swimmers dare to lie/face to the sky/and water bears them,” and concludes with a statement of wanting to float into the Spirit’s embrace.³ I wrote to Cecilia again and told her honestly, “I like this piece, but this non-Biblical text scares me. I’m a scared rabbit.” She responded by sending me several more pieces on a fear-factor range of tame to daring. “Are these better,” she asked kindly? Well, we sang “Celestial Fire” and our English-major Dean was ecstatic—he found the poetry gorgeous. It turns out he loves Denise Levertov’s poetry, and somehow it all worked out fine.

Now I am thinking self-importantly, let’s do more music by prominent women composers like Judith Weir. She is court composer to the Queen of England. They did her music at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, so it must be *kosher*, right? We sang, “Love Bade me Welcome,” a text I took to mean that women and all those silent voices so often sidelined by the church, are also welcome. The piece was great. It took a lot of rehearsal time, as interesting new music often does. Sometimes, that is a price worth paying.

Now we had crossed another bridge in my mind. I was basically choosing music at random and, lo and behold, it is just fine. With few exceptions, there was not a single woman composer whose name I knew. I had to decide for myself. All of us are highly trained musicians. We don’t actually need anyone to tell us if the music is any good. We make that call alone. Is it interesting and well-written? Is it trite and derivative? I can tell that, and so can you.

Repertory choices for Christmas were more numerous. We included Elizabeth Maconchy’s “There is no Rose,” Elizabeth Poston’s “Balulalow,” and Melissa Dunphy’s “O Oriens,” among all the many standard selections.

In January, I was asked to pick an audition piece for our three Director of Music finalists. In a spirit of wickedness, I chose an unpublished *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* setting by Cecilia McDowall, her “St. Alban’s Service.” (*Shown on opposite page and page 4.*) I wanted to be sure the music was new to each person. All three did an excellent job learning the piece and teaching the choir this exotic canticle of shimmering beauty.

In Lent we sang “Ave verum” by Canadian composer Stephanie Martin. We also purchased her “Now the Queen of Seasons,” an Easter anthem for choir, brass, and organ, easy enough for the choristers to sing as well. The effect was every bit as good as the Dunphy was the previous year. We tackled another difficult, but fantastic Lenten work. Susan Matthews’ choir was singing “The darkness is no darkness” by Judith Bingham, an atmospheric work of primal intensity, using the full vocal range (low Cs representing darkness and high B-flats for the light.) Written as a fantasy on Wesley’s “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace,” the two pieces are always performed together. The Bingham ends on the dominant and leads directly into the Wesley.

For Maundy Thursday, I programmed the piano prelude “Troubled Water” by Margaret Bonds. I am smitten with this piece of Jazz + Juilliard + Chicago South Side. Bonds studied with Florence Price before getting her B.A. and M.M. in piano at Northwestern University. In both women, we see the language of the Black community of Chicago’s South Side,

deftly combined with brilliant, European-style compositional technique.

I want to stress that these pieces were relatively minor additions to an otherwise standard Holy Week repertory. The liturgies stayed the same. We indulged in “transformative expansion”⁴ by simply adding a few fresh sounds. On Good Friday, we included a second piece by Bonds, the alto solo “Lord I just can’t keep from cryin’.” The other anthems were by Juan of Portugal, Pablo Casals, and Philip Stopford. The juxtaposition of standard repertory with the new voices brought depth and wonder to the worship. The unique and extraordinary voice of Margaret Bonds was, for me, the most spiritually moving music during my interim time.

After Easter, a wedding couple requested chants by Hildegard von Bingen. While some of her chants are remarkably virtuosic, many, such as “Caritas abundat in omnia,” are both beautiful and manageable. I added an octave drone on the antiphonal organ and three staff singers sang from the back gallery to the ecstatic response of the wedding party. All the Hildegard chants are available for free online.

In May, we consecrated the eleventh Bishop of Colorado, Kym Lucas. For the service, it seemed appropriate to have at least one woman composer represented. Sarah MacDonald had just written her April U.K. report in the TAO about

women composers, and mentioned that there is no Anglican chant by women. I asked Sarah if she would write one for us. She responded with an ingenious cryptogram containing Kym Lucas’s name (*see next page*).

We sang Jane Marshall’s “Become to us the Living Bread” (*see page 5*) at communion two days before she died. I wish she could have known how the beauty of that small piece has stayed with me. Since the Boston conference, Keith Weber of Grace Song, Inc., has had the piece engraved by Marvin Havard. Keith was involved with the original commission of the work and now invites us all to use the piece free of charge. Thank you, Keith!

Last and surely least, I decided to write an Anglican chant for Michie’s and my last Sunday. Why? Because we had nothing by a women in the morning service. This was no longer acceptable to me. Our rehearsal time was limited, but the chant could be learned quickly. I also felt the urge to put my own small “B.A.C.H.” into the music and the year.

In the last twelve months, we did twenty-five anthems by women. I also played some twenty-five organ pieces by women, averaging one woman composer per week. I am guessing (perhaps unfairly) that this is more music by women than any other church or cathedral in the country, maybe the whole world. That was not my original intention, but it felt

First performed by the London Festival of Contemporary Church Music Choir, conductor, Christopher Batchelor, at St Pancras Church, London, on BBC Choral Evening, 11 May, 2016.

The St Albans Service

for SATB and organ

The Book of Common Prayer, 1662 **Magnificat** CECILIA McDOWALL

Gently flowing $\text{♩} = c. 60$

SOPRANO 1 & 2 My
ALTO My
TENOR
BASS

ORGAN
Man. *p*

Solo
mp dolce *mf* *mp*

3 *poco* *mp*
soul doth mag - ni - fy the Lord: and my spi - rit hath re -
soul doth mag - ni - fy the Lord: and my spi - rit hath re -
mp dolce
The Lord:
mp dolce
The Lord:
mf *mp*

6 *mp* *mp*
joiced in God my Sa - viour.
joiced in God my Sa - viour.
doth mag - ni - fy the Lord.
doth mag - ni - fy the Lord.

9 *mf* *f*
he hath re - gard - ed: the low - li - ness of his
For he hath re - gard - ed: the low - li - ness of his
For he hath re - gard - ed: the low - li - ness of his
For he hath re - gard - ed: the low - li - ness of his
End solo
mf *f*
Ped.

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Who among us is teaching the next Marie-Claire Alain or Marilyn Mason to play the organ, women I was fortunate to have as teachers and role models? Who is teaching composition to the next Elizabeth Poston? Conducting to the next Marin Alsop? How are we preparing our girl choristers for leadership roles when there are so few role models? Is there not room for a plurality of voices, room for those who occupy the edges? In the spirit of inclusion, here are some suggestions:

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- Start a composer-in-residence program at your church.
- Trust your ability to judge a piece of music without regard to gender or name recognition of the composer.
- Understand that most women composers write secular music because they can make a living there. Orchestral composer Jennifer Higdon has, for example, written sacred music, but no one is doing it, that I know of.
- Commission music by women. Don't overlook American composers and those women who are local in your community.
- Urge publishers to recruit women composers and re-issue works of Elizabeth Poston, Mary Howe, Mabel Daniels, and the like, who were in their day tremendously prolific and successful.
- Use your social networks to share what you found.
- Program concert series that feature equal numbers of women and men conductors, organists, and performers.
- Value and encourage all your choristers equally.

Get started. Wade in the Water. You will be astonished at the treasures to be found.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Alex Ross, "The Rediscovery of Florence Price." Accessed January 29, 2018. [https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/05/the-rediscovery-of-florence-price]: 68.

² John Wolffe, *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004): 206.

³ See Denise Levertov and Paul A. Lacey, "The Avowal" in *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2003): 142.

The Day of Resurrection

Allegretto ♩ = 112+ Melina Dunphy

I

Soprano *p* The day of re-sur-rec-tion! The day of re-sur

Alto *p* The day of re-sur

Tenor *pp* No.

Bass *pp* No.

II

Soprano *p* The day of re-sur-rec-tion! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!

Alto *p* Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-

Tenor *pp* No.

Bass *pp* No.

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Become to Us

Text by: Miriam Dnury Music by: Jane Marshall

Be - come to us the liv - ing bread by which the
Be - come the new - er fail - ing wine, the spring of a -
May Chris - tians all with one cord u - nite

Chris - tian life is fed, re - newed and
joy shall in - cline our hearts to
round the sa - cred board to praise your

great - ly com - fort - ed, AL - LE
bear the cove - nant O sign, LE
ho - ly name, Lord, Lord,

LU - IA, AL - LE - LU - IA!

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Dunphy | The Day of Resurrection - Page 2

rec-tion! Al-le-lu-ia! The pass-o-ver of glad-ness!
rec-tion! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! The pass-o-ver of glad-ness!
Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine!
Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine!

The day of re-sur-rec-tion! Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine! The
ia! The day of re-sur-rec-tion! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine! The
Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine!
Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Shine! Let it shine!

Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
Shine! Let it shine! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
Shine! Let it shine! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!

pass-o-ver of God! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
pass-o-ver of God! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
Shine! Let it shine! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!
Shine! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia!

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⁴ See Matthew Owens and Graham Welch, "Choral Pedagogy and the Construction of Identity: Girls" in *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy* edited by Frank Abrahams and Paul D. Head (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 167-181.

Lyn Loewi (D.M.A., Stanford) studied organ with John Rodland, Marilyn Mason, Herbert Nanney, and Marie-Claire Alain. She holds a unanimous First Prize in organ from the French National Conservatory. From 2012 until 2019, Lyn was Assistant Organist and then Interim Director of Music at St. John's Cathedral, Denver. In addition to many years as a church musician, she has taught at the University of Minnesota, Portland State University, and Lewis and Clark College. Lyn wishes to thank Amanda Sprott-Goldson, Susan Jane Matthews, and David Loewi for their help writing this article.

