

PROGRAM NOTES

Tomás Luis de Victoria is the composer of some of the most beloved music that comes down to us from the Renaissance. Born in the Castilian town of Avila in 1548 (also the home town of the Spanish mystic St. Teresa), he was the grandson of a merchant and had a fair number of prominent relatives on both sides of his family. His education began at the local Jesuit school of San Gil (St. Giles), and in the choir of the local cathedral. In the early 1560s, after his voice broke, he was sent to the Jesuit Collegio Germanico in Rome, where his musical and ecclesiastical career began to blossom. He held several significant musical positions in Rome, among them at Santa Maria de Monserrato, at San Giacomo degli Spagnoli, at the Collegio Germanico, during which time he was ordained as a priest, and at the Seminario Romana, where he succeeded Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. During his time in Rome, Victoria joined St. Philip Neri's Congregation of the Oratory, and held a chaplaincy at San Girolamo della Carità, where Neri lived. Victoria returned to Spain in the mid-1580s, and in 1587 assumed the position of Chaplain (and chapelmaster) to the Dowager Empress María, who was living out her widowhood in the Monastery of the Discalced Carmelites of Santa Clara, in Madrid. That was such a well-connected position that the cathedrals of Saragossa and Seville could not pry him away. Victoria composed the music for the obsequies of the Empress in 1603, and published it in 1605, as his fifteenth published volume. After her death, Victoria reduced his role to that of the organist for the convent, and he died in Madrid in 1611.

Victoria's music is part of the movement away from the balanced polyphonic style of the music of the High Renaissance, and toward the drama and expressivity of the Baroque. He removed archaic gestures and techniques from his polyphony, he employed rapid-fire syllabic declamation, a technique we associate with the Italian frottola, and, almost as if he were a Venetian, he composed many double-chorus psalms and Marian antiphons. Victoria's collection, *Missae, Magnificat, Motecta, Psalmi, et alia quam plurima (Masses, Magnificats, Motets, Psalms, and many other things)*, published in 1600, includes an organ reduction of the choral parts, and in his 1605 *Requiem*, there are several examples of contrapuntally generated seventh chords. And yet, it is sometimes Victoria's earlier works that we find most endearing. We adore Victoria's music for its expressivity, especially his dark and sometimes plaintive music for Holy Week. Victoria's later works, on the other hand, may strike us as moving toward the Baroque without actually stepping into that territory.

Ecce Sacerdos Magnus is a setting of an antiphon for the feast of a Confessor Bishop. The first phrases of the antiphon are set quite literally as the subject of points of imitation. But the motet develops along somewhat different lines than the tune of the antiphon. Thus the tune is not used as a cantus firmus, but as more of a banner, an identifier, whose beginning is used as a point of departure.

Resplenduit Facies Ejus combines the texts of two antiphons for the Feast of the Transfiguration even though Victoria's music pays no attention to the tunes of the antiphons. The glint of Jesus' face and the brightness of his white garments seem to be symbolized by motives which so often reach upward, and by the canonic treatment of the top part, which allows us to hear everything twice, including the altered note on the word "Ecce": Behold!

Three of the pieces on this afternoon's concert are by predecessors of Victoria. *O Domine Jesu Christe*, in the setting of **Francisco Guerrero**, is one of a series of devotional prayers called the Seven Prayers of St. Gregory on the Passion of the Lord. Guerrero was associated his whole life long with Seville; born in 1528, he was twenty years older than Victoria. His music shows the same kinds of changes of texture as Victoria's, and yet it is at the same time a little more all of one piece, like a tunic woven without a seam. Guerrero finds simple and subtle ways of underlining "Adoro te" (I worship you) and "Deprecor te" (I pray to you), without drawing too much of our attention away from the overall flow. We notice these words, and yet we are not tempted to stop and think about why.

Victoria had something of a predilection for high voices. *Duo Seraphim Clamabant*, for the Feast of St. Michael and [all] Angels, glimmers in that high tessitura. The motet is in the ABCB form of a responsory, yet is not based upon a chant. The text makes reference to the Vision of Isaiah (Ch. 6), which was the point of origin of the Sanctus of the mass and which, via Revelations Ch. 4, did a great deal to set the general tone for the Christian liturgy. Like the two seraphim mentioned in the text, the motet tosses its musical thoughts back and forth in a kind of double-choir style, although there are only four parts. As Victoria's music gave a gentle push away from the closely woven sounds of the earlier period, his work foreshadows many of the sounds of the chordal music of later periods.

If there was ever a piece written for a particular occasion, this is it. **Cristóbal de Morales's** *Iubilate Deo Omnis Terra* was an adornment to the festivities attending the conclusion of the Truce of Nice, June 18, 1538, between the French king,

Francis I, and Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and Spanish king—with the help of Pope Paul III. The war had been a struggle that arose when Milan passed into the control of Charles V after the long and painful death of Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan, who succumbed without issue. The French invaded Italy, and Spain invaded France. An alliance between France and (of all people) the Ottomans proved decisive in limiting Spanish ambitions, and a truce became the best solution. Francis and Charles hated each other to such an extent that they would not sit in the same room, hence the need for the assistance of the Pope. All three of these worthies are mentioned in the text of the motet. Morales was born in Seville around 1500, and was a well thought of, if somewhat reserved, member of the papal choir. In our concert, this piece represents the style of polyphony which Guerrero (born 1528) and Victoria (born 1548) inherited: long-spun lines, with a motto of “Gaudeamus” (Let us rejoice), derived from the beginning of many antiphons, sung over and over in one of the tenor parts.

This five-voice *Salve Regina* shows us Victoria’s version of the styles of earlier church music. The chant is treated as a real cantus firmus, and the verses of the *Salve Regina* are set *alternatim*, going back and forth between chant and polyphony. Although there are moments when the text seems to “bend” the music a bit, for example, the treatment of “gementes et flentes” (we moan and weep), the relative abstractness of this earlier style is indeed a very great strength; the music seems ready to accept whatever we as listeners bring to it. This *Salve Regina* was published twice, in 1576 in Venice, and then in 1581 in Rome. Later publications of Victoria’s which included a 5-voice *Salve Regina* substituted a much more modern, chordal, through-composed choral piece. Perhaps that says more about the music-purchasing public and institutions of the Renaissance than it does about Victoria, but the trend is unmistakable.

While Victoria undoubtedly knew of Morales and his work, and may have known Guerrero personally, he certainly knew **Bernardino de Ribera** and his music, because Ribera was running the musical establishment at the Cathedral of Avila when Victoria was a choirboy there. Ribera’s *Regina Coeli* is a very bright and splendid piece, as befits this Marian antiphon, sung from Eastertide through Pentecost. Ribera takes the chant as the source of musical subjects for the polyphony and casts the entire antiphon all in one section rather than dividing it into two or four sections.

Super Flumina Babilonis is one of Victoria’s many double-choir pieces. Curiously, it may strike us as reflecting more the burnished gold of the church than it does the words of the psalm, at least in the conventional sense. It was written as an “occasional” piece: it was performed Oct. 17, 1573, as part of the reorganization of the Collegio Germanico. The German, scholarship students were being separated from the Italian, paying students. On that day the Germans processed from their old quarters to the new, and a commemorative service was held. The motet helped to turn separation into celebration.

O Magnum Mysterium is one of Victoria’s most popular motets, and it seems it was ever thus. It appeared in five of the fifteen volumes that were published in Victoria’s lifetime, ranging from 1572 to 1605. In our own day, it is prized for its spare melodies and sensitive harmonies with mildly chromatic passages placed here and there, and for its unique, quiet contemplation of the mysterious atmosphere surrounding the birth of the Lord. The open fifths at the beginning, the striking downward melody of “et admirabile,” the weaving line of “sacramentum,” and the triads at “O beata Virgo,” particularly suspended in time and space, are especially memorable. Victoria’s music lives today, indeed, because there is nothing else quite like it.

The *Missa O Magnum Mysterium*, curiously, seems to have remarkably little in common with the motet, which is its model. Where are the open fifths? Where is “et admirabile”? Where are the chords of “O beata virgo”? In fact, the mass doesn’t have much in common with the motet beyond a reworked incipit, and the ascending tetrachord from “in praeseptio.” The borrowings are used to construct a new piece. Creating a reminiscence of the motet seems to have been no object at all. Indeed, motets for the Office can be contemplative; the Mass is public music, and its music must be celebratory even where the text might suggest a darker tone.

We close with another of Victoria’s splendid double choir psalms. *Laudate Dominum Omnes Gentes* is a psalm used at Vespers. The text is very short, just two verses plus the Gloria. (Its most famous setting is that of Mozart, for solo soprano.) Double choir pieces seem to be inspired by the architecture, both of sound and stone, of those large and glorious Italian churches. The technique originates with Roman composers, and was taken to an entirely new level of grandiosity by the Gabriellis of Venice. As in so many ways, in between stands Victoria.

—Thomas Baker