

WESTMINSTER CHOIR CONCERTS

Cathedral Church
of St. Luke and St. Paul

May 26, 5:00pm;
June 1, 5:00pm

Conductor Joe Miller

1 hour, 15 minutes | Performed without an intermission

Program

I

“Peace Song (Beatitudes)”

Leanne Contino and Margaret Bergmark, *soprano*;
Katie Arnold, *alto*; Sam Denler, *tenor*; Alex Simon, *bass*;
Gloria Wan, *djembe*

Tim Brent (b 1975)

II

Mass for Double Choir

Kyrie
Gloria

Frank Martin (1890 – 1974)

“I Sat Down Under His Shadow”

Edward Bairstow (1874 – 1946)

Mass for Double Choir

Credo

Frank Martin

“Little Lamb”

Joel Phillips (b 1958)

Mass for Double Choir

Sanctus et Benedictus

Frank Martin

III

“Kaisa-Isa Niyan”

Nilo Alcala (b 1978)

“Fäbodpsalm från Dalarna”

Christina Han and Dyanne Lile, *soprano*;
Sophia Santiago, *flute*; John Swedberg, *violin*

Anders Öhrwall (1932 – 2012)

“Elijah Rock”

Moses Hogan (1957 – 2003)

These performances are made possible in part through funds from the Spoleto Festival USA Endowment, generously supported by BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America.

Please find song texts in an appendix beginning on page 124.

Program Notes

“Peace Song (Beatitudes)”

Tim Brent is assistant professor of popular music studies at Westminster Choir College and is in high demand as a jazz performer, arranger, and educator. In this piece, written specifically for the Westminster Choir’s 2017 – 18 season, Brent sets verses from the well-known text from the Gospel of Matthew as an optimistic celebration of humanity. “Peace Song (Beatitudes)” is a lively conversation between three groups: the mixed choir, three percussion instruments, and a solo quintet standing apart from the ensemble and singing in Latin. Noticeably influenced by jazz harmonies and rhythmic feel, Brent constructs a three-part piece with energetic, active outer sections (for “the peacemakers” and “the pure of heart”), and a more subdued middle section (for “the merciful”). The festivity culminates at the very end with the assurance that our peacemaking, our mercy, and our purity ensure humankind’s collective prosperity.

Mass for Double Choir: Kyrie and Gloria

The musical sphere in Europe in the early 20th century saw a steadily growing divide between schools of thought and multiplicity of musical style. While the majority of his contemporaries (such as Olivier Messiaen and Igor Stravinsky), committed to new, serialist compositional techniques or musical modernism, Frank Martin belonged to a school that looked, instead, to reinvent the past. Born in Geneva to a Calvinist minister, Martin would study and live all over Europe over the course of his life. At age 12, he was profoundly affected by hearing J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, a work for double-choir and double-orchestra often known as the crowning religious expression of the baroque master. The *Mass for Double Choir* was his own private statement of faith—an “expression of religious feelings that should remain secret and removed from public opinion,” according to the composer. To that end, he waited four decades to release it for publication.

The five ancient texts of the ordinary of the liturgical mass (corresponding to each of the five movements of Martin’s work, though the choir will not perform the final *Agnus Dei*) serve as the ideal vehicle for Martin’s musical voice. Setting these words has been a rite of passage of sorts for composers since the Renaissance. In his own unique approach, Martin’s setting marries past and present. It is at once indebted to the aesthetics of Gregorian chant, French impressionism, and his own rhythmic and melodic flair that seems to resist chronology. This work therefore belongs not to a single time period but to *time*. The listener should not be surprised to feel lost between the centuries.

The Kyrie opens with individual lines evoking the sound of chant. They weave throughout the choir, with more and more voices joining for each musical phrase. Eventually, the full choir begins an almost dance-like section with dotted rhythms, but the spirit of chant will never be far away.

Martin’s second movement is atypical of Gloria settings. The conventional approach to these words is a triumphant or jubilant treatment. Martin instead searches more inwardly and characterizes each musical phrase by the sound and meaning of the words. The result is a noticeable adherence to the natural rhythms of speech and a dynamic sound-palette. After a pleasant, thankful opening, the middle section of this movement centers around three earthly, elongated iterations of “Domine Deus” (“Lord God”). These act as “pillars” upon which Martin places the piety of Jesus Christ and our pleas to him for mercy. The conclusion of the movement features the fluttering sounds of the composer’s representation of the Holy Ghost dashing throughout the choir.

“I Sat Down Under His Shadow”

The English organist and composer Edward Bairstow is best remembered for his compositions written to be used in the liturgy of the Anglican Church. The text for “I Sat Down Under His Shadow” comes from the Song of Solomon. These words are spoken by a woman about her lover, but over the centuries, Christian tradition has read this as allegory for God’s love for the church. Like much of Bairstow’s output, “I Sat Down Under His Shadow” is modal—it is neither major nor minor. This harmonic world reflects the mystery and complexity of the relationship between heaven and earth.

Mass for Double Choir: Credo

The Credo is Martin’s bold, unapologetic declaration of faith. His approach to text-setting is much the same as that of the Gloria, with rhythms relating closely to natural speech and nuanced musical character shaped to the text. These musical traits reveal much about the composer’s spiritual relationship with these words: His wholehearted praise of God is apparent at “God of God, light of light, true God of true God;” he regards the moment of Jesus’s incarnation with utmost holiness; he jumps for joy at the resurrection; and he once more feels the Holy Ghost dancing within him toward the end of the movement. The music comes barreling to a vibrant end with the hope of resurrection and eternal life.

“Little Lamb”

Joel Phillips is professor of composition and music theory at Westminster Choir College, where he has taught since 1985. Phillips begins and ends his setting of the classic poem by William Blake in the purity of C major, but imbues the two stanzas with their own harmonic character. The first, concerning the lamb, remains tender and hushed. The second then gains musical majesty to depict Christ. These words and this music teach us to remember our shared humility.

Mass for Double Choir: Sanctus et Benedictus

In the Sanctus et Benedictus of his *Mass*, Martin takes full advantage of his double-choir scoring. At virtually every moment, the two groups act as discrete entities. The Sanctus begins with undulating iterations of “Santus, sanctus, sanctus” (“Holy, holy, holy”), steadily growing in harmonic intensity, while soaring quasi-chant melodies from the sopranos and altos unfold above. Then, rhythmic shouts of praise echo throughout the choir celebrating God’s glory in heaven and on earth. The Benedictus is Martin’s exercise in rhythmic complexity. He uses this compositional aspect to build more and more musical energy, which peaks with the final cadence and one last exclamation of “Hosanna!”

“Kaisa-Isa Niyan”

Active as a composer, arranger, and vocalist, Nilo Alcala is a rising star in the choral sphere. This piece of music sets a popular children’s counting chant from Maguindanao in the southern Philippines. One might liken it to “One, two, buckle my shoe” in English. With creative, playful vocal writing, Alcala uses the human voice to imitate the Kulintang, a percussion instrument made of rows of metal gongs and played with bamboo sticks. “Kaisa-Isa Niyan” was written for the Philippine Madrigal Singers, a legendary vocal ensemble which frequently gives international tours and exposes Western ears to music from Philippine culture.

“Fäbodpsalm från Dalarna”

Anders Öhrwall was one of Sweden’s most celebrated conductors and composers, having worked extensively with such groups as the Swedish Radio Choir and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Chorus, in addition to founding several of his own groups. “Fäbodpsalm från Dalarna” (folk song from Dalarna—a Swedish province) sets a traditional wordless melody to original harmonies. This music conjures a world that is distant in both time and space. Its interpretation is left completely open and offers the listener a chance to reflect, meditate, and escape.

– Andrew Leslie Cooper

Artists



JOE MILLER (conductor) is the director of choral activities for Spoleto Festival USA and conductor of two of America’s most renowned choral ensembles: the Westminster Choir and the Westminster Symphonic Choir. He is also director of choral activities at Westminster Choir College of Rider University and director of The Philadelphia Orchestra’s

Philadelphia Symphonic Choir. Performances by the Westminster Choir and Joe Miller at Spoleto Festival USA have earned critical praise. *The New York Times* described their 2014 performance of John Adams’s *El Niño* as “superb” and wrote, “Meticulously prepared ... the chorus was remarkable for its precision, unanimity and power.” *The Post and Courier* wrote about their 2015 performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, “This was an evening of near-flawless execution and many moments of ravishing beauty and power. It will go down as a highlight (maybe even THE highlight) of this year’s festival.” As conductor of the Westminster Symphonic Choir, Miller has collaborated with some of the world’s leading orchestras and conductors, earning him critical praise. *The New York Times* wrote about Symphonic Choir’s performance of Mahler’s Symphony no. 2 with the Cleveland Orchestra, “Joe Miller’s Westminster Symphonic Choir was subtle when asked and powerful when turned loose.” Recent seasons have included performances with the Philharmoniker Berliner and Sir Simon Rattle; The Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin; and the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela and Gustavo Dudamel. Miller is also founder and conductor of the Westminster Summer Choral Festival Chamber Choir, a program that offers professional-level choral and vocal artists the opportunity to explore challenging works for one week each summer on the Westminster campus in Princeton.

WESTMINSTER CHOIR is composed of students at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, and has been setting the standard for choral excellence for 98 years. It has been the chorus in residence for Spoleto Festival USA since 1977, performing both in concert and as the opera chorus. The ensemble’s 2017 – 18 season has included performing at the World Symposium on Choral Music in Barcelona, a concert tour of the Midwest, and performances and broadcasts at its home in Princeton. It also made its fourth recording with Joe Miller, Frank Martin’s *Mass for Double Choir*, which will be released in September. The choir’s debut recording with Maestro Miller, *Flower of Beauty*, received four stars from *Choir & Organ* and earned critical praise from *American Record Guide*, which hailed the Westminster Choir as “the gold standard for academic choirs in America.” Praised by *The New York Times* for its “full-bodied, incisive singing,” the Westminster Choir also forms the core of the Westminster Symphonic Choir, which has performed and recorded with the leading conductors and orchestras of our time.