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### Feature Article by William Kempster

#### Interview with Samuel Adler on the New Recording of His Choral Music from *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*

The renowned 94-year-old Samuel Adler speaks about a new recording of a number of his choral works, as well as reflecting on a life spent in music.

*Sam, firstly congratulations on the new CD of your choral music: yet another landmark in a long and storied career! How did the idea for this disc come about?*

After a very fine recording of some of my earlier choral pieces by *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*—under the direction of Elizabeth Patterson [*A Prophecy of Peace*, released in 2004]—and subsequent recordings of quite a few of my Psalm settings by the same choir, I sent some of my recent works, as well as a number of unrecorded shorter choral pieces, to Richard Pugsley, the new conductor of the group, and asked him if he would be interested in doing a second full CD of my music. He was very excited by the idea, especially since there was no recording of *To Speak to Our Time*, and thought this plus other recent pieces would make for an exciting recording project.

*You have written an enormous amount of music, much of which has been recorded. As far as I can find, however, along with the other *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* recording just mentioned, this is only the second disc entirely devoted to your choral music. Can you briefly give us some idea of how you yourself regard the importance of your choral writing across your collected works as a whole?*

I come from a musical family. My father was a cantor, a fine pianist, and also an excellent composer, mostly of Jewish liturgical music, but also quite a few large-scale oratorios. My mother was a good singer, and also could play the piano. So, my sister and I were exposed to music from a very early age, especially to the classics. When I was still a boy I sang in children's choirs, and at age 13 conducted my father's synagogue choir in Worcester, MA. I also played the violin in orchestras from high school on.

My love of choral music, however, was always enduring, and I conducted choirs whenever the opportunity arose. After my U.S. Army Service, I became music director at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas, and founded a large choir there. I also conducted at the Dallas Lyric Theater, the opera company that preceded the Dallas Opera. As the music director of the temple, I wrote a great deal of liturgical music, as well as for the community in general, which had so many wonderful church choirs. I was always very ecumenical and loved to set sacred texts from both the Old and New Testaments. After leaving Dallas for the Eastman School, where I taught for 30 years, and later at the Julliard School for another 20 years, I left choral conducting, but never the writing of choral music, both sacred and secular, which remained my first love. The final work commissioned by Temple Emanu-El, the University of North Texas (where I was teaching), and the Dallas Symphony, was my first oratorio, *The Binding*. This I conducted as my "swan song" before moving to Rochester, NY.

*It seems to me that the works selected for this disc span a large portion of your career—more than 60 years—but the notes accompanying the recording don't always set out exactly when each piece was written. Can you give us a chronology of these pieces so that our readers might better, perhaps, follow your development as a choral composer?*

The works on this CD do indeed span more than 60 years. The very first piece on the disc is actually the oldest, dating back to 1957. I was asked to write a hymn for the city-wide Thanksgiving celebration in Dallas, which involved 1,000 members from church and synagogue choirs of all denominations. I decided to use the Praise to the Living God hymn, which uses the “Leoni” tune attributed to an 18th-century London cantor.

On the new recording this is followed by *Let Us Rejoice*, which was dedicated to my youngest daughter, Naomi, upon her graduation from Mt. Holyoke College. This biblical verse is the motto of the College: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the key corner stone.” The other works on the new recording were all written this century, beginning with *My Beloved is Mine*, continuing on to the *Choral Trilogy*, and then, of course, *To Speak to Our Time*. Finally, the arrangement of *Amazing Grace* was a commission from publisher Carl Fischer, who wanted me to set this beautiful melody in a harmonization which would sound like Aaron Copland. Since I had studied with this great American composer, I tried my best to make it sound as close to his harmonic language as I could!

*Your life has just about spanned the last century now, and I would find it difficult to believe there would be anyone better placed to evaluate the trends in Western so-called “classical” music during the vast majority of this period. We could talk about dodecaphony and its influence on an entire generation of composers; the comparative disdain with which some treated the neo-Romantics or more conservative tonal composers of the central part of the century; the influence of Americans such as Carter and Cage; the rise of Minimalism; the return to tonality many composers embraced towards the end of the 20th century; the eclectic nature of composition today. What do you think has proven to be lasting, and what not so?*

The 20th century is probably the first to have no one style triumph over any other. It started with the colossus of Wagner, whose influence dominated much of the music of the first years of the century, and which (perhaps inevitably) led to Arnold Schoenberg’s 12-tone concept and serial music. One reaction to this was the Neoclassical music many composers produced, especially after the First World War. Because of the great migration of composers from Hitler’s Germany these two musics then came to America, and students took up various versions depending on the person with whom they studied. There was also an “American School” of composition, made up predominantly of the men and women who had studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris during the 1920s. Most important among these were Aaron Copland, Walter Piston, and Roy Harris, who all taught at major American universities and music festivals, thereby influencing many students.

When I was one of a class of 15 graduate students studying at Harvard with Walter Piston and Paul Hindemith, there was actually only one student interested in writing serial music. That changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when all of us became interested in more non-tonal music, and felt the influence of people like John Cage and Elliott Carter. I was certainly among those composers who wrote a kind of serial music throughout that period and into the 1980s.

After that, however, I rebelled and wrote the music I really wanted to write. I did not entirely abandon the new music, but tried to make it more my own by not denying tonality completely, relying more on counterpoint to create my harmonic language. Melody was always very important to me, and this probably was derived from my love of vocal music. I feel that today popular music—with its emphasis on simplicity—has had too much influence on the music written in the “classical” sphere, and I am not quite sure what young composers will write in the future. That said, I do have confidence that we have in our country some very impressive young composers who are forging a musical language of their own.

*Without in any way detracting from the other music on this disc, I feel that the multi-movement *To Speak to Our Time* is the most important piece on this new recording. I know this was commissioned by the Dresden Chamber*

*Choir for the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, but has Gloriæ Dei Cantores—or any other U.S. choir for that matter—actually performed this in the United States? I assume this new recording is the first. Can you perhaps speak to your approach to tonality (or otherwise) in this work, and how the subject matter might have affected your choices in that regard?*

*To Speak to Our Time* was commissioned by the Dresden Chamber Choir to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, which is usually referred to as the beginning of the Holocaust. This meant a great deal to me since I actually lived through this event as a 10-year-old boy still in Germany. The Dresden group, under its excellent conductor Hans-Christoph Rademann, did a fabulous job at the premiere, which took place at the Frauenkirche in Dresden, a reconstructed cathedral which was destroyed during the fire-bombing of the city during World War II. It had its American premiere in New York City with the NY Virtuosi conducted by Herold Rosenbaum, just before the pandemic. Gloriæ Dei Cantores has not performed it in concert, but the recording for me could not be better. The two violins as well as the chorus are outstanding, and Richard's interpretation is exactly how I imagined the work to sound.

I chose the texts for *To Speak to Our Time* for several reasons. First of all, I wanted to feature the languages of all three major Western religions, with the hope of advocating for the unity so necessary in our still-divided world. These are prefaced by my setting of a very powerful poem by the Nobel-Prize winning German poet Nellie Sachs. This poem speaks of the reality of the refugee crisis which existed during and right after World War II, with millions of displaced people knocking on the doors of the world and finding them closed. How relevant this still seems now, unfortunately, when we again are facing the same horrible situation in Ukraine! Of the three other movements of *To Speak to Our Time*, two take Biblical texts, and the last presents a paraphrase of Isaiah 60:15–20 by the Anglican poet William Cowper.

As far as the musical language I have adopted in *To Speak to Our Time* is concerned, I have tried to set it by allowing for the meaning of the words themselves to guide the consonance or dissonance of the music. In order to highlight my love of Gregorian Chant, the Psalm 111 setting uses an actual chant as its basis. I should also add that the Preludes and Interludes were devised to set the mood for each of their following choral movements. The Prelude gives the feeling of unease and quite a bit of horror—as reflected in Sachs's poem—while the other Interludes foreshadow the mood of the texts to follow.

I believe this work amply demonstrates an approach to which I have subscribed in my later compositions of allowing my musical language to become completely at ease with the handling of harmony and counterpoint.

*It has been a real delight to get your background thoughts on not only this recording, Sam, but a range of other things as well. Is there anything else you'd like to mention we have not addressed?*

I would just like to add that I am more than delighted with the repertoire that was chosen for this recording, and for the performances set down here. I hope that this disc will be an enjoyable and thought-provoking musical experience for many listeners.

ADLER A Hymn of Praise.<sup>2</sup>, 5 Let Us Rejoice. My Beloved is Mine. Choral Trilogy.<sup>4</sup> Psalm 23.<sup>5</sup> To Speak to Our Time.<sup>1</sup>, 3 How Sweet the Sound<sup>5</sup> • Richard K. Pugsley, cond; 1Diana Shannon (sop); 2Joshua Kanaga (ten); 3Julianne Lee, 3Lucia Linn (vn); 4Clara Gerdes, 5SharonRose Pfeiffer (org); Gloriæ Dei Cantores • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 66 (SACD: 49:10 Text and Translation) Interview with Samuel Adler on the New Recording of His Choral Music from Gloriæ Dei Cantores