




PÄRT *Peace upon You, Jerusalem*¹. *L'abbé Agathon*². *Salve Regina*³. *Magnificat*⁴. *Nunc dimittis*⁵. *Stabat Mater* • Richard K. Pugsley, cond; ^{1,2,4}Rachel McKendree, ⁵Amanda Ortolani (s); ²Alexander Pugsley (bar); ³James E. Jordan (org); *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* • GLORIÆ DEI CANTORES 063 (SACD: 69:02 )

Sung Prayer: *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* Records Arvo Pärt

INTERVIEW WITH CONDUCTOR: RICHARD K. PUGSLEY

Many readers will know *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*—Singers to the Glory of God—from the large catalog of fine choral recordings they have released over the years, including many programs of liturgical chant. Richard K. Pugsley is their Music Director, the second in that position during the choir's 38-year history, and a position that he has held now for over 15 years. He also produces the choir's recordings. We first met—in the email sense of the word—in 2017 in conjunction with the release of *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*' acclaimed recording of the Rachmaninoff *All-Night Vigil*. The resulting feature article appears in issue 40:6 (July/Aug 2017) of *Fanfare*. For those new to the chorus and their work, I began with some catch-up questions:

It has been almost exactly three years since we last “spoke” via email. I know you and Gloriæ Dei Cantores have been very busy since then, not least with the Vaughan Williams production we discussed briefly at the end of the last interview. But before we focus on this new disc, would you mind telling those who have not read our previous Fanfare interview a bit about Gloriæ Dei Cantores and about the community of which you are a part?

Yes, it has been a bit of time since we last “spoke.” Much has transpired in the world since our last conversation.

Gloriæ Dei Cantores is a choir based in Massachusetts at the Church of the Transfiguration on Cape Cod. It consists of members of a vowed monastic community: the Community of Jesus. The community is based on, and observant of, the traditional Benedictine rule of life. It began during the Evangelical period of the late 1960s and early 1970s and found itself evolving into a Benedictine community as it searched about for what its calling truly was, and how it seemed to express itself.

What exactly is a “vowed monastic community?” I suspect many will imagine this as cloistered monks in an abbey, singing Gregorian chant. Clearly there is much more to it than that.

Yes, Ron, I imagine most would see a vowed monastic community in the more traditional sense: the European model of cloistered/shuttered monks or nuns praying and singing Gregorian chant, or, if not cloistered, possibly serving their communities in some way.

There are several expressions of monastic community. In general, it is a life choice: to take on religious vows and commit to serving God in a very focused way. The Community of Jesus,

with which *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* is associated, consists of three classifications of people: brothers (monks), sisters (nuns), and lay persons. The lay community is made up of both single and married members, some with families.

The vowed members observe at least two of the daily offices (Lauds and Vespers) each day of the year. In addition, the sisters and brothers of the community observe mid-day and compline. So, although not cloistered, we do sing Gregorian chant—a lot of it! In part, this allows a natural focus on the word. Twice every day we are praying, in Latin, the psalms, songs, antiphons, and prayers of our monastic ancestors: sung prayer.

Could you explain how your choir grew from one that supported its worship services to a performing group of international stature?

A life given and dedicated to God brings a desire to bless his heart. The choir grew out of this longing. By blessing his heart, one progresses naturally to improve each day—to try to bring more to the offering—causing an inherent progression to the professional level. The professional level was not a goal, simply a result.

Touring was also a natural progression of sharing spirit to spirit, nation to nation. We did not go out to “show off” our capabilities. As we went to each nation, we tried to learn about its history, culture, and some of their music, including language, pronunciation, etc. We always went with at least one piece of its music for our concerts, to sing as closely to the way that people would sing it as we could manage. This acknowledged their heritage and opened the gate for us to share what had developed in our country. This brought us all together as we highlighted each country’s prayers and its unique form or expression.

So, *Gloriæ Dei Cantores* sings music from the Gregorian chant period to the present, from all over the world, but with that particular focus on choral music as sung prayer.

I am intrigued by the concept of “sung prayer.” How is this accomplished in rehearsal?

Since we approach our musical expression as a prayer or conversation with the Almighty—an interior spiritual wrestling or a corporate expression toward God—we then by necessity must take time to internalize the words themselves, their meaning and their particular expression. Then we must explore how these texts intersect with our personal lives. If we don’t find a connection to these prayers for ourselves, when we sing them, they read falsely.

Once we have taken time to reflect, ponder, and find personalized meaning in the text, then and only then can we look at the composer’s rendition. How did the composer set the text? What were his possible intentions? What characteristics did the composer desire to bring out? What was his or her vision of the expression of the text? Why did he or she choose to ascend on the word “prayers”? Does this have some deeper meaning, like prayers ascending to heaven? What if the notes descend? Is that God’s answer? What if they stay the same? Is that a mantra that isn’t looking for an answer, simply a recitation? Or...?

Of course, if we waited until we had all the answers, we would probably only sing a couple of pieces a year. So, it is a continual process of searching and remaining open to whatever we feel the Holy Spirit might enlighten us to understand.

Is this proposed by you as director, or is it arrived at as a group?

So, if everyone has their own understanding, how can it function together? I attempt to not dictate my understanding or interpretation, as I am not the performer at that time but the guide, helping the singers to work towards a common goal. When (not if) there is a difference of opinion amongst the choral members, I try to hear them out and then ask questions or share thoughts that might help them come to a unified conclusion. Those questions or thoughts might include making sure they are looking at the text in its context, or some other possible understanding. It makes for some animated discussions, but an educated singer is a thoughtful singer!

We *are* praying, so the prayer has to come from our heart and experience, however mature or immature that experience may be. It requires us to do the work to make sure the text is the primary element. The melody, harmony, tempi, rhythm, etc. inform but ultimately must serve the text. And the group determines the meaning, with some occasional input from the director, if the text seems incongruous or when there is dissent.

It seems like a tremendous amount of work you must do, and a great deal of singing.

Yes, the choir members do have a great deal of work. But the discipline of bringing the depth of personal worship and joining it to the composer's shortens preparation time. Each member is strongly encouraged to do the prayed text, theory, harmonic analysis, historical study, and research of the composer's background and experience, etc. beforehand. As a result, when a member comes to the rehearsal of a work, the two are intimately acquainted. We approach choral rehearsals as a time to work on ensemble, not individual, performance issues.

Combine this with our long tenure of membership, and one can spend a short time fixing only the issues presented in service music and be more attentive to the larger works being prepared. For younger or less experienced members, there is quite the learning curve. Initially, one must be willing to put in a great deal of work to build up the chops.

So, I believe this the first new recording by Gloriæ Dei Cantores since the wonderful Rachmaninoff All-Night Vigil?

Yes, this is the first recording since the Rachmaninoff.

Can you catch us up a bit on what projects you have been working these past three years?

Shortly after the last recording, we began a major focus on a staging of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. This was in support of a series of presentations and papers from the Mount Tabor Ecumenical Centre for Art and Spirituality based in Barga, Italy. The initial papers presentation was in Florence and the final presentation was here in the U.S.

What is the Mount Tabor Ecumenical Centre for Art and Spirituality?

Mt. Tabor Ecumenical Centre for Art and Spirituality grew out a desire to provide a voice for artists, musicians, and actors to bring understanding to present day sacred expressions. The center, based in Barga Italy, was founded [Ed.: by the Community of Jesus] to further this goal. Many conferences, concerts, and presentations have occurred through the center, including papers and seminars to help further the understanding of what is being expressed through the media of music, art, and acting. Multiple faith expressions are encouraged, and Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, etc. are often participants. This provides a great path for unity through discussion and understanding.

And it was in this context that you presented the staged performances: the second, I believe, undertaken by the choir and community?

Yes, the performance of Vaughan Williams's *The Pilgrim's Progress* was by the choir, the community members, and some friends of ours from over the years.

This event provided the choral members an excellent opportunity to work on making their words into living texts. The staging and acting re-focused us on the text and its meaning by way of physical expression. It also allowed a deeper level of vocal expression. Through the use of onset, articulation, character, color, legato/non-legato, etc., one can ask the question, "What tools should I use to bring this particular text or sub-text to life?" Certainly "House Beautiful" [Ed.: an idyllic scene from Vaughan Williams's opera] will be a contrast to "Vanity Fair" [Ed.: a scene where Pilgrim confronts the sinners and is brought to trial]. The opera gave us a great opportunity to become more versatile in the use of these different brushes and techniques in our toolboxes.

How was this done?

Whenever we delve into a large work such as Vaughan Williams's setting of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we want the performers to be empowered to become their characters: not only in the vocal, but in the acting discipline. In addition to the work on text, as mentioned before, we are always searching for what the composer said with his other tools—melody, harmony, theme, tempo, instrumentation, orchestration, range etc.—to understand, to the best of our ability, what his expressive intent was; what is the truest form of his creation.

So, we gave individuals assignments about their character's background and about what caused them, on that particular day, to come to House Beautiful or Vanity Fair. In addition, they were challenged to look at what themes might support their character's movement, presence, posture, or evocative energy. This brings a great intensity to the floor and gives the director something with which to truly sculpt the scene.

In the last interview you also mentioned your then recent work with the music of Arvo Pärt and Ēriks Ešēvalds, the former of which has borne fruit in this latest release.

I find that working with music that is new or fresh to us encourages the desired exercise, whereas a more familiar work tends to draw us to the "muscle memory" of bad or old habits and outlooks. So, I turned to some composers who were somewhat new for us—Arvo Pärt, Pēteris Vasks and Ērik Ešēvalds—to accomplish this goal.

I find their music particularly inspired. It seems that so often the suffering of a nation or person offers the opportunity for a deep and fresh expression of faith. In our own time, it could be the suffering from world wars, or a global pandemic, or the sufferings of one person or culture at the hands of another. Somehow these pains bring about some of the most deep and inspirational music: Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, the siege of Leningrad; or Copland and Bernstein, the Jewish holocaust; or Hovhanness, the Armenian genocide. For the Latvian and Estonian composers you named, it was the attempted extermination of their culture by the Communist Russian occupiers of the Cold War.

Arvo Pärt, an Estonian, began writing serial music early in his career, possibly as a protest of that occupation, but he found that the music of earlier times, especially medieval and Renaissance music, and music of faith inspired him much more. He began writing deeply religious works despite the effective banning of his music for his religious views. He eventually was allowed to leave Estonia in 1980, and it was in the West that he became free to write what he wished, and it is where his music first became well known. How did you first come to Pärt's music, and how long have you been singing it?

I think this was in 2014. We were preparing for the Advent season, so the birth of Christ was very much on our minds when I came across his *Magnificat*. I was so moved. We started in shortly afterward and closed our Advent Lessons and Carols service with his setting. It proved an appropriate way to bring ourselves into an active participation in Mary's preparation and was a reminder of our own calling as we left to return to our daily lives.

Have you had an opportunity to meet and work with Pärt?

Unfortunately, we have not been able to make something work to meet and work with him. It is a very strong desire of ours. What a rare opportunity that would be! And to be able to hear from the composer directly adds a deeper level of understanding. Maybe someday....

I am listening again to L'abbé Agathon, the most recent of the works on this disc. It is unlike any other work by Pärt that I have heard: almost a dramatic scena. Like Vaughan Williams's opera it is a reflection on a spiritual journey, full of tests for the soul that is striving to be faithful. In fact, it is, in a way, a tableau drama like A Pilgrim's Progress. Did your soloists and choir develop the characters and choral response in that sense? I am struck by how engaged with telling the story they are.

Yes! There is always a cumulative effect. In learning, there are several ways to get information into the mind and body: visual, aural, tactile, spoken, etc. The more of these paths that are employed, the deeper the engagement for the performer, and therefore the stronger the story or piece is. As a group and individually, they all created back stories similar to their *Pilgrim* process. Some of the exercises were quite moving. Many of them were theater-based: creating scenes, moving, dancing while speaking, and the like. The result was a strong and present image for the performer, which then has a better possibility of translating to the listener. This also helped the prayer aspect of the singing, bringing honesty and generosity, the foundation of engaged storytelling.

Have you performed this as a chancel drama? I would think it would be quite effective.

No, we have not yet performed it as a chancel drama but that is an interesting idea! I can see it now, especially with our church's processional path. The effect could be quite winning.

As I think about it, all the works here—the two earlier works from the 1980s and the ones from the first decade of the new century—trace the composer's spiritual journey as well. He composes these works as prayers, doesn't he, not performance pieces? And he uses, for most of them you have recorded, the great liturgical texts of the Church. That must, in addition to their incredible, often serene beauty, make them almost irresistible to a choir dedicated to sung prayer.

This is another great statement/question. Yes, in some ways they do trace his journey. He definitely composes pieces as prayers, not performances. They seem to come from his heart. One of my favorite stories that I remember hearing of him is the one about him sitting—contemplating—disappointed with a piece he was working on. A young girl happened by and asked how he was doing. He replied that he was working on this problem, and her response was quite profound. Her answer was, “Have you given thanks for this failure yet?” Out of the mouths of babes!

To me, Pärt's compositional process seems to involve a process similar to iconography in the Orthodox faith. There is a time of prayer and a good deal of inner spiritual work that is brought to bear, all while sticking to a disciplined compositional process.

And in many of Pärt's works, that process uses a stylized method—which he calls tintinnabuli—which is sort of a musical equivalent of the visually engaging icon.

Yes, and by the nature of the process, this seems to encourage an individual to become a participant in the action rather than an observer. This, I think, is the effect many find so moving in his music. They are invited to become a participant in the story or action of the text. So yes, a prayer, but an active, engaging prayer.

I have stopped to listen to your recording of that first sublime climax in the Stabat Mater. It would be easy to think, given the serenity of much of the music and the seeming ease with which Gloriae Dei Cantores performs it, that this is relatively simple music to perform. But in actuality, it offers significant technical challenges, doesn't it?

The range, dynamic, control, and word-accent challenges are many in these works. Again, I would commend the work of the singers. The technical work to prepare for these is arduous. But as most singers know, once achieved, the feeling of satisfaction is great.

In keeping with the idea of sung prayer, the word-accent traps are probably my biggest challenge. Either through range leaps or rhythmic pulse, a word will be indirectly accented on the wrong syllable. For instance—I believe it is in the 13th verse of the *Stabat Mater*—the tenors have a word where the weak accent is on an upper note to which they leap. The support to sing this note causes one to want to accent the pitch, not consciously, but quite by accident: a simple result of the work. So, attention to these smaller details is required to lessen these traps that undermine the work of the sung prayer.

Another real difficulty, especially in these works for the *soprani* and *tenori* voices, is the control of quiet, fully present voices in the upper regions of the range. Maintaining the room in the vocal resonance spaces for the full voice, yet maintaining the quiet dynamic, is a great challenge, but ethereal when achieved.

There are indeed some absolutely lovely high, soft passages in these performances, and in general, the warmth and intensity of the singing is quite impressive at all volume levels. It is quite different than the established sound for this composer's music, which is a cooler, ultra-refined choral sound often associated with some British professional choruses. That is a ravishing sound, and I love those recordings by Estonian and British choirs, but your chorus sounds more like an ensemble of worshipers, which adds a more human dimension to the sung prayers. These worshipers have, of course, superb voices and technique. In fact, one might suspect that there are more who could be soloists than appear in that role here. Is that something you work to develop, or are you more intent on maintaining a warm, blended choral sound?

There is a long-running debate among choral and soloist folk involving a division between solo voice and choral voice. I would suggest a good solo voice is not incapable of choral singing. In fact, I would suggest a good choral voice must be working towards a good and full solo voice. It is like saying a good artist can only paint one way. That doesn't make them good, it makes them limited. One can see this in the work of the professional baritone Thomas Hampson, who by all accounts, sings opera, art song, and Broadway, all in equally appropriate style: oils as well as watercolors.

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I had a few more questions to ask about the technical challenges of singing the music of Arvo Pärt, about the process for the choosing of pieces for the program, and about the special version of the *Stabat Mater* recorded here: neither the one for a trio of singers and trio of strings, nor the orchestral version with chorus, but one with an octet of strings in three parts and chorus. Schedule issues and looming deadlines made that impossible.

I did have an opportunity to hear from Kirsti Pfeiffer, *Gloriæ Dei Cantores*' publicist and a member of the chorus, as to what the future holds for the ensemble. As have many religious organizations, the Community of Jesus has, at this writing, been placed in shutdown, with many services and other events cancelled or postponed. A tour of the United Kingdom and Italy, scheduled for May of this year, has had to be rescheduled to 2021.

Beyond that, Pfeiffer said, "none of us really know what is coming down the pike, as exhibited by the Covid-19 pandemic." When the world has settled into a new normality that allows larger assemblages and renewed choral activities, she stated that "in addition to our normal service schedule, I know Maestro Pugsley has mentioned continuing to work on the music of Ēriks Ešņvalds and Pēteris Vasks," the two others, in addition to Pärt, that Pugsley has found especially inspiring among contemporary composers. Finally, regarding future recordings: "There are also discussions in the works about doing another recording of Samuel Adler's music, which would feature a work written in commemoration of Kristallnacht." This would join a CD of his choral music recorded 16 years ago by Pugsley's predecessor, Elizabeth C. Patterson, and recently reissued. And I will not give up my hope that a recording of *A Pilgrim's Progress* may yet appear from this source. **Ronald Grames**