Advance Program Notes
Blackburg Master Chorale
*Messiah*
Sunday, December 15, 2019, 4 PM

These Advance Program Notes are provided online for our patrons who like to read about performances ahead of time. Printed programs will be provided to patrons at the performances. Programs are subject to change.

Blackburg Master Chorale
Handel's *Messiah*

Meredith Bowen, *guest conductor*

Melissa Heath, *soprano*
Charles Humphries, *countertenor*
Brian Thorsett, *tenor*
David Newman, *baritone*
Program Notes

Good evening and welcome to the 2019 edition of Blacksburg Master Chorale’s performance of Handel’s Messiah. I’m thrilled to be invited to conduct this ensemble and orchestra in Dwight’s absence. It has been an honor to work with these fine folks over the last seven weeks. I’m a huge Baroque choral nerd, and this experience has been very rewarding.

Let’s take a journey back to the days when Louis XIV moved to Versailles, the city of Philadelphia was founded by William Penn, Isaac Newton was writing about gravity, and James Stuart was crowned King James II. This is the age in which our composer is born. George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) was a German composer who wrote Italian opera in England. Handel was born in Halle, Germany, a small city north of Leipzig where he studied music theory, organ, harpsichord, and violin with Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow. He was appointed organist at a Calvinist Cathedral in Halle when he was 17. He took a grand tour of Italy when he was 21, a 17th- and 18th-century tradition for upper-class young, wealthy European men of rank. While he was on his grand tour, Handel was introduced to the popular Italian forms of music at that time, which included opera, cantata, and concerto, and he began writing Italian operas for important venues and arts patrons. He then visited London in 1710, learning the music of Henry Purcell and securing contacts for future endeavors. His first English appointment was to the future Duke of Chandos when he was 30 years old, and his opera career peaked seven years later.

The Italian Baroque oratorio was simply an opera on a sacred subject presented in concert instead of dramatically acted on the stage. It was decreed by the Pope that opera was forbidden during Lent in Italy; subsequently, the oratorio emerged as a genre. Handel wrote two oratorios when he was in Italy and began writing them in England after 1738 when his opera season was cancelled because of a lack of subscribers. He wrote 22 oratorios in all, most of them composed within a month—Messiah was composed in 24 days. He composed Messiah and Samson in 1741 and continued to write two oratorios per year for six years. Even though the oratorios are sacred in nature, they should not be regarded as church music. They are intended for the concert hall. Indeed, he borrowed his own music for four secular Italian duets and turned them into four choruses in Messiah.

Choral scholar Dennis Shrock writes:

“For unto us a child is born and All we like sheep were taken from the two allegro portions of the cantata for two sopranos No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi; His yoke is easy and And he shall purify were taken from the cantata Quel fior che all’ alba ride. The choruses and their original counterparts are strikingly similar. For instance, the first 30 measures of For unto us and No, di voi differ only slightly in rhythm. However, differences between the secular and sacred texts could not be more pronounced. ‘For unto us a child is born’ replaces the original text ‘No, di voi non vo’ fidarmi,’ which translates as ‘No, I do not want to trust you,’ a passage about blind love and cruel beauty.”

In 1741, Handel received an invitation to present benefit concerts in Dublin that would include new and old oratorios. He planned to present Esther, Saul, and a new oratorio, Messiah. Charles Jennens, a landowner and wealthy patron of Handel’s who had an interest in music and literature, wrote the libretto for the oratorio. The text comes from the King James Bible and the Coverdale Psalter, and, in a tripartite form, encompasses the prophecies by Isaiah and the annunciation to the shepherds; the Passion, which ends with the Halleluiah Chorus; and the resurrection of the dead and Christ’s glorification in heaven. The orchestration was intended for a 32-person choir of men and boys with two female soloists, strings, oboes, trumpets, timpani, and a basso continuo group—organ and/or harpsichord and cello and/or bassoon.

Messiah was an instant hit in Dublin, but did not become popular in London until 1750 when Handel presented it in a sacred venue of the chapel at the Foundling Hospital. The work gained popularity throughout the 1750s with many performances at cathedral festivals and extractions of movements for church services. After Handel’s death, the work was performed all over the world with increasing adaptations and re-orchestrations based on the musical taste of the time. Indeed, Mozart took out the organ continuo and added parts for flutes, clarinets, trombones, and horns; recomposed some passages; and rearranged others. With the rise of community choruses (women and men singing together!) in the 19th century, the work became an even larger monster: a New York performance in 1853 has a chorus of 300, one in Boston in 1865 had more than 600, and
Program Notes, continued

a whopping 2,000 singers and an orchestra of 500 performed it in London at the Crystal Palace in 1857. Over the last 30 years, choral scholar-conductors have created historically accurate performances with smaller forces and research-based articulations and ornaments.

This evening the Blacksburg Master Chorale will sing the entire Part I, the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Part II, and the closing *Amen* fugue. Part one consists of five scenes: Isaiah’s prophecy of salvation, the coming judgement, the prophecy of Christ’s birth, the annunciation to the shepherds, and Christ’s healing and redemption. Listen for Handel’s cosmopolitan influences in the French overture style of double dotting in the opening *Sinfonia*; the sound of the shepherd-bagpipers who played their pipes in the streets of Rome at Christmas time in the *Pifa*; the third musical subject in the *Hallelujah Chorus*, “And He shall reign for ever and ever,” which harkens back to Handel’s German roots with the Lutheran chorale tune *Wachet auf*; and the influence of Italian master polyphonist Palestrina in the *Amen* fugue.

—Meredith Bowen, guest conductor
Blacksburg Master Chorale

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Jing Chen
Elizabeth Cox
Sheila Darby
Anita Ehrhardt
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Leah Fitchett
Kaye Gilliam
Jane Hammel
Mary Harder
Renee Jacobsen
Leah Johnson
Janice Jones
Jeanette Jones
Elizabeth Kaler
Alex Kinnaman
Abby Lewis
Jennifer McCord
Susan Miller
Judy Ruggles
Julann Stephenson
Donna Thielen
Lucy Anne Wontrop

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Kate Burnham-Hull
Laura Cormier
Alice Feret
Susan Hansen
Marcia Harris
Lynda Hartson
Peggy Layne
Kelly Lemkul
Emma Maguire
Paula Markham
Mary Denson Moore
Mary W Osgood
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Schuyler Brown
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Ed Champion
Curtis Ray Cox Sr.
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Arthur Krieck
Clayton Kolb
Brian Muller
Jacob Paul
Randy Stith
George Terrell
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VIOLIN I
James Glazebrook, concertmaster
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Meredith McCree

BASSOON
Rebecca Meisel

TRUMPET
Jason Crafton
James Bean

TIMPANI
Annie Stevens

ELECTRONIC ORGAN
Joetta Petersen
Biographies

MEREDITH BOWEN, guest conductor

Meredith Bowen’s two current scholarship interests are restoring, publishing, and performing music written by 17th-century women and the impact of socially conscious programming. Bowen enjoys an active guest-conducting schedule; is an inaugural member and artistic administrator of mirabai, a professional-level women’s ensemble; and is on faculty for the Choral Music Experience Institute and the Virginia Governor’s School for the Visual and Performing Arts and Humanities.

Bowen is the director of choral activities and assistant professor of choral music education at Radford University, where she teaches classes in choral conducting, vocal pedagogy, choral methods, and choral literature, and conducts three choirs. Previous to her appointment at Radford, she taught K-12 general music, choir, and band in Lansing, Michigan, and was the artistic director of multiple ensembles in Michigan, including Sistrum, Lansing Women’s Chorus; Holland Chorale; and the Battle Creek Girls Chorus. Bowen holds a bachelor of science in music education from West Chester University and both a master of music and a doctor of musical arts in choral conducting from Michigan State University.

MELISSA HEATH, soprano

Soprano Melissa Heath enjoys a varied career of opera, concert, and recital work. Hailed as a “soaring, sparkling soprano” with “vivacious stage presence,” Heath’s recent opera roles include Countess in Mozart’s Le Nozze di Figaro and Micaëla in Bizet’s Carmen. Recent concert work includes Vaughan Williams’ Dona Nobis Pacem and both Mozart’s Requiem and Mass in C minor with the Temple Square Chorale and Orchestra at Temple Square, Handel’s Messiah with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and both Mozart’s Exsultate, Jubilate and Barber’s Knoxville, Summer of 1915 with Sinfonia Salt Lake. With the Utah Symphony, Heath has performed both Nielsen’s Symphony no. 3 and Handel’s Messiah. In November 2017 she was the soprano soloist with Ballet West in choreographer Nicolo Fonte’s world premiere of Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana. In 2018 Heath had the pleasure of singing the songs of Messiaen and Schubert on NOVA Chamber Music Series’ season finale concert, and performed recitals in Seattle and New York. In 2019 Heath sang the role of The Water in Utah Opera’s Production of The Little Prince and Mahler’s Symphony no. 2 with the Salt Lake Symphony, and she performed with the Utah Symphony in their Deer Valley Concert Series.

Heath was a district winner in the Metropolitan Opera’s National Council Auditions, and has twice been a regional finalist in the National Association of Teachers of Singing’s biennial art song competition. Heath is an assistant professor of music and the vocal area coordinator in the Department of Music at Utah Valley University. She holds a bachelor’s degree in voice from Brigham Young University, and both a master of music and doctor of musical arts in voice from the University of Utah.
CHARLES HUMPHRIES, countertenor

Charles Humphries’ vocal career started as a seven-year old chorister at Salisbury Cathedral (U.K.) and since then, music has taken him all over the globe. After graduating from the Royal Academy of Music, Humphries was honored as an associate of the Royal Academy of Music for his services to music. Known for his intelligent interpretations of baroque and renaissance music—“...singers on Humphries’ level can do something extraordinary with the sound, it mixes with and stands out through the orchestral sound in a very special way both ethereal and in its smooth, pure beauty”—he remains a highly sought-after countertenor worldwide.

Humphries has worked with many distinguished conductors and directors, and, as a soloist, he has collaborated with John Eliot Gardiner, Richard Hickox, and Trevor Pinnock, among others. As a consort singer and soloist, he has made over 50 recordings, and his solo album of Bach Cantatas continues to garner much attention. He was a major contributor to the Bach cantata pilgrimage with Gardiner. His many operatic appearances have taken him to Germany, England, Lithuania, France, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Latvia, and Greece in a wide range of roles that include Ptolomeo (Handel, Giulio Cesare); Pompeo (Cavalli, Pompeo Magno); and the Sorceress (Purcell, Dido and Aeneas), to name only a few. Sharing his time between the U.K. and the U.S., Humphries’ career continues to flourish, singing for many ensembles all across the U.S. Recent collaborations in Virginia, New Mexico, California, North Carolina, and Massachusetts include repertoire ranging from Purcell to the 21st-century composer Juliana Hall, who composed an advent cantata specifically for him based on the gospel of St Luke. He has also premiered Marco Rosano’s Stabat Mater for countertenor and string ensemble.

Humphries is in high demand as a vocal coach, teacher, and mentor. He runs a private voice studio and teaches master classes at universities and schools. Humphries is director of music at Ware Episcopal Church in Virginia, where he runs an extensive music program, and is also the artistic director of the concert series, Ware is the Music, which allows the local community and beyond to experience national and international artists performing a wide range of music.

DAVID NEWMAN, baritone

Baritone David Newman enjoys an active and varied concert career throughout North America. Hailed as “electrifying” by the Washington Post and noted by the Philadelphia Inquirer for his “eloquent, emotional singing,” Newman is best known as a Baroque specialist. He has performed Messiah with Tafelmusik, Portland Baroque Orchestra, Jacksonville Symphony, and with Masterwork Chorus in Carnegie Hall; St. John Passion with the American Bach Soloists, Carmel Bach Festival, and the Bach Chamber Orchestra of Honolulu; and St. Matthew Passion with the Bach Society of St. Louis, San Francisco Bach Choir, and on tour with the combined forces of Santa Fe Pro Musica and the Smithsonian Chamber Players.

In his debut with the Washington Bach Consort, Newman was noted by the Baltimore Sun for his “exquisitely phrased, velvet-toned Mache dich, mein Herz.” Other notable appearances include Bach’s B minor Mass and Christmas Oratorio with the Bethlehem Bach Choir; Coffee Cantata, Easter Oratorio, and Christmas Oratorio with the Santa Fe Bach Festival; and Haydn’s Creation with the Honolulu Symphony. His European appearances have included the 2003 Berlioz Festival in Paris, Le Tournoi de Chauvency with Ensemble Aziman in Sarrebourg and Metz, and Le Roi et le Fermier with Opera Lafayette at the Opera Royale in Versailles.
Biographies, continued

Newman has appeared regularly as a guest artist with the Four Nations Ensemble, including performances in Lincoln Center and Merkin Hall, and has also performed with the Spoleto Festival, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Metropolitan Opera Guild, Opera Birmingham, Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Russian National Orchestra. He has recorded opera and oratorio for the Philips, Dorian, Analekta, K617, and Naxos labels. Newman teaches voice and music theory at James Madison University.

Brian Thorsett, tenor

Hailed as “a strikingly gifted tenor, with a deeply moving, unblemished voice” (sfmusicjournal.com), tenor Brian Thorsett excels in opera, oratorio, and recital across the world. Since taking to the stage, Thorsett has been seen and heard in over 100 diverse operatic roles and fosters a stylistically diversified concert repertoire of over 250 works. Upcoming operas include the title role in Getty’s Goodbye, Mr. Chips and a concert version of Mozart’s Clemenza di Tito. Future concert highlights include Evangelist and soloist in both Bach’s St. John Passion and St. Matthew Passion, as well as multiple cantatas across the U.S., Einhorn’s Voices of Light, Britten’s Serenade and Ballad of Heroes, Handel’s Messiah and Alexander’s Feast, and a rare tenor-turn in Barber’s Knoxville.

An avid recitalist, Thorsett is closely associated with expanding the vocal-chamber genre; upcoming projects include the premiere of Edgar Girtain’s Four Folk Songs (tenor and cello), Eric Choate’s ...and fall, and David Conte’s Ogden Nash Settings. He will be featured on recitals in San Francisco, Sausalito, Berkeley, New York, Atlanta, Gloucester, London, and Paris in the coming seasons. Thorsett has also been heard in commercials and movies as the voice for SoundIron’s library Voice of Rapture: Tenor. He has recorded for Albany, Arsis, Edition Lilac among several labels. Thorsett is currently assistant professor of voice at Virginia Tech. For more information, please visit brianthorsett.com.
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This project is supported by the Virginia Commission for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.
Go Beyond

Comparing Bach to Handel, journalist Jonathan Kandell writes that while “Bach’s oratorios exalted God, Handel was more concerned with the feelings of mortals.” He goes on, quoting conductor Harry Bicket, who contends that “[e]ven when the subject of his work is religious, Handel is writing about the human response to the divine.” What elements of Messiah feel more secular than liturgical, and vice versa? What is the emotional effect of this balance, as compared with similarly iconic works by Bach?

In the Galleries

COMING SOON

Fierce Women
Chakaia Booker, Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, Marilyn Minter, and Rozeal
Thursday, January 30-Saturday, April 25, 2020
All galleries and Cube

This suite of one-person exhibitions by some of the most acclaimed artists of our era presents exemplary works of art that are formidable, impactful, and “fierce” in both their dramatic visual power and the potency of ideas presented. Spanning the latter part of the 20th century up to the present time, the exhibition features sculpture, painting, works on paper, digital prints, and video, all of which give voice to a range of critical issues in our world today.

Beginning with the historical precedent of the Guerrilla Girls, a notorious (and still active) collective of activist artists, the exhibition continues with works by the internationally acclaimed artist Jenny Holzer, then proceeds up to the present with an enthralling large-scale video installation by Marilyn Minter. Ranging from Holzer’s iconic LED signs to Chakaia Booker’s audacious rubber tire compositions or Rozeal’s fantastical, cross-cultural mashups, these artists take on gender and racial inequality, the politics of identity, and a panoply of injustices surrounding power, morality, and corruption in our world.

OPENING RECEPTION
Thursday, January 30, 2020, 5-7 PM
Grand Lobby
Free; complimentary refreshments

GALLERY HOURS
Monday-Friday, 10 AM-5:30 PM
Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM

To arrange a group tour or class visit, please contact Meggin Hicklin, exhibitions program manager, at megh79@vt.edu.