



Exegesis of Isaiah in Choral Music

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I. LASTER'S CATALOGUE

JAMES LASTER HAS COMPILED A *CATALOGUE OF CHORAL MUSIC ARRANGED IN BIBLICAL Order* (2d ed., Lanham: Scarecrow, 1996). His book is a list of music for choirs that is built on biblical texts. The texts are given in the Bible's order from Genesis through Revelation. Biblical citations are recorded chapter by chapter and verse by verse, then laid side by side with choral pieces on the given citations.

Not surprisingly, most of the list is given over to the psalms. Of the 513 pages, 270 are from the book of Psalms—almost 53 per cent of the whole. The biblical book with the next largest representation is Isaiah, way behind with about seven per cent. It requires 37 pages. After that comes Matthew with 30 pages, John with 29, and Luke with 23. Then come 1 Corinthians with 9 and Mark with 5. All the other books have less than a page to several pages.

Laster's book does not list all the choral music that has ever been written or is now in print, and such a compilation as this is always incomplete and out of date,

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Composers—not only preachers and teachers—exegete and interpret biblical texts for the church. Isaiah has provided a rich resource for those whose proclamation takes musical form.

as Laster notes in his preface. But his is nonetheless a serious attempt to compile what could be found, and it is a fair representation of what texts from the Bible composers have chosen to set to music.

II. CONFIRMATIONS

Isaiah's importance for composers is confirmed in several other less impressively statistical ways. The recent anthology of choral music called *The Augsburg Choirbook: Sacred Music of the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998) edited by the former director of the St. Olaf Choir, Kenneth Jennings, reflects a weighting similar to Laster's. Of the 67 pieces in the collection, 34 are listed in a Scriptural Index. Of those, 16 are from the Psalms, four from John, and three each from Isaiah, Matthew, and Luke. Or, again, if you check pieces church choirs are actually singing, you'll almost invariably find texts from Isaiah among them. At a recent rehearsal of one church choir I attended, half of the pieces were from Isaiah. Or, think of two of the finest and best-known oratorios ever written. In *Messiah*, George Frideric Handel used Isaiah 21 times, even more than the Psalms, which he used only 15 times. The next largest set of quotations came from 1 Corinthians with 11. Eleven other books of the Bible supplied Handel with one to six texts. In his *German Requiem*, Johannes Brahms quoted Isaiah twice (35:10 and 66:18). The other texts he employed were, as might be expected, from the Psalms and also from Matthew, 1 Peter, James, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Hebrews, 1 Corinthians, and Revelation.

Isaiah can't come near the importance of the Psalms for composers, but it has nonetheless served as a very important set of texts for them. How might this importance be explained?

III. THE LECTIONARY AND THE LITURGY

First, it might be because the lectionary gives prominence to readings from Isaiah and because all the settings of the Sanctus (and there are a huge number of them, most not listed by Laster), which is derived from Isaiah 6:3, might be explained by its presence in the ordinary of the mass. After all, most churches want music for the texts they use; the Sanctus especially is one of the most sung texts in all of Christian history, and it is not surprising that composers have risen to the occasion. They have done this and still do it out of a genuine concern for the need that exists, but also because they want their music to be bought and sung.

While the needs of the lectionary and the liturgy are clearly factors in the importance of Isaiah for composers, these needs alone are not the whole explanation. Pieces not driven by the lectionary nor related to the liturgy, like Handel's *Messiah* and Brahms' *German Requiem*, have mined Isaiah as well.

IV. LANGUAGE

A second explanation might be the language of the book. It sings well. The words themselves compel a song. The best way to indicate that is to cite a few passages from Isaiah to illustrate how they resonate in our language and memories, even in a time when such resonance is rare.

- “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains” (2:2)
- “Tell the righteous it shall be well with them...Woe to the wicked!” (3:10-11)
- “In the Year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple” (6:1)
- “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts” (6:3)
- “Behold, a virgin shall conceive” (7:14)
- “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (9:2)
- “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” (9:6)
- “A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse” (11:1)
- “...and a little child shall lead them” (12:6)
- “...he will swallow up death forever” (25:8)
- “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee” (26:3)
- “You shall have a song” (30:29)
- “Comfort ye, my people, saith your God” (40:1)
- “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings” (52:7)
- “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4)
- “For you shall go out in joy” (55:12)
- “Arise, shine; for your light has come” (60:1)

V. MEANING

Third, the words themselves not only compel a song because of the way they are put together. They also carry a compelling meaning. Composers are attracted to what will be used and what sounds good, obviously, but they are also likely to choose texts which mean something that rings true and stimulates their imaginations. Isaiah admirably fits these requirements. The brief list just given includes words that express the presence and call of God, dire human despair, God’s righteous indignation, and the hope and comfort of humanity in God’s presence. They do this in their own Old Testament context, but they also are easily applied to Christ and the Christian life, as in Handel’s *Messiah* and the Brahms’ *German Requiem* (no matter what Handel and Brahms may have personally intended which, like any composer’s intentions, can never really be deciphered). These words become contemporary nuclear nuggets that composers have been able to explode with candor into the sounds of their own time and place. That composers have

found inspiration in almost the whole book gives a sense of the range that is involved. It might be expected that only a few chapters of Isaiah would have been used, like the vision and call in chapter 6 or the prologue to Second Isaiah in chapter 40. Indeed, chapter 6 does require three pages in Laster and chapter 40 requires almost six, but much of the rest of the book has been set to music also. Only fifteen of Isaiah's sixty-six chapters are not listed at all in Laster.

VI. EXAMPLES

To illustrate what composers have crafted with texts from Isaiah, we need some examples. The following are somewhat random choices of musical settings of texts in the book of Isaiah. The only self-conscious requirement for inclusion was that the pieces represent different parts of the book. They give a glimpse into the range that composers have explored with Isaiah's texts and some sense of how composers have done their exegesis. I will describe the musical syntax of each piece with enough detail to make clear how the composers' imaginations seem to have been stimulated by the texts and what the composers seem to have wrought, but not so much detail that readers without analytical musical tools become lost.

In the Year That King Uzziah Died (H. W. Gray, C. M. R. 1356 Revised) by David McK. Williams is a dramatic setting of Isaiah's call. It uses the first eight verses of the sixth chapter, just as they stand. After a brief organ introduction in C minor, the men sing in unison and then the men and women sing largely in octaves. Big organ chords surround the voices, setting the scene in the year that King Uzziah died with Isaiah's vision of the Lord, high, lifted up, his train filling the temple, and the seraphim covering their faces and feet, and flying. This section ends with the organ and chorus together flying loudly above a low F in the organ. The chorus emerges alone as the seraphim cry to each other, at which point organ and chorus together break out in the Sanctus, each "Holy" higher and louder than the last. Chorus and organ then retreat to a hush at the realization that the whole earth is full of God's glory, and a quiet shimmer greets the moving of the doorposts and the house filling with smoke. "Then said I, Woe is me!" takes us back to the C minor of the beginning and brightens to C major at "mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Presently we move to the related key of F minor as the seraphim fly with a live coal to Isaiah's lips, then brighten again to F major and a trumpet blast when "thine iniquity is taken away." D minor and a drone on D quietly but insistently propel the voice of the Lord who asks, "Whom shall I send." "Send me" unwinds in a C major pianissimo of quiet acceptance and resolve.

This is a dramatic portrayal of Isaiah's vision and call that paints musical images of the various stages in the process, leading finally to a purified prophet quietly ready to do God's bidding. We may ask if the setting stops too soon; whether by not proceeding to the next verses David McK. Williams has missed Isaiah's point: tell the people to listen and not comprehend, to look and not understand. Or maybe that's asking too much of any composer for a single anthem. Maybe getting us to

“Send me” is more than enough to take in at one sitting, and the distress of what is to follow has to wait until we have recovered from the wonder of the presence and call of God. Something of that sort is probably what McK. Williams would say were we able to ask him. In any event, Isaiah 6 stimulated his musical imagination, and he composed music that leads forward from a huge sonic vision of God’s presence to quiet readiness for action.

Springs in the Desert (H. W. Gray, C. M. R. 580) by Arthur B. Jennings, one of Philip Brunelle’s predecessors at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis (1939-1966), is a quite different piece. Widely sung since its publication in 1920, Jennings took parts of Isaiah 35 and responded to its vision of the end of sorrow. A brief lilting introduction in F sharp minor sets up a proclamatory tenor solo that encourages the fearful to be strong and not to fear, for “your God will come and save you.” Then the desert blossoms in a newly lilting F sharp major. Streams flow. The parched ground becomes a pool. The organ spins out of the springs of water and drives the rejoicing forward to set up the choir’s announcement of the highway of holiness on which the redeemed first walk more slowly and then accelerate as the ransomed of the Lord who return with songs of joy. Sorrow and sighing flee away as the music slows to its quiet and liquid ending.

This piece has its drama, but it is not the high drama of call as in David McK. Williams’ composition. Here it is more like a meditation or glimpse into the end of sorrow and sighing, a foretaste of the feast to come, “springs in the desert” and the joy of God’s presence.

Moving to Second Isaiah, Carolyn Jennings (no relation to Arthur; Carolyn teaches at St. Olaf College; Kenneth is her husband) set a free paraphrase of parts of chapter 40 called *Climb to the Top of the Highest Mountain* (Curtis Music Press, No. C 8118). This is a relatively quiet setting in which the choir sings a simple and melodious tune, sometimes breaks into a canon, and moves to four parts and a children’s choir which increase in intensity and loudness but always in the context of deep shalom. This is not so much drama as abiding peace in God’s presence. The text is less literal than the previous two. It goes like this.

Climb to the top of the highest mountain,
Joyous tidings proclaim to the world,
Lift up your voice,
Shout the good news:
Behold, your Lord comes to you.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
He will carry the lambs in his arms,
He will ever keep them safe from harm.
Behold, your Lord comes to you.

He who made the stars in the heaven,
He who fashioned the earth and the sea,

From time eternal, He was Alpha and Omega, He.
Behold, your Lord.

He will come in pow'r,
He will rule with mercy and truth,
Hope of all the nations,
Light of all.

He will love the little children,
He will hold them in his arms,
Love and trust him as a child,
Behold, your Lord comes to you.

Go Out with Joy (Hindon Publications, Inc., HMC 117) by Hank Beebe is a rhythmic and jubilant setting of Isa 55:12-13. This music is as much bodily excitement, perhaps frenzied excitement, as the previous piece is quiet joy. A driving rock-like keyboard part provides the backdrop for a syncopated choral line about going out, being led forth with peace, hills and mountains breaking into singing, and trees clapping their hands. As pine trees shoot up in place of the camel thorn, and myrtles instead of briars, the texture turns to four-part homophony. The initial material then returns, and the camel thorn and myrtles again restate their homophony, now somewhat more complex. The initial material returns once more in an antiphonal and yet more syncopated form, and the piece ends in a rhythmic flurry of joy. Here the presence of God is presumed as the force that drives one out in a wildly joyful and enthusiastic celebration with the whole creation.

The Peaceable Kingdom (E. C. Schirmer, E. C. S. Choral Songs, No 1747) is a set of texts from Isaiah, as a whole lengthier than any of the previous pieces, though it could be divided into parts which would each be comparable to the ones just discussed. Randall Thompson composed it for the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society. Because of its length Thompson was able to choose a wider variety of pronouncements from the book of Isaiah and to embody a progression that shorter pieces can only imply. He also had the courage to give more duration than other composers to the parts of Isaiah which express God's anger in the most palpable and unpalatable ways.

There are eight a cappella choruses in *The Peaceable Kingdom*: Chorus I, "Say Ye to the Righteous," is a setting of Isa 3: 10-11 and 65:14. (Critical considerations that may divide Isaiah into first, second, and third prophets are not likely to control a composer's selection of texts, though a composer may be well aware of these divisions either by study of biblical scholars or simply by careful reading of the text itself. In selecting texts, composers are likely to allow images to be the control, mixing various parts of the book as seems necessary or prudent to them.) The text from chapter 3 says to the righteous that it shall be well and to the wicked that it shall be ill. Chapter 65 is scarier. It addresses us directly in the second person as the wicked ones. The servants of God apparently refer to others: "My servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart and shall howl for vexation of spirit."

Thompson sets these texts in a relatively homophonic way. Woe to the wicked is loudly marked, joy of heart sings on an ornamented melisma, and the howl moans downward in semi-parallel groans. This chorus sets up the woes, the howling, and the final hope in God's presence which follow in the coming choruses.

Chorus II, "Woe Unto Them," is a series of seven maledictions from Isa 5:8, 11, 12, 18-20, 21, and 17:12 (not used in that order). The woes are pronounced in declamatory fashion, until a concluding wail expands and increases the anguish of the howl from the first chorus:

- woe to them that draw iniquity with chords of vanity
- woe to them that call evil good and good evil, that put darkness for light and light for darkness
- woe to them that are wise in their own eyes
- woe to them that are mighty to drink wine and mingle strong drink
- woe to them that rise up early in the morning to follow drink until night; and the harp and the viol and the tabret and pipe are in their feasts, but they regard not the work of the Lord
- woe to the multitude of many people who make a noise like the noise of the seas
- woe to them that join house to house, field to field, till there be no place alone in the midst of the earth!

Chorus III is "The Noise of the Multitude," agitated, bloody, and brutal, from Isa 13:4, 5, 7, 15, 16, 18. Though homophonic and tonal, Thompson nonetheless set this gory scene from a quiet beginning of noise in the mountains to dissonant horror. The indignant Lord comes to destroy the whole land, dashes young men and children to pieces, has no pity on the fruit of the womb, thrusts everyone through, spoils houses, and ravishes wives. A fortissimo marcato moves to a broken pianissimo and silence as everyone grows faint, melts, and is afraid. The chorus ends with the loud and dissonant wail of pangs of sorrow as of a woman in travail and faces as flames. The picture is not pretty, and Thompson does not back away from its horror.

The howling that was prepared in Chorus I now screams out in Chorus IV, "Howl Ye." The text is from Isa 8:8 and 14:31. It is as short as it is horrible—"Howl ye, for the day of the Lord is at hand. Howl, O gate; cry, O city; thou art dissolved"—but it takes time for this cry of despair to gather and find its appointed end. A double chorus sends the howl back and forth, and then all eight voices break into imitation of one another in a cacophony of despair that is linked to the city's dissolution. The downward semi-parallel moans and groans of the first chorus roll out of control to a loud wail from the whole chorus, and the piece gradually dissolves into a whimper.

Isa 14:7 provides the text for the next movement, Chorus V, "The Paper Reeds by the Brooks." Here a beautifully quiet and reflective respite from the howling is first set homophonically, then the sopranos imitate the lower parts who re-

main a single homophonic unit. After the howling of the previous chorus, the words that provide the respite here paradoxically take on the character of hopeful despair.

The paper reeds by the brooks, by the mouth of the brooks, and everything sown by the brooks, shall wither, be driven away, and be no more.

Chorus VI is in two parts. First, Isa 65:11, "But these are they that forsake the Lord, that forget my holy mountain," is stated once in a stentorian unison from all the men. Then, in a reversal of the first chorus, we are addressed as the righteous with the words of Isa 55:12, "For you shall go out with joy." These are the same words of hope that Beebe set, but they are handled quite differently by Thompson. The first choir begins slowly as the mountains and hills break forth into singing, at which point the second choir joins in. Both choirs together sustain all the trees of the fields in their hand clapping, cadence with a hemiola, and then a gently rhythmic dance celebrates the clapping.

Chorus VII functions in relation to VIII somewhat as the two halves of Chorus VI function together. Chorus VII is a brief declamation of the questions in Isa 40:21: "Have ye not known? Have ye not heard? Hath it not been told you from the beginning? Have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth?"

The answer comes in Chorus VIII (Isa 30:29), "Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept." The words are drawn out quietly and slowly, first by the women and then by the men, each in four part-harmony. Gladness of heart gradually increases the intensity, and then the men greet us rhythmically and lightly "as when one goeth with a pipe," playfully answered by the women. The men are anxious "to come into the mountain of the Lord," but before the women have a chance to answer their announcement an extended celebration of gladness of heart and going with a pipe breaks out again. The celebration reaches its peak, stops in silence, and the response of the whole choir at length sustains the affirmation: "to come into the mountain of the Lord."

Randall Thompson's piece may not be the norm for settings of texts from Isaiah in that it stares directly and at some length into the horror of God's anger, but it gives an insight into the imagination and interpretation the book has stimulated among composers.

VII. FINAL THOUGHTS

It would be easy to multiply examples. In addition to the texts from Isaiah that Handel and Brahms set in the oratorios which were mentioned earlier, the remarkable "Sanctus" of Bach's *B Minor Mass* with its triplets for "Sanctus," the striding octaves of "Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth," and the fugue for "Pleni sunt coeli" could be explored. The tone clusters in Knut Nystedt's *Cry Out and Shout* from Isa 12:3 might suggest how twentieth-century people perceive the Lord as strength and song. Walter Pelz's *Day of Rejoicing* from Isa 25:8-9 gives a bold and

somewhat angular yet tonal way to express themes of resurrection. We might ask why Jean Berger used a tenor solo against a richly layered choir in *When Thou Pass-est Through the Waters* from Isa 43:2-3. Is Charles Gounod's understanding of *Lovely Appear* from Isaiah 52 tensionless? If so, why? Is Karl Heinrich Graun's setting of "Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs" from Isa 53:4 almost too chromatic? What is the meaning of the text in such a setting?

We could continue to explore these questions of detail about individual pieces, but let us conclude by asking whether there is a central motif in Isaiah to which composers have responded. The range of topics composers have been able to draw from Isaiah runs the gamut of the Christian story with implications for the Christian life and vocation. That seems to suggest no central theme or control. I wonder, however, if the presence of God is not the center. The seemingly disparate themes only make sense in the context of the call in Isaiah 6 and the holy presence of God that accompanies the call. Nobody can finally say what controls composers or sets their imaginations to work, but the few compositions we have considered and the book of Isaiah itself do seem to set God's presence at the center.

Maybe there is no controlling motif. Maybe composers have just set various themes, and no more than that can be said. One thing is clear, however. Though the sounds that composers construct do not mean anything by themselves, in connection with texts they clearly interpret words in certain ways. The choral pieces composers have set from Isaiah's texts give glimpses into one part of the church's exegetical discourse. That part is fashioned from God's gift of music. As Laster's catalogue and a bit of analysis suggest, Isaiah has been a strong stimulus in this part of the church's exegetical activity. ⊕