

# An Appreciation of John Harbison

## by David Hoose

John Harbison, who celebrates his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on December 20 of this year, has played an essential role in the cultural life of Boston for more than five decades. Most listeners have heard his music, since virtually every significant Boston ensemble—large or small, prestigious or modest—has performed compositions of his, some organizations with great regularity. In particular, those ensembles that have commissioned John to compose new works for them have especially strengthened our connection to his music.

John has touched the Boston musical community in myriad ways: as a probing conductor (former Cantata Singers music director, now Emmanuel Music principal guest conductor, and guest conductor with several contemporary music groups), as music professor at MIT who exposes bright minds to the marvels of classical music, and—perhaps most importantly—as an engaged concert-goer. Few listeners possess John's breadth and depth of listening experience. Few active composers allow as much openness to as wide a variety of music, from old to new, light to serious, or jazz to classical, for they can find themselves admitting a narrow range of music, perhaps as a way of developing and securing their own creative voices. But John's appreciation for a huge span of music, new and old, extends generously, and even that which may not appeal to his own musical thinking always receives thoughtful observation and respect.

For me, as someone who has studied, rehearsed, and performed at least twenty-five Harbison choral, orchestral, and chamber works, it is his music that continually and repeatedly gives immense satisfaction. His musical voice is uniquely his and, at the same time, reflects a penetrating understanding of the greatest traditions in classical music—particularly those of Bach and Schütz—as well as those in the seminal worlds of jazz. His language constantly evolves to meet the needs of the particular project at hand, but it remains rooted in musical values that I deeply admire: compelling harmonic motion, closely heard contrapuntal relationships, vital rhythmic life, fascination with the syntax and meaning of texts, and interest in the infinite capacity, both complex and straightforward, of music to breathe in phrases.

In every composition of John's that I know, from the jazz-infused 1979 *Wind Quintet* (which the Emmanuel Wind Quintet, of which I was a member, performed about forty times without our interest in it ever fading), to the rigorously conceived *Emerson*, for unaccompanied chorus, it is easy to see—and hear—his fascination with, and commitment to, the same qualities that he admires in Bach. In his recent book of essays, "What Do We Make of Bach," John speaks of Bach's "great synthesis of strict and free elements—law and fantasy—given and divined." John's music, too, is inventively systematic, its rigor shot with flexible imagination. The layers of relationships and powerful emotions that arise from such sophisticated thought, always heard and always hearable, bring me back again and again.

# Program Notes

## **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, “WACHET AUF, RUFT UNS DIE STIMME,” CANTATA BWV 140**

*Bach composed the cantata “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme” when he was forty-six, and in the ninth of his twenty-seven years in Leipzig, where he was responsible for weekly music both at Thomaskirche and at Nikolaikirche. The cantata is for the 27th Sunday after Trinity, immediately before Advent, the period of reflection that prepares for Christmas, and it was first heard in St. Nicholas Church on 25 November 1731. It is one of the few of Bach’s cantatas that did not disappear after his death, and it is, today, one of his most beloved works.*

*“Wachet auf,” now catalogued as BWV 140, is for four-part chorus, soprano and bass solos (who share two extraordinary duets), tenor solo, two oboes, taille (a tenor oboe tuned to the pitch of the oboe da caccia and English horn), horn (doubling the soprano line in the outer movements, and here representing the watchmen’s instrument), strings (with a prominent solo violin part), and a continuo group that includes organ and, variously, cello, bass and bassoon.*

Melancholy, doubt, or fear shades even the most optimistic music of J.S. Bach. The *Dona nobis* of the *Mass in B minor* and the final chorus of the *Ascension Oratorio*, BWV 11, for instance, are exhilarating, but they bear a tinge of worldly sadness. And these are only single movements within larger, emotionally nuanced compositions. “Wachet auf,” on the other hand, embraces an expectant hope virtually untouched by anxiety.

Bach’s working environment in Leipzig was frequently contentious. He regularly quarreled with town officials about his position and about the resources necessary to fulfill his exhausting duties. His music often baffled the congregation, and even his colleagues: in 1737, the twenty-three year old composer Johann Adolf Scheibe criticized the 52-year old Bach for having “removed every natural element from his music through their bombastic and muddled nature, obscuring their beauty through an over-abundance of art.” “Art” was not desired, and when Bach died in 1750, the town council, seeking his replacement, tellingly wrote, “We must remember that we want a schoolmaster, not a musician.” The lack of support and comprehension easily could have clouded Bach’s creative output. In such a world, any optimism would be surprising, so a cantata as emotionally confident as BWV 140 is extraordinary.

Much of the joy of “Wachet auf” has roots in the stirring chorale melody that Bach chose as the basis for three of the cantata’s movements, a tune and words written in 1599 by Philipp Nicolai. This pastor and poet had penned the hymn, as well as another powerful melody, “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (How brightly shines the morning star), in thanks after his health miraculously returned during a plague in Westphalia. His melody is robust and assuring, and its bold shape, powerful leaps, a wide range, and dramatic pauses have made fertile material for many composers since, including J.C. Bach, Buxtehude, Mendelssohn, Reger, and Distler. To J.S. Bach, it was a matchless source, and he turned to it only once.

412.

**Ein anders von der Stim̄ zu Mitter-**  
**nacht/ vnd von den klugen Jungfrauen/ die**  
**ihrem himmlischen Bräutigam bes-**  
**gegen/ Matth. 25.**  
 D. Philippus Nicolai.

**W**achet auff / ruft uns die Stimme / Der Wächter sehr hoch  
 Mitternacht heist diese Stunde / Sie ruffen uns mit  
 auff der Zinnen / Was auff du Statt Jerusaleim / Wolauff  
 hellen Wunde / Wo seyd ihr klugen Jungfrauen ?  
 der Bräutigam kompt / Siehe auff die Lampen mit e. Halleluia. Mach  
 euch bereit / Zu der Hochzeit. Ihr müßet ihm entgegen gehn.

**W**achet auff / ruft uns die Stimme /  
 Der Wächter sehr hoch auff der Zinnen /  
 Wach auff du Statt Jerusaleim.  
 Mitternacht heist diese Stunde /  
 Sie ruffen uns mit hellen Wunde /  
 Wo seyd ihr klugen Jungfrauen ?  
 Wolauff der Bräutigam kompt /  
 Siehe auff die Lampen mit e.  
 Halleluia.  
 Macht euch bereit / Zu der Hochzeit /  
 Ihr müßet ihm entgegen gehn.  
 11.  
 Zion höret die Wächter singen /

Das

First publication of Philipp Nicolai's "Wachet auf," 1599.

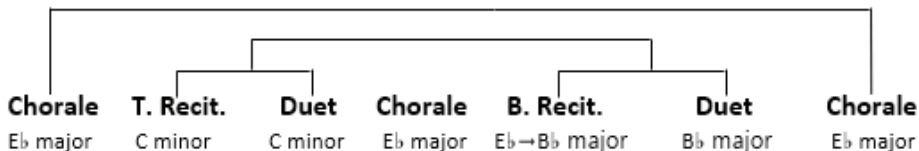
Each of the cantata's three chorale movements sets a verse of Nicolai's hymn, words referring to the parable, as found in the Book of Matthew, about the young virgins who have variously prepared for, and not prepared for, the bridegroom's arrival. The cantata's solo movements—two recitatives and two duets—are on texts by an unknown author, and they draw liberally on the Song of Solomon, with wedding allusions that were used by Jesus in his preaching to portray the kingdom of God and to identify himself as the "Bridegroom." The often erotic tone of words associating earthly love with divine union create an excited, charged atmosphere.

Cantata BWV 140 is one of a group of cantatas in which vocal duets represent conversations between Jesus and the Soul. These "dialogue cantatas" (including BWV 21, heard in Cantata Singers' last season) distinguish themselves from the many other cantatas with duets by giving the two singers different texts. Elizabeth Linnartz, in her dissertation<sup>1</sup> on the dialogue cantatas depicts the drama in "Wachet auf" in a refreshingly straightforward way:

- Chorale: The Watchmen awaken the faithful
- Recitative: The Bridegroom is sighted
- Duet: The Soul yearns and Christ assures
- Chorale: The Bridegroom arrives
- Recitative: Christ accepts the Bride
- Duet: They experience blissful union
- Chorale: All offer an eternal hymn of praise

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Byrum Linnartz, "The Dialogue Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach," The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004.

This large design is *chiastic*, a symmetrical shape suggesting an X, or a cross: the central chorale-based movement is surrounded by two elaborate dialogues (each preceded by a recitative), and chorale-based movements frame the whole.



The first movement sets the scene for the Bridegroom's arrival, an elaborate chorale fantasia that is an elated procession buoyed by a walking bass line and dancing rhythms. The rolling orchestral ritornello leads to the first entrance of the chorale tune, laid out by the sopranos in long notes, and the alto, tenor, and bass quickly follow, commenting contrapuntally on the hymn tune. For the first two vocal phrases, the soprano chorale enters before the lower three voices, but in the third (and then, sixth) phrase, all four simultaneously exclaim, "Wach auf" (wake up!)—a startling gesture for any chorale fantasia. By the seventh and eighth phrases, the lower voices have become too excited to wait, and they leap in ahead of the chorale. With an abrupt shift of energy, a blissful "Alleluja" then materializes in the altos, a gliding line reminiscent of the orchestra's rolling sixteenth notes. This miraculous moment continues as the tenor and bass enter in imitation, but the chorale tune remains silent. Eventually, from within the fabric, it emerges, climbing up to lead all toward the two final, climactic phrases. The exalted processional spins out in the orchestra.

In a brief, animated recitative, the tenor assumes the role of narrator (a representative of the watchmen), and his excited leaps and wide-reaching melodic line prepare the first soprano-bass duet. The detailed dialogue between "Bride" and "Bridegroom"—the Soul and Jesus—suspends in the gentle lilt of a *siciliano*, a slow dance of courtship. The exchanges draw the parallel between earthly love and transcendent union, but the two voices do not often share texts, their lines never quite flow as one, and their phrases never end together. Around the dialogue of promise, the solo violin weaves garlands.

At the center of the cantata, the second verse of the Nicolai hymn makes a stately declamation. An infectious unison violin-viola line repeats throughout, but its yearning gestures lean against the continuo line in subtly shifting ways that make the unchanging appear ever fresh. The text's reference to "die Wächter" (watchmen), instead of "der Wächter" (watchman), suggests that it is more than one of the faithful proclaiming the single tenor line. Through myriad transcriptions for all manner of instrumental combinations, including the composer's own version for organ, this music has become some of the most familiar in all of Bach.

The second recitative is accompanied by the strings, which suggest the halo surrounding the Jesus recitatives in the *Saint Matthew Passion*. The tone here is warm, and though the air clouds at "dein betrübtes Augen" (your troubled eye), it is a

fleeting moment, and the Bridegroom reassuringly ushers in the second magnificent dialogue. The first duet's vision of a heavenly marriage had been illusive, but this duet offers a glowing image of promise fulfilled. Interweaving with a smiling oboe line and an alert bass line, the Bridegroom and Bride sing more as one, their lines flowing together in mystical rapture, and each of their phrases now ending together. The final, glorious chorale affirms the eternal life of union with Christ, and it rings out as if from heaven's spaciousness. It is a thrilling close to a perfect cantata.

### **JOHN HARBISON, SACRED TRILOGY**

*The three compositions that now make up John Harbison's Sacred Trilogy were composed over a period of twenty-eight years, between 1986 and 2014. All were commissioned by Cantata Singers, with the third, The Supper at Emmaus, co-commissioned with Emmanuel Music. For the first of these three works, The Flight Into Egypt, Harbison received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Music.*

*During the three-decade period that encompassed the creation of his Sacred Trilogy, Harbison composed a wide variety of other sacred works, including unaccompanied motets (performed by Cantata Singers in January 2010 and December 2017) and the inspiring Four Psalms (performed by Cantata Singers in November 2000, with a commercial recording released New World Records). Initially, the composer did not conceive the three compositions as a unit, but their similar origins, comparable scope, and related instrumentations all create close relationships that make their union logical. Most compelling, though, is the implied narrative of the biblical texts, which flow in dramatic and theological order, reaching from Advent to Easter and beyond.*

*The three works are for chorus, with varying vocal soloists, and with slightly differing chamber orchestras. The Flight Into Egypt includes soprano and baritone solos, 2 oboes, English horn, bassoon, three trombones, portativ organ, and a small body of strings. But Mary Stood is for chorus, soprano solo, and strings, either solo players or sections. As with The Flight Into Egypt and The Supper at Emmaus, the chorus in But Mary Stood is largely in four parts, but its middle movement divides the chorus into two three-part groups, one high (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor) and one low (alto, baritone, bass) that often act in a responsorial manner. The Supper at Emmaus expands the vocal soloists to four—who appear alone in the central movement—and it restores the pungent woodwinds and portativ organ, but not the evocative trombones, of The Flight Into Egypt.*

*Cantata Singers is pleased to present this first complete performance of John Harbison's expansive Sacred Trilogy, given in celebration of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday on 20 December 2018.*

—David Hoose

***The Flight Into Egypt*** (1986) was composed on commission from Cantata Singers. The commission allowed me to follow through on musical ideas already in motion, at a time when I was working on a number of projects (of which this was the least “practical”). It is my first choral music in five years and renews an association with Cantata Singers that dates to 1969, when I became their Music Director, and continues to the present through many friendships and my close relationship with their remarkable Music Director, David Hoose.

I began *The Flight* on an impulse stemming from a conversation with Craig Smith and Rose Mary Harbison about Christmas texts. Craig Smith mentioned the Christmas season counseling experience of Rev. Al Kershaw at Emmanuel Church as a time when need, isolation, and anxiety increase. We agreed that the darker side of Christmas needs representation, especially in a time of increasing distance between the privileged and the less fortunate.

I have worked twice before with unedited Bible texts in a narrative manner favored by Schütz and Stravinsky, and I'm sure I will again. Without those pieces I would feel that a significant part of what I want to do as a composer would not have a voice. In this piece the subject matter gave rise to musical techniques: a frequent reliance on points of imitation, and the derivation of most of the music from the short motives stated at the outset. These are metaphors for the pre-ordained, inevitable aspect of the story. The harmony is more freely ordered, in the interest of a more flexible and compassionate rendering of the details of the narrative. The most expressive element in the piece is the continuity, which fuses the narrative into one continuous impression, both abstract and highly colored.

When I wrote this piece, I didn't even know of the existence of Schütz's incomparable setting of this text. But I should have known that if anyone were to be exploring the shadow-image of Christmas, in times not unlike ours, it would be that composer.

***But Mary Stood*** (2006) was commissioned by Cantata Singers in honor of David Rockefeller, Jr. It begins with a Prelude for string orchestra, actually composed last, a summary of many of the musical questions posed in the other movements.

The two choral motets resulted from requests from important women in my life: my mother-in-law and my mother. These women were both political activists and religious seekers. They asked me (many years ago) to memorialize them with settings of their favorite scriptural passages.

In “Let Your Heart Be Troubled,” the aural picture contrasts the idea of the Consoled, remaining behind, with Christ in His upward journey. The word “Charity” frames the text from Corinthians and is set as a symmetrical musical emblem, held by forces from above and below. More ambiguous harmonies describe various states of incomplete knowledge.

Much of this music was composed while working with Cantata Singers on Bach's *Saint John Passion*. There, at the moment of Jesus' death, the two Marys move to the center of the stage. Jesus' words to John, “Behold your mother,” ignited the power of the anima in the prayers and iconography of early Christianity.



Mary Magdalene, her presence both contrasting and complementary to Jesus' mother, is the first to see that the tomb is empty, the first to meet the risen Christ, the first to report it. ("Do not touch me," says Christ in the King James version, while "Cease clinging to me" is the 1976 translation by the Catholic Council.) John, the last gospel writer, responds to the longing for the Eternal Feminine: compassion, approachability, and sensuality.

Between the two unaccompanied choral movements, "But Mary Stood," for soprano, double choir, and string orchestra, proposes the soloist as both Narrator and Mary, the double choir as Jesus. These three characters each have their own vocabulary, family related. The setting envisions a Mary Magdalene who was the true intimate of Jesus, who understood, intellectually and intuitively, his purpose on earth.

In composing a piece to honor longtime Cantata Singers leader and colleague David Rockefeller, Jr., I resolved to make something that would live close to the center of the themes typically associated with the Cantata Singers. All of us who have been involved with this organization have been grateful for the places the subject matter has taken us. This was at the heart of David's devotion to the group, and I feel privileged to be able to add to our common legacy.

***The Supper at Emmaus*** (2014) is a cantata on texts from Luke and I Timothy. The work was commissioned jointly by Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music, with generous support from David Rockefeller, Jr., the Mattina R. Proctor Foundation, and Epp K.J. Sonin. The first performance of the outer choral movements was given in 2014, with the orchestra and chorus of Emmanuel Music, Ryan Turner, conductor, and the first performance of the complete work was given by Cantata Singers and David Hoose in 2015.

David wrote to me at the end of July 2013, asking if I would be able to compose a piece for the Cantata Singers 50th anniversary. I described to him a long-contemplated cantata, *The Supper at Emmaus*, which our friend Craig Smith discussed with me some years ago—for both of us a favorite Biblical passage. Completing it now, in Craig's memory, suggested a collaboration with Emmanuel Music, which the leadership of both organizations was able to arrange.

The main narrative, "Historia," sets the Biblical report of the story in Luke 24 (KJV) for four soloists and orchestra. Before and after this chronicle comes a Prelude and Postlude, for chorus and orchestra.

The chorus first sings the words from Luke of the guards (are they Angels?) who confront the women coming to the tomb seeking Jesus' body. The Postlude text is from a letter of Paul. Its tone is common and personal; Heinrich Schütz composed, in the *Geistliche Chormusik*, this same text in memory of his friend, the composer Johann Hermann Schein.

When Craig Smith and I talked about this subject, we started with Bach's great Cantata 6, in which the themes of abandonment and loss are expressed as collective anguished lamentation, and as intimate loneliness and uncertainty. We also paid attention to many paintings, especially the two by Caravaggio, the first theatrical, the

second later one meditative, with a mysterious new female figure, whose role, we decide, involves us. All the figures, including Jesus, were approachable, familiar. (In some of Caravaggio's other paintings, his historic figures have dirty feet.)

A special hint for the composer came from Duccio's marvelous painting *The Road to Emmaus*. Jesus is talking with the two disciples; he is disguised as a traveler, with broad-brimmed hat, knapsack, and walking stick. One of the archetypal story beginnings: A Stranger Comes to Town. And the strangeness, the mystery, the fervor, felicity, and awkwardness of the Scriptural account, a glowing recalcitrant found object, taken on just as it comes.

It is a great privilege to write another large piece of sacred music for two such cultivated institutions as Cantata Singers and Emmanuel Music. I am very grateful to both organizations and to the generous sponsors David Rockefeller Jr., the Mattina R. Proctor Foundation, and Epp K.J. Sonin.

—John Harbison, edited for this program by David Hoose