

SPRING SONGS & SONNETS

PROGRAM NOTES by Rebecca Scott

When I was a small child, I heard my mother, Ruth Scott Clark, practice the piano and compose music. As my two sisters and I became of sing ages (7, 5, and 3) we began to sing her compositions for visitors at the house and to this day we still perform her songs at home and in the concert hall. My mother wrote several pieces just for Cantabile, and in 2007 I asked her to write a theme song for the chorale. The result of this request is ***We are Cantabile***, a perfect “sing-around-the-piano” piece designed so that it can even be sung a cappella around a campfire. While she composed other more serious music for Cantabile, this little ditty tells a bit about who we are, what we sing and how much fun it is to be the Cantabile Chamber Chorale.

This outstanding arrangement of ***Amazing Grace*** by John Coates, Jr. is one we have enjoyed performing in many concerts over the past thirty years. It is a sensitive treatment of this classical American hymn. It opens with a unison chorus over a slow, rhythmic gospel piano line. Listen as each vocal section gets a chance to shine.

Josquin de Prez (1440-1520) wrote at least three pieces in the manner of the “frottola,” a popular Italian song form whose subject matter is often humorous and mocking. It was usually for four voices, characterized by syllabic text setting, small melodic ranges, repeated notes, clear-cut phrases and sections, and word painting. ***El Grillo***, by Josquin is one of the most well-known pieces of the late 15th century. It is a very fast, rhythmic song, which entertains singers and audiences alike as it imitates the chirps of a cricket with a happy and lively feeling.

Revey venir du printans (*Here comes the Spring*) by Claude Le Jeune (1528-1600). Le Jeune was an important composer of the French chanson which was the main secular form of song in France during the late 16th century. This chanson has a refrain for all five voices, which begins and ends the song, and is sung in between each verse. Combinations of voices sing the various verses, soprano and alto, soprano, alto and tenor, etc, etc etc. The dance rhythm used is two accents followed by three accents, popular in Renaissance music which you will hear in *Spring Song* by Leonard Bernstein and also in his West Side Story score.

Our program offers three aspects of Leonard Bernstein’s creative output: his spiritual and choral pieces, his theater music, and his love of Renaissance music and dance rhythms. One example of the rhythms is in ***Spring Song*** from *The Lark*, a play written by Jean Anouilh, and adapted by Lillian Hellman. *Spring Song* is light and bouncy, with a simple, straightforward melody and text “Revey venir du printemps; Laudate domine” [Behold, spring is come; God be praised]. Bernstein uses the Renaissance dance rhythms in alternating accents of two and three in beats of six.

Tarleton’s Resurrection by John Dowland (1563-1626) Dowland was one of the most important composers of lute music in 16th century Europe. ***The Cobbler*** is an anonymous tune from the Folger “Dowland” lute book which is one of the major sources for English lute music, containing many pieces by John Dowland. Cantabile singer, Nic Brown plays these pieces on the guitar and introduces us to Renaissance music composed for the lute.

George Gershwin was well respected by Leonard Bernstein, who played and conducted Gershwin's music everywhere. ***Sing of Spring*** was composed for the 1937 musical film *A Damsel in Distress*. The story takes place in an English castle so the song imitates an English madrigal in the popular style of the day, adding imitations of bird calls, especially in the piano introduction and little trills in the voices. Bernstein said "Jazz is the ultimate common denominator of the American musical style." As a teenager in the 1930s he organized a jazz band which played at parties and he directed a swing band at summer camp. He composed music with jazz influence while a student at Harvard and later when he studied at Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. After graduation from college, he played in jazz clubs in New York and spent time transcribing jazz solos by Coleman Hawkins and other jazz legends. He was commissioned to compose music for Woody Herman's jazz band. Bernstein compositions are infused with jazz! And he influenced the listening public to consider jazz a serious musical expression!

In 1986 George Shearing set a series of pieces for choir, jazz piano and bass with lyrics by William Shakespeare that he called *Music to Hear*. After these were widely received and performed, the Mostly Madrigal Singers of St. Charles, Illinois, Jeffrey Hunt, director, commissioned Shearing to set seven more songs on Shakespeare's words. The first performance of ***Songs and Sonnets***, was on July 9, 1999 with John Rutter conducting and Shearing at the piano. You'll want to follow the words to understand the meaning of some of the Shakespearean English. *Live with me and be my love* is a bouncy love song with lyrics from *Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music*. *When daffodils begin to peer* is all about sex and good weather! Words are from *The Winter's Tale*, act 4, scene 2 when Autolycus enters singing. *It was a lover and his lass* is from *As You Like It*, act 5, scene 3, with the Pages singing a song to spring-time, ring-time, birds singing time, lovers-time. In *Spring*, we hear the cuckoo singing that married men have been cuckolded. It is from *Love's Labour's Lost*, act 5, scene 2 when the character Ver (who is the personification of spring) sings to the King. *Who is Silvia?* from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, act 4, scene 2 has Proteus standing outside Silvia's window in the moonlight serenading her. *Fie on sinful fantasy* is from *The merry wives of Windsor*, act 5, scene 5. Mistress Quickly, dressed as the Fairy Queen, sets the Fairies onto Falstaff: "Corrupt, corrupt, and tainted in desire! About him, fairies. Sing a scornful rhyme, and, as you trip, still pinch him to your time." *Hey, ho, the wind and the rain* from *Twelfth Night*, act 5, scene 2 ends the play with the song refrain: "for the rain it raineth every day". This casts a pall over the characters' expectations of a good life.

Two spiritual songs ***Almighty Father*** and ***Sing God a Simple Song*** are from *MASS* by Leonard Bernstein. I remember seeing a performance of this theater piece done outside at Lincoln Center, around the fountain with Alan Titus in the lead role. It was exciting and confusing, a mix of elements built around a loose form of the Roman Catholic Mass. As all of Bernstein's pieces, it was "of its time", and a hit with audiences but not understood by critics. Songs from Mass like *Sing God a Simple Song* became very popular with succeeding generations of singers.

Take Care of This House is from *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, a Broadway show about 1776 Washington D.C. politics, with book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. It was done in 1976 to trace the first 100 years of American democracy. The show was a flop that ran only seven performances and was Bernstein's last original score for Broadway. In this song, Abigail Adams, the wife of President John Adams sings to a servant to protect her house - The White House. Arranger Rob. Fisher has combined it with ***My House*** from *Peter Pan*, a 1950 musical adaptation of J.M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*, or *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, which ran less than a year with only five songs composed by Bernstein.

I Hate Music is from a *Cycle of Five Kids Songs* composed in 1942 with words and music by Bernstein originally for a solo voice. The first performance was sung by the famous mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel with Bernstein at the piano. It is dedicated to Edys Merrill, an artist, friend and flatmate of Bernstein in the 1940s, because she used to emphatically exclaim the title phrase - I Hate Music! - because Bernstein made so much noise coaching singers and playing the piano.

West Side Story with book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and music by Leonard Bernstein and choreography by Jerome Robbins was a huge success. It took Shakespeare's play *Romero and Juliet* and set it in the blue-collar Upper West Side neighborhood of New York City which Lincoln Center now occupies. The time was the mid 1950s and the story was built around the rivalry between the Jets, a white street gang and the Sharks, a Puerto Rican street gang. Of course the Jets' leader falls in love with the sister of the Shark's leader. This tragic musical changed the tone of the American musical theater. Audiences will find the lyrics rather timely. It seems that some things have not changed in society since the 1950s.

The Best of All Possible Worlds and *Make our Garden Grow* are from *Candide*, which opened in 1956 and ran 73 performances. It is an adaptation of the satirical 19th century novel by Voltaire. Bernstein's music for the play is outstanding and it has earned respect and admiration for its rich score which blends elements from popular music through opera. With its gorgeous melodies and harmonies and inspirational lyrics, *Make Our Garden Grow* has been an oft-repeated favorite in Cantabile's repertoire. It is a joy to share the stage with the New Brunswick High School Choir in singing this song.

Cantabile has sung *Make Our Garden Grow* many times over the past thirty years, enjoying the gorgeous melodies and harmonies and deeply resonating with the lyrics: "We do the best we know." It is a joy for us to have the New Brunswick High School Chamber Chorus join us for this finale, and as the text states: "Let dreamers dream what worlds they please; Those Edens can't be found. The sweetest flow'rs, the fairest trees are grown in solid ground. We're neither pure, nor wise, nor good. We'll do the best we know. We'll build our house, and chop our wood, and make our garden grow."