

Choral Reviews

John C. Hughes, Editor

Missa Charles Darwin

Gregory W. Brown (b. 1974: ATTB voicing 2010–11, revised for SATB choir in 2013, further revisions and corrections made to SATB voicing in 2015)

SATB div., unaccompanied (c. 25')

Six movements: I: Introitus, Tropus ad Kyrie; II: Gloria; III: Alleluia; IV: Credo; V: Sanctus; VI: Agnus Dei

Text: Greek and Latin, English: Traditional Mass, Charles Darwin (compiled and edited by Craig Phillips)

Score available from the composer:

<http://www.gregorywbrown.com>

Recording: Brown, Gregory W., *Moonstrung Air*. New York Polyphony and The Crossing, Donald Nally. Navona Records, NV5989. February 10, 2015. MP3 or compact disc.

Inspired by a news article stating that the King James Bible (1611) and *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) are the most influential books written in English, Craig Phillips, New York Polyphony's bass, approached Gregory W. Brown about writing a piece combining the religious and secular themes of these two seminal writings. The resulting composition is *Missa Charles Darwin*. The work adheres to the form and structure of the traditional Mass but draws the majority of its texts from Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man* (1871), and his letters. Phillips compiled and edited the texts masterfully. The joining of the sacred and secular in a single work invites the listener to discover parallels and departures between the two perspectives.

An American composer and conductor living in western Massachusetts, Brown completed *Missa Charles Darwin* in 2011 for the four male voices of New York Polyphony, hence the original version's ATTB voicing. In 2014, Brown created an SATB version of the piece for the London Concord Singers, who performed it in April of that year. After that performance, Brown made additional revisions to the SATB voicing for an upcoming performance in June 2017 by Seattle's The Esoterics (Eric Banks, conductor).

Missa Charles Darwin begins with a short *Introitus* that is immediately followed by the Kyrie movement. Rather than deriving the musical material for the meterless, monophonic *Introitus* from chant, Brown draws on a portion of the DNA sequence of *Platyspiza crassirostris*, a group of birds known as Darwin's Finches. A DNA sequence is a lengthy series made up of four nucleotides: adenine, guanine, cytosine, and thymine (abbreviated to AGCT). In the original ATTB voicing, the birds' genetic sequence (ATTTTGGGAAGGATTTAATCTATCA...) directly corresponds to pitches of the same letter name; Bb was used for T as Bb is sometimes

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represented as “T” (10) in integer notation. In the SATB version, the *Introitus* is transposed up a perfect fourth but still follows the genetic sequence, albeit now in transposition. The *Introitus*’s text comes from *The Descent of Man*: “...ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge...”

The subsequent Kyrie movement begins with a brief “Kyrie eleison” incipit, which also takes its pitches from the preceding genetic sequence. The movement combines the usual tripartite text in Greek with a passage about natural selection: “...one general law leading to the advancement of all organic beings,—namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die.” This movement’s text invites the listener to consider if and how the concept of mercy jibes with the inherently merciless process of natural selection.

The Gloria movement does not use any of the traditional Mass texts. Instead, various texts from Darwin’s writings are excerpted and combined to form a cohesive text. The movement centers on one trope, “There is grandeur in this view of life...,” which is from the final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*. The “grandeur” that Darwin speaks of is the interdependence of living beings. Although species vary and may be unaware of their reliance on other entities, their interconnectedness has created a set of natural laws that are at once merciless and wondrous. For the text “different yet dependent upon each other,” Brown gives the passage a quality of symmetry by using “graphical point-reflections” (mm. 47–49). Brown’s polyphonic vocal writing (focused horizontally rather than vertically) creates a texture that mirrors the simultaneous independence and interdependence of which the text speaks.

At times playful and perhaps even snarky, the Alleluia movement juxtaposes the single word “Alleluia” with a phrase from Darwin’s introduction to *The Descent of Man*: “...it is those who know little, and not those who know much, who so positively assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science” and a portion of an 1873 letter by Darwin: “...if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came and how it arose.” The movement’s playfulness comes from the patter-like motif with the text “...it is those who know little, and not those who know much.” Brown moves this motif between voices, imitates it melodically, and slightly alters it throughout the movement. At the same time, other voices are singing “Alleluia.” At one point (mm. 32–34), the upper three voices declaim “science” homophonically three times, and each time the bass enters a beat later with “never.” The exchange between the voices coupled with dominant-tonic harmonic language creates a sarcastic, barbershop-esque critique of those who eschew self-reflection in favor of unexamined beliefs. Brown juxtaposes this rather snarky moment with a subsequent contemplative passage setting the text: “...but if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came.” The mystical musical language of this passage and the following twenty-eight measures of “Alleluia” seem to suggest self-examination and a nuanced approach to addressing life’s unanswerable questions. Although each voice is independent and expressive, they come together at the very end of the movement on a stunning Bb-major chord.

A statement of belief, the Credo movement is traditionally a setting of the Nicene creed. Appropriate to Darwin’s theories, the Credo movement of this work is centered on the concept of “process”—that of development, structure, and form. After a short incipit of Carolus Linnaeus’s

maxim “Natura non facit saltus.” (“Nature makes no leaps.”), the movement consists of texts culled from *On the Origin of Species* and *The Decent of Man*. In homage to “process,” Brown intricately structures this central movement. He uses three rhythmic cells of various lengths (three, four, and seven measures). The genetic sequence used in the *Introitus* appears throughout the movement and, akin to genetic mutation, the rhythmic cells and genetic sequence are inverted, put in retrograde, embellished, and truncated. Brown uses a *Hauptstimme* symbol (H) to denote each appearance of the sequence.

In line with the previous movement, in the Sanctus, Brown uses the intricate musical construction of a canon as a means to depict oneness with creation. The movement’s text explores the image of buds giving “rise by growth to fresh buds,” each of which is connected to the same “great tree of life.” The movement’s polyphonic texture mirrors the interconnectedness found so often in nature, such as in ecosystems. The idea of the holiness of interdependence is quite moving, and this Sanctus movement, which does not use the traditional Latin text, is emotionally powerful.

The text of the Agnus Dei movement is an appreciation of “the many complex contingencies on which existence depends.” After a meterless incipit, the Agnus Dei movement begins with a hymn-like texture. The movement’s homophony, symmetrical phrases, and repeated music is a sure departure from the previous movements and seems to round out the piece in the same way a chorale does a Bach cantata. The Agnus Dei concludes with a reprise of the second movement’s polyphonic setting of “Alleluia.”

Two resources are available for more information about this piece. First, in October 2011, Brown gave a TEDx talk about the work. New York Polyphony joined him on stage and sang several movements. This talk is available on YouTube and is a tremendous resource for understanding the origin of the piece and Brown’s compositional approach. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=s3IsKOXjcbk). Second, New York Polyphony recorded the work for Brown’s album *Moonstrung Air*. Conductors should certainly consult the recording but should be aware that it is of the ATTB voicing, which obviously differs from the SATB version. The album as a whole is stunning and expertly performed by New York Polyphony and The Crossing (Donald Nally, conductor). All those interested in Brown’s music should consult it.

Missa Charles Darwin is a welcomed piece of new music. It is refreshing to see a living composer write polyphonically and to limit himself to using only four parts (*divisi* is only sparingly used in the SATB voicing). In addition to Brown’s musical language, the piece is commendable for its unique texts. Craig Phillips did a tremendous job wedding the disparate texts into a cohesive whole. The texts are written out and the corresponding original sources are cited in the liner notes of *Moonstrung Air*; however, this useful information does not appear in the score. Including this information in future editions would help conductors better study the text and prepare their program notes and materials.

Missa Charles Darwin is quite demanding, but this is understood given that it was written for New York Polyphony, a virtuosic ensemble. The work demands singers to be independent, familiar with the polyphonic idiom, and comfortable with some abrupt tonal shifts. A

concert pairing this work with a Renaissance Mass setting such as Palestrina's *Missa Brevis* would be thought provoking and would make a wonderful evening of music. However, preparing this twenty-five minute unaccompanied work of such difficulty may not be conducive for every ensemble. In this case, the Kyrie and Sanctus movements are the most accessible and could each be excerpted if desired.

Depending on the setting, it is not unimaginable that some students might object to singing this piece on religious grounds. If such concerns are raised, it might be prudent to remind them of how often Christian sacred music is justifiably taught within a public school setting because of its musical and historical worth. In such a situation, any non-Christian students are typically expected to perform the work. It is therefore reasonable to expect those students with misgivings about this work to sing something with which they philosophically disagree. Such an experience can and should be framed as a learning opportunity. So long as the music that conductors program has musical validity—as *Missa Charles Darwin* certainly does—students will benefit from performing it. Additionally, *Missa Charles Darwin* gives performers the chance to grapple with the relationship between faith and science and belief and non-belief.

— *John C. Hughes*