

Festival of Psalms

Hong Kong Chamber Choir, Hong Kong Soloists

City Hall Concert Hall, 1st December 2005

1: Cantonese Introduction:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this concert by the Hong Kong Soloists, Hong Kong Chamber Choir, and Orchestra. The concert's title is "*Festival of Psalms*"; and in your house-programme you'll find background notes about these religious poems from the Hebrew Bible, and about the composers and their musical settings of the particular psalms we'll be listening to this evening, as well as the texts of those same psalms.

Time-wise, we're starting with one of the earliest and most influential of baroque composers: a northern Italian who became Master of Music of the Republic of Venice, Claudio Monteverdi. He's best-known today for his Italian madrigals, and for a complete setting of the psalms and canticles for the evening prayer-service in church, his 'Vespers' of the year 1610. One of the Vespers psalms is Ps 121 "Laetatus Sum" ('I rejoiced when I heard them say...'). It's a *later* setting of that *same* psalm that we're about to hear: not published in Monteverdi's lifetime, this is written for six voices.

2: English Introduction:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this concert by the Hong Kong Soloists, Hong Kong Chamber Choir, and Orchestra. The concert's title is "*Festival of Psalms*"; and in your house-programme you'll find background notes about these religious poems from the Hebrew Bible, and about the composers and their musical settings of the *particular* psalms we'll be listening to this evening, as well as the texts of those same psalms.

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Following this, we'll hear two psalm settings by a German contemporary of Monteverdi, who twice visited Venice, the second time to study with the Italian master, and who brought the influence of Venice to the traditional German music of his day: Heinrich Schütz. Schütz wrote many settings of psalms, but few of them were published. We'll hear two polychoral settings by him, from the collection of 26 that he did publish in 1619, Ps 1 (Blessed is the man....) and the popular exiles' lament, Ps 137, (By the rivers of Babylon). First, Monteverdi

3: Monteverdi: Ps 121 "Laetatus Sum"

4: Cantonese:

Ps 121, "Laetatus Sum" (I rejoiced), by Venetian composer Claudio Monteverdi. Next, two psalm-settings by a German *contemporary* of Monteverdi, who twice visited Venice, the second time to study with the Italian master, and who brought the influence of Venice to the traditional German music of his day: Heinrich Schütz. Schütz wrote many settings of psalms, but few of them were published. Here are two polychoral settings by him from the collection of 26 that he *did* publish in 1619, Ps 1 (Blessed is the man....) and the popular exiles' lament, Ps 137, (By the rivers of Babylon).

5: Schütz: Ps 1 and Ps 137

6: English:

Settings of Ps 1 and of Ps 137 (By the rivers of Babylon), by Heinrich Schütz of Germany. He was the undisputed “big name” and major influence on church music in Germany until J.S.Bach came along ---- but that was a hundred years later. And even then, Bach was never as well known in his own time. Now of course, *he’s the great name* in sacred music of the baroque era. His legacy of church cantatas cover not only all the seasons and festivals of the year but the whole range of religious sensibility. Their texts come from various sources: the bible (psalms, new testament, the gospels), with contemporary hymns and poems providing chorale parts. One of them, based on a *Psalm*, is an early cantata (catalogued as number 131): the text is from the penitential Ps 130 “From the depths I cry to you O Lord”. It’s scored for tenor and baritone soloists, choir, oboe, bassoon, strings and basso continuo.

7: **Bach: BWV 131**

8: **Cantonese:**

One of the earliest church cantatas of J.S.Bach, no.131, based on Ps 130 “From the depths I cry to you O Lord”: the chorale sections are two verses from a German religious poem of Bach’s day. Bach’s church cantatas cover not only all the seasons and festivals of the year but the whole range of religious sensibility. Their texts come from the bible, including the book of psalms, with contemporary hymns and poems providing chorale parts.

In the second part of our concert, after the intermission, we’ll have two psalm settings from the baroque period in England, and one from the Romantic era.

===== I n t e r m i s s i o n =====

9: **English:**

Welcome back to part 2 of our “Festival of Psalms”, with the Hong Kong Soloists and Hong Kong Chamber Choir and orchestra. One category of psalms is those in praise of God, of His power, sovereignty, creation. Ps 96 “O Sing unto the Lord a new Song” is one of a group of such hymns to the kingship of God and his coming as judge of the world.

This psalm seems to combine two poems, and also has references to the Book of Isaiah the prophet. Henry Purcell's setting of it, in English, is in the newer cantata-style of church anthem that he developed towards the end of his short life: he'd already made his mark with some anthems for royal occasions in London. His Ps 96 is arranged for solo soprano, alto, tenor and bass, together with chorus: a form known as "verse-anthem" in English church music.

10: Purcell : Ps 96 O Sing unto the Lord a New Song

11: **Cantonese:**

We've just listened to English composer Henry Purcell's Ps 96 (O Sing unto the Lord a New Song), in the English verse-anthem form in which he wrote for great church and state occasions in London. Ps 96 is one of a group of hymns to the kingship of God and his coming as judge of the world, and contains references to the Book of Isaiah the prophet. Purcell was at the peak of his powers, not quite 30 years old when he wrote that piece, and was only 36 when he died, at the height of his fame. Our next composer died even younger --- at only 31, and not yet well-known. Franz Schubert's setting of one of the most popular of all the psalms, Ps 23 "The Lord is my shepherd", was almost an accident: he wrote it as a favour for a music-teacher friend. Here it's sung by our Chamber Choir with organ accompaniment.

12: Schubert: Ps 23 The Lord is my Shepherd

13: **English:**

A choral arrangement of Franz Schubert's setting of Ps 23, The Lord is my Shepherd, originally written for four girls' voices and piano, as a 'test-piece' for pupils of a friend of Schubert. He himself was just 23 at the time.

Some of the psalms borrow quite a bit from other books of the bible, notably from the Exodus story. Ps 135 "O Praise the Lord with one consent" is a song of praise and invitation to praise the Lord, in which the text is *entirely* made up of borrowing from other psalms and biblical texts. George Frederick Handel's setting of it, as one of his so-called

“Chandos Anthems” uses a rather free verse-translation, and is scored for four soloists, choir, oboe and strings. The nick-name “Chandos” comes from the wealthy tycoon, the Duke of Chandos, in whose country-house Handel was for a while the “live-in” composer, and where he wrote the 11 ‘Chandos’ anthems for the Duke’s retinue of musicians and singers.

14: Cantonese:

Ps 135 “O Praise the Lord with one consent” is a song of praise in which the text borrows from other psalms and biblical texts. George Frederick Handel’s setting of it, as one of his so-called “Chandos Anthems” uses a rather free verse-translation, and is scored for four soloists, choir, oboe and strings. The nick-name “Chandos” comes from the wealthy tycoon, the Duke of Chandos, in whose country-house Handel was for a while the “live-in” composer, and where he wrote the 11 ‘Chandos’ anthems for the Duke’s retinue of musicians and singers.

15: Handel: Chandos Anthem no. 9 “O Praise the Lord with one Consent”