



Let 'Passiontide' wash over you

Vox Philia and Berks Sinfonietta are teaming up to celebrate a holy season with powerful works.

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Event: Vox Philia and Berks Sinfonietta present "Music for Passiontide."

Where and when: Sunday, March 25 at 4 p.m. in Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, 740 Cherry St., West Reading.

Tickets: \$15 adults, \$5 students. Call 484-509-1290 or visit www.voxphilia.org.

In "Music for Passiontide," [Vox Philia's](#) concert Sunday at 4 p.m. at the start of Passion Week, the audience at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, West Reading, can expect a mystical, contemplative experience as the chorus, along with [Berks Sinfonietta](#), explores works written throughout the centuries for this holiest time of the Christian calendar, culminating in Easter.

David McConnell, the artistic director of both ensembles, said he is always drawn to the music connected with the story of Christ's suffering and death.

"As a church musician for 35 years, I've heard a lot of excellent preachers talk about this," he said. "But I think the music speaks more profoundly and eloquently about all the supernatural, complicated things that happened during this week than even the best preacher can."

McConnell said he chose some favorite works that he has conducted throughout his career, as well as some favorites he will conduct for the first time. What they have in common is texts that have personal meaning for him and music that has the ability to open the heart.

French composer Maurice Durufle's "Ubi caritas," a 1960 work from his Opus 10 "Four Motets," is a setting of the text "Where charity and love are, God is there," which ends "and may we love each other with a sincere heart."

"It's one of the most important texts for me on my own journey," McConnell said. "These days, when I'm struggling with where and how I want to be in the world, that's a text that holds a lot of meaning for me."

The a cappella composition uses a Gregorian chant tune and usually is performed on Maundy Thursday.

Another a cappella motet, Anton Bruckner's 1884 setting of "Christus factus est" ("Christ became obedient"), is often used for Good Friday services.

"If you're a composer and you're looking for someone who sets a text perfectly, this is it," McConnell said. "Every sentiment is perfectly expressed."

Thomas Tallis' two "Lamentations of Jeremiah," composed between 1560 and 1569, are the oldest pieces Vox Philia has performed, and "it's been a fascinating thing to teach," he said.

"I spend a lot of time reminding them how it used to be" during the Renaissance, he said. "We think in chords now, but this is linear (three distinct vocal melodies sung simultaneously). At that time, the singers only saw their own parts and not the other parts. It forced listening; they had to listen to the other parts."

He said it's a different way for Vox Philia to sing, and he tells them not to look at all the information in the score.

Mozart's "Ave verum corpus" ("Hail, True Body"), written in the composer's final year, along with "The Magic Flute" and Requiem, is performed often, but too beautiful to pass up. The text is a meditation on the Catholic belief in Christ's real presence during the Eucharist, or Holy Communion.

"Its simplicity and ease are deceptive of how wonderfully deep and perfect a setting it is," McConnell said.

Emily Fredericks, director of choirs at Wilson High School, who in 2014 won the Outstanding Young Conductor Award from the Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Choral Directors Association, will guest-conduct this work.

McConnell said he is excited about presenting two works by the Estonian composer Arvo Part, who is currently the most-performed contemporary classical composer in the world.

Both the instrumental work "Fratres" ("brethren") from 1977 and the 1985 "Stabat Mater," originally for three voices and three strings, but expanded in 2008 for mixed chorus and strings, use Part's "tintinnabuli" technique.

This technique evolved from Part's intensive study of plainchant and early polyphony, which he did to help develop his own compositional voice.

In "Fratres," for example, a melodic voice moves around a central pitch, while the other voice sounds the notes of the tonic triad (in the key of C, the C chord, with pitches C, E and G).

These simple elements are juxtaposed with several odd meters in a repetitive pattern, with a gradual crescendo and decrescendo throughout the piece.

In a book he read about the religion and spirituality in Part's music, McConnell said, the author explained that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, icons (paintings of saints) open a window to the divine to allow for a subjective, transcendent experience.

"I think Part's music works the same way," he said. "In the Bruckner, every note is expressive and is capturing something in the text. Part's music feels more like a visual picture. It's our job to get everything in the picture perfectly, and the music itself creates the emotion. We can't be subjective with it.

"The program asks a lot of the audience; any good program does, but especially the Part. You have to let the busyness of your life go, and focus on being open, and you'll have a deep, subjective reaction to the music. You don't have to be a believer for that to happen."

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