



(LEMS 8059)

THE SALZBURG MOZART MOZART'S SALZBURG CHORAL MASTERPIECES

Johannes Somary, conductor
Cynthia Richards Wallace, soprano
Megan Friar, alto
Michael Steinberger, tenor
Richard Holmes, baritone

AMORARTIS CHORUS
Johannes Somary, music director

MUSICA ANTIQUA SANKT PETERSBURG
Steven Fox, music director

Program Notes by Johannes Somary

Much of the tension that existed between Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo of Salzburg and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart stemmed from the archbishop's penchant for brevity. He had no patience with music that caused the celebration of Mass to last more than forty-five minutes, most especially a Mass for which he was the presider. And yet the Mass was expected to include an Epistle sonata, an offertory motet, and all the movements of the Ordinary — Kyrie, Gloria., Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei —all with string orchestra, trumpets, and drums in addition to the organ. The challenges for Mozart as composer were formidable. And yes, he met these challenges brilliantly by leaving for posterity a large and impressive collection of magnificent choral compositions, most of

them written during his Salzburg years. There are some, including the venerable authors of papal decrees, who warned musicians against writing or performing church music that sounds as if it were written for the theater. And indeed, Mozart did write Masses and motets that have melodic phrases which could easily come right out of his operas. But in the Age of Enlightenment, composers who wrote sacred music—and most composers actually did—were not inclined to separate sacred styles of writing from secular ones. Nor were they quite enamored of the mysticism replete in the more severe acappella polyphony of the Renaissance. They loved to hear solo voices emerge from the choir, and they loved to hear orchestras or chamber ensembles contribute color, vitality, and joy to the music of the church.

Regina Coeli, K. 276, the third setting Mozart composed for this text, evokes an atmosphere at once exuberant, triumphant, and sublime. The words “Regina Coeli” are those of a Marian hymn sung at the conclusion of the evening service of Compline from Easter until Pentecost: “Queen of Heaven, rejoice! He whom you have borne is risen, as He said; Alleluia! Pray for us to God.” With its distant echoes of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” Mozart’s ebullient motet, scored for strings without violas, oboes, trumpets, timpani, and organ, was composed in 1779, just two years before his final quarrel with the Archbishop of Salzburg.

The Coronation Mass in C Major, K. 317, also composed in 1779, was written not to celebrate the coronation of a king or emperor. It was written to celebrate the crowning of an image of the Virgin Mary in the pilgrimage church of Maria Plain, on the outskirts of Salzburg. This festive Mass is richly scored for oboes, bassoon, horns, trumpets, timpani, strings, and organ. Soloists, as in “Regina Coeli,” weave in and out of the choral fabric as would a concertino in a baroque concerto grosso, except in the final movement, when the chorus yield to a solo soprano for what must be one of the most sublime settings of the “Agnus Dei” in the entire history of music. *Litaniae Lauretanae*, K. 109, composed in 1771, when Mozart was barely fifteen years old, is a blissfully tender cantata-like composition in five movements, the last one an exquisite sigh, worthy of a much older genius. Legend has it that the house in which Mary first received the news that she was to bear the Son of God was transported during the crusades first to a town in Croatia and later to an Italian seaside village called Loreto. Subsequently, Loreto became a shrine and in that shrine a special litany was prayed daily to the Virgin Mary. This litany replaced all existing Marian litanies and eventually became a most popular text for composers of sacred music. Mary is given all kinds of poetic descriptions: “Gate of Heaven,” “Fountain of love,” “Tower of ebony,” “Queen of Angels”— these are all followed by the invocation “ora pro nobis” (“pray for us”). Mozart composed this, the first of his two settings of the litany, for choir with soloists, strings without violas, and organ. By today’s standards of speed and efficiency, a “Missa Brevis” by Mozart would hardly be called brief. But the appellation “brevis” probably refers more to the slender orchestration than to the length of the work.

Mozart composed numerous liturgical pieces designated as “Missa Brevis.” But his *Missa Brevis* in C Major, K. 220, was originally simply called “Missa,” nothing more, nothing less. The nickname “Spatzenmesse” (“Sparrow Mass”) came about as a result of the

chirping sounds created by the grace notes in a repeated violin figure heard in the “Sanctus” and again at the end of the “Benedictus.” A characteristic of this glorious work and of the other Masses known by the subtitle of “Missa Brevis” is the dominant homophonic texture and clarity of text. As with The Coronation Mass, Mozart closes the Agnus Dei with music from the Kyrie, thus providing a kind of structural unity. And as in The Coronation Mass, the Gloria in excelsis Deo is one lively throughcomposed movement and the Credo is in three tight sections, the middle one a poignant slow passage for the words about the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. The “Spatzenmesse,” scored for two trumpets, timpani, strings without violas, and organ, is believed to have been composed in 1775, during that short period of a few months when Mozart left Salzburg to go to Munich.

Two additional motets appear on this Mozartean collaboration between AmorArtis in New York and the period-instrument orchestra Musica Antiqua Sankt Petersburg, founded by Steven Fox. Mozart wrote many canons, ranging in texts all the way from sacred to scatological. His sacred canon Ave Maria (“Hail Mary, full of grace”), composed in 1788 and sung a-cappella, is one of the more complex and one of the most beautiful. As for Ave Verum Corpus, written in the very last year of his life for chorus, strings, and organ, this gem is arguably the most exquisite, possibly the best loved, and surely the most often performed motet of the entire eighteenth century.

TRACKS:

1. Regina Coeli (K. 276) - 6:28

Coronation Mass (K. 317)

2. Kyrie - 2:49

3. Gloria - 4:30

4. Credo - 6:54

5. Sanctus - 1:51

6. Benedictus - 3:08

7. Agnus Dei - 5:47

8. Ave Maria (K. 555) - 1:52

Litaniae Lauretanaem (K. 109)

9. Kyrie - 2:12

10. Sancta Maria - 3:39

11. Salus informarum - 1:13

12. Regina Angelorum - 1:54

13. Agnus Dei - 3:02

Missa Brevis (K. 220)

14. Kyrie - 1:45

15. Gloria - 2:48

16. Credo - 4:02

17. Sanctus - 0:55
18. Benedictus - 3:08
19. Agnus Dei - 3:40
20. Ave Verum Corpus (K. 618) - 3:48

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The Lyrichord Early Music Series

PO Box 1977 Old Chelsea Station

New York, NY 10011 Ph: 212 404 8290 Fax: 212 404 8291

email: nick@lyrichord.com Web: www.lyrichord.com

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