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4 Choral music in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries

NICK STRIMPLE

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, composers were presented with more stylistic options than at any previous time. While often associated with national schools, these options were not, in reality, confined to them. In America, Charles Ives (1874–1954), laboring in near anonymity, trusted that people who appreciated the simultaneous sounds of separate marching bands in a parade could listen the same way in a concert hall. In France, Claude Debussy (1862–1918), after hearing a Javanese gamelan orchestra, invigorated Western music by subtly blurring ideas of tonality. The Russian Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) emancipated rhythm in previously inconceivable ways. In Austria, competing ideas emerged: on one hand Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) continued to expand the limits of traditional tonality and form,¹ while on the other Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), believing that his muse was the true heir of German Romanticism,² experimented first with expanded orchestral timbres before moving on to atonal expressionism and thus to dodecaphony. In England, Sir Edward Elgar (1857–1934) summarized all that was noble in Victorian tradition, while his younger contemporary Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), driven by impulses similar to his contemporaries Béla Bartók (1881–1945) in Hungary and Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) in Moravia, discovered what could be achieved by a complete assimilation of folk traditions. At the same time, jazz musicians were striving for respectability while Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) in England and Amy Beach (1867–1944) in America were endeavoring to prove that women also could compose music of high quality. In addition, the two world wars had profound impact on choral music. All succeeding composers were thus influenced, in some way, by these people and events and, as the century progressed, they incorporated into their own music the various techniques pioneered during the first two decades of the century.

Charles Ives: polytonality, tone clusters, collage, and chance

In 1894, Charles Ives composed Psalm 67. The same year he began work on Psalm 90, a work on which he would not put the finishing touches until 1924.

In 1898 he began *Three Harvest Home Chorales*, which he would not complete until 1912. These works, at the beginning of their creation, anticipated many of the innovations that occurred in twentieth-century music: bitonality, atonal melodic lines, dissonant harmonies, whole-tone scales, chord clusters, and serialized rhythm. Works that Ives composed well within the time frame encompassed by *Psalm 90 – General William Booth Enters Heaven* (1914), *Serenity* (1919), the *Symphony No. 4* (1910–16), and other pieces that include chorus – incorporate collage technique, polytonality, and exceptionally complicated rhythmic constructs.

It is difficult to ascertain Ives's influence on European composers during the twentieth century's first two decades because many of his important compositions either remained unperformed or were performed only locally. By the end of World War II, however, he was a familiar name among composers. Even those not usually associated with the avant-garde occasionally found something in Ives that could be adapted for their own purposes. For example, the "Pleni sunt coeli" section of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1961), as well as the initial choral entries in Béla Bartók's *Cantata Profana* (1931) and Steven Stucky's (b.1949) *Drop, Drop Slow Tears* (1979) are direct descendants of the outwardly expanding chord cluster in Ives's *Psalm 90*. Other composers obviously influenced by Ives include: Bernd Alois Zimmermann (1918–70), whose enormous *Requiem für einen jungen Dichter* (1967–69) masterfully utilizes collage technique; John Cage (1912–92) and all others who experimented with indeterminacy; those who experimented with *musique concrète* and other forms of electro-acoustic music; early leaders of the Scandinavian avant-garde, including the Norwegian Alfred Janson (b.1937), whose *Tema* (1966) uses wordless chorus and indeterminacy within a measured structure to create a collage effect; and the Swede Lars Edlund (b.1922), whose *Gloria* (1969) constructs chord clusters in quarter tones.

Claude Debussy and Impressionism

The Javanese gamelan music, modes, whole-tone scales, parallel chord motion, smooth edges, and visual images that informed Debussy's music cast a remarkably wide net of influence during the twentieth century. Early on, composers as dissimilar as Stravinsky and Vaughan Williams found common ground in Debussy's universe. Very few, however, followed his lead totally. Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) is often mentioned in the same breath as Debussy, but his music, including the famous *Trois chansons* (1914–15) and the ballet with wordless chorus *Daphnis et Chloe* (1909–12), is more cleanly etched than Debussy's earlier *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orléans* (1898–1908) or his *Nocturnes* (1897–99), which also uses wordless chorus.

In addition to Vaughan Williams, several English composers of the same generation fell under Debussy's spell. In the work of Gustav Holst (1874–1934), the influence is most apparent in portions of *Hymn of Jesus* (1919) and the third set of *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda* (1910). The affinity of Herbert Howells (1892–1983) to Debussy is apparent in his lovely *Hymnus Paradisi* (1938). But the most consistently Impressionistic of the English is Frederick Delius, whose *Sea Drift* (1904), *A Song of the High Hills* (1911), and other works owe most of their inspiration to the example of Debussy.

Harmonic aspects of Debussy's style colored much of the music written in the middle of the century, as exemplified in the works of Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959) and Frank Martin (1890–1974). Martinů managed to successfully combine elements of Moravian folk music with impressionistic harmonic progressions and textures in compositions such as *The Spectre's Bride* (1932) and *The Opening of the Wells* (1955). Martin progressed from modality, as in his impressive *Mass* (c.1922–26), to a unique dodecaphonic technique, as found in the opera-oratorio *Le Vin Herbé* (1938–41), in which tone rows were harmonized with major or minor triads.

Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) presents an outstanding example of Debussy's continued influence in France during the twentieth century. Like Debussy, Messiaen was profoundly moved by the music of the East, in his case Hindu chant. He also experimented with various modes and non-retrogradable rhythmic constructs. For him, music was color. All this can be heard in his splendid *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1944), and the enormous *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1969).

More recently, Debussy's continued influence in rather undiluted form can be seen in the choral compositions of Romanian-French composer Edgar Cosma (b.1925). Other younger composers have continued to use swathes of impressionistic color to balance various avant-garde techniques, as can be observed in compositions as different as *The Path of the Just* (1968) by the Norwegian composer Knut Nystedt (b.1915), and *A Maya Prophecy* (1985) by the Israeli Meir Mindel (b.1946).

Igor Stravinsky and eclecticism

Along with Ives, Stravinsky remains the quintessential twentieth-century composer in that he fearlessly incorporated into his music – as it suited him – all of the styles and elements then known. Impressionism, neoclassicism, folk music, jazz, and dodecaphony were all, at one time or another, incorporated into his music with startlingly original results. After the appearance of *Les Noces* (1914–23), which utilized Russian folk materials, he was applauded by the Russian press as a great champion of the Russian tradition

established in the previous century by Mikhail Glinka, Piotr Tchaikovsky, Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and others. But as his style evolved and his musical impulses became more cosmopolitan, the official communist press turned on him with a vengeance, as did many others. *Les Noces* became an aberration, while his later works – many of them also masterpieces – were viewed as abominations. The Russian communists, in particular, could not see that *Symphony of Psalms* (1930, revised 1948) – with its initial struggle to achieve consonance, the second movement's exquisite double fugue, and the triumph of Russian Orthodox mysticism in the finale – was a veritable storehouse of tradition. Many could comprehend neither the neoclassical originality of *Oedipus Rex* (1926–27, revised 1948),³ nor the loving admiration of Bach exhibited in *Chorale Variations on "Vom Himmel hoch"* (1956). The acerbic religious objectivity of *Mass* (1944–48) offended some, while his adaptation of Schoenbergian dodecaphony in works such as *Threni* (1957–58) and *Requiem Canticles* (1965–66) was viewed as puzzling, if not troubling. Still, more musicians reacted positively to his music than not, and long after his death he remains one of the twentieth century's most influential composers. It is therefore important to remember that Stravinsky wrote choral music throughout his career, although he was not essentially a choral composer. In this he is like the others named above, whose collective work set the course of music during the century.

Among those who counted Stravinsky as a major influence was the Bavarian Carl Orff (1895–1982), who absorbed Stravinsky's driving, often asymmetrical rhythms to create a percussive style now referred to as Primitivism. His most successful work is the ever-popular *Carmina Burana* (1937), which weds secular medieval texts (in Latin, Old German and Old French) to Bavarian dance rhythms. Typical of other choral composers impacted by Stravinsky are the French Jean Langlais (1907–91), who was attracted by Stravinsky's often austere added-note harmonies; the Russian Georgy Sviridov (1915–98), who was profoundly influenced by elements of Stravinsky's Russian style; the Italian Luciano Berio (1925–2003), whose early works, in particular, are immersed in Stravinskian neoclassicism; the Chinese Bright Sheng (b.1955), whose propulsive rhythms and harmonic textures are informed by Stravinskian processes; György Ligeti (1923–2006), the great Austrian composer of Hungarian birth, whose attractive early folksong arrangements and Hungarian-inspired part-songs give no hint of the immense polyphonic constructs in his later avant-garde masterworks, *Requiem* (1963–65) and *Lux aeterna* (1966); and Krzysztof Penderecki (b.1933), whose *St. Luke Passion* (1963–66) – an amazing amalgam of the latest avant-garde devices and loving glances back at traditional modes of expression – stands as one of the twentieth century's most significant works.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Stravinsky's procedures were still apparent, in a more subtle way, in the music of such composers as the Americans Morten Lauridsen (b.1943) and William Bolcom (b.1938). Like Stravinsky, both absorbed the work of previous masters before launching into their respective explorations of antique or popular genres. As Stravinsky learned the classical symphony before writing one, Lauridsen learned thoroughly the Renaissance motet, Italian madrigal, French cabaret song, and the Broadway musical before composing his loving, respectful, and occasionally mystical tributes: *Madrigali: Six "Firesongs" on Italian Renaissance Poems* (1987), *Chansons des roses* (1993), *Nocturnes* (2004), and various Latin motets (most notably 1994's *O Magnum Mysterium*). Bolcom cleverly parodied various styles of jazz and popular music, mixing them freely with postmodern effects, a collective technique made obvious in his sprawling *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1984).

Gustav Mahler and the indestructibility of tonality

Although Mahler's music had retreated to the fringes of the repertoire until Leonard Bernstein revived it in the 1960s, his influence had still continued: his three great choral symphonies, No. 2 ("Resurrection," 1894), No. 3 (1898), and No. 8 ("Symphony of a Thousand," 1906) – each one different from the others – provided many more sympathetic bridges to the original example of Beethoven than did the earlier efforts of Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Liszt. Beginning with Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* (1905) and continuing through the twentieth century, the genre would be exploited by composers whose art represented virtually all schools of twentieth-century composition, including Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud (1892–1974), Leonard Bernstein (1918–90), Peter Mennin (1923–83), Alfred Schnittke (1934–98), Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75), Luciano Berio, and Hans Werner Henze (b.1926).

More important, Mahler's stretching – but not breaking – of tonality comforted composers who were not inclined to follow Schoenberg or the avant-garde. Richard Strauss (1864–1949), Alexander Zemlinsky (1871–1942), Eric Zeisl (1905–59), and Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) are among those who created beautiful and challenging choral works whose tonal language sprang from the harmonic rhetoric of Mahler.

Further, composers such as Leonard Bernstein, Jan Hanuš (1915–2004), and Luciano Berio adapted more personal aspects of Mahler's aesthetic. In Bernstein's problematic masterpiece the *Symphony No. 3* ("Kaddish," 1962, revised 1977), various Mahlerian devices of orchestration and musical gesture are combined with elements of American musical theater, jazz, serial technique, and chance. In Hanuš's *Ecce homo* (1977–78), touches of

Mahlerian harmony are combined with aleatoric writing and pre-recorded sounds. In *Sinfonia* (1968), Berio borrowed large chunks of Mahler's Second Symphony, around which he built a collage of sounds inspired by other wildly varying sources. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, as interest in minimalism increased and in serialism waned, many younger composers were attracted to these examples and utilized all manner of avant-garde devices within a tonal framework, good examples being: *Magnificat* (1995) by the German composer Wolfram Buchenberg (b.1962), and *Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine* (2000) by the American composer Eric Whitacre (b.1970).

Arnold Schoenberg and dodecaphony

As the twentieth century began, Arnold Schoenberg created the immense, sprawling *Gurrelieder* (1900–1), a work remarkable for its experimental combination of late German Romanticism and impressionistic textures and tone colorings. Like Mahler, Schoenberg was intent on continuing the German Romantic tradition, but whereas Mahler focused on a simplification of harmonic language to accommodate otherwise complex contrapuntal writing, Schoenberg concentrated on an intense chromaticization of the lines themselves. By the time *Friede auf Erden*, Op. 13 (1906) was completed, Schoenberg had realized the need to develop new ways of sustaining chromatic lines. This led first to atonal expressionism and ultimately to the formulation of his dodecaphonic technique, in which all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, as equal partners, replaced the hierarchy of tonal harmonic progression.

The first work utilizing this new technique was *Four Partsongs*, Op. 27 (1925), for mixed chorus (unaccompanied except for the last, which includes the exotic instrumental ensemble of violin, clarinet, mandolin, and cello). The twelve-tone technique had a profound influence throughout the century; composers such as Anton Webern (1883–1945), Pierre Boulez (b.1925), René Leibowitz (1913–72), Luigi Nono (1924–90), and Ross Lee Finney (1906–97), liberated by adherence to the technique's discipline, wrote compelling and difficult choral music.

But Schoenberg himself was not bashful about returning to tonality when it suited him, as in his two sets of German folksong arrangements, and the brilliant *Kol Nidre*, Op. 39 (1938). Moreover, this willingness to move in and out of dodecaphony provided a more enduring influence on younger composers, beginning with his own students: Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944), who created excellent folksong arrangements in Terezín during World War II; and Ernst Krenek (1900–91), who enriched the repertoire with choral works in styles ranging from twelve-tone to

neo-Renaissance. Others who created interesting and often stunning choral music – thoroughly informed by twelve-tone technique, but not limited to it – include Luigi Dallapiccola (1904–75), Hans Werner Henze, Frank Martin, Boris Blacher (1903–75), Witold Lutoslawski (1913–94), and Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001).

In the late 1960s other composers, reacting negatively to atonal serialism, began writing in a style incorporating the simplest kind of diatonic harmonies coupled with hypnotic rhythmic structures. Among the leaders of this style, known as minimalism, were Philip Glass (b.1937) and Steve Reich (b.1936), who would each produce important choral works as minimalism evolved during the century.

Edward Elgar and the continuance of national traditions

When Elgar composed *The Dream of Gerontius* (1899–1900), in a world far removed from Arnold Schoenberg's, he probably did not realize that it was the culmination of nineteenth-century British music. In addition to its harmonic richness and lyrical beauty it contains three of the most brilliant passages in the choral repertoire: the double choir incantation pleading for the prayers of Old Testament heroes, the great demonic chorus "Cast aside, thrust," and the angelic chorus "Praise to the Holiest, in the Height." Having assimilated all that British music had to offer in the nineteenth century and comfortable in his style, Elgar, like his great contemporaries Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) and Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848–1918), was not inclined toward the bolder innovations of the new century's avant-garde. Still, he continued to compose and influence younger British composers until his death.

Many of the British composers who carried forward the torch of tradition excelled in the composition of choral music. While some, such as Martin Shaw (1875–1958) and John Ireland (1879–1962), achieved moderate fame outside the British Commonwealth, theirs was essentially an insular art which, like Elgar and his contemporaries, avoided the "Shock of the New."⁴ Others, like John Rutter (b.1945), embraced popular aspects of traditional British music to create part-songs, anthems, and folksong arrangements that captured a broad international audience. But there were also those who were able to combine their inclination toward nationalism with an interest in a new means of expression. Outstanding examples include Benjamin Britten (1913–76), Sir William Walton (1902–83), Malcolm Singer (b.1953), and James MacMillan (b.1959). Benjamin Britten's view of British musical tradition extended far beyond nineteenth-century Romanticism. Profoundly influenced by Henry Purcell (1659–95), his music is laced with textures, dotted rhythms,

ritornelli, modal inflections, and cross-relations of the French baroque, as filtered through Purcell. Many of his choral compositions are standard repertoire, including *War Requiem* (1961), one of the twentieth century's greatest works, and the charming *A Ceremony of Carols* (1942). William Walton, whose music varies from the serious and dramatic part-song "Where Does the Uttered Music Go?" (1946) to the splashy and provocative cantata *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931), invigorated his essentially Victorian musical vocabulary with jazzy rhythms and spicy harmonies built from seventh and ninth chords. Malcolm Singer's choral works, both secular and sacred, are subtly informed by the Jewish modes; MacMillan's compositions, including the *St. John Passion* (2008), weave many modern trends into a uniquely British lyricism.

The tendency to carry traditions forward while gradually incorporating new elements can also be observed within other national schools. In Germany, for instance, nineteenth-century Romanticism flourished well into the new century in choral works by the aging Max Bruch (1838–1920), Max Reger (1873–1916), Georg Schumann (1866–1952), Hans Pfitzner (1869–1949), Richard Strauss, and others. This was supplanted – just before World War II – by a renewed interest in early Baroque forms and textures, as exemplified by the music of Johann Nepomuk David (1895–1977), Ernst Pepping (1901–81), Wolfgang Fortner (1907–87), and Hugo Distler (1908–42). Their primary inspiration was the early German Baroque composer Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672), and the Passions of Pepping and the smaller motet-like works of Distler are particularly transparent reflections of the earlier master's work. Neoclassical impulses asserted themselves after the war in the work of Siegfried Reda (1916–68) and others. In particular, Reda's impressive motet *Ecce homo aus dem 22. Psalm* (1950) was influenced by Stravinsky as well as by older German masters. The postmodern *Deus Passus* (2000) by Wolfgang Rihm (b.1952), informed by virtually all the compositional techniques associated with twentieth-century German music, perhaps represents the culmination of these tendencies.

In Russia, nineteenth-century nationalism was carried into the new century by Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943), Alexandr Kastal'sky, Pavel Chesnokov (1877–1944), Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859–1935), and others. Rachmaninov's choral works, which are significant rather than numerous, include the cantata *The Bells* (1913, to a text by Edgar Allan Poe) and the brilliant *All-Night Vigil* (1915), which became internationally popular toward the end of the twentieth century. Kastal'sky, Chesnokov, and Ippolitov-Ivanov focused on the composition of sacred music. Under their guidance, new choral music in the styles of the St. Petersburg School (also known as the Common European Style, established early in the nineteenth century by Dmitri Bortniansky) and the more nationalistic Moscow School (established

late in the nineteenth century by Mily Balakirev) continued until the Bolshevik Revolution. Liturgical composition was then severely curtailed until the last decade of the twentieth century. During the Soviet era, however, sacred choral music was still championed by Alexander Gretchaninov (1864–1956), who not only flew in the face of secular authorities but challenged the Orthodox religious establishment as well by calling for the inclusion of instruments in some of his liturgical works. Particularly provocative was *Missa oecumenica* (1944), a Latin mass with orchestra which represented an effort to bring the international religious community together during World War II.

The outstanding Soviet composers Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75) composed several choral works in which tradition was necessarily viewed through the lens of Soviet realism. Whereas most of Prokofiev's choral music is too narrowly political to warrant much international attention today, the cantata culled from his wonderful score for Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky* (1939) is still frequently performed. Shostakovich's numerous choral pieces meant to showcase Soviet values were often met with official censure. While his blatantly enthusiastic cantata *The Execution of Stepan Razin* (1964) was popular throughout the country, his 13th Symphony ("Babi Yar," 1962) – a somber reflection on life during World War II, including criticism of Soviet indifference to the slaughter of Jews – was banned from performance until Yevgeny Yevtushenko's text was changed.

Other important Russians whose choral music reflects national traditions include: Dmitri Kabalevsky (1904–87), Georgy Sviridov (1915–98), Rodion Shchedrin (b.1932), Alfred Schnittke, who contributed several important works, and Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931), whose impressive *Johannes Passion* (2000) appeared at century's end.

In Latin America, composers successfully fused European choral concepts with local musical customs producing a variety of colorful pieces, some of which became internationally popular. Important works include *Chôro No. 10* (1925) by the Brazilian Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959); *El sol* (1934) by the Mexican Carlos Chávez (1899–1978); *Psalm 150* (1938) and *Lamentations of Jeremiah* (1946), by the Argentine Alberto Ginastera (1916–83); *Misa criolla* and *Navidad nuestra* (both 1964) by the Argentine Ariel Ramírez (1921–2010); *Requiem* (1994) by the Puerto Rican Raymond Torres-Santos (b.1958); *Stabat Mater* (1997) and other impressive pieces by the Venezuelan Alberto Grau (b.1938); and the incredible *La pasión según San Marco* (2000), by Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960), an Argentine of Romanian heritage who eventually moved to the USA.

In France, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), and the Swiss Arthur Honegger (1892–1955) – members of the group known as Les

Six – maintained the urbane sophistication associated with French music while incorporating polytonal, Latin American, and jazz elements into their exceptionally colorful choral music. Poulenc and Milhaud were particularly adept choral composers. Poulenc's *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitence* (1938–39), *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël* (1951–52), and the cantata-like *Gloria* (1959) are standard repertoire. Milhaud, in addition to enriching the repertoire with numerous part-songs, cantatas and other large choral-orchestral works, was also instrumental in the creation of Jewish liturgical music which could be performed in concert outside the synagogue. Honegger composed a number of large cantatas designed for radio performance, as well as the oratorio *Le roi David* (1921), one of the most popular large choral works of the century's first half, and the masterful and thought-provoking *Une Cantate de Noël* (1953).

Also in France, just after World War I, Nadia Boulanger became the century's most influential teacher of composition. Her students – including the Hungarian Erzsébet Szönyi (b.1924), the Norwegian Øistein Sommerfeldt (1919–94), the Lithuanian Antanas Račiūnas (1905–84), the Portuguese Jorge Croner de Vasconcellos (1910–74), the Mexican Arnulfo Miramontes (1882–1960), the Canadian Gabriel Charpentier (b.1925), the Australian Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912–90), and a veritable who's-who of American composers: Aaron Copland (1900–90), Roy Harris (1898–1979), Elliott Carter (b.1908), Daniel Pinkham (1923–2008), Robert X. Rodriguez (b.1946), Donald Grantham (b.1947), David Conte (b. 1955), and others – all returned home with highly individual, often progressive styles, mostly rooted in an affectionate understanding of their own country's traditional music. And all made important contributions to the choral repertoire.

Other composers whose choral music clearly exhibits the influence of national traditions include the Italian church composers Lorenzo Perosi (1872–1956), Domenico Bartolucci (b.1917), and Aurelio Porfiri (b.1968); the Israeli composers Paul Ben-Haim (1897–1984) and Aharon Harlap (b.1941); the Chinese composers Chen Yi (b.1953), Bright Sheng, and Tan Dun (b.1957); and the great Czech composers Jan Hanuš, Karel Husa (b.1921), and Petr Eben (1929–2007).

Ralph Vaughan Williams, Béla Bartók, Leoš Janáček, and the music of Truth

Serious scholarly interest in folk music had begun in Europe during the nineteenth century, and by its end some composers had started viewing folk music, in its purest forms, as the raw material for serious composition. Ralph Vaughan Williams in England, Béla Bartók in Hungary and Leoš

Janáček in Moravia were leaders in these investigations, and each would develop highly individualized styles that absorbed their respective folk traditions completely. Vaughan Williams worked in collaboration with Gustav Holst, Bartók with Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), in the collection of folk tunes and each produced vivid and often inspiring original choral pieces in addition to superlative choral arrangements of folk songs, many of which became staples of the repertoire. Janáček was equally interested in folk texts. He described the marriage of text and tune in Moravian folk music as “the music of Truth,” and he incorporated the spoken inflections of the Czech language into his music, which resulted in one of the most unique compositional styles of the twentieth century.⁵ Their efforts were far removed from those who occasionally utilized folk music as a component in the continuance of classical tradition (see above). Rather, the melodic contours, harmonies, rhythmic stresses and formal structures of folk music were actually the bedrocks of their music. Works as varied as Vaughan Williams’s *Five English Folksongs* (1913), Bartók’s *Three Village Scenes* (1926) and *Cantata Profana* (1931), and Janáček’s magnificent *Glagolitic Mass* (1926) and large, dramatic unaccompanied male choruses not only demonstrated, eloquently, the efficacy of their respective musical languages, but also provided inspiration for like-minded composers all over the world. Emīlis Melngailis (1874–1954) in Latvia, Jón Leifs (1899–1968) in Iceland, Lucrecia Kassilag (1918–2008) in the Philippines, Gil Aldema (b.1928) in Israel, Stephen Leek (b.1959) in Australia, Hyo-Won Woo (b.1974) in Korea, and the Haitian-American Sydney Guillaume (b.1982) represent only a handful of those whose choral music is rooted in native musical customs.

Ethel Smyth, Amy Beach, and the emergence of inclusiveness

In 1893, the English Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) composed a Mass in D. Two years later, in America, the slightly younger Amy Beach (1867–1944) composed her *Grand Mass in E-flat Major*. Both works were successful and both women continued to compose, soon earning the respect of their male peers. Smyth’s mass was held in such high regard by Sir Donald Francis Tovey that he included a discussion of it in his five-volume treatise on musical analysis,⁶ while Beach became one of the most celebrated American composers during the first third of the twentieth century. Both women’s music fell into eclipse after their deaths, only to be revived during the last decades of the century.

Their work (which included numerous other choral pieces), though not ground-breaking in any musical sense, was nevertheless of utmost importance in the gradual changing of societal attitudes, not only in regard to

gender, but also to race and musical genres. By the end of the twentieth century, women were counted among the world's prominent choral composers, including Rosalina Abejo (1922–91), Thea Musgrave (b.1928), Sofia Gubaidulina, Tania León (b.1943), Margaret Bonds (1913–72), Judith Lang Zaimont (b.1945), Tzippi Fleischer (b.1946), Libby Larsen (b.1950), Nancy Telfer (b.1950), Chen Yi, Sylvie Bodorová (b.1954), Eleanor Daley (b.1955), and Anna Thorvaldsdottir (b.1977).

In the twentieth century, the African-American spiritual, which had become internationally famous during the last third of the nineteenth century, became virtually institutionalized in choral arrangements by Hall Johnson (1888–1970), William Dawson (1899–1990), John Work (1873–1925), Jester Hairston (1901–2000), Moses Hogan (1957–2003), and others. As the century wore on and societal attitudes changed, the genre's stature was elevated from being a merely popular idiom to one of serious artistic utterance.

The other great musical contribution of African-Americans to world culture is jazz. Long before the Nazis' attempt to bind artistic expression in a straitjacket, jazz had been popular in Europe. And it was taken much more seriously there than in the United States, where many people viewed it as something only a notch or two above Devil worship. In Europe, classically oriented composers were experimenting with jazz at least as early as 1927, and since then have produced several interesting choral works incorporating the genre. Among them are: *The Rio Grande* (1927), a piano concerto with choir by Constant Lambert (1905–51); *Das Berliner Requiem* (1928) and *Kiddush* (1946) by Kurt Weill (1900–50); the oratorio *HMS Royal Oak* (1930) by Ervin Schulhoff (1894–1942), who was also bold enough to combine jazz with Schoenbergian techniques; William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* (1931); various works by Boris Blacher and Heinz Werner Zimmermann (b.1930); and the *Requiem* (1993) of Nils Lindberg (b.1933).

The first serious American attempts to incorporate jazz in choral music began about 1959 and focused on the introduction of jazz into the Christian liturgy. This was followed by settings of religious texts for concert purposes, including *Jazz Suite on Mass Texts* (1965) by the Argentine-American composer Lalo Schiffrin (b.1932) and the important *Sacred Concert: In the Beginning God* (1965, second version 1968, third version 1973) by Duke Ellington (1899–1974). These works were widely criticized at the time,⁷ but the concept of choral jazz stuck around, and by century's end vocal jazz ensembles and show choirs were common in American schools. Other American choral jazz works include the oratorios *The Light in the Wilderness* (1967) and *The Gates of Justice* (1970) by Dave Brubeck (b.1920), and the cantata *The Green House* (1991) by the Bulgarian-American composer Milcho Leviev (b.1937).

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the increasing interest in vocal jazz and an overflow of enthusiasm for spirituals in the United States had resulted in the evolution of the gospel song (a product of nineteenth-century White revivalist movements) into a new genre called Black Gospel, which relied heavily on a call-and-response form ideally suited to choral singing. This genre, primarily influenced by rhythm and blues, also became internationally popular.

Impact of the world wars

The twentieth century's two world wars had a profound impact on choral music. During World War I, composers sought to sow the seeds of patriotism by means of choral works whose sentiments were either blatant (Ives's *They Are There!*) or thoughtful (Ravel's *Trois chansons*). Further, the conscription of young European males into the armed forces resulted in increased composition for women's voices, such as the outstanding series of small works composed by Leoš Janáček in 1916 (*Kašpar Rucky*, *Songs of Hradčany*, and *The Wolf's Track*).

Whereas the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed celebratory compositions at the conclusion of wars (such as Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* and Brahms's *Triumphlied*), World War I resulted in a very different kind of musical commemoration. With the possible exception of the Agnus Dei in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, there was scant musical precedent for warning against such events, while traditional requiem settings seemed inadequate to memorialize the enormity of this war's devastation and carnage. Therefore, large cantatas began to appear which often utilized poetry lamenting the waste of war, such as *Morning Heroes* (1930) by Arthur Bliss (1891–1975) and Elgar's *Spirit of England* (1916). This trend culminated in 1934 with Vaughan Williams's thoughtful *Dona Nobis Pacem*. Still, in German choral works from this period, such as Pfitzner's *Von deutscher Seele* (1922), one can sense a veiled resentment at the war's outcome.

During World War II, patriotic (or propagandistic) choral works were composed in all of the combatant countries, good examples being: the *Yellow River Cantata* (1939, revised 1941) by Hsien Hsing-hai (1905–45), *Along the Coast, Conquer the East* (1940) by Kiyoshi Nobutoki (1887–1965), *The Testament of Freedom* (1943) by Randall Thompson (1899–1984), *Six Choral Songs* (1940) by Vaughan Williams, *Das Jahr* (1940) by Ernst Pepping, and Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* (composed shortly before hostilities began in Russia). An interesting twist on the patriotic cantata is Martinů's magnificent *Polní Mše* (Field Mass), composed in 1939 to honor Czech volunteers in the French army. It deals with a Czech soldier, riddled with doubt and hoping that God will recognize him in a foreign land.

Another work in this vein (and from the same time) is Michael Tippett's (1905–98) oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (1939–41), about the young Polish-Jewish assassin whose actions in Paris were manipulated by the Nazis into the nationwide riot on November 10, 1938 known as Kristallnacht, which is now generally viewed as the beginning of the Holocaust. This oratorio still merits attention, not only for its sympathetic treatment of the subject but also for its clever use of African-American spirituals.

Important works of spiritual resistance were also composed in countries occupied by the Nazis, such as Poulenc's *Figure humaine* (1943) and the heartfelt cantata *Lord, Your Earth is Burning* (1944) by the Latvian Lūcija Garūta (1902–77), which contains a particularly poignant setting of The Lord's Prayer.

Choral organizations had long been a part of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Before, during and after World War I, Jewish worker choruses were occasionally invited by German orchestras to participate in performances of large choral/orchestral works. But when the Nazi era began, the activities of these choirs in Germany were curtailed. In the middle of 1933, the German propaganda ministry organized the Jüdische Kulturbund in order to isolate completely Jewish cultural activities. Within the umbrella of this organization, Jewish choruses, orchestras, and theatrical groups flourished until Kristallnacht and continued to function until early in 1941. While the Jüdische Kulturbund was rather quickly prohibited from performing music by non-Jewish Germans, its ensembles were the only ones in Germany allowed to perform works by Jewish composers; on occasion, however, it managed without incident to present pieces by German composers, such as Karl Amadeus Hartmann (1905–63), whose compositions the Nazis labeled as "degenerate." Perhaps the Kulturbund's most important choral concert was the February 27, 1941 performance in Berlin of Mahler's Symphony No. 2 ("Resurrection"), given after the performers knew they would soon be transported to concentration camps in the East.⁸

The most heartrending choral activities took place in Nazi ghettos and concentration camps. The eastern ghettos generally maintained some forms of organized music-making (including choral singing) until they were liquidated. In some places, such as Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania, concerts and plays were controversial,⁹ but they were openly embraced in other ghettos. In Warsaw, for instance, concerts were not only publicly advertised but also received critical reviews in the ghetto press. Because of a shortage of performing venues, choruses there gave frequent concerts in any available space, including soup kitchens. Repertoire consisted of works from the standard choral repertoire, opera choruses (a particularly favored genre), and arrangements of traditional Yiddish and Hebrew songs. One of the last concerts

before the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto began in the summer of 1943 was given by a children's choir numbering well over one hundred, and included renditions of "Ani Ma'amin" ("I believe with unshakable faith in Messiah's coming; yet though He tarry, still He will come") and "Hatikvah," which would later become the national anthem of Israel.¹⁰

Choral activities in concentration camps varied considerably from place to place. In Buchenwald, for example, the commandant ordered a composition contest for the creation of a camp song that could, on his order, be sung by all inmates during morning roll call to drown out frequent spontaneous performances of the "Internationale" by communist inmates; the winning composition was "Buchenwaldlied," by Hermann Leopoldi (1888–1959) and Fritz Löhner-Beda (1883–1942).¹¹ About the same time (1938) in Dachau, Herbert Zipper (1904–97) and Jura Soyfer (1912–39) composed "Dachaulied," which was performed in secret by a unison male vocal ensemble, accompanied by various rustic instruments made by the inmates. As prisoners were transferred they took this song with them, so that it, like "Buchenwaldlied," became known in several camps.¹² In Sachsenhausen, choral singing, also in secret, is known to have been accompanied by choreography on at least one occasion.¹³ In Le Vernet and Ravensbrück, the commandants staged talent shows, with each barracks – which were mostly divided along ethnic lines – producing an act of some kind.¹⁴ Choral singing of folk songs was, therefore, a popular way of carrying out the commandant's orders. While most of these performances were likely sung in unison, the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC contains numerous manuscript examples from Buchenwald, and other camps, of TTBB arrangements of folk songs (primarily Yiddish and Polish) and Polish partisan songs.

Highly organized choral singing occurred in Theresienstadt (Terezín). During the war this ghetto camp, some forty kilometers northwest of Prague, contained the highest concentration of Jewish artists, musicians, and intellectuals in Europe. Public concerts, organized primarily by the Czech choral conductor Raphael Schächter (1905–45), ran the gamut of musical genres from opera and symphonic music to cabaret and big band jazz. There were at least nine choirs, including three children's choirs, a male choir, two choirs specializing in liturgical music, a chamber choir specializing in the folk songs of several nationalities, a large Czech-language choir (famous for its performances of Verdi's *Requiem* in 1944),¹⁵ and a large German-language choir that performed, in addition to other works, Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.¹⁶ Among the inmates were some exceptionally talented composers, including Viktor Ullmann (who also organized concerts), Gideon Klein (1919–45), and Pavel Haas (1899–1944), who each contributed fine choral works which survive, and are only now beginning to enter the repertoire.

The Nazis encouraged musical and theatrical performance in the internment camps established for captured American and British civilians. In Kreuzburg, for example, a Jewish educator named William Hilsley (1911–2003) composed the remarkable *Missa brevis in festo Nativitatis* as a Christmas gift for his fellow inmates. He also composed several cabaret musicals utilizing male-voice chorus.¹⁷ After the war he continued to stage the musicals with his students at the Quaker International School in Utrecht, and allowed for performance of his male-voice mass by three-part treble or six-part mixed choir.¹⁸

The efforts of English and Dutch women held prisoner by the Japanese in Sumatra must also be mentioned. Under the leadership of Margaret Dryburgh and Norah Chambers, these women created a vocal orchestra that performed not only a variety of folksong arrangements, but also vocal arrangements made from memory of Chopin *Preludes*, Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*, and other standards of the European orchestral repertoire.¹⁹

The war's conclusion elicited numerous commemorative works. Even though not involved in the conflict, the Swiss government commissioned Frank Martin to compose the moving *In terra pax* (1944). Other pieces, such as Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd: A Requiem for Those We Love* (1946), Milhaud's Symphony No. 3 ("Te Deum," 1946), and Jan Hanuš's *Song of Hope (On the Threshold of Tomorrow)* (1945–48), were also composed close to the war's end (Hanuš's work was actually suppressed by the Czech government until after the Velvet Revolution of 1989).²⁰ But several important compositions – Dmitri Kabalevsky's *Requiem* (1961–63), Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 ("Babi Yar," 1962), and Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (1961), for instance – appeared after some time had passed. These pieces came into existence about the same time as works protesting nuclear war, including: *15 June 1960* by Machio Mamiyas (b. 1929) (1961, memorializing a Japanese student killed at an anti-American rally), *Threnody* (1966) by the Canadian R. Murray Schafer (b. 1933), and a few years later *Noah* (1976) by Erik Bergman (1911–2006), one of the most important Finnish choral works. More recent additions to this list include the tenth symphony of Robert Kyr (b. 1952), *Ah Nagasaki: Ashes into Light* (2005), and two fascinating pieces by Hans Werner Henze: *Orpheus Behind the Wire* (1983) a suite for unaccompanied chorus which places the Orpheus and Euridice tale in a concentration camp, and Symphony No. 9 (1995–96), a setting for chorus and orchestra of segments from Anna Seghers's novel *Das Siebte Kreuz*.

Among the earliest works specifically commemorating the Holocaust are Arnold Schoenberg's great *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947); the masterful *Requiem ebraico* (1944–45) by his Austrian émigré compatriot Eric

Zeisl (1905–59); and the incredibly moving cantata about the Warsaw ghetto uprising *Di Naye Hagode* (1948) by the Polish-American composer Max Helfman (1901–63). Another important commemorative work is *Song of Terezín*, written in 1964–65 by the film composer Franz Waxman (1906–67). Consisting of gripping and insightful settings of several poems written by children in Terezín, it opened the floodgates for such works, many of which are by composers of marginal talent who somehow felt compelled to set the poem “I Never Saw Another Butterfly.” Still, several other fine Holocaust-related choral pieces command attention, not the least of which are Alfred Janson’s *Tema* (1966), Sylvie Bodorová’s powerful oratorio *Juda Maccabeus* (2002), and the brilliant suite for unaccompanied choir *Chestnut Branches in the Court* (1999) by the young American composer David Cutler (b.1971).

The exemplary *Sacred Service* (“Avodath Hakodesh,” 1930–33) by the Swiss composer Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) was the only composition based on Jewish texts that was known to the concertgoing public prior to World War II. After the war, however, a widespread interest in Jewish music developed, attributable not only to the Holocaust but also to a new willingness on the part of audiences to experience more adventuresome and inclusive programming. Liturgical works by composers such as Darius Milhaud and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895–1968) began to be publicly performed, while conductors sought out pieces by the Italian Renaissance composer Salamone Rossi (1570–c.1630); various giants of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century synagogue music; and prewar émigrés to America, including Max Helfman, Max Janowski (1912–91), and Samuel Adler (b.1928); as well as new works by younger composers such as Malcolm Singer, Michael Isaacson (b.1946), David S. Lefkowitz (b.1964), and Coreen Duffy (b.1976).

Looking ahead

Jewish music was not the only previously marginalized repertoire to reach for the mainstream during the last decades of the twentieth century. As the influence of folk music and jazz continued, conductors were encouraged to program less Eurocentric repertoire. Composers in Korea, Australia, South and Southeast Asia, Venezuela, and Israel – often well known in their own countries – now discovered a rising demand for their music in other parts of the world as well. In the United States, at least, publishing companies flourished through the distribution of choral music from various African countries, Mongolia, and other locales relatively unknown to the West. The African-American spiritual increased in prestige, and minimalism – especially in the hands of John Adams (b.1947) – increased

in popularity as it matured through the adaptation of a richer, more Mahlerian harmonic language.

After the explosion of new ideas in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the resistance to them exemplified by traditionalists and later by minimalists, the last third of the century gradually relaxed into an era where virtually nothing new was brought to the compositional table. Rather, choral composers experimented with various combinations of twentieth-century devices, eventually abandoning atonality and dodecaphony in favor of an essentially – but not exclusively – diatonic language (often derived from folk music or chant) which could be manipulated to function in association with any known compositional technique. Arvo Pärt (b.1935), James MacMillan, Tan Dun, and a few others were able to turn this situation to their advantage and create choral works of genuine originality. Some, such as Morten Lauridsen, chose to ignore trends altogether and developed exceptionally distinctive and inviting styles.

But many sought refuge in the harmonies and small forms of earlier centuries, or simply relied on easy aleatoric and/or minimalist gimmicks, interspersed with rich, impressionistic vertical sonorities and otherwise enveloped in unthreatening harmonic environments. A particularly favored device among younger composers of choral music (which threatens to become as common in the twenty-first century as the authentic cadence in the eighteenth) is the gradual creation of a (usually diatonic) chord cluster beginning with a single pitch and fanning outward in one or both directions, as in the impressive *Lucis Creator optime* (published 2001) of Vytautas Miskinis (b.1954). And, while it cannot be claimed that compositions consisting of these procedures necessarily sound alike, it is also true that identifying the work of most current composers through unique stylistic characteristics is frequently impossible. Still, if history is any guide, the strongest artistic personalities will eventually gain prominence, compelling new ideas will emerge and the future of choral composition will remain bright.