

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 21ST JANUARY 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

All about Maria

Many of us (not all) will be familiar with the famous settings of the **Ave Maria** for solo voice by Schubert and Gounod (borrowing from JS Bach), so I thought I might write a bit about some of the many choral versions of the Ave Maria that exist. Unlike last week, my starting point for this article was the version that I'm going to mention last! But, as another Maria put it, let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start...

The Ave Maria is a traditional prayer of praise and petition to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The text is largely based on two phrases from the Gospel of St. Luke in the Bible, together with an intercession asking her to pray for us. This closing intercession has been in the Roman Catholic version of the prayer since the 16th century. The prayer appears in various forms and has often been set to music. I have narrowed my selection down to a "rule of six", with a little surprise item at the bottom of page one, which joins two of the versions together.



Version one is a very plain setting by the 16th century Franco-Flemish composer, **Jacques Arcadelt (c.1507 - 1568)**. Although Arcadelt wrote sacred vocal music, he was best known for composing secular vocal music and was one of the most famous of the early composers of madrigals. Indeed, his first book of madrigals was the most widely printed collection of madrigals of the entire era. Click on the link in blue to listen: [Arcadelt - Ave Maria - YouTube](#)

Version two is another quite plain setting by the Hungarian composer **Franz Liszt (1811 - 1886)**. Liszt is a composer who we don't often associate with choral music, although he wrote four mass settings (I recommend his *Missa Choralis* of 1865) and *Via Crucis* which is based on the stations of the cross. I like how Liszt finds some interesting harmonies in this version: [Festival Comunicantus 2014 - "Ave Maria II \(S. 38\)" - YouTube](#)



To fit the two versions above together, Liszt made quite a few different versions of "Ave Marias" for piano, including this lovely one based on the version by Arcadelt! I tend to associate Liszt's piano music with fireworks (such as the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*), but Liszt in a much gentler mood. Click on the link in blue to listen: [Liszt - Ave Maria d' Arcadelt - YouTube](#)



Version three is a setting by a Protestant! The Ave Maria by **Felix Mendelssohn (1809 - 1847)** is in three parts, the outer sections contrast beautifully with the fugal type entries in the middle section. This is a very sumptuous eight-part texture. Click on the link to listen to The Sixteen in action: [Mendelssohn: Ave Maria - YouTube](#)

Back to virtuoso pianists now for version four, which takes us to Russia, for the "Bogoroditse Devo" by **Sergei Rachmaninov (1873 - 1943)**. This beautiful prayer setting comes from his Vespers (All-Night Vigil) composed in January and February 1915. Here are the USSR Ministry of Culture Chamber Choir, conducted by Valeri Polyansky (20 minutes in on the link in blue). Listen out for how often they breathe... [Rachmaninoff - All-night Vigil \(Vespers\), op. 37. Divine choral music. \[Valery Polyansky\] - YouTube](#)



Another composer that we don't often associate with sacred choral music is **Igor Stravinsky (1882 - 1971)**. Version five of the Ave Maria is one of three short prayers, originally set to Slavonic texts, but revised in 1949 with Latin texts. As you'll hear from The Kings Singers, this is Stravinsky on a tonal day and I suspect if you heard it without me telling you who the composer is, you wouldn't guess! This is deceptively difficult to sing: [Igor Stravinsky - Ave Maria for SATB Choir \(1934\) \[Score-Video\] - YouTube](#)



Version six could be classed as a "one hit wonder" by the German composer **Franz Biebl (1906 - 2001)**. From 1939, Biebl was an assistant professor of choral music at the Mozarteum, an academy of music in Salzburg, Austria, teaching voice and music theory. In 1943, Biebl was drafted into the military and was a prisoner of war from 1944 to 1946, being detained at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan. After world war two, he moved from Austria to Fürstenfeldbruck, Germany, where he served as director of the town chorus. The Ave Maria was originally composed for seven part male voice choir TBB / TTBB, but has since been adapted by the composer himself, including this version for SAA / TTBB as sung by Voces8: [Voces8 - Biebl: Ave Maria \(Angelus Domini\) - YouTube](#) I personally think that I've saved the best version 'til last... and would go as far as saying that *this piece is one of my top ten favourite choral works!* Do you agree with my verdict? Let me know!

Next online Zoom session!

Following on from the success of the Zoom caroling session, I am very pleased to report that we are going to have another session online on **Wednesday 24th February**. This zoom session is going to be along the lines of the WCMF Taster Days, where I'll be talking a bit about the chosen composer / music, then a chance to try some of them out. I feel that this format will be the most beneficial / successful as opposed to trying another rehearsal on zoom.



February's featured composer will be **Joseph Haydn (1732 - 1809)** and we will be singing the **Little Organ Mass**, alongside extracts from the **Nelson Mass** and the **Creation**. Details of how to download / obtain scores are available at the members section of the choir website, together with learning files if you would like to get some practice in before the session.

That's all for this week folks, I hope you're still enjoying the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham