

Mass of the Divine Shepherd

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Mass of the Divine Shepherd is a one-hour musical exploration of the figure of the Good Shepherd, unfolding as melodic dialogue between adult chorus with orchestra and antiphonal children's chorus with handbells. Between these two stands the audience, a silent but indispensable third voice, called to active participation in the mysteries of that Shepherd who at once enfolds all in a universal and eternal embrace, and yet lays down his life for each, as if for each alone.

This Mass is written in memory of my dear friend Dennis Stanton Avery, who passed away in 2012. Dennis was instrumental in my coming to study at Cambridge University, his alma mater. After his death, I was asked by the University to write a piece for a memorial service held there in his honor. I recognized from the start that within that piece – a setting of the 23rd Psalm for tenor with organ accompaniment – lay the seeds of something greater; *Mass of the Divine Shepherd* is the fulfillment of this artistic vision. The Mass remains centered around this tenor solo, now accompanied by full symphony orchestra and, for the Carnegie Hall premiere, 600 handbells. The sweeping, arc-like structure of the Mass reaches its pinnacle at the end of this solo with its supreme statement of faith: *I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*.

The Mass begins with simple, chant-like melodies, sung first by the children and answered by the men of the chorus, before blossoming into a highly canonic interplay, as though these melodies had sprung to new life, echoing through every corner of the hall. Just as sheep trust their shepherd as they come to know his voice, so this Mass seeks to build a trust relationship with the audience by opening with naturally flowing, singable melodies. As the interplay between children, adults, orchestra, and handbells develops, these melodies lead us, as though by the hand, as we embark into musically richer, more textured territory.

After the childlike innocence of the opening movements, the adults lead a proclamation of the *Credo*, driven and riveted with rhythmic intensity. In this movement, the orchestra recapitulates fragments of sacred music, from the chants of the first Christians to the hymns of our day, generating a cacophonous sonic whirlwind embodying a full two thousand years of music all written specifically for one Person, overlaid by a soaring statement of the Resurrection. Relentlessly the men repeat *I Believe in God*, hundreds of times in this movement – and finally the children enter, superimposed upon the adults' closing *life everlasting*, singing only four words: *I Believe in God* – once, slowly, decisively. This leads directly into the children's response to the Creed, which is not sung at all, but played entirely with their angelic handbells, high in the balconies, bathing the audience in a gentle wash of soft, pure tones.

Then the tenor soloist begins: *The Lord is My Shepherd*, as the children's bells continue through much of this movement. With the final word of the Psalm – *forever* – the movement does not really end, but rather, overlapping with the next, elevates us into the *Sanctus*, the chorus of *Holy, Holy, Holy* which we sing on earth as mere reflection of the eternal song of praise in heaven that has been from the dawn of time and will be for all eternity. In the quietest moment of the Mass, the children enter *pianississimo*, singing a most delicate *Hosanna* which repeats and echoes through the hall, reminiscent of the supplications of the opening movement.

The final movements, the *Lord's Prayer* and *Lamb of God*, fix our gaze upon the eternal, through a brooding, extended solo cello line, the rich yet gentle voice of a solo mezzo-soprano, and chant-like melodies sung by the men. Following the close of the *Lord's Prayer*, marked in the musical score as "expansive, resplendent," we return, in the *Lamb of God*, to the purity and vulnerability of children's voices. As each part sings the same melody, but in different, slow rhythms, the children in six parts lead the adults in twelve into intricate canon. This movement represents unity, in its fixed adherence to a single, simple melody; yet by simultaneously representing all rhythmic possibilities, it looks upward, outward, embracing the universal and the eternal. Indeed, it is through this model of paradox that we hope to enter into the very mystery of the Divine Shepherd: the eternal, omnipotent God become man; the Lord of all who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness to lay down His life for the one; the Shepherd and the Lamb once slain who lives forever.

By choosing for his papal pectoral cross the image of the Good Shepherd, Pope Francis reminds us of the centrality for our day of Christ the Savior who, through his tender mercy, reaches out to all without exclusion. As we look forward to 2016 as the Holy Year of Mercy, it is my prayer that *Mass of the Divine Shepherd* may draw us all into a deeper trust and confidence in our Divine Shepherd, who is Love, who is Life, who is Word, whose sheep know his voice. For as St. Gregory Nazianzen wrote, "The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep, came in search of the straying sheep to the mountains and hills on which you used to offer sacrifice. When he found it, he took it upon the shoulders that bore the wood of the cross, and led it back to the life of heaven."