Mason Bates (1977-)

Appalachian Ayre

Mason Bates was born in Philadelphia and raised in Richmond, Virginia. He is one of America's most widely performed composers and has been resident with the Chicago, San Francisco and Pittsburg Symphony Orchestras. He studied on the joint program of Columbia/Juilliard and with John Corigliano, David Del Tredici and others. In 2001, Mason relocated to the Bay Area to study for a PhD in composition at Berkeley, working as a Techno DJ in the area as he did so. Scholarships have taken him to Rome and Berlin, but he now lives in Burlingame, California. A central theme of his work is the 'magical intersection' between music and technology. Often, that technology has allowed him to expand the palette of the orchestra - an instrument in which from already mines distinctive and evocative sounds.

Appalachian Ayre, written for Philharmonia Baroque, is no different - even the technologies involved here are rather old ones. Mason himself describes the piece: 'it is a dreamy and lyrical mediation on the interesting connection between baroque performance practice and early bluegrass. Growing up in Virginia, I was often struck by the way bluegrass players held their bows in the middle, an idiosyncrasy I later noticed when first encountering period instrument ensembles at Juilliard. I find it fascinating that the music of the early colonists' Old World was kind of frozen in time. There are also some melodic ornaments that connect these seemingly disparate genres. It'll be neat to hear gentle blues ideas realized with the beautiful pure sound of the PBO, with the theorbist providing some light pre-banjo picking.'

Johann Heinrich Schmelzer (c1623-1680)

Lamenta sopra la morte Ferdinand III

In the middle of the seventeenth century - a generation before Handel and Bach - music was in a state of considerable flux. The period we now know as the 'baroque' was tentatively emerging. After the austerity and stringent discipline that characterized music from the Renaissance, composers were exploring expressivity and virtuosity. The freer, more unrestrained style of composition that rapidly blossomed became known as the 'stylus phantasticus'. As Mason Bates suggests, the improvisatory, expressive string-playing style associated with this movement is not a million miles away from folk traditions including bluegrass.

Johann Heinrich Schmelzer - along with his probable pupil Heinrich Biber - was one of the first to embrace the stylus phantasticus. Not a great deal is known about Schmelzer's early life, but he was apparently born in Lower Austria, moving to Vienna where he entered the Imperial Court as a musician around 1635. By 1649 he had secured as place as a violinist in the court orchestra, rising to the ranks of Vice Kapellmeister in 1671 and eventually Kapellmeister in 1679. He had less than a year in the top job before dying of the plague in 1680.

Death was a bigger part of life and art at the time - certainly for Schmelzer. The 30 years war raged for the first 25 years of the composer's life and the plague that killed him emerged towards the end of it. His first professional connection to mortality came in 1657, at the death of his employer, the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand III.

For the occasion, Schmelzer wrote what is now his first work: *Lamenta sopra la morte Ferdinand III* (roughly, 'Lament on the death of Ferdinand III'). It is a grand but wrenching threnody for Ferdinand, opening with a solemn Adagio whose solo violin line one musicologist has described as 'almost numb with grief.' That was probably genuine: sources suggest Schmelzer was liked and respected by his employers.

After this solo full of expression, the ensemble mimics the sound of funeral bells with a series of deep, clanging chords and after-echoes. Some say the fugue that follows depicts mourners gathering as if for a funeral. If so, they are soon drawn in to a life-affirming dance. 'Memento mori' ('remember you shall die') may have been one motto of the time, but another was 'Carpe diem' ('seize the day').

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber (1644-1704)

Mensa Sonora Pars III in A minor, C 71

I Gagliarda: Allegro
II Sarabanda
III Aria
IV Ciacona
V Sonatina

Heinrich Biber was rather luckier than Schmelzer, who almost certainly taught the younger composer. Biber got his dream job earlier in life and had a few decades in which to enjoy it. That job was Director of Music to the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg. For Biber, the job security allowed his imagination to run and run. He was a virtuoso violinist and a composer of rare imagination who pushed the boundaries of his instrument, most notably in his iconic *Mystery Sonatas*. The music we hear today is a little different. Biber's collection *Mensa Sonora* (literally 'Sonorous Table') was written to accompany the Prince-Archbishop's mealtimes.

There was a long tradition of so-called 'table music' at the time but Biber clearly wanted to write something deeper while not impinging upon his employer's dinnertime concentration or conversation. He prefaced the score for his collection with an elaborate explanation of these aims: 'it is by no means painstakingly to spread upon your princely table a rare banquet, like those of the glutton Apicius, not to serve you with a pearl beyond price, like the spendthrift Cleopatra, but to tender in all dutifulness the noble jewel of homophony, concordant with obedient and humble veneration.'

Accordingly, this was music of harmonic interest but little of the bold gesticulation Biber was known for (he specialized in 'scordatura': retuning one or more strings to allow a broader reach of notes or an unusual effect). The suites are made up mostly of dance movements, written in a manner that meant the music was only ever a few bars away from a cadence - so the plug could be pulled in case the Prince-Archbishop or one of his companions required sudden silence. The scoring is for four-part ensemble of violin, two violas and bass, but might well have been expanded beyond single instruments (also, the first viola part might well have been taken by a second violin, a practice that was growing common at the time).

The third suite of the collection is particularly interesting. For starters, it opens with an unusual movement marked 'Gagliardo' - a fast, two-step dance that is filled with humor and interest here, the melody line tumbling from one instrument to another. Perhaps the most noteworthy movement is the 'Ciacona' - what we would call, in English, a 'Chaconne'. Biber (and indeed Muffat) was particularly keen on this device, whereby the musical conversation is controlled by a looping bass line - a repeating 'track' from which the harmonic structure doesn't swerve, over which variations are woven. Often, as here, the effect is of music plumbing steadily deeper emotional depths.

Georg Muffat (1653-1704)

Missa in labore requies

I Sonata (Kyrie)
II Kyrie
III Christe
IV Kyrie
V Gloria: Et in terra pax
VI Gloria: Laudamus te
VII Gloria: Gratias agimus tibi
VIII Gloria: Domine Deus
IX Gloria: Qiu tollis peccata mundi
X Gloria: Quoniam tu solius Sanctus
XI Gloria: Cum Sancto Spiritu
XII Credo: Patrem omnipotentem
XIII Credo: Et in unum Dominum
XIV Credo: Qui propter
XV Credo: Et incarnatus est
XVI Credo: Crucifixus
XVII Credo: Et resurrexit
XVIII Credo: Et in Spiritu Sanctum
XIX Sanctus
XX Hosanna
XXI Benedictus
XXII Hosanna
XXIII Agnus Dei
XXIV Dona Nobis Pacem

Georg Muffat was born in the town of Megève, now a resort in the French Alps. In Muffat's day, it was part of what was known as the Duchy of Savoy. As a professional musician, Muffat mixed in the circles of France's most high-profile composer, Jean-Baptiste Lully, before becoming organist at the cathedrals of Strasbourg and Molsheim.

What Muffat really wanted, though, was a job at the Imperial Court in Vienna. But none of his applications proved successful. It was probably through his Strasbourg Cathedral colleague Prince-Archbishop Karl Liechtenstein-Castelkorn - a great music lover - that Muffat made contact with both Biber and Schmelzer. Someone evidently put in a good word and in 1678, Muffat landed a court position not in Vienna, but in Salzburg.

Muffat and Biber were colleagues at the court of the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg for a decade. In 1681, Muffat was granted a leave of absence to study with Bernardo Pasquini in Rome (a mark of how seriously the Habsburgs took the development of their staff musicians). After ten months familiarizing himself with Italian styles including the works of Arcangelo Corelli, Muffat was called back to help provide musical celebrations for the 1100th anniversary of the Archbishopric (or diocese) of Salzburg. It was for this event that he wrote his most famous work: the set of instrumental sonatas titled *Armonico Tributo*.

For some reason, Muffat felt a strong need to leave Salzburg after a decade in service there. Some speculate that a rift had emerged between him and Biber; that their working relationship became one colored more by jealousy than cooperation. Either way, Muffat made one last (unsuccessful) attempt to gain employment at the Imperial Court Vienna, before a certain Prince-Bishop Johann Philipp Graf Lamberg persuaded him to take a job as his Kapellmeister in Passau, a German town on the border with Austria. Muffat blossomed in Passau, and remained there until his death in 1704.

Like Schmelzer, Muffat is remembered as a fine violinist and composer of instrumental music. But he surely wrote a great deal of sacred choral music that was subsequently lost. All but one work, that is. Thankfully the only choral work from Muffat's hand that did survive is a spectacular one: his *Missa in labore requies*. Perhaps the reason for the score's preservation was the handing of its autograph manuscript to a man who looked after it very well indeed - a man named Joseph Haydn.

It's little wonder Haydn wanted to keep hold of this extraordinary, elaborate score. It is notated for twenty-four singers split into two choirs; a band of trumpets and drums; a band of cornetts and trombones; an ensemble of strings and continuo and an organ for each of those five teams of musicians. The configuration strongly suggests the piece was written for the cathedral in Salzburg, where four balconies face one other at the nave crossing. Muffat's score fits this configuration perfectly: choirs facing each other on opposite balconies with the two wind ensembles facing each other on the other two, and the strings and continuo on the church floor.

And yet, the work feels like it was commissioned for a grand occasion - likely the enthronement of Muffat's new employer, the Prince-Bishop of Passau, at that town's cathedral. Could it have been written for Passau? There's supporting evidence in the Mass's title, *in labore requies,* which refers to a passage from the Pentecostal Sequence 'Veni sancte spiritus' ('Come Holy Spirit'); we know the Passau enthronement took place at Pentecost 1690. Might Muffat have written his Mass in Salzburg and been influenced by the architecture of its cathedral, even if he intended the work as a salutation to his new employer for performance in a different space? Might that title, 'rest from labors', even refer to Muffat's departure from what had evidently become a toxic working environment in Salzburg?

We may never know, although there's no hint of frustration in this gloriously celebratory Mass*.* Here is a work in which a web of intricate individual parts contributes to a grand omnipotent whole; in which ever-apparent contrasts of texture, pitch and physical positioning generate constant variety and interest. Muffat's cosmopolitanism is all over the score: the particular splendor of the music he would have heard from Lully; the spatial grandeur and instrumental

filigree of music from the Italian school; and the atmosphere of expressive severity that characterized music from the centers of the Habsburg Empire Muffat knew so well.

The individual tools Muffat deploys are too many to mention, but there are some moments that stand out. Despite the sprawling manpower involved, Muffat manages to write a supple fugue at the end of his 'Christe' that gives the impression of involving far fewer moving parts than it actually does. In the 'Et in terra pax' movement of his Gloria sequence the composer has an enchanting way of emphasizing the word 'pax' ('peace'), using pert little vocal repetitions of the word that are interrupted by broadsides from the full ensemble. The pair of dialoguing sopranos that initiate the 'Laudamus te' section - followed immediately by pairs of altos, tenors and basses - are a pure delight.

Perhaps the most remarkable moment of the entire Mass comes in the Credo sequence, when an almost cinematic march sounds in the shadows behind the words 'passus et sepultus est' ('he suffered death and was buried'). The music springs back in direct contrast for 'et resurrexit' ('he rose again') but still that sinister death march interjects, as it does in the 'Et in Spiritu Sanctum' passage. Muffat's Sanctus is characterized by a glistening waterfall of imitating voices, themselves interrupted by nave-shaking chords on 'pleni sunt caeli' ('heaven and earth are full of your glory'). This sort of contrast and dialogue characterized music from this time and this place, but Muffat exploits them with flair as well as skill, and manages to create from them strikingly unified whole.

Program notes by Andrew Mellor © 2023

GLOSSARY

AYRE An Anglicized, early incarnation of the word 'aria', simply meaning song or song-like music.

KAPELLMEISTER In the baroque period, a Kapellmeister (literally 'chapel master') was the person in charge of the music at the court of an aristocrat or monarch, equivalent to 'Director of Music' now. Their duties would spread over musical genres (secular, sacred, vocal and instrumental) and involve composing as well as organizing, training, conducting and probably teaching music to the court children.

FUGUE The braiding of a melody (or 'subject') into an elaborate conversation by different instruments or voices, who introduce the melody at staggered intervals and at different pitches.

CONTINUO Or 'Basso Continuo' refers to 'continuous bass'. In baroqye music, the continuo section of an orchestra or ensemble underpins the harmonic structure and forms the music's chassis. It might consist of a harpsichord, cello and other plucked or strummed instruments - or just one of those - often (as here) in combination with strings.

CORNETT An early wind instrument without keys in common use up to and occasionally (as here) beyond 1650. The cornett was a staple of Italian renaissance and early baroque music - especially sacred - but was also used in the Habsburg courts. With a fundamentally mellow tone, it has a huge volume range meaning it can sound as softly as a recorder or as loudly as a trumpet. It was especially adept at projecting from church galleries or balconies - often responding to an opposite number - or bolstering choral voices in large, washy church acoustics.