Aurora Orchestra: Bernstein & Bach

***Chichester Psalms* (1965)** **Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)**

I. Maestoso ma energico –– Allegro molto
II. Andante con moto, ma tranquillo –– Allegro feroce
III. Sostenuto molto –– Peacefully flowing

For centuries, the Psalms––the songs of petition, lamenting, love, and adoration of God from the Hebrew Old Testament––have inspired musical settings.

In the autumn of 1965, **Leonard Bernstein** returned from a year-long sabbatical to resume his post as conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. His sabbatical had yielded one completed work: the ***Chichester Psalms***, commissioned for the Southern Cathedrals Festival by the Rev. Walter Hussey, Dean of Chichester Cathedral. Writing in the *New York Times*, Bernstein introduced the *Psalms* to the paper's readers in a whimsical poem: 'these psalms are a simple and modest affair, / Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square'.

Bernstein's unassuming characterization of his composition is an understatement. Rather than 'simple', 'modest', and 'square', the three movements of the Psalms span an emotional gamut that ranges from untroubled serenity to violent anger; and share their striking harmonies and dance-like rhythms with the most dramatic of Bernstein's musical theatre compositions. This theatrical character is evident from the opening chords of the first movement, which muster the entire forces of chorus and orchestra in a blazing setting of two lines from Psalm 108 in Hebrew, before settling into a dance-like setting of Psalm 100.

The second movement begins with a lyrical solo setting of Psalm 23. Yet its tranquillity is interrupted by the angry raging of the nations, depicted by close canons sung by the tenors and basses, and emphasized by dissonant interjections from the orchestra. This imitative material repurposes a rejected number from Bernstein's hit musical *West Side Story* ('Mix! Make a mess of 'em'), reinforcing its theatrical character. Over this growling anger, Bernstein instructs the upper voices to continue singing 'blissfully unaware of threat'.

A flowing setting of Psalm 131 constitutes the final movement of the work. When this text reaches its conclusion, Bernstein sets the chorus to sing the melody in unison on the single syllable 'ah', as if their emotion escapes the bounds of semantic language. As this melody concludes, Bernstein introduces a verse from one final Psalm––'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity'––fashioning what the composer himself poignantly described as a 'prayer for peace'.

Emma Cameron

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Frideswide Psalms **(2026)** **Nico Muhly (b.1981)**

I. A Nest
II. Hear Me
III. Wings

Frideswide Psalms is a three-movement setting of several interwoven psalms, whose imagery circles the life of the early medieval Saint Frideswide.

The first movement, *A Nest*, introduces a five-note motif which permeates the piece; the psalmist implies two sorts of metaphoric dwellings: the "courts of the lord" (here, represented by quite formal music with squared edges), as well as the gentler and pastoral images of the sparrow's house and the swallow's nest (suggested by hushed strings and a latticework of woodwinds). The movement ends with a suggestion of moving water.

The second movement, *Hear Me*, is dramatic and depicts flight, escape, wind, and tempest––particularly resonant with the legend of Frideswide, who fled to avoid unwanted attention from a gentleman caller. Austere canons on the word "O" usher in another avian interlude: "O, that I had wings like a dove, for then would I flee away, and be at rest."

The third movement, *Wings*, starts simply, a private sort of song. Slowly, all the hushed music opens out, through wordless pulses and repeated semiquavers, into a strong declaration of the text "Therefore, I will offer in his dwelling an oblation with great gladness." All of the techniques and images in the first two movements collide (flight giving way to shelter beneath God's wings), and the comparatively modern language of the Book of Common Prayer dissolves into the 14th century Wycliffe translation: *God schal help it eerli in the grey morewtid*––the grey morning, or, more poetically, the grey tomorrow.

The piece doesn't aim to force a connection between the Psalms and the Saint so much as offer moments of resonance and rhyme between her life and their imagery.

Nico Muhly

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***Magnificat* (1723)** **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)**

I. Magnificat
II. Et exsultavit
III. Quia respexit
IV. Omnes generationes
V. Quia fecit
VI. Et misericordia
VII. Fecit potentiam
VIII. Deposuit potentes
IX. Esurientes implevit
X. Suscepit Israel
XI. Sicut locutus est
XII. Gloria Patri

Like many of the Psalms, the Magnificat is a praise of God, uttered by the Virgin Mary in the Gospel of Luke. J.S. Bach's ambitious and dramatic ***Magnificat*** was premiered on Christmas Day in 1723, during the first year of the composer's tenure as music director at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. The *Magnificat* is divided into twelve movements: while the first and final engage the full forces of chorus and orchestra, those which intervene include solos, a further chorus, a duet, and a trio.

The drama of Bach's setting stems in part from his vivid word painting. The second movement ('Et exultavit') employs ascending motifs in both the soprano voice and the orchestra, reflecting the exultation of the text; while the word 'deposuit' in the eighth movement is set to a rapidly descending scale that mirrors God's diminishment of the mighty. The contemplative tone of the third movement is perhaps inspired by Mary's allusion to her humble estate in the Gospel text.

The final movement is signalled by a reprise of the music that begins the piece, literally embodying the text 'as it was in the beginning'. While the orchestra quotes the *tonus peregrinus*––the traditional Magnificat plainchant in Bach's Lutheran practice––the chorus sings in the imitative textures commonly employed by composers of the generation before Bach. Together, these elements hearken to an older musical style, resonating with the textual reference to 'our fathers'. These imitative textures also fashion a tension that only dissipates when the music reaches its final, triumphant 'Amen'.

Emma Cameron

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