

ENSEMBLE
/ALTE·RA/
presents

the
LAMB'S
JOURNEY

directed by

C H R I S T O P H E R L O W R E Y

SAT 8.20.22 | 8PM

ST. PAUL'S PARISH, CAMBRIDGE, MA

SUN 8.21.22 | 3PM

BLESSED SACRAMENT, PROVIDENCE, RI



Anyone who has spent any significant amount of time in a cinema recently might join in the looming sense of despair about the state of what remains of serious American cultural life. With numerous prequels, sequels, soft reboots, retcons, callbacks, and fan service, it can sometimes feel like a cesspit of corporate nostalgia is crowding out anything truly interesting. Some say this is a problem of our own making. After all, you paid for that *Jurassic World: Dominion* ticket, didn't you? Others speculate that the blame for our tastes and fashions spinning in ever-smaller culs-de-sac is the internet, sold to us as a great emancipator of thought and expression, but which shackles us to algorithms, hidden from view, that reflect back our own prejudices and unconscious biases. One might ask how the culture can innovate or move on when there is no longer any center, nor taste makers gatekeeping the conversation. Perhaps the fault lies with an attention economy cynically optimized for "engagement," where every numbed eyeball and half-hearted click is relentlessly monetized into ad revenue. Many arts organizations are selling fewer tickets than ever for even the reliable cash-cow events. Can this be explained by the triumph of the Netflix-and-chill phenomenon, in which one can work, consume entertainment, and socialize, all without so much as changing out of one's pajamas? Have we got drunk on the convenience of concerts delivered straight to our devices at a fraction of the cost? Have the myriad disruptions – geopolitical, epidemiological, and economic – of the last few years played a role in hollowing out what remains of our shared space? Or might it just be possible that we value less that which asks less of us? Whatever the reason(s), we are undeniably on shifting ground. And, despite the inertia of our creative life, events are racing ahead after what felt like an interminable pause of history.

In this unstable but pregnant moment, Altera is resolutely spreading her wings in what can sometimes feel like an oil slick of apathy. I use the metaphor advisedly, casting my mind back to other colossal problems requiring collective consciousness and action like the polluted Narragansett Bay and hunted whales that were nevertheless both saved; the tobacco companies which were hemmed in; and, latterly, our intransigence on and denial of climate change, which finally feels as if it may be abating. These examples should give us cause for hope – that imagining something new, and excellent, even in an atmosphere of navel-gazing nihilism, is worth it. Indeed, as I take stock of the past year, Altera's many endeavors are teeming with life and enthusiasm. Our second annual Composition Competition attracted applications from 75 countries and 22 U.S. States spanning every demographic. Our music therapy program, in which we license our entire recorded music library to the residents of the Forefront Living continuing care facility, is on the march, and we are currently exploring plans to expand the program to other communities. We exceeded the target for our debut commercial album crowdfunding campaign. Artistically, Altera is no less thriving, attracting the finest artists from across the country, and, for the first time, overseas. We commissioned works from renowned composer Joanna Marsh, and our own Michael Garrepy. And, we look forward tremendously to performing a groundbreaking chamber version of Handel's beloved *Messiah* in both Providence and Newport this winter.

Thousands of acts of courage, generosity, and faith bear Altera's wings aloft despite many headwinds, including: our countless donors (listed in full below); our intrepid Board of Directors, led by Simon Holt and Jennifer Ritvo Hughes; the volunteer efforts of our wonderful corps of ushers, organized by Dwight Porter and Trevor Neal; the dedication and perseverance of our Treasurer Charlie Oliver, the quiet service of our Secretary Donna Lowrey, our Communications Officer Jared Kornblatt, and our Production Manager Tim Harbold; the multivariable equations solved by Accommodations Officer Camilla de Rochambeau; the manifold ministrations of our Board Liaison and all-around wonderwoman Olivia Kleyla; the unheralded administrative assistance of Barbara Hill; the gift of polymath Michael Garrepy's counsel and friendship; the venues that open their doors to us and the hosts who open their home to our artists; and most of all to you, our loyal audience. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Yours in music,
Christopher Lowrey
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ENSEMBLE
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the
LAMB'S JOURNEY

directed by

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organ

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THE CALL

Jesu, the Very Thought of Thee
Gordon Slater, arr. Paul Halley (b. 1952)

'Salvator Mundi' from *Requiem*
Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

The Lamb*
Żuzanna Koziej (b. 1994)

'Agnus Dei' from *Mass in G Major*
Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)



"The Virgin Lamb" (1903) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

1.
Jesu, the very thought of thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far thy face to see,
And in thy presence rest.

No voice can sing, no heart can frame,
Nor can the memory find,
A sweeter sound than Jesus' name,
The saviour of mankind.

O hope of ev'ry contrite heart,
O joy of all the meek,
To those who ask, how kind thou art,
How good to those who seek.

But what to those who find? Ah, this
Nor tongue nor pen can show;
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but his loved ones know.

Jesu, our only joy be thou,
As thou our prize wilt be;
In thee be all our glory now,
And through eternity. Amen.

2.
O Saviour of the world, Who by thy
Cross and thy precious Blood hast
redeemed us, Save us and help us,
we humbly beseech thee, O Lord.

3.
Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee,
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and He is mild,
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little lamb, God bless thee!
Little lamb, God bless thee!

4, 8, and 12.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis
peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis
peccata mundi,
dona nobis pacem.

*Lamb of God, who takes
away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes
away the sins of the world,
grant us peace.*

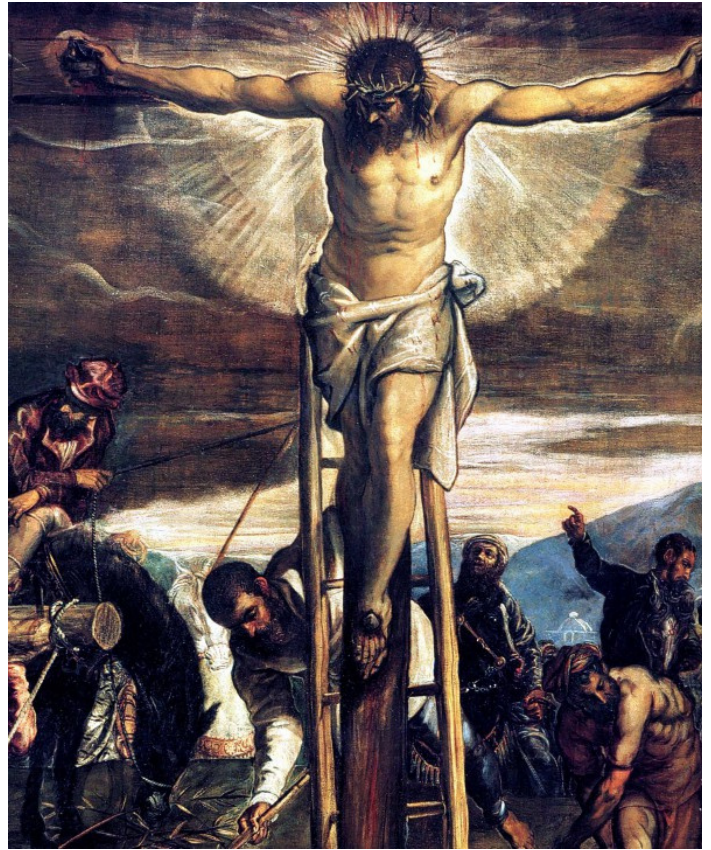
THE TRIAL

'O vos omnes' from *Responsoria Tenebrae*
Paweł Łukaszewski (b. 1968)

Drop, drop, slow tears
Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988)

Crucifixus à 8
Antonio Lotti (1667-1740)

'Agnus Dei' from *Mass in E minor*
Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)



"The Crucifixion" (1566) by Tintoretto

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

5.
O vos omnes qui transitis per viam:
attendite et videte si est dolor sicut
dolor meus. Attendite, universi
populi, et videte dolorem meum.

*O all ye that pass by the way: attend
and see if there be any sorrow like
unto my sorrow. Attend, all ye people,
and see my sorrow.*

6.
Drop, drop, slow tears,
And bathe those beautiful feet
Which brought from Heaven
The news and Prince of Peace.

Cease not, wet eyes,
His mercy to entreat;
To cry for vengeance
Sin doth never cease.

In your deep floods
Drown all my faults and fears;
Nor let His eye
See sin, but through my tears.

7.
Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub
Pontio Pilato:
Passus, et sepultus est.

*He was crucified also for us under
Pontius Pilate: He suffered and was
buried.*

THE RETURN

Were You There?*

American Spiritual, arr. Michael Garrepy (b. 1990)

Surrexit Christus Hodie

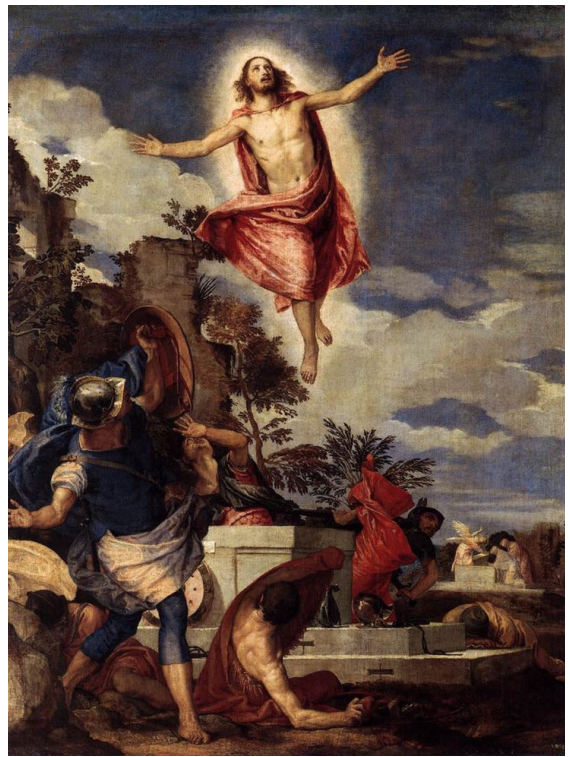
Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654)

O clap your hands

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)

Agnus Dei based on *Adagio For Strings*

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)



"The Resurrection of Christ" (c. 1570) by Paolo Veronese

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

9.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when he rose up from the grave?
Were you there when he rose up from the grave?
Sometimes I feel like crying 'Glory, glory, glory!'
Were you there when he rose up from the grave?

***World-Premiere of an Ensemble Altera Commission*

10.
Surrexit Christus hodie, Alleluia.
Humano pro solamine, Alleluia.
In hoc Paschali gaudio, Alleluia.
Benedicamus Domino, Alleluia.
Christ is risen today, Alleluia.
For the comfort of all people, Alleluia.
In this paschal joy, Alleluia.
We bless the Lord, Alleluia.

11.
O clap your hands together, all ye people: O sing unto God with the voice of melody. For the Lord is high, and to be feared: he is the great King upon all the earth. He shall subdue the people under us: and the nations under our feet. He shall choose out an heritage for us: even the worship of Jacob, whom he loved. God is gone up with a merry noise: and the Lord with the sound of the trumpet. O sing praises, sing praises unto our God: O sing praises, sing praises unto our King. For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding. God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon his holy seat. For God, which is very high exalted, doth defend the earth, as it were with a shield. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, amen.

THE GIFT

Panis Angelicus

Francis Grier (b. 1955)

O sacrum convivium!

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

O salutaris Hostia

Ēriks Ešēvalds (b. 1977)

Worthy is the Lamb**

Joanna Marsh (b. 1970)



"Glorification of the Holy Sacrament" by Van Ĵ. Gareminj, (ca. 1740)

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

13.

Panis angelicus fit panis hominum;
Dat panis coelicus figuris terminum:
O res mirabilis! Manducat Dominum
pauper, servus et humilis.

*Thus Angels' Bread is made the Bread of
man today: the Living Bread from heaven
with figures dost away: O wondrous gift
indeed! The poor and lowly may upon their
Lord and Master feed.*

14.

O sacrum convivium!
in quo Christus sumitur:
recolitur memoria passionis eius:
mens impletur gratia:
et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur.
Alleluia.

*O sacred banquet!
in which Christ is received,
the memory of his Passion is renewed,
the mind is filled with grace,
and a pledge of future glory to us is given.
Alleluia.*

***World-Premiere of an Ensemble Altera Commission*

15.

O salutaris Hostia, quae caeli pandis ostium:
Bella premunt hostilia, da robur, fer auxilium.
Uni trinoque Domino sit sempiterna gloria,
Qui vitam sine termino nobis donet in patria.
Amen.

*O saving Victim, who expandest the door of
heaven, hostile armies press, give strength; bear
aid. To the One and Triune Lord, may there be
everlasting glory; who life without end
gives us in the homeland. Amen.*

16.

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath
redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive
power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength,
and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing
and honour, glory and power, be unto Him that
sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for
ever and ever. Amen.

PROGRAM NOTES

In toying with different program ideas for Ensemble Altera's debut commercial album and today's concert, there was much to consider. Advice from industry cognoscenti was plentiful, contradictory, and useful. Cultivating a program for any concert requires hacking through a thicket of inspiration and pruning it into an appearance of organic inevitability, hoping that the result can stimulate, delight, and edify. Extra courage is required to weather the added commercial and critical scrutiny an album invites, to say nothing of not knowing if the album's reception will stand the test of time. Nevertheless, audacity is a prerequisite to any artistic enterprise, and there is no shying from it. First and foremost we required a platform to showcase the range of Ensemble Altera's many strengths, utilizing forces small and large, accenting fine details in unaccompanied pieces alongside works that showcase a partnership with the organ, in repertoire reaching from the dusty past all the way forward to today's bleeding edge. With *The Lamb's Journey* I needed to tailor something idiosyncratic to the specific artists on this project, but nevertheless to flash our all-purpose business card to the biz.

And this balancing act couldn't skirt a recurring issue with our home repertory that intensifies each cycle: Most of our music is rooted in a single faith tradition, that, for better or worse, some can find distant and unrelatable, or worse, alienating and unapproachable. And what of originality? Look through any database of recordings and confront an embarrassment of projects centered on the Christ narrative; in winter we are perennially treated to music of the nativity, and passiontide music follows swiftly on a few months later. It is no longer sufficient to simply offer reference recordings of "great works," a mere goalpost to creativity and not the product of a considered, well-thought through programmatic idea. To avoid another tired release, we needed, in the words of a recent convocation speech, "to build totally new things, and to conserve very old ones...to listen to new voices, and to heed ancient wisdom that is being lost." Trickier said than done. Those who already love what we do are bound to follow us, but was there an appeal to the outsider?

The *Lamb of God* is a title first bestowed upon Jesus by John the Baptist (John 1:29), making reference to the so-called sacrificial lamb. The Christian church eventually broke with the longstanding practice of burnt animal offerings by introducing the Son of God as a more perfect or total oblation, prefigured by the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham in the Old Testament (Genesis 22:7-8). The foundational image of the Paschal Lamb is reinforced by the trope of God as shepherd, tending his flock (Psalm 23) and the Lamb that rises victorious in the Book of Revelation. Having initially resolved to tell the story of the Lamb of God in four traditional chapters, *Invocation, Passion, Resurrection, and Adoration*, each bookmarked by a setting of the foundational *Agnus Dei* text, I challenged myself to consider a way in for non-believers. I committed myself to a more Jungian approach. Jung, himself an admirer of music's therapeutic properties, discovered deeper truths in the abstractions of music:

"I feel that from now on music should be an essential part of every analysis. This reaches the deep archetypal material that we can only sometimes reach in our analytical work with patients."

The account of Jesus Christ and *The Lamb's Journey* is, indeed, historically, metaphorically, and morally specific, but were there not universal truths running through it, too? I found myself returning to Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, in which he attempts to find a common thread stitching together the epic stories from diverse periods, civilizations and geographies into one unifying tapestry – a monomyth retold countless times. As anyone who has taken at least one semester of Schenkerian music theory or any other reductive mode of textual analysis can tell you, the act – however earnest – of distilling, reducing, essentializing a work, by its very nature, might expurgate what is most valuable. Much can be lost in translation, but then again, if one is truly open to it, can't something fresh be found, as well?

I found myself pleasantly surprised – and not a little trepidatious at the anticipated blowback from my theologically minded friends – when I saw for myself how comfortably much of the narrative themes from Christ’s journey mapped onto the chapters of Campbell’s ur-narrative. Could not our opening section, summoning and addressing Christ in the first person (the “very thought of thee,” “O Saviour of the world,” and the “Little Lamb” of Blake’s poem) become Campbell’s invocatory *The Call*; our passiontide episode translate to *The Trial*, (complete with Christ’s own corporeal and legal trial); the Resurrection passage be easily and felicitously read into *The Return*; and the Corpus Christi texts, focusing on the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, be reread as *The Gift* (in Campbell’s language, The Boon), in this case, the “gift” of his most precious Body and Blood? True, you might have to squint to see it, but I became convinced that, by throwing our arms wider to embrace new listeners, we were not watering down our offerings – rather, I believe we have undertaken the very finest of a tradition stretching back a millennium in the most inviting, unpretentious way.

British-Canadian organist and composer **Paul Halley**’s effervescent arrangement of Gordon Slater’s hymn, *Jesu, the very thought of thee*, uncorks a champagne bottle to open our program. Flying atop fiendishly tricky accompanying eddies in the organ, this inspired setting bubbles aloft from E flat to G flat to A to F sharp major (something of a home key on our program) before gently alighting back on E flat. One of Halley’s choristers recently wrote “I will always treasure his musical genius, his warm heart, his relentless pursuit of excellence, and the beautiful music he allowed us to make.” Having just retired after fourteen years at The University of Kings College Halifax, that excellence is much in evidence to anyone who has encountered his student choir, arguably the finest in North America. In this arrangement, we are lovingly reassured by his dab hand, as the hymn tune is volleyed from the tenors and basses to the sopranos. The organ drops out to reveal a cappella jazz harmonies as warm as a pair of Christmas slippers, and the trebles radiate to the rafters in the final verse descant.

Much of the musical output of **Herbert Howells** was marked by the shocking loss of his son Michael, who died at just nine years old. It was long believed that Howells’ setting of the *Requiem* was composed in response to this tragedy, but we now know the manuscript predates it by several years. Although Howells did compose many memorial works for his son over the years, including most prominently, *Hymnus Paradisi*, he nevertheless came to increasingly associate his *Requiem* with the loss of his son. By the time of the *Requiem*’s composition in 1932/33, Brahms, Fauré, and Duruflé had deviated further and further from the original form of the liturgy. Howells too added several movements not traditionally included in the rite, including the opening *Salvator Mundi* (“Saviour of the world”). The free flow from a timeless and recessed Dorian modality to the modern immediacy of pleading chromaticism creates an ingenious impressionism that lends an air of both surprise and inevitability to each moment.

The winner of Ensemble Altera’s 2nd Annual Composition Competition, 28-year-old Polish composer **Zuzanna Koziej** has set William Blake’s ‘The Lamb’, from his 1789 collection *Songs of Innocence*. The poem’s speaker is but an innocent, not yet inoculated to the world’s complexities and despair, yet still possessing an instinctive curiosity for the immaterial, the unexplained, and the unknowable. Koziej’s work seemed a glove-fit for the themes of the poem: elegant simplicity masking profound complexity. The three-note motive that grounds the piece is juvenile, perhaps a half-remembered fragment of a nursery rhyme sung in childhood (this element recalls the well-known four-square setting by Sir John Tavener). The main motive, threaded throughout, is by turns timid and exposed, jocund and convivial, or insistent and daring, but always as unwavering as the inquisitive faith of the poem’s narrator.

Francis Poulenc's reputation as an important figure in 20th-century choral music is now beyond doubt. His towering *Figure Humaine* is still considered one of the most challenging and rewarding works for choir, and his luscious *Gloria* is dappled with every conceivable orchestral and vocal color. His sacred music, including much of the *Mass in G Major* (1937), is characterized by an exuberant interplay between moods of devotion and mischief. There is hardly a passage that doesn't include a "mispelled" chord, and Poulenc can never resist a needlessly complex voice crossing when a conjunct line would do just fine. After all, where would be the fun in that? It's little surprise then that the *Mass in G* concludes with a highwire act of an *Agnus Dei*. The solo soprano line is a trap laid for all but the most expert vocalist, and the part writing is riddled with thumb-in-your-eye intervals almost impossible to tune. And yet, when the work locks into place, there is no arguing with its brazen genius.

In *O vos omnes* from **Paweł Łukaszewski's** *Responsoria Tenebrae*, Christ beckons us to attend ('*attendite*') the sorrow of his sealed fate. This sadness is not self-pitying, but rather, to use Łukaszewski's marking in the score, a "placid" and magnanimous sadness on behalf of his persecutors. The biting, dolorous dissonances echo and expand upon Carlo Gesualdo's rather ballsy setting of the text nearly 400 years earlier. Łukaszewski's acidic crunches go further, lingering in the air to suggest many possible harmonic progressions.

Kenneth Leighton has largely been esteemed "a musician's musician", as any church choir that includes in its repertoire his beloved *Second Service, Preces and Responses*, or the Christmas carol *Lully, lulla, thou little tiny child* can attest. But, his ardent setting of *Drop, drop, slow tears* from the larger passion cantata *Crucifixus pro nobis* is more than enough to make the case for wider acclaim. The impassioned soprano melody is supported by chords tracing mediant key relationships, and the recurring sharpened fourth scale degree accentuates words like "tears", "floods", and "fears".

A native of Venice, **Antonio Lotti** trained as an alto in the famous choir of St. Mark's Basilica. A student of Giovanni Legrenzi, whose works are now enjoying something of a renaissance, Lotti ascended the ranks at St. Mark's, from Assistant Second Organist all the way to maestro di cappella in 1736. Despite his modern associations mainly with sacred music, Lotti was a prolific composer of secular forms as well, including some thirty operas. Though many of his works are characterized by gallant style, bridging the gap from the late Baroque to early Classical periods, his famous *Crucifixus à 8* (he also wrote settings for six and ten voices as well) employs elements of a *stile antico* going back to the contrapuntal roots of the preceding generations. The eight-voice *Crucifixus* remains a marvel of polyphonic writing, its harmonic tension beautifully depicting the pain of the cross. Lotti, like his contemporaries Hasse and Porpora, and his student Jan Dismas Zelenka, enjoyed great success in his own lifetime, followed by centuries of neglect. Interest in those composers has revived in recent decades, and it stands to reason that a wider reappraisal of Lotti may very well be forthcoming in musicological circles.

Another largely *stile antico* work in eight parts, the *Mass No 2 in E minor*, by **Anton Bruckner**, reacts against the more spirited Rococo flourishes deployed by composers like Schubert in their own mass settings. Scored originally for an outdoor performance with wind band in 1866, our edition (an organ reduction based on the 2nd version of 1882) has been adapted for church usage. In the accompaniment, and the thick choral textures, one detects an immediate kinship to Bruckner's architecturally proportioned symphonic writing. The *Agnus Dei* is something of an apotheosis of *stile antico* style, blending the refinement of Renaissance master Palestrina with 19th-century harmonies of transfiguration. As with his symphonies, there is deliberate and precise control of harmonic unfolding, right through the final monumental cadence into E major, which he tweaked to perfection in this later edition.

Michael Garrepy, a founding member of and artistic advisor to Ensemble Altera, is quickly becoming a new American voice in choral composition. Previously commissioned to produce a wide array of arrangements for the group, his style achieves new heights of harmonic invention and formal command in his reimagining of the beloved spiritual *Were you there*. The quasi-orchestral textures resound with spaciousness and optimism, fusing the mid-century American pastoral style with a now-receding filmic maximalism. The brilliance of Michael's work emerges from technical expertise and precision that always services sentiment.

After studying with Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck in Amsterdam, **Samuel Scheidt** returned to his native Halle to become court organist, and later Kapellmeister to the Margrave of Brandenburg. As the first prominent German composer of organ music (a lineage culminating in J.S. Bach), Scheidt was instrumental in developing new musical forms after Germany's Protestant break with Rome. The easter work *Surrexit Christus Hodie* (which also appears with the Nativity contrafactum text *Puer natus in Bethlehem*) is often erroneously referred to as a double-choir motet in the Venetian mold of Gabrieli or Schütz. Though there are distinct rhythmic affinities with that style, *Surrexit* is much more a call-and-response work for solo soprano supported by a single choir of seven voices. The florid writing lends itself beautifully to consort-style performance.

Living only to the age of 41, **Orlando Gibbons** nevertheless casts an indelible shadow over music of the English Reformation. Attracting the attention of King James I as a virtuosic keyboard player (the so-called 'best finger' in the land), Gibbons benefited greatly from James' patronage. Throughout his short career Gibbons gained prominence as a master composer for the English virginal and of the English madrigal (e.g.: *The Silver Swan*). The king's favor also led to Gibbons' installation at the Chapel Royal in London, for which he wrote the bulk of his church music. Known today widely for his many settings of the ordinary offices (evensong, matins, and mass), he was also a prolific composer of verse anthems (i.e. *This is the record of John*) and full choral anthems (i.e.: *Hosanna to the Son of David*), of which the double-choir *O clap your hands* is the crown jewel. Gibbons' works built upon the legacy of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, paving a path for his successors John Blow, Pelham Humfrey, and indeed, Henry Purcell.

In recent years it has become something of a fashion to adapt symphonic works for choral forces, sometimes winkingly, as in The Swingle Singers' rendering of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* or Bach's *Air on a G string*, other times with the self-serious romantic heft of high German romanticism (e.g.: Clytus Gottwald's many re-scorings, including Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder*). Perhaps none is quite as famous as **Samuel Barber**'s adaptation of his own reputation-making *Adagio* movement of the 1936 String Quartet, Op. 11 – which he had previously expanded for full string orchestra – to the text of the *Agnus Dei*. In this early part of his life Barber attended many performances at The Metropolitan Opera given by his aunt, the contralto Louise Homer, and he himself trained as a baritone at Curtis Institute. The *Adagio* is suffused with an air of profound melancholy, and its sinuous, lyrical lines, whether in the version for strings or choir, are rendered carefully by a true lover of and student of the voice.

The often frenzied, always engrossing work of **Francis Grier** is gracefully distilled in his Corpus Christi hymn, *Panis Angelicus*, composed in 2015 on the occasion of the sudden death of David Trendell, Director of Music of King's College, London. In the unusual key of F sharp major, a soprano and tenor soloist weave alluring octatonic lines above an undulating ostinato in the lower voices reminiscent of wafting clouds of incense. Although each statement of the motive is exchanged between the two soloists with subtle variations arising, the harmonies are unshifting, generating a hypnotic sense of stillness. In choosing F sharp major, Grier was doubtlessly influenced by another setting of the Eucharistic antiphon for Corpus Christi, *O sacrum convivium!*, by **Olivier Messiaen**. Although a deeply devout man, this 1937 work was Messiaen's single liturgical motet – he was said to have believed that the perfection of plainchant could not be improved upon.

This is a pious sound world of restrained tranquility designed to transfix the listener in contemplation. Erupting in one brief moment of ecstasy, it reposes again on its closing smoky added sixth chords. The mood of adoration and wonderment continues in *O salutaris hostia*, perhaps the best known of the many choral works by the Latvian composer **Ēriks Ešenvalds**. Like the Grier work, the piece is framed by sections of solo and duet vocal filigree rising prayer-like over choral ostinati, but unlike both Grier's and Messiaen's antiphons, Ešenvalds' intensifies to a protracted climax bursting with sonority.

The triumphant biblical verse, *Worthy is the Lamb* (Revelations 5:9,12), seemed a fitting close to our powerful journey. The canticle from which it is derived, *Dignus est Agnus*, initially used as an Easter antiphon, was repurposed by the Catholic Church as the Introit for the feast of Christ the King, established in 1925. Having recently performed the majestic *Magnificat* from her St Paul's Service, Altera set about commissioning a new setting of the text from one of today's most sought-after composers, **Joanna Marsh**. Her modern conception for double choir and organ is one of very few versions (the other prominent one being the conclusion of Handel's *Messiah*, which you can hear Altera perform in a few short months). The rhythmically incisive interplay between the two choirs and the organ is a world apart from the static motets we've just heard. One can detect throughout the work a fascination with the interplay of major and minor chords, semitone and tritone relationships, often stacked atop one another. The angular antiphonal writing gives way to a rapturous hymn-like section full of thrilling agogic melismas.

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"Agnus Dei" oil painting by Francisco de Zuburan (c. 1635-1640)

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Photo by Janet Moscarello

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Fast-rising **ENSEMBLE ALTERA** was founded to be the beating heart of professional choral music in the United States. Led by internationally celebrated countertenor Christopher Lowrey, Ensemble Altera is dedicated to bringing thoughtful, engaging, and relevant programs to in-person and digital audiences at home and around the world. The group is versatile, working on multiple scales, in a wide range of idioms, across the full range of medieval to modern to music being written today.

Over the past few years, Ensemble Altera has presented concerts both in person in Rhode Island and virtually to audiences around the world. Most recently, Ensemble Altera produced “We Watch & Welcome: Feminine Voices at Christmas,” featuring works by seven female composers for treble voices arrayed around Britten's Ceremony of Carols, and previously "We Remember", a musical journey of healing and reflection in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Presented both live in Providence and streamed in 4K globally, the performances received rave reviews from audience and community members. Upcoming projects include a boldly reimaged chamber version of Handel's Messiah, and next year, a return to Altera's roots, with a summer community concert back where it all started in the unique location of one of Providence's resonant parking garages.

In addition to performing, Ensemble Altera is deeply committed to its extensive education and outreach program. Such activities include interactive presentations with school students in a variety of settings, with a particular focus on opening musical horizons to those from underserved backgrounds. Additionally, Altera has a profound faith in the healing power of music both in and out of the concert hall, and is proud to offer its complete recorded music library free of charge in collaboration with select partners in music therapy.



Founder and Artistic Director **Christopher Lowrey** was born and raised in Johnston, RI, and trained at Brown University, the University of Cambridge, where he sang under Stephen Layton with Trinity College Choir, and the Royal College of Music. In addition to conducting, he enjoys a dynamic international solo career as a countertenor, working at some of the world's leading opera houses and concert platforms, including The Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House, Philharmonie de Paris, Teatro Real, The London Symphony Orchestra, and this season he will be making his debut at Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich and Oper Frankfurt. More at www.christopherlowrey.com.

Hailed as “a great organist” displaying “phenomenal technique and sheer musicality” (Bloomberg News), **James Kennerley** is a multi-faceted musician, working as a conductor, keyboardist, singer, and composer. His performances are known for their illustrious flair and thrilling virtuosity, subtlety and finesse, drawing on the full resources of the instrument. James’ YouTube performances have enjoyed worldwide popularity and millions of views globally.



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To learn more about all our exciting artistic activities, both in-person and digital, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at:

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THANK YOU

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Jesu, the very thought of Thee

Gordon Slater
arr. Paul Halley

verse 5



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