

Music Notes: Assumption Mass, 2017

One of the innumerable spiritual benefits of the Mass is that it integrates the best cultural expressions of each generation, and yet, transcends all of them. This is nowhere more apparent than in the tremendous legacy of liturgical arts that are associated with the Liturgy, especially sacred music.

The music of the annual Mass in honor of Our Lady's Assumption has long been an expression of this integration, and this year's order of music is no exception. The centerpiece of these works is Franz Schubert's setting of the Mass Ordinary, the *Mass No. 3 in B-flat Major*. Schubert wrote six complete Mass settings, and the B-flat Major dates from 1815, as does his more commonly performed *Mass in G Major*. The B-flat Major shares much of the energy of this slightly earlier Mass, but in place of the first Mass's lightness and ebullience, the B-flat Major strikes a note of solemnity and grandeur. This work dates from the "hinge" decade, when classical sensibilities were giving more way to the expressive tendencies of the Romantic era. Other composers who were prominently active in this year include Ludwig van Beethoven (who wrote *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage* in 1815) and Gioachino Rossini (whose *Elisabeth, Queen of England* was premiered in Naples in 1815). Although the circumstances of the first performance are obscure, Schubert's *Mass in B-flat* is thought to have been composed for the parish church of Lichtenthal (now within the boundaries of Vienna), the church in which the composer was baptized. The Mass has six movements, all of which except the *Credo* will be performed for the Mass of the Assumption.

The other works performed at the Mass will be drawn from various periods. The mid- and late-Renaissance are strongly represented by three great composers, Felice Anerio (1560-1614; *Psalm 116*), William Byrd (1543-1623; *Ave Verum Corpus*), and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594). All three of these composers exemplify the virtues of the age in their music. The clear, soaring lines, integrated with impeccable contrapuntal skill, achieve a gravity and sobriety that is unsurpassed for its suitability in the Roman Rite. The younger composers, Anerio and Byrd, lived well into the early days of what we now call the Baroque period. Nevertheless, these composers maintained the antique style of the 16th Century, the former because of his association with the very conservative diocese of Rome, and the latter because of his remote location on Great Britain. It is also interesting to note that Anerio served as the chapel master at the newly founded English College in Rome. Both Palestrina and Anerio were known associates of the colorful St. Philip Neri.

The order of music is notable this year also for the premiere of a new setting of the ancient Marian prayer, *Tota pulchra es*, by Timothy McDonnell. The work is scored for choir and string quartet. The style of the music is contemporary, but evokes the spirit of traditional forms, even quoting the Gregorian *Litany of Loretto* in the invocations *virgo prudentissima* and *mater clementissima*. Likewise, the setting of the *Et incarnatus est* of the Credo – also composed by McDonnell – incorporates the traditional tune of *Credo III* in the soprano part.

The choral works are buttressed by a selection of instrumental pieces from the Baroque period by Manfredini, Heinichen, and the great Arcangelo Corelli. During this period, instrumental works were frequently intended to ornament liturgical celebrations, the *Church Sonatas* of Corelli being a pre-eminent example.