

A SONG FOR ST. CECILIA'S DAY

The martyrdom of St. Cecilia (Rome, 2nd century) has inspired many colorful stories and narratives. Her existence is considered fact, but the rest is legend. Cecilia is revered as the patron saint of music due (perhaps) to the story of her marriage, arranged despite her vow of chastity. At the ceremony she is said to have sat apart from the celebration, singing to God in her heart. Her piety led to her husband's baptism, but also to martyrdom for both. The stories relate that Cecilia miraculously survived for three days despite three attempts to behead her, and that she asked the Pope to convert her home to a church. Since the Renaissance, she has often been depicted with a viola or a small organ; some stories credit her with inventing the organ.

The English marked St. Cecilia's Day (November 22) with a service and a concert. John Dryden wrote "Song for St. Cecilia's Day" for the 1687 celebration. This poem was put to music by G. B. Draghi and later by Handel.

The universe depicted by Dryden is one established and ordered by the divine power of music. The earth is surrounded (framed) by the planets in their spheres with the moon innermost; each sphere yields to another, culminating in the outermost sphere which holds the stars. The spheres are set in motion by divine force and produce the "heavenly harmony" of the opening text. This harmony then creates order, separating the four elements (in Dryden's era, cold, hot, moist, dry) from the chaos of a "heap of jarring atoms". Dryden's poem thus displays the Enlightenment's ideal of divinely inspired balance and structure; that idea that heavenly music created the universe is an extension of Gen. 1 and John 1, which depict God creating the universe through his word.

The second stanza recounts the story of Jubal (Gen. 4:21), the first human to produce music, and establishes the power of music to influence human emotion. A catalogue of those emotions or "passions" and the different instruments which evoke the four passions is laid out in subsequent stanzas. Note that only the organ is said to arouse divine inspiration!

Dryden then contrasts two stories to illustrate two types of music, the terrestrial and the celestial. The pagan musician Orpheus holds sway over the natural world with music so beautiful that the trees uproot themselves and follow him. St. Cecilia outdoes even Orpheus, however, since the sublime notes of her organ draw the angels down to earth, "mistaking earth for heaven."

The poem closes with a triumphant image of the end of time, when music's transformative power dissolves the order of the spheres and returns creation to its Creator.

Clifton J. Noble, Jr. was born in 1961, and began to play piano and guitar under his father's guidance at age 5. Original compositions followed shortly, and the urge to write

music of all kinds has never left him. Noble earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Magna Cum Laude, from Amherst College in 1983 and a Master of Arts Degree from Smith College in 1988.

Since 1987, Noble has served as pianist for the Smith College choral ensembles, and he currently holds the position of Staff Accompanist in the Smith Music Department. Smith choral forces have performed his compositions and arrangements throughout the United States and Europe. His works have also been performed by the Mt. Holyoke and Radcliffe Choral Societies and University of MA Choral Societies, the Williams College Chorus, the Assabet Valley Mastersingers, the Needham Children's Chorus, and by ensembles at the University of Michigan and Indiana University. His instrumental works have been performed by the Boston Chamber Music Society, the Longmeadow Chamber Music Society, the Holyoke Civic Symphony Orchestra, the Florentine Camerata and flutist Carol Wincenc. His music is published by Warner Chappell, Treble Clef Music Press, and Artisttec, Inc..

An active jazz pianist, Noble has recorded two CDs with clarinetist Bob Sparkman, "Good Talks" and "Still Talkin'." "Vermont Songbook," by the Richard Mayer Quartet, records Noble and Sparkman's fruitful musical conversations with drummer Richard Mayer and bassist Genevieve Rose.

NOTES FROM THE COMPOSER- written for the Premier performance in May 1998.

Conductor Robert Eaton issued an interesting challenge when he commissioned a celebratory piece scored for the rather dark, solemn ensemble that Mozart chose to set his *Requiem*... The text that immediately came to mind was John Dryden's "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day," with its magical closing image of music "untuning" the sky. For me, the poem is unparalleled in its cosmic praise of music, and begs to be set more than once in a composer's life. This first time, I resolved to present "heavenly harmony" in relatively conventional diatonic dress. In the manner of the Baroque suites that began to appear in the world of Dryden's late years (though without pause) the interior scenes of the poem are cast as individual dances. The final stanza's "Grand Chorus" coalesces into just that, and not accidentally, incorporates the work's only unaccompanied singing.

The piece is, at least consciously, reference-free, except in one obvious place -- where Dryden invokes "that last and dreadful hour" when "the trumpet shall be heard on high." Few composers have captured the fearsome majesty of that hour better than Giuseppe Verdi, so my hat is tipped to his massive contribution to the *Requiem* repertoire.