

h e a v e n
b e a u t y a n d l o v e
e a r t h

Selections from The Classical Singers' *debut* programme:

Mozart - *Ave Verum*
Saint-Saëns - *Ave Verum*
Brahms - *Geistliches Lied* (with organ)
Fauré - *Cantique de Jean Racine*
Ešenvalds - *Only in sleep**

* *First performance in Hong Kong*

St John's Cathedral, Central, Hong Kong, 31 August 2016, at 1.15pm

The joy in
discovering and
rediscovering
pieces of
exceptional
musical qualities.

The power and
impact of a
beautiful
"pianissimo",
sung together.

THE
CLASSICAL
SINGERS

We are a mixed-voice
ensemble group and we
sing classical, romantic,
and modern repertoire.

Introduction to The Classical Singers

In early 2016, a group of working Hong Kong professionals – all of whom love singing and sang in choirs when growing up – decided to set up a new ensemble with a philosophy.

We were inspired by the idea of creating a new musical group for those of us who are doing it for only 2 reasons: to make music for its beauty (and the spirit of creating something together), and the spirit of trying to be better, of taking a hobby seriously, and to keep learning.

We want to be a small group, to find beautiful music and make music. We bring with us a dream for a beautiful blended sound. We are also inspired by the possibility of discovering and rediscovering mixed-voice choral repertoire of exceptional quality, whether classical, romantic, or modern.

We've called ourselves The Classical Singers – "classical" in the meaning of, first, being exemplary and setting a high standard, and second, we are classically trained and we sing mostly serious art music (though we will also sing some musicals and transcriptions). Overall, our name reflects the value of great music sung with exemplary musicality and a sheer joy in the music-making.

Notes on the music

W. A. MOZART

Ave Verum

K.618. (in D major)

&

C. SAINT-SAENS

Ave Verum

(in E flat major)

We open the concert contrasting Mozart's *Ave Verum* with Saint-Saën's *Ave Verum*, both beautiful, heavenly music.

At a mere 46 bars, Mozart's exquisite *Ave Verum* is a summation of the composer's ability to say something profound in the simplest possible way. It is one of two sacred works Mozart composed in the last ten years of his life in Vienna (the other is the *Requiem*), and an example of his determination to create a new type of church music based on clarity and emotional directness rather than the "learned" counterpoint of the baroque period. The *Ave Verum* has been called Mozart's perfect composition, where the "ecclesiastical and personal elements flow together".

The *Ave Verum* is a short text attributed to the 14th century that has been set to music by various composers. Mozart's is probably the best known, and Saint-Saëns's is a well-loved version. Other settings include that of William Byrd, Edward Elgar, Charles Gounod, Gabriel Faure, as well as Franz Liszt's piano transcription and Tchaikovsky's further orchestral version. The text is also used in Francis Poulenc's opera, *Dialogue of the Carmelites*.

Saint-Saën's E flat major *Ave Verum* is quite different. One could say it is filled with French romantic harmonies but set within a very classical purity and balance. Famously, Saint-Saëns once said that Mozart's "is the only *Ave Verum*". Though less performed than Mozart's *adagio* setting that is written for choir with strings accompaniment, this *Ave Verum* (marked *moderato* and written to be sung *a cappella*) is, like Mozart's, simple, luminous and beautiful.

J. BRAHMS

Geistliches Lied, Op.30

Geistliches Lied, Op 30., is a sacred song written by Brahms when he was only 23. It is remarkable for its voice parts being constructed as a double canon throughout, with two different lines imitated between the soprano/tenor and alto/bass parts, and the distance of imitation at a ninth (one step greater than an octave), an unusual distance. After the opening, the pairs intertwine with each other, while the imaginative organ interludes also incorporate quasi-cansons at the ninth.

The work is a setting of a poem by the early 17th century writer Paul Fleming whose theme is the consolation that God provides in times of difficulty. The archaic 4/2 meter, with its frequent double whole notes, is meant to evoke the Renaissance composers Brahms studied while writing this piece.

The counterpoint in the *Geistliches Lied* is a technical *tour de force*, but Brahms uses the canonic devices as an expressive tool. Within the framework of the double canon, the work is also notable for its word paintings, with sudden admonishments to silence, upward motives when referring to God, and its soaring Amen at the end. Only 67 bars long, the work is the smallest numbered piece in Brahms's repertoire, but its compositional complexities make it a work of exceptional beauty.

G. FAURE

Cantique de Jean Racine, Op.11

Fauré is one of the foremost representatives of the 19th century French *mélodie* tradition, and many of his songs are well-known and much-loved.

The *Cantique* is a setting of words by the 17th century dramatist and poet Jean Racine (the text was Racine's French translation of portions of the Roman Breviary). It was Fauré's first significant composition, written in 1865, whilst he was in his final year at the *Ecole Niedermeyer* (an establishment dedicated to the training of church musicians) in Paris. He went on to compose a great deal of religious music, most notably his *Requiem*.

Considered a "classicist" musically, much of Fauré's work has been songs and short works for chamber audiences - his songs for solo voice and piano constitute a cornerstone of the French repertory. While "cantique" can be translated "song", the English "canticle" accurately evokes the prayer of supplication that is the essence of the work. Fauré's gift for melody is apparent - the simplicity of the melodic line provides for a steady declamation of the sung text supported by the purity of the harmony in the rhythmic triplet accompaniment.

E. ESENVALDS

Only in Sleep

Ēriks Ešņvalds is a Latvian composer (born 1977) who has taken to composing in English. "Only in sleep" is a 2010 composition set to American poet Sara Teasdale's text and as Ešņvalds spent time attached to Trinity College, University of Cambridge, whose choir has recorded this work (2014, Hyperion).

This is the first performance of this piece in Hong Kong – and we wish to thank the composer who wrote us with the following description:

Only in Sleep - there is almost nothing more to say except to repeat those pure words written by Sara Teasdale in this poem that to remember the years of our childhood and to remember the children we played with is like a precious diamond that makes our life beautiful and so dear.

English translations of the text

Mozart's Ave Verum / Saint-Saën's Ave Verum

Ave verum corpus natum
De Maria virgine
Vere passum immolatum
In cruce pro homine
Cuius latus perforatum
Unda fluxit et sanguine
Esto nobis praegustatum
In mortis examine. [Amen]

Hail the true body, born
of the Virgin Mary:
You who truly suffered and were sacrificed
on the cross for the sake of man.
From whose pierced flank
flowed water and blood:
Be a foretaste for us
in the trial of death. [Amen]

Brahms - Geistliches Lied

Laß dich nur nichts nicht dauren mit trauren;
Sei stille, wie Gott es fügt,
So sei vergnügt, mein Wille.

Brahms - Spiritual Song / Sacred Song

Let nothing indeed make you endure grief;
Be at peace! If God ordains it,
may my will accept it.

Was willst du heute sorgen auf morgen?
Der Eine steht allem für;
Der gibt auch dir das Deine.

Why worry today about tomorrow?
God stands for all;
He also gives you what is yours.

Sei nur in allem Handel ohn' Wandel,
Steh feste; was Gott beschleußt,
Das ist und heißt das Beste.

In all your dealings be without whim -
stand firmly! That which God decides
is and means the best.

Amen.

Amen.

Fauré - Cantique de Jean Racine

Verbe égal au Très-Haut,
notre unique espérance,
Jour éternel de la terre et des cieux;
De la paisible nuit nous rompons le silence,
Divin Sauveur, jette sur nous les yeux!

Fauré - Hymn of Jean Racine

Word of God, one with the Most High,
in Whom alone we have our hope,
Eternal Day of heaven and earth,
We break the silence of the peaceful night;
Saviour Divine, cast your eyes upon us!

Répands sur nous le feu de ta grâce puissante,
Que tout l'enfer fuie au son de ta voix;
Dissipe le sommeil d'une âme languissante,
Qui la conduit à l'oubli de tes lois!

Pour on us the fire of your powerful grace,
That all hell may flee at the sound of your voice;
Banish the slumber of a weary soul,
That brings forgetfulness of your laws!

O Christ, sois favorable à ce peuple fidèle
Pour te bénir maintenant rassemblé.
Reçois les chants qu'il offre à ta gloire immortelle,
Et de tes dons qu'il retourne comblé!

O Christ, look with favour upon your faithful people
Now gathered here to praise you;
Receive their hymns offered to your immortal glory;
May they go forth filled with your gifts.

Performers

Soprano

Florence Chang
Sylvia Chan

Alto

Cecilia The
Flora Young

Tenor

Keith Chan
Kyle Hung

Bass

Colin Lau
Vincent Leung

Organ by kind assistance of Felix Yeung

Piano Hiu Lui Ko

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