Voices of Ascension

Dennis Keene
Artistic Director & Conductor

Thursday, March 30, 2017 at 8:00pm
The Church of the Ascension
Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street
New York City

The Catherine B. Fair & Esther D. Hamilton Memorial Concert
Silver Jubilee Society Concert Sponsor: The Moon Drunk Fund

Bach: St John Passion

Part I
Intermission
Part II

Soloists

The Characters

Derek Chester, *tenor,* (*Evangelist)*
Kevin Deas, *bass-baritone* (*Jesus)*
Jason Eck, *bass-baritone (Pilate)*
Paul An, *bass (Peter)*
John Tiranno, *tenor (Servant I)*
Brian Dougherty, *tenor (Servant II)*
Ellen Taylor Sisson, *soprano (Maid)*

The Arias

Sarah Shafer, *soprano*
Avery Amereau, *mezzo-soprano*
Gene Stenger, *tenor*
Alan Dunbar, *baritone*

The audience is urged at this time to make sure that all cell phones and other electronic devices are turned off.
The use of cameras and recording devices is strictly prohibited.

Members of the audience are cordially invited to greet the artists at a reception following the concert in the Parish Hall (enter through the right side doors).

Notes on Bach's *St John Passion*

One of the amazing things about musical masterpieces of the very highest level is that people can relate to them in many different ways. One can listen to Bach's *St. John Passion* 1) as pure music; or 2) with general knowledge of the story – perhaps even relating to the idea of suffering and eventual victory; or 3) with detailed understanding of the text and its meaning. Since Bach composed his *St. John Passion* for a specific Good Friday service at a specific German Lutheran church, I have here provided detailed program notes as to the meaning of the music as I believe Bach conceived it. Feel free to gain sustenance from this astonishing work any way you choose!

The tradition of Passion readings on Good Friday goes back many, many centuries, and during some periods the story was chanted. Little by little, the chanting became more elaborate and different singers took the various character parts. By the time of the early Baroque period, composers such as Heinrich Schütz composed elaborate compositions with soloists, choruses, and instrumental ensembles. There were countless settings of The Passion during the Baroque, but none could prepare us for the two towering works of Johann Sebastian Bach, *The St. John Passion* and *The St. Matthew Passion*. In these works Bach used every skill he had as a composer to *illuminate the text*.

Bach's plan in each was to take the text of the Bible passages verbatim and have it sung by a tenor (the "Evangelist" - representing St. John in this case) and by other solo singers taking the parts of various characters in the narrative. Throughout the piece, the action is frozen and Bach inserts some commentary on what has just occurred. These commentaries could be vocal arias or traditional Lutheran hymns tunes (called "chorales") with special texts written for this piece. And *The St. John Passion* also contains two large "bookend" choruses at the beginning and end of the work. We are not sure, but it is possible that Bach himself put together the libretto, collecting and adapting various religious poems and texts for the commentaries.

The central story theme of this great work is declared right at the beginning and repeated over and over again, straight through to the end of the work. It is what is called the "Victory of the Cross." This means that because Jesus went through his suffering and death, we are given the ultimate victory of everlasting life. In movement after movement, Bach shows us this victory in very clear poetic and musical ways.

The work begins with one of Bach's finest choruses and, indeed, one of the great beginnings in all of music. Immediately we are transported to another world, teaming with profound and complex emotions. The epic scope of the entire work is also indicated right from the beginning. And the theological theme is also stated right up front: "Lord, show us by your Passion that you triumph even in deepest humiliation." On the words "grössten Niedrigkeit" ("deepest humiliation") the voices go to the lowest notes, then build up again with the words "verherrlicht worden bist" ("you are glorified").

Then the story itself begins as told by the Evangelist (John). It is Maundy Thursday, the Last Supper has been finished, and Jesus has taken his disciples to a garden to sit with him as he prays. But Judas has betrayed him, and soldiers come to take Jesus away. Bach tells this story with what is called *secco recitative*. This is the singer accompanied only by occasional notes and chords by a bass instrument and a keyboard instrument (I have chosen cello and harpsichord.) This art form reached its summit in this Passion and the *St. Matthew*. The notes given the soloists and the harmonies chosen indicate the story and the *meaning* of the story, the *significance* of the story, in an extraordinary manner unequalled by any other composer. For example, in this opening recitative, the tone is rather ordinary at first, until, suddenly, the name of Judas is mentioned. Here the chord is the highly-charged harmony of a diminished chord. And the recitative gets quite active as the soldiers arrive with torches and weapons. Then, as the Evangelist sets up the first words of Jesus, the recitative melodies become more tender and the harmonies turn to the major.

Jesus asks, rhetorically, "Whom do you seek?" And the soldiers answer with hostility, "Jesus of Nazareth!" Here the chorus plays the part of the crowd of soldiers. Many times they will assume character roles; and at other times will take the part of the faithful congregants, commenting on what has just happened. Again Jesus asks, "Whom do you seek?" and again the soldiers answer with hostility. Then Jesus says, "I have told you I am the one you want. Let my disciples go." At this point comes the first inserted commentary in the form of a chorale (German Lutheran hymn). "What great love it was for me that you took upon this suffering."

The disciple Peter acts in a knee-jerk manner, draws his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. But Jesus stands above all this, and tells Peter to put away his sword. Jesus says, "Shall I not take the path that my Father has given me?" Another commentary follows. The people ask to be as faithful to God's will in their lives as Jesus was.

The next recitative is centered around Jesus being *bound* and led away. The commentary that follows is the first vocal aria of the piece. "Jesus allowed himself to be bound so that I can be unbound from my sins." The two oboes depict this *being bound up* with their plaintive melodies which constantly crisscross each other - being tied-up with sin.

A brief sentence about two of the disciples following Jesus sets up the next - and very special - aria. Bach uses the notes of the recitative as the basis for the beautiful theme of the aria. It is scored for soprano, two flutes and bass line. "I will follow you, my life and light." The piece was originally sung by a boy soprano, and, for me, I hear this movement as an incredibly sweet, innocent, testimony of faith from someone who is (happily) too young to know the difficulties and suffering that come with following in Christ's footsteps. When the young singer says, "Push me along when I hesitate," Bach gives us slurred pairs of upwardly-moving notes, depicting the nudging along.

Now the action becomes more vivid, as we return to the high priest's court. It is most interesting to notice the mood changes in the character of Jesus. At first his music is calm and in F Major. But, as he gets worked up, all the harmonies change, and he sings in a higher and more intense register. Finally, as he asks "If I spoke no wrong, why did you strike me?" The music is filled with such compassion (in E Major) that Bach tells us that Jesus has already forgiven the officer. The following chorale continues in this compassionate mode, by Bach's choice of the beautiful hymn melody and his extraordinary, heart-felt harmonization. (It should be mentioned that the tradition of composers harmonizing traditional Lutheran hymn tunes reached its absolute summit in the hands of Bach. And the magnificent collection of chorales in The *St. John Passion* form the true backbone of the piece, each one communicating some thought, some reflexion, in a profound and clearly expressive manner.) This chorale asks who it was that struck you, Jesus? The second stanza answers, "I and my sins were the cause."

Then, the crowd says to Peter, "Aren't you one of the disciples of that man on trial?" Their short, quick contrapuntal notes are cold, callous. Peter keeps denying he has anything to do with Jesus. When the cock crows, Peter realizes what he has done and weeps bitterly. The tenor's recitative on the words "wept bitterly" ("weinete bitterlich") is one of the greatest examples of recitative composition in all of music. It is a chromatic sigh of anguish. The following aria is Peter's song of remorse and anguish. It is the most blatantly passionate aria in the piece, befitting the disciple who always behaved so emotionally.

The aria doesn't really conclude. It just stops, and leads directly to the closing chorale of Part I. This is a totally amazing chorale. The first eight measures deal with Peter - how he took one look into Jesus' eyes and realized what he had done. The other eight measures are a plea from the faithful, "Jesus, look at me when I sin!" Bach uses every technique in the book to express very complex emotions. The first two measures start in the minor, but the second two evolve into a resolution of sorts in A Major. Then the harmonies sound completely troubled as Peter looks into Jesus' eyes and weeps. Even the cadence on "bitterly weeps" is worthy of mention, with its sad, expressive moving parts, and the fact that this phrase - and the first half of the chorale - ends on a dominant seventh chord in an inverted position (in layman's terms: *totally unresolved.*) Now, as the chorale talks about the lives of the faithful congregation, it picks up with considerable strength and conviction (again, through Bach's amazing use of harmony and voice-leading), finally ending with peace and faith.

Intermission

In *The St. Matthew Passion*, Bach begins Part II with a lengthy commentary in the form of an aria with chorus. Here, he begins Part II much more directly, with a short, rough chorale. In less than 60 seconds Bach communicates three things: 1) what happened in Part I (Jesus was seized and taken away); 2) this was done *for us* (a reminder of the theological theme of the work); and 3) what is coming next (falsely accused, mocked, spat upon.) Bach expresses the words "falsely accused" with unexpected, deviating harmonies.

The action moves along quickly now. Jesus is taken to the high priest Caiphas and then to Pontius Pilate. Pilate asks the crowd what one would think would be a pro-forma question, "What charge do you bring against this man?" The crowd practically explodes, "We wouldn't have brought him here if he weren't a criminal!" This is the first of many highly dramatic, emotionally-charged choruses that give *The St. John Passion* its particular character. Here Bach uses sharp repeated notes, wild chromaticism, and an intensity which builds up and up, recedes temporarily, then builds up again. A brief recitative is followed by another highly-charged chorus.

In the next recitative, Pilate asks Jesus "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world; if it were, his servants would fight. But his kingdom is not of this world. As the text talks about fighting, Bach animates the notes. But, interestingly, the animation is not really dramatic, and it is in *major keys*: because Jesus, of course, would never really wage a battle. As he sings the final "aber nun ist mein Reich nicht von dannen" (my kingdom is not here) Bach clearly portrays Jesus thinking about his *real* kingdom, the one in heaven. In the commentary chorale which follows, the faithful try to express that, as human, earthly beings, we cannot possibly conceive of the mercy of this heavenly king. The chorale has almost continuous eighth notes in the bass line. Does this perhaps represent the earth-bound existence of human beings?

Pilate then tells the crowd he will release one of the two prisoners, Jesus or Barabbas, and asks them, "which one?" They cry out, "Not this one (Jesus) but Barabbas!" Pilate then has Jesus taken away and whipped. The word "geisselte" (whipped) provides Bach with another opportunity for picture-painting, which he seizes with enormous effect.

One might expect a bold, dramatic commentary to follow here, or at least a lament, as the Gospel text talks of Jesus' whipping. But, remember the theme of this *St. John Passion*: "The Victory of the Cross." What follows is instead one of the most luminous, tender, poetic arias Bach ever composed. It is scored for a very special collection of forces: bass soloist, accompanied by two viola d'amores (a high, sweet-toned member of the Baroque viol family), lute, organ, cello and bass. (In our performance, the viola d'amore parts are played on modern violins with mutes.) In this magnificent aria, the text expresses the thought that, out of Jesus' suffering comes the highest good. Out of the thorns that prick him comes a beautiful blossom; out of his wounds comes sweet fruit. The beautiful sound world of this arioso, the extraordinarily expressive melodies and subtle, profoundly moving harmonies, all contribute to one of the truly magnificent moments of the Passion. A full-length tenor aria continues with exactly the same theological concept, again with beautiful and evocative poetry.

The soldiers place a crown of thorns and purple cloak on Jesus. They mock him in a chorus, "Hail, King of the Jews!" The music is in a major key and is rather pretty, but Bach's swirling 16th notes in the flutes and oboes adds an uneasy, mocking undercurrent. Notice in the next recitative the spot where the Evangelist talks of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns and purple cloak. Bach's setting depicts the Evangelist's deep pathos as if he were feeling "How could they treat the Son of God this way?"

As the high priests and officers scream "Crucify him!" we have another highly-charged, brutal chorus, fast and dissonant. The next chorus depicts the high priests slavishly following the letter of the law. So Bach composed music that also slavishly follows the letter of the law in musical composition. Although periodically it indicates the seriousness of the situation, this four-part choral fugue sounds as if a student following all the rules had written it. It is square and done correctly by formula.

Pilate starts to get anxious about who this Jesus fellow really is. The harmonies sound unsure. But, as this recitative comes to a conclusion, it remarkably ends in a sweet E Major key. It prepares us for the most theologically central chorale of the entire work. "From your imprisonment comes our freedom." The Victory of the Cross. To indicate the centrality of this chorale, Bach constructs the movements before and after it in a mirror image. Immediately before and after the chorale are two choruses with the same melodic material ("Wir haben ein Gesetz" and "Lässest diesen los"). On either side of those choruses are two "Crucify him" choruses. On either side of those are yet two more choruses with the same melodies ("Sei gegrüsset" and "Schiebe nicht"). An interesting detail along the way: in the libretto #23g, the Evangelist sings "he handed over Jesus to be crucified." On the word "crucified" Bach composed a very expressive melody for the Evangelist, properly depicting the word. But then he follows that harmonically charged phrase with a cadence in D *Major*. This major chord sounds totally out of place. Indeed, when I first conducted this piece - 35 years ago! - during a rehearsal, the D Major chord struck me right in the face. I stopped the rehearsal to make sure it was indeed a D *Major* chord and not D *Minor*. And then I understood, this was yet another depiction by Bach of The Victory of the Cross.

A marvelously vivid bass aria follows in G Minor, "Hurry to Golgotha!" The chorus asks, "Where?" When the text says, "You will be revived there," the music goes into E-flat Major.

After the "Schriebe nicht" chorus comes the chorale "In meine Herzen." This personal, compassionate piece serves as a transition from all the action to the final moments of Jesus' life. Then comes a unique moment in the work. As the soldiers take Jesus' coat, they decide to cast lots for it. Bach depicts this gambling with a most unexpected chorus. It is full of nimble running notes, quick repeated eights, syncopations and, in general, a rather playful atmosphere. Other than expressing the rolling of dice or whatever form of gambling you might choose, why is this movement here? Perhaps Bach is expressing the contrast between most of the characters in the Passion – those who know the significance of the Crucifixion - and those who are so engrossed in the trivialities of their daily lives that they cannot begin to grasp the significance of what is going on around them. The playful scene reveals the soldiers not at all caught up in the emotion of the event, living simply for the hope of gambling winnings of trinkets.

We are near the end. The following recitative begins by finishing the story of the coat. Then it becomes extremely poignant as Jesus' mother and the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (St. John) gather beneath Jesus on the Cross. Jesus says to Mary, "Mother, this (John) is (now) your son." And to John, "There is now your mother." The chorale which follows is the same chorale tune as the final movement of Part I. And here, as was the case before, the first half is a commentary on what just happened, and the second half encourages all of us to act the way Jesus did. But the harmonizations of the melody are quite different. We are not in the same world now. And Bach expresses this with a more muted setting.

Jesus utters his final words in the next recitative: "Es ist vollbracht!" It is ended. It is fulfilled. One of the most famous arias follows. The thinner, poignant tones of the viola da gamba (a Baroque predecessor of the cello) is used, and the alto sighs a lament from deep within. And yet, all of a sudden, coming from nowhere, the aria suddenly breaks forth vigorously in D Major "The Hero of Judah triumphs in power!" The alto proclaims the ultimate victory. But, just as quickly as this section began, it is over, as the alto nonetheless realizes that Jesus' time is finished.

A hushed recitative announces Jesus' death. Bach does not give us a lament here, but one of the most radiant pieces he ever composed. There are two worlds going on here: 1) the bass soloist and cellist ask the question, "Jesus, now that all is fulfilled, am I made free from death?" Jesus answers silently, with his head down, "Yes!" The melodies here are profoundly beautiful; and with its slow, gentle lilt, the music is spiritually happy. 2) The chorus exists simultaneously and sings from afar the familiar chorale (the same one heard at the end of Part I and earlier in Part II - this time in a low key with luminous, peaceful harmonies). They sing, "Jesus, you were dead and now live eternally. Let me follow your path."

A dramatic recitative follows as the veil of the temple is torn and the earth quakes. The quivering notes in the bass instruments here become the throbbing sound of a heart in the next tenor arioso. The rending of the veil, the rocks splitting, the earthquakes, and the graves opening up are all vividly depicted in the orchestra. But the arioso ends tenderly and unresolved as the tenor asks, "My heart, what will you now do?" The following soprano aria answers the question, "Dissolve, my heart, in floods of tears, because Jesus is dead." This, also, is one of Bach's greatest creations. Only four instruments accompany the soprano, flute, English horn, bassoon, and organ. The sound world prefectly suits the profound sadness of the singer. And the role of the singer is that of a real human being, someone present at the Crucifixion who knew and loved Jesus. Three times the aria just stops, as if she realizes that he is actually *dead*. And in the moment before one of those cessations, Bach writes trills on two long held notes. These trills, however, are not usually performed like normal Baroque trills, but like an early Baroque Monteverdi trill: repeated notes on the same pitch, like a sound of sobbing.

The next recitative ties up many loose ends of the story, each with a different emotional expression. The firm chorale, "O hilf, Christ," provides a strong contrast before the final recitative. Here Bach gives the tenor some of his lowest notes as we journey to the grave. These notes sound particularly solemn in the voice of a "Bach tenor" whose voice naturally resides in higher pitches. Bach also knew that, after two hours of singing the recitatives, often in very high passages, the tenor's lowest register would be even weaker, sounding more frail than usual. The recitative ends on the cello's and the organ's lowest notes, a low C.

Now is the final chorus, one of the most beautiful Bach composed. It is the other large bookend, balancing the opening chorus, bringing this epic story to a close. "Rest well," the people say. And the movement concludes solemnly in C Minor. But the work does not end here! Bach adds a final chorale, a final prayer from the faithful people: "Lord, when I die, send your angels to take me to Abraham's bosom where there is no pain. Then, at the last day, wake me from sleep so that I may see you. I glorify you eternally!" The chorale starts so softly and tenderly, and, little by little, grows into one of the most inspiring moments in Western Music.

— Dennis Keene

A Note from Dennis Keene

In recent years a great deal has been discussed and written about concerning the anti-semitism found in the text of tonight's great work. Was Bach blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus?

The most thorough writing on this topic is a book entitled *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion,* by Michael Marissen. I recommend it very highly.

The libretto of the St. John Passion was most likely put together by Bach himself. Since it was to be used for the Good Friday services at his church, St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Bach was obliged to use the standard Gospel according to St. John as the text for the narration and the action portions of the piece. Around this central text he put commentary material in the form of arias and chorales. The texts for those commentary sections came from various German poets of the time. They were chosen by Bach to provide clear commentary on what was occurring in the active story, and what it meant.

There is no question that the text from the Bible -- the 1st century Gospel by St. John -- talks of the Jews in an extremely harsh manner. Historically, this is a bit odd, since Jesus himself was a Jew, and since only some of the Jews wanted Jesus condemned. Other Jews were his most faithful followers. Nonetheless, this text is brutal and difficult to read today.

And it is common knowledge that the founder of Bach's branch of Christianity, Martin Luther, was himself anti-Semitic.

So, how does Bach fit into all this? As Michael Marissen discusses at length in his book, Bach's choice of Commentary Texts completely transforms the situation. Instead of blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus, these texts proclaim, over and over again, that it is the sin of all Christian believers that is the cause of Jesus's death.

In #7 the alto sings "To free me from the bond of my sin my Savior is bound." In #11 the question is asked, "Who hit you?" The answer is, "It is I, with my sins." And in #37, "Help us, Christ, as your loyal followers, to avoid wrong-doing and, with the thought of your death and its cause, to bring you thanks."

Indeed, this is one of the two main theological themes which are the entire basis of Bach's St.
John Passion: 1) that it is because of our sins that Jesus suffered crucifixion and death, and 2) out of his suffering came redemption, the "Victory of the Cross," the ultimate triumph from his death. These are the themes which Bach discusses and develops so strongly with his great music.

It is hoped that through discussions and writings such as Marissen's, an understanding can be achieved in just how far Bach diverged from the less-enlightened viewpoint of the founder of the Lutheran church and so many others.

Dennis Keene is Artistic Director and conductor of the Voices of Ascension Chorus & Orchestra. Known internationally through his many concerts and recordings with Voices of Ascension, his regular guest appearances as conductor and clinician, and his work as Artistic Director of The Dennis Keene Choral Festival, he has emerged as one of leading choral conductors in the world today.

Recognized early as an exceptional organist, Dennis Keene began musical studies and performing in his native Los Angeles. He moved to New York City to study at The Juilliard School, where he earned the BM, MM, and DMA degrees and the coveted Gaston Dethier Organ Prize as a student of Vernon de Tar. Dr. Keene also studied privately in Paris with Marie-Madeleine Duruflé, André Marchal, and André Isoir.

Dennis Keene was active as a recitalist until his interest in conducting prompted him to study conducting at the Pierre Monteux School for Orchestral Conductors, with Charles Bruck in Paris, and with John Nelson at The Juilliard School. His passion for the finest in professional choral music can be traced to his early work as organist with Gregg Smith, Roger Wagner, and Margaret Hillis.

In addition to his work with Voices of Ascension, Dr. Keene continues as Organist and Choirmaster of Church of the Ascension in New York City. He served for many years on the Board of Directors of Chorus America, which honored him with the first Louis Botto Award for "innovative action and entrepreneurial zeal in developing a professional ensemble of exceptional artistic quality." He has also served on the Choral Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts and on the Music Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts.

From 1998 to 2003 Maestro Keene presented a major summer institute for the training of conductors and singers: The Dennis Keene Choral Festival, in Kent, Connecticut. In 1993 he began his recording association with Delos International, with which he has recorded such best-selling CDs as Beyond Chant, the Duruflé Album, and the Berlioz Te Deum. This series of highly acclaimed recordings with Voices of Ascension has secured international recognition for both conductor and chorus and become the standard for first-ranked ensembles worldwide.

Voices of Ascension

GRAMMY-nominated Voices of Ascension, founded in 1990 and directed by conductor Dennis Keene, presents exceptional performances of great works of music for chorus and orchestra. Over the course of its 27 year history, Voices of Ascension has produced an annual concert series, released GRAMMY-nominated recordings, and engaged in artistic collaborations with the San Francisco Symphony, Mostly Mozart Festival, José Limón Dance, the Mark Morris Dance Group, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and others. These performances have won acclaim for their "sheer musical excellence" (NY Times), the chorus for being the "finest in American choral music" (Stereophile), and Dr. Keene as the "leader most widely touted to pick up the mantle of Robert Shaw" (NY Times).

VoA's professional ensemble musicians collectively share the finest credentials in classical music, boasting degrees from and teaching appointments at major conservatories and universities including Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music, Mannes/New School, New England Conservatory, Eastman, Oberlin, Indiana University – Harvard, Yale, Columbia, NYU, CUNY, SUNY and Rutgers among others. They regularly perform with orchestras including the NY Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Orpheus, The Knights, Philip Glass Ensemble, and Boston Baroque; the Metropolitan, Chicago Lyric, Houston Grand and New York City Operas, with vocal ensembles Conspirare, Lionheart, Seraphic Fire, Waverly Consort; and comprise the core ensemble for many NY professional choruses including Musica Sacra, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. John the Divine, and Trinity Wall Street.

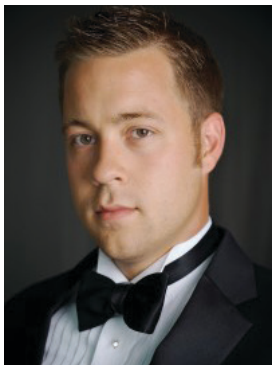
The ensemble shares a commitment to artistic excellence and helps to sustain the choral tradition by supporting emerging soloists in VoA's Young Artist Program and serving as the chamber ensemble for the VoA Conductor Academy. Recent performances have been described as "inspired" (The New York Times 4/4/15) and "richly colored, impressive, and beautifully balanced" (Wall Street Journal 2/11/15). Voices of Ascension is proud to present the musical integrity and sensitivity of these extraordinary musicians.

The Voices of Ascension mission is to produce exceptional performances of great music for chorus. VoA also seeks to sustain the legacy of the choral art through the following programs:

Young Artists Program: identifies exceptionally gifted emerging solo artists and gives them the opportunity to perform in a world-class choral setting, under the direction of Dennis Keene.

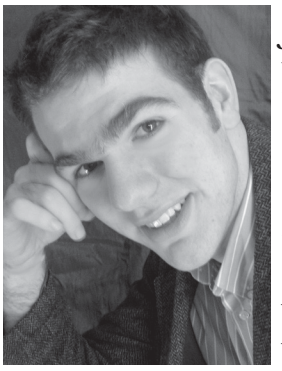
VoA Conductor Academy: An intensive conducting workshop with Dennis Keene, featuring talks, master classes, and private lessons, for serious students as well as veteran professionals. Participants conduct the Voices of Ascension chorus and chamber orchestra.

Voices Online: records VoA performances of choral masterworks live, in concert, for free online distribution to a new and larger audience.



Praised by the New York Times for his "beautifully shaped and carefully nuanced singing," **tenor Derek Chester** is steadily making a name for himself in the world of classical music. In demand as an interpreter of oratorio, Chester has appeared as soloist with such organizations as Boston Baroque, Ars Lyrica Houston, the Korean Broadcasting System Symphony, the Toronto Symphony, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Voices of Ascension, Barokksolistene Norway, the Colorado Symphony, Bach Collegium San Diego, and the American Bach Soloists. He holds degrees from University of Georgia and the Yale School of Music as a full scholarship recipient. After a year as a Fulbright Scholar in Germany, Chester competed his Doctorate in Music from the University of North Texas. As a well-regarded pedagogue Chester participated in the 2016 NATS Intern Program and has given master classes across the country. He currently serves on the voice faculty at the University of Northern Colorado and continues his worldwide career as an interpreter of concert repertoire.

Kevin Deas has gained international renown as one of America's leading bass-baritones. He is perhaps most acclaimed for his signature portrayal of the title role in *Porgy and Bess*, having performed it with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, National Symphony, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Pacific Symphony, and the symphonies of Atlanta, Baltimore, Calgary, Columbus, Detroit, Florida, Hartford, Houston, Milwaukee, Minnesota, Montreal, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Utah, and Vancouver, and at the Ravinia, Vail and Saratoga festivals. Kevin Deas' engagements during the 2015-16 season included Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the Bach Festival Society of Winter Park and the Pacific, Phoenix, and Richmond Symphonies; Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass,* the *Duruflé Requiem*, and a concert of Bach Cantatas with the National Philharmonic; Messiah with Pacific MusicWorks and the Alabama Symphony; Frank Martin's *Golgotha* with the New Amsterdam Singers; the Brahms *Requiem* with Vox Ama Deus; Mozart *Requiem* with the Baltimore Choral Arts Society; and Elgar's *The Apostles* with the Bucks County Choral Society.



Jason Eck bass-baritone was born and raised in Binghamton, NY. Mr. Eck received his bachelor's degree from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music where he performed Dulcamara (*L'Elisir d'Amore*), Geronimo (T*he Secret Marriage*), Peter Quince (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Figaro (*Le nozze di Figaro*), and Sarastro (*The Magic Flute*). Jason has completed his graduate studies at the Indiana University having sung Bartolo (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*), Theodorous Van Gogh (World premiere of *Vincent*), Don Alfonso (*Cosi fan Tutte*), Sid (*Albert Herring*), Leporello (*Don Giovanni*) and Aye (*Akhnaten*). At IU, Mr. Eck was also the bass soloist (Jesus) for Arvo Pärt's 'Passio' and Giuseppe Verdi's 'Requiem'. Jason has sung with Opera Theatre of St Louis in 2013 singing The Sergeant of Police (*The Pirates of Penzance*) and Angelotti in Atlanta Opera's production of Tosca. Most recently, Mr. Eck has been heard in NYC singing with Voices of Ascension, Musica Sacra and Early Music New York. Jason is currently a member of the choir at the Church of Ascension

Mezzo-soprano Avery Amereau is a native of Jupiter, Florida. Ms. Amereau has garnered much attention for the unique quality of her voice and sensitivity to interpretation, having been praised by the New York Times as "achingly perfect," "sensual," and singing with "excellent body and clarity." Last season at The Juilliard School, Ms. Amereau made her operatic debut as Olga in *Eugene Onegin,* followed by Mme. de la Haltière in *Cendrillon* and the title role in *The Rape of Lucretia*. A proud recipient of a Kovner Fellowship, she will return to Juilliard next fall for an Artist Diploma in Opera Studies. Ms. Amereau also has an extensive concert repertoire, and is equally at home in the world of song, having performed recitals in New York, Miami, and in Bavaria as a participant in the Internationale Meistersinger Akademie. She has worked with many prominent artistic collaborators, including Helmut Rilling, William Christie, Joyce DiDonato, Elly Ameling, and Eve Shapiro.

Praised by the New York Times for her "luminous voice" and named "a singer to watch" by Opera News, **soprano Sarah Shafer** is sought after on the operatic and concert stage. Last season she made her role debut as Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at San Francisco Opera, and reprised the role of Adina in *L'elisir d'amore* with Opera Philadelphia. Concert work includes collaborations with pianist Richard Goode and clarinetist Anthony McGill, Handel's *Messiah* with the Indianapolis Symphony, and Mahler's Resurrection Symphony with the New York Youth Symphony at Carnegie Hall. Career highlights include two world premieres at San Francisco Opera: Rosetta in Marco Tutino's *Two Women* and the role of Mary Lennox in Nolan Gasser's *The Secret Garden*, Barbarina and the cover role of Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Glyndebourne Festival and the BBC Proms in Royal Albert Hall, and Mahler's Fourth Symphony with the Aspen Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Robert Spano.

The American **tenor, Gene Stenger,** obtained his Bachelor of Music Degree in Voice Performance with Arts Management Emphasis from Baldwin Wallace University Conservatory of Music, and his Master of Music Degree in Voice Performance from Colorado State University). Currently, he is completing a second Master of Music Degree in Early Music, Oratorio, and Chamber Music Performance with a full scholarship from the Yale School of Music conferred jointly with the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, where he studies with tenor James Taylor. Gene Stenger, a specialist in the oratorio repertoire of J.S. Bach and George Frideric Handel, sings with elegant conviction and effortless agility. In March 2013, Stenger returned to the Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart to perform as the tenor soloist in J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (BWV 244), and completed an international tour with Maestro Helmuth Rilling in both Germany and Chile. Gene Stenger is quickly establishing himself both on the national and international level as a specialist in the oratorio repertoire. Praised for his "sweet vibrancy" and "crisp, gleaming sound".

Baritone Alan Dunbar is a versatile performer, lauded for his beautiful tone and his nuanced musical and textual interpretation. Recent performances include Argento's *The Andrée Expedition* at the Ordway, Schaunard in La Bohème with Madison Opera, Schoeck's *Notturno* and Barber's *Dover Beach* at the Apollo Music Festival, the title role of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* at Santa Fe Opera, as well as concert performances with Indianapolis Baroque Orchestra, Santa Fe Symphony, and Lima Symphony Orchestra. Alan made his European solo recital debut at the Oslo Grieg Festival after winning the grand prize at the 2009 Grieg Festival in Winter Park, FL. He holds a BA in music theory and composition from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and an MM and DM in vocal performance from Indiana University. Alan was a founding member of the internationally acclaimed male chamber vocal ensemble Cantus, and sang throughout North America and Europe with the ensemble from 1998-2004. He currently serves as Assistant Professor of Voice at Winona State University.

Voices of Ascension wishes to thank Dr. Jon Walton, the staff and members of The First Presbyterian Church for making their restrooms available to us. At the intermission, you may use the three Ascension restrooms, or follow the directions to the seven restrooms accessible throughout the 11th Street side entrance at First Presbyterian.

For further assistance, please ask a Voices of Ascension volunteer, usher, or staff member for instructions.

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Robert Zubrycki

Violins II
Sebu Sirinian
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Daire Fitzgerald

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Brian Cassier

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