

Jocelyn Hagen's *amass*

Program notes by Joshua Shank

Composers have been setting the Roman Catholic liturgy to music for centuries. There are seemingly endless examples which stretch back to antiquity and range in scope from the sparse settings chanted by monks to Johann Sebastian Bach's grand two-hour *Mass in B Minor* for chorus, orchestra, and soloists. Franz Joseph Haydn wrote 14 masses during his lifetime while Palestrina contributed over 100 different settings of his own before his death in 1594. These are impressive statistics to be sure and, over the centuries, writing a mass has become to the choral world what writing a symphony might be for orchestral composers: an ancient form so well-established in the medium that the listener can easily hear the unique aspects of a particular setting.

As with any piece in this tradition, Jocelyn Hagen's *amass* owes much of its form to the structure of the Roman Catholic mass which, despite a few minor alterations throughout the centuries, exists in much the same way as it did when it was first formally put into practice after the Council of Trent in 1570. These texts call to mind the grandeur of cathedrals and the recitation of sacred rites by priests and a congregation of worshippers. They are the familiar, unchanging, and outward aspects of religion. Set directly against these traditions are translations of deeply felt spiritual musings by American poet Daniel Ladinsky. They come from his 2002 book, *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, and are attributed to—among others—a Muslim woman writing in the sixth century and a German theologian tried as a heretic 500 years later. This ecstatic poetry represents the regions of a person's understanding of spirituality which are unique and oftentimes closely held. By including texts from both of these sides of faith as well as diverse spiritual traditions, *amass* becomes less about a certain religion and more about the dual nature of an individual's spirituality. Though these ideas will often spring from the systems inherent in a particular belief structure (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.), in the end they become profoundly personal. It is by highlighting this dichotomy that the work finds its inspiration and takes flight.

What is remarkable about this piece is how a centuries-old sequence of praise and prayer is given such a deeply personal voice by its composer. Like the many who have set these same texts before her, Hagen has entered the tradition but kept her individuality intact, and in retrospect, this seems to have been the reason for sending the listener on this journey in the first place. Updating an ancient form is a gesture of continual renewal and, in taking us to the well that has been drawn from so many times before, she returns us refreshed in a way that leaves us both thoughtful and contented at the same time.

amass begins, much like any sort of spiritual contemplation, with an invocation. The solo cello wanders through its high and low registers, drifting through various keys and tempos until it finds the right pitch to begin the reflection. Once this note is found the rest of the string section intones a response in the form of a chorale and they continue as leader and congregation. The tenor eventually adds his voice on a text by Saint John of the Cross—one of the proponents of the Counter-Reformation—and, with voice and instrument working together, *amass* has begun.

The choir makes its first appearance in the *Kyrie* as they chant pleas for mercy. The music is searching for something and is intentionally difficult to listen to. The dissonant harmonies vanish briefly at the mention of "Christe," but we are soon back to the same briar patch of notes groaned out in brief syllables before a final, supplicating cry wafts away into the ether.

At the outset of *Use the geometry*, the marimba provides a backdrop for the soprano as she sings poetry attributed to the fourteenth-century Hindu mystic, Mira. Once the solo cello enters the movement takes off and the music twists around itself like figures in a kaleidoscope held up to the light.

The second text of the Latin mass, *Gloria*, begins with an explosion of ecstatic sound only hinted at in the previous movement. Here the choir is divided into two smaller ensembles who trade dialogue back and forth. The music ebbs and flows with the opening motive nearly always present; sometimes whispered in hushed

excitement and at other times shouted from on high. The music cannot contain its joy and eventually the opening murmur overflows into a thunderous “Amen” to propel us into what comes next.

This is the point in the Roman Catholic liturgy where the “Credo” is normally recited. It is a detailed confession of the specifics of the religion and its omission is the only departure which *amass* takes from the customary Latin texts. Composers will often do this because of its considerable length (as in the tradition of the *missa brevis*, or “brief mass”), but Hagen has instead constructed a moving sequence in its place centered around the universality of faith and the risks of overconfidence.

After the brief statement of *Inventing Truths*, the ringing of bells signals the move into *Certainty*. Here Hagen takes the message of the poetry—by a Hindu saint from the 1600s—and overlays it on the music in a strikingly literal way. The choir is divided in two; half of them will ascend exclusively in whole steps while the other half descends solely by half steps. At first this might seem like nothing more than an intellectual exercise, but it provides a powerful metaphor. These two choirs aren’t listening to each other and the resultant music is strained and discordant. They learn their lesson, however, and by the end are working together—still in their respective methods—to produce something much more harmonious than the eerie music heard earlier.

Much like the tradition of Tibetan Tingsha bells—used to “clear” a space in the mind for contemplation—the ringing once again signals the start of something new. *Where all are welcome* presents a series of questions posed by a Spanish nun from the sixteenth century which become more impassioned until rising to a climax on the only text which asks nothing. It is, rather, an emphatic declaration reminding us that perhaps truly listening to *each other* is what actually brings us closer to the divine. The statement is made and the choir fades away as the bells once again lead us into thoughtful reflection. The words of St. Francis of Assisi now glide over music reminiscent of a pop song.

The next two movements are paired together as meditations on the Latin words for “holy” and “blessed,” respectively. They are chanted repeatedly as a mantra until the music becomes swept up in the repetition spilling over into a blissful revelation shouted at the heavens. The *Sanctus* then turns immediately inward to conclude with a deep sense of personal gratitude while the *Benedictus* goes on to quote the chorale played by the strings in the opening prologue. This music—central to *amass* in its entirety—will return later. Here it is content to gradually disappear.

The next two movements come in relatively quick succession. *The Hope* punctuates the music the choir has just sung with a text by twelfth-century German theologian, Meister Eckhardt; a trio of instruments quietly accompanies the three soloists on a brief musing about the desire for love. *In my soul* then follows as a simple folksong rendered under a poem by Rabia, a female Sufi mystic born in Basra, Iraq in the eighth century.

For the final text taken from the Roman Catholic liturgy, Hagen has constructed an unorthodox scale which has shadings of both major and minor keys simultaneously. This sequence of notes serves as a metaphor of sorts for the juxtaposition of individual spirituality and communal faith; a duality which informs every aspect of a person’s faith journey. It is dark and light; yin and yang; scarcity and abundance. The movement begins as a dance between the marimba and the women of the choir and, where the “Kyrie” was brooding and wandering, the *Agnus Dei* is sure-footed and bright by comparison. It ends on a sparkling chord sung quietly as if it were a cherished gift held close to the heart.

Everything is the last movement to include words and is a summing up both musically and philosophically. All hands are on deck to illuminate texts from four different authors and, once the soloists begin repeating lines of poetry, the music rises to a climax on the text “we are all madly in love with the same God.” From there the proceedings wind down and the cello which began the contemplation at the outset of the entire work sounds the final pitches in a gentle reminder that the path to spirituality is and has always been a solo journey whose destination is never reached.

amass has ended. Go in peace.