

Classical VOX: Breaking the Classical Ceiling
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Classical VOX: Breaking the Classical Ceiling is a celebration of pathbreaking music by, for, and about women in the classical sphere. Through their singing, poetry, visions, compositions, and choral arranging, women across time have exerted power and influence in the world around them. By highlighting this music, we give voice to these women and showcase their contributions to the vocal and choral arts. Above all, we seek to show that women create meaning simply through their existence. As Sappho foretold, we remember their words, thoughts, and dreams—and we hope that someone will remember us, too, in another time.

Tonight's program travels between medieval and modern-day chant, 17th- and 18th-century sacred music, choral arrangements of Romantic art song, and contemporary works exploring both historical legacy and thrilling new vistas of womanhood. Hildegard von Bingen and Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, two nuns living centuries apart, remind us of the rich musical activities in all-female institutions that were often invisible in the male-dominated spheres of public life and religious performance. Robert Gass and Jocelyn Hagen invoke the names of ancient poets and goddesses, illustrating the generative power of remembering the past. In a similar vein, Elaine Hagenberg's setting of poetry by Harriet Prescott Spofford gives a second life to a Victorian-era woman who dared to dream beyond the boundaries of her world. Virginia Davidson and Mari Esabel Valverde's choral arrangements of solo vocal works by Clara Schumann and Ernest Chausson provide a fresh take on Romantic-era repertoire. Finally, we present Vivaldi's beloved *Gloria, RV 589* as it was most likely originally performed: with an all-treble voice choir featuring stunning soprano and alto soloists.

"Caritas abundat" is a psalm antiphon by Hildegard von Bingen, a 12th-century German Benedictine abbess, writer, and composer who was renowned during her lifetime for her visions, prophecies, and miracles. One of the earliest known women composers, Hildegard wrote original melodies setting both contemplative and dramatic poetry. "Caritas abundat" is a meditation on the omnipresence of love. Hildegard's melody alternates between syllabic treatment of the Latin text and elaborate melismas, most notably on the first and last words: "caritas" (love) and "dedit" (she gave).

"Ancient Mother" is the title song from an eponymous 1993 album by Robert Gass, an American musician, recording artist, and organizational leadership consultant who has released more than twenty albums of spiritual chant, rock, and New Age music. In "Ancient Mother," Gass celebrates goddesses, priestesses, and singers from cultures across the world. Ambient nature sounds are interwoven with a flowing piano accompaniment that evokes running water. Throughout, the choir repeats a chantlike melody, invoking the names of Ishtar, Isis, Sophia, Gaia, Parvati, Morgana, and other goddesses.

"Regna terrae, cantata Deo" is a motet by Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, a 17th-century Italian nun, composer, and abbess. Editor Meredith Y. Bowen writes:

“Chiara Margarita Cozzolani (1602 – ca.1678) was a choir nun and composer who resided in the Convent of Santa Radegonda in Milan, Italy. Like many young women from noble or merchant class families, she professed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience at age 18 and lived her entire life behind the stone walls and iron grates of the convent. She composed and published four volumes of music for the famous choir nuns at Santa Radegonda.

‘Regna terrae, cantate Deo,’ a setting of Psalm 67:33-36, is a motet from Cozzolani’s 1642 volume of music. The performance would have taken place in the chapel with the nuns singing and playing behind a wall or iron grate to obscure their faces from the public.

“Ave Maria” by B.E. Boykin is a setting of one of the most popular Marian prayers throughout history: *Ave Maria* or Hail Mary. The Latin text blesses the Virgin Mary, asking for her prayers both now and at the moment of death. In this setting, the composer curiously omits part of the opening text: *gratia plena* (full of grace). Throughout, the choir delivers the text homophonically with both intimacy and power. Though most of the work suggests the key of B minor, the work takes a surprise turn in the final *amen*, closing on a brilliant D major chord.

In “Someone Will Remember Us,” American composer Jocelyn Hagen adapts poetry by the ancient Greek poet Sappho, one of the most revered figures of her time. Both celebrated and demonized for her use of emotional, erotic, and lesbian imagery, Sappho revolutionized poetry as one of the first poets to write highly personal, emotional verse using the first person. Hagen combines several of Sappho’s poems in this lush, harmonically daring setting for treble voices, piano, and strings. Throughout this work, and especially in the opening, Hagen pays homage to the chant melodies of earlier eras through her use of free, speechlike rhythms, powerful unison singing, and the alternation of duple and triple rhythms. “Someone Will Remember Us” is aptly named after one of Sappho’s most famous surviving fragments: “Someone will remember us, even in another time.”

“Der Mond kommt still gegangen” is a choral adaptation of a German lyric art song, or *lied*, by Clara Schumann. Virginia Davidson’s SSA version showcases the beauty of treble harmony while centering the expressive melody of Schumann’s original composition, which is often performed today with solo voice and piano. The text, a poem by the 19th-century German poet and playwright Emanuel von Geibel, describes a lover’s solitude while gazing across a moonlit valley at a light in the beloved’s window.

“Die Stille Lotosblume” is the sixth and final song in Clara Schumann’s *Sechs Lieder*. This work, also a setting of an Emanuel von Geibel poem, describes another moonlit scene: a swan serenading a snow-white lotus blossom that has risen out of a dark blue lake. In Virginia Davidson’s arrangement for SSA choir, the first two lines are delivered by a soprano solo, in keeping with Clara Schumann’s original setting. The full choir comes in as the swan approaches the lotus, the object of his love. The song ends with a question: “Oh flower, lovely flower, can you understand his song?” Fittingly, the music also leaves us with a question: a delicate, unresolved dominant chord played by the piano.

“Hébé” is Mari Esabel Valverde’s choral arrangement of an art song by the 19th-century French composer Ernest Chausson. The original song, which Chausson subtitled “a Greek song in the Phrygian mode,” sets a Louise Ackerman poem describing the arrival of a cup-bearer at a feast of the gods. This divine child serves a drink of unearthly youth, renewing the immortality of the gods. Valverde writes,

“Chausson’s portrayal of such an untouchable divinity is characterized by a simple, flowing melody and modal harmony which recalls an ancient era. The arpeggi of the piano in the original song suggest the flourishes of the harp in this arrangement. In a classic style of implicit sensuality, all the voices come together as a nostalgic expression of lust for youth and vitality.”

“By Night” is Elaine Hagenberg’s dramatic setting of an eponymous poem by Harriet Prescott Spofford. A prolific 19th-century writer from New England, Spofford challenged stereotypes through her poetry and Gothic fiction at a time when few women were able to make inroads in the male-dominated world of publishing. Hagenberg, a contemporary American composer and arranger, was commissioned to write “By Night” by the University of Kentucky Women’s Choir. Hagenberg writes,

“Harriet Prescott Spofford’s poem ‘By Night’ depicts a young woman who discovers a bold new world of thrilling beauty when she ventures beyond her familiar walls. A galloping accompaniment underscores this wild discovery, and a soaring wind motif in the vocal line rushes forth as if to take the viewer’s breath away. A contrasting middle section pauses briefly to meditate on the ‘beauty born in its Maker’s thought’ before racing forward again, painting a cinematic scene of wonder and awe.”

Gloria, RV 589 by Antonio Vivaldi

One of Antonio Vivaldi’s most celebrated choral works today, *Gloria* was virtually unknown for centuries after the composer’s death. First composed between 1713-1717, *Gloria* was rediscovered in the 1920s in a monastery in Turin, Italy, in a trove of hundreds of manuscripts of Vivaldi’s other vocal and choral works. Decades later, Vivaldi’s original version of *Gloria* was finally published and premiered in 1957. It has remained one of his most popular choral compositions ever since.

The most influential Italian composer of his generation, Vivaldi broke new ground in his contributions to Baroque composition and especially his virtuosic writing for the violin. *Gloria*, an exuberant setting of a single mass movement, showcases both his innovative approaches to string technique as well as some of his best choral writing. The work dates to Vivaldi’s years as a violin teacher and substitute choirmaster at the Ospedale della Pietà, a prestigious charitable institution for musically talented orphan girls in Venice. Several compositional features indicate that the work was intended for performance by the girls at the orphanage: the solos are scored for soprano and alto soloists, the bass part is set in an unusually high tessitura, and Vivaldi used octave doublings in the orchestral parts to reinforce the lower voices. This edition by Malcolm

Bruno adapts Vivaldi's original SATB score for SSAA choir using the techniques that Vivaldi himself likely would have used: transposition, revoicing, and reliance on orchestral doubling.

Vivaldi set the text of the Gloria in eleven movements. The exhilarating opening *tutti* movement begins with one of the iconic motives of this work: rapid unison octave leaps. The second movement, "Et in terra pax," is a more restrained, *andante* setting featuring imitative entries and suspensions in the vocal parts. "Laudamus te" is a joyful duet for two soprano soloists. "Gratias agimus tibi" opens with a slow, serious declamation, followed immediately by a stunning display of vocal fireworks in a *tutti allegro* full of vocal melismas. The fifth movement, "Domine Deus, Rex coelestis," is a tranquil duet between the oboe and soprano soloist. "Domine Fili unigenite" is one of the most beloved and recognizable movements of the work. Scored for full choir and strings, this movement features jubilant, dancelike dotted rhythms throughout. The following movement, "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei," is set in a more serious, contemplative mood, alternating between alto solos and *tutti* choral responses asking for mercy from the Lamb of God. "Qui tollis peccata mundi," one of the shortest movements of the *Gloria*, is an almost entirely homophonic prayer of supplication. "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris" features an alto solo in the relative key of B minor. The penultimate movement, "Quoniam tu solus sanctus," reprises the opening movement in miniature: after a very abbreviated orchestral introduction, the choir delivers a succinct, homophonic statement of the text in the shortest movement of the entire *Gloria*. The final movement, "Cum Sancto Spiritu," is a magnificent double fugue adapted from *Gloria in D major* by Giovanni Maria Ruggieri, another Venetian composer and one of Vivaldi's contemporaries.