

# Oracles

Saturday, March 9, 2024 • 7:30 p.m.

First Free Methodist Church

**Harmonia Chorus**

**William White**, conductor



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

*Der Geist hilft unsrer Schwachheit auf*, BWV 226

*Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf — Der aber die Herzen forschet — Du heilige Brunst, süßer Trost*

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN (1098–1179)

*Caritas habundat*

ORLANDE DE LASSUS (c. 1532–1594)

*Prophetiae sibyllarum*

Prologue • *Sibylla Persica* • *Sibylla Libyca* • *Sibylla Delphica* • *Sibylla Cimmeria*

SALAMONE ROSSI (1570–1630)

*Al Naharot Bavel*

CYRILLUS KREEK (1889–1962)

Psalm 137

ORLANDE DE LASSUS

*Prophetiae sibyllarum*

*Sibylla Samia* • *Sibylla Cumana* • *Sibylla Hellaspontica* • *Sibylla Phrygia*

SHEILA BRISTOW (\*1969)

*Winter Solstice* — WORLD PREMIERE

ORLANDE DE LASSUS

*Prophetiae sibyllarum*

*Sibylla Europaea* • *Sibylla Tiburtina* • *Sibylla Erythraea* • *Sibylla Agrippa*

JESSICA FRENCH (\*1984)

*Hear My Voice*

**Cassie Willock**, soprano

*Please silence cell phones and other electronics, and refrain from the use of cameras and recording devices during the performance.*

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## Harmonia Orchestra and Chorus

William White, music director • George Shangrow, founder

1916 Pike Pl. Ste 12 #112, Seattle WA 98101 • 206-682-5208 • [www.harmoniaseattle.org](http://www.harmoniaseattle.org)

**Soprano**

Barb Anderson  
Ann Bridges  
Karen Dunstan  
Susanna Erber  
Kiki Hood  
Genevieve Hurlocker  
Alivia Jones  
Peggy Kurtz  
Veena Ramakrishnan  
Courtney Ross  
Cassie Van Pay  
Cassie Willock

**Alto**

Sharon Agnew  
Sheila Bristow  
Emily Crawford  
Deanna Fryhle  
Nori Heikkinen  
Pamela Ivezić  
Natalia Johnson  
Ellen Kaisse  
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Rick Thompson  
Jon White

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Matthew Wyant

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Yuh-Pey Lin  
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Chris Peterson

**Bassoon**

Jeff Eldridge

**Percussion**

Dan Oie

**Harp**

Juliet Stratton

**Theorbo**

Daniel Frizzell

**Maestro's Prelude**

Dear Listeners,

Tonight we're really digging into the 2023–2024 season theme, "Prophecy," with our chorus taking center stage.

The choir is the ideal medium to represent the sound of "voices from the beyond," and the composers tonight have not disappointed in their sonic depictions. Our program centers around a most extraordinary work, the *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* of Orlando di Lassus. This is a collection of 12 motets (plus a prologue) in which Lassus sets to music the poetry of Jewish oracles from the Hellenic world, poems that were written during the early centuries of the first millennium (CE) but only rediscovered during the Italian Renaissance.

Lassus did everything he could to make these texts stand out, and his most distinctive musical tool was harmony. I can think of precious few works of Renaissance polyphony that sound anything like these motets. (The closest thing that comes to mind are the madrigals of Gesualdo, the notorious, murderous prince of Verona, from the generation following Lassus.) These pieces hardly ever get performed, so I hope you'll cherish what you hear tonight!

When I program choral concerts, one thing I always like to include is two settings of the same text, and this time around that text is Psalm 137. We'll hear it performed first in its original Hebrew, in music by the remarkable 17th-century musician Salamone Rossi, one of the few Jews in Europe who adopted and adapted the music of the surrounding Gentile society for use in the synagogue. Then we'll hear the text in a wholly different guise as set by the 20th-century Estonian composer Cyrillus Kreek.

The text of Bach's motet *Der Geist Hilft Unser Schwachheit Auf* ("The Spirit aids our weakness") speaks of a prayer given to those who don't know what to pray: "But the spirit itself pleads for us in the best way with inexpressible groans." Bach divides his performing forces into two choruses often using antiphonal (call and response) textures. This suggests the image of Choir I representing the voice of God, filling the spirits of Choir II with a divine presence. (I promise you they do better than inexpressible groans!)

Some of the earliest music that we can still decipher and perform is by the one divine oracle who actually notated her own music, Hildegard von Bingen. I never feel more like I'm communing with "the beyond" than when I hear her thousand-year-old music come to life.

We round out the program with two works of a much more recent vintage, both by Seattle-area composers. Jessica French's *Hear My Voice* uses the words of St. Teresa of Avila, an ecstatic mystic from 16th-century Spain. And we have a world premiere tonight — certainly a harbinger of the future — by Harmonia's own Renaissance woman, Sheila Bristow, written for the unusual combination of voices plus clarinet, harp and vibraphone.



## Program Notes

It was the custom in 18th-century Leipzig for the family of a prominent citizen who died to hold a memorial service on the following Sunday afternoon. Both the order of service and the music were prescribed: hymn, sermon, motet, collective prayers, blessing. **Johann Sebastian Bach** composed numerous motets for such memorial services during his time (1723–1750) as music director of Leipzig’s Thomaskirche, but only six survive. BWV 226 was written in 1729 for the funeral of 77-year-old Johann Heinrich Ernesti, a professor of poetry at the University of Leipzig and rector of the Thomasschule, where Bach was also employed. Because of Ernesti’s association with the university, his memorial was held in St. Paul’s (the university church) rather than the Thomaskirche, with the sermon (selected by Ernesti himself) taken from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (8:26–27). Bach used this text for his motet and followed its lead for the uplifting demeanor of his music. The first section, in  $\frac{3}{8}$  time, is for double chorus, with a small group of string instruments accompanying one and a quartet of double reeds the other. This leads to a double fugue in duple time. The motet traditionally concludes with Bach’s setting of a Martin Luther text (the third stanza to the 1524 hymn “Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott”), which was likely performed at a separate juncture in the funeral service.

In *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (“Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations”), **Hildegard of Bingen** — a mystic, natural scientist, artist, prophet and composer — collected 77 musical settings of lyric poems, including *Caritas habundat*, a psalm antiphon (designed to be sung before and after the singing of a psalm) that makes reference to Psalm 85:10.

**Orlande de Lassus** (or Orlando di Lasso, or any of a half dozen variations on this name he used during his life, depending on where he happened to be working at the time) was born in modern-day Belgium but at the age of 12 traveled to Mantua, then Sicily, Milan (where he began composing) and Rome, before eventually settling in Munich. He may have composed the dozen motets collectively known as *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* (“Sibylline Prophecies” or “Sibylline Oracles”) during or shortly after his time in modern-day Italy, reportedly offering them as a personal gift to his patron in Munich (Albrecht V, Duke of Bavaria). The text consists of a three-line prologue and 12 six-line motets, all in dactylic hexameter, with each motet relating a prophecy about the coming of Christ from a different sibyl (a prophetess or oracle from Ancient Greece).

**Salamone Rossi** worked for most of his adult life (from 1587 to 1628, during the late Renaissance) as the concertmaster for the court of Mantua. His surviving compositions

include five books of madrigals, innovative instrumental music, and a substantial collection of Jewish liturgical music written in the Baroque tradition. Rossi’s Hebrew setting of Psalm 137 (“By the Rivers of Babylon”) was published around 1623.

Estonian **Cyrillus Kreek** composed in a variety of genres, but is perhaps best known for his choral music. Between 1914 and 1944 he composed seven settings of various Psalms of David, later arranging four of them along with two other religious pieces for orchestra (as *Musica Sacra*). His choral treatment of Psalm 137 dates from 1938.

**Sheila Bristow** is a church musician, composer and collaborative keyboardist who serves as music director and organist for St. Barnabas Episcopal Church and as keyboardist for Harmonia. The poem on which she based her newest choral work, *Winter Solstice*, “conjures visions of our primeval ancestors sitting around the fire in the dead of winter,” she writes. “As they sit in this community, they mark the turning of the season, from the longest night of the year to the rebirth of the light. To represent this scene, I have used modern equivalents of basic musical instruments — percussion (vibraphone), plucked strings (harp), winds (clarinet) — combined with communal singing. Between each choral phrase, the clarinet repeats a folk-like melody over a harmonic pattern derived from one of the Lassus motets heard on tonight’s program.” Says conductor William White: “The choral writing is both smooth and dramatic. It’s a knock-out of a little choral piece!”

Award-winning composer **Jessica French** received a Bachelor of Music in organ performance from Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and a Master of Music in the same subject from Yale University. After moving to the Seattle area in 2011, she refocused her musical efforts toward composition, composing and arranging nearly 30 choral works during that period. *Hear My Voice* was commissioned for Epiphany Parish of Seattle (where it received its premiere on March 20, 2022) by Edie and Thomas W. Johnston to celebrate generations of musical family members. It sets “Let Nothing Disturb Thee” by St. Teresa of Avila in an English translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which, the composer writes, “embod[ies] the message of peace and hope that is central to this commission. I wanted to give St. Teresa’s message even more significance, so I decided to contrast it with a text that represents our human search for hope during times of despair, and the words of Psalm 130 (“Out of the Depths”) immediately came to mind. As a result, I decided to juxtapose the two texts, with a soprano soloist singing the words of Psalm 130 representing each individual reaching out for help during times of trouble, while the choir responds with the words of St. Teresa, channeling her message of peace and calm.”

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