

Daniel Knaggs

Hymn to St Cecilia

Text: Cecilia Virgo (medieval, anon); translation by Daniel Knaggs

US composer Daniel Knaggs describes to **Shirley Ratcliffe** his new take on the medieval hymn to the patron saint of music

In our ever-changing world of music, today's young composers have to take an entrepreneurial approach to their craft. One of the most enterprising of these is Daniel Knaggs, from south-east Michigan. He wanted to study music at university, and as he had plenty of vocal training and experience, his high school teacher encouraged him to 'get his foot in the door' in the voice programme at the University of Michigan. He explains, 'I wanted to study Spanish because foreign languages fascinate me ... especially their mysterious power to open up doors of understanding; and I loved the different soundworlds that languages offered. I was also given the opportunity to study Brazilian Portuguese, and as a Voice major I was required to study Italian, French and German.' This was to lead him to live in France, Mexico and Nicaragua, which had an appreciable effect on his music: 'I developed a sense of connectedness to the cultures of those languages whose histories I'd come to appreciate. Many of my works draw from literature or themes native to these cultures.'

In his fourth year, Knaggs knew that music composition was important to him: 'It was a long shot and I was getting a late start, but I decided to assemble a portfolio in about four months and apply for a Master's in composition. I saw the two years of my Master's degree as making up for lost time and I wrote a lot of music.' To advance his study he also wanted to apply for a doctorate but knew that he wasn't ready: 'I decided to enrol at another university during the second year of my Master's, and simultaneously completed 24 graduate



COURTESY DANIEL KNAGGS

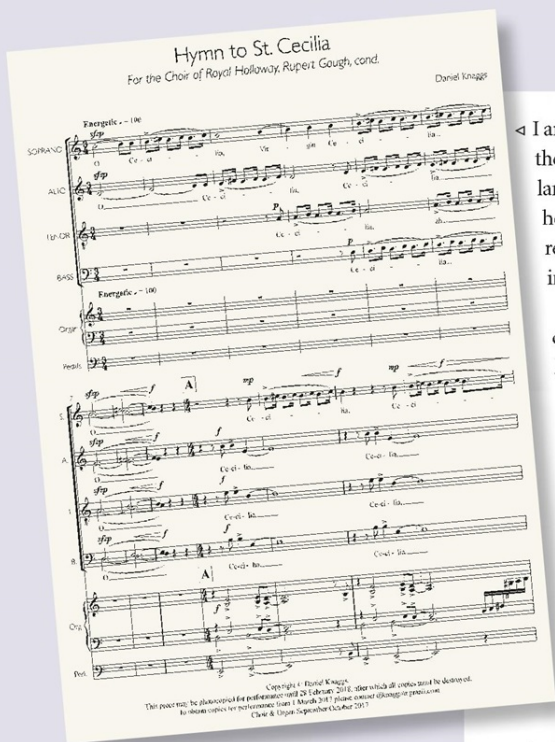
▲ Daniel Knaggs: many of his works draw on indigenous cultures of countries he has visited

credits in foreign language education. I then worked for three years, virtually living a double life as a full-time Spanish teacher and a part-time composer. A number of awards came in during those three years of high school teaching, and I knew I had at least to apply for doctoral programmes.'

Attending the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, Knaggs was eventually able to embark on his doctorate and had a creative idea for his first composition recital: 'I really wanted to do something special, and had been playing around with the idea of hiring a choir of 20 professionals who had the skill to perform several of my new works at a high level. At first I hesitated because there was no guarantee that I could raise US\$5,000 in 30 days. My dad convinced me it would be a win-win situation for everyone involved, so against my better judgment I

went all in.' What happened? 'The performance was a huge success in every possible way and I exceeded my fundraising goal, receiving a number of very generous donations, many of them anonymous. The effort resulted in the release of my first CD, *A New Springtime*, featuring works for choir, organ, brass and percussion.'

Influenced by many composers, he says the one thing he has taken from most is their approach to counterpoint, especially Palestrina and Byrd: 'I find the most wonderful lines, and then the moments at which they converge to create very special sonorities. In my works, contrapuntal rules are observed to varying degrees of adherence. Sometimes I impose strict renaissance counterpoint rules; other times I aim for more of an 18th-century counterpoint (fugue, sequences etc.). At other times again, ▶



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The premiere of *Hymn to St Cecilia* will take place at the 6pm annual St Cecilia Concert at Royal Holloway, University of London on 22 November.

◀ I am more flexible, bending or twisting these rules in order to achieve a particular outcome, or seeking straight-up homophonic writing with or without regard to voice-leading norms or creating my own.'

Knaggs has said he is 'seeking to capture a distinct timelessness' in his compositions. 'I do like to evoke qualities from music of many eras. Perhaps far into the future, these compositions might not be classified too easily into a movement or category assigned to a particular decade or two.'

For his New Music commission for Royal Holloway, Knaggs took as his text the medieval prayer *Cecilia virgo*, translating it into English but ending with part of the text in Latin. He explains, 'I love to write in Latin, but if I were to set this piece in it, it would not afford as many listeners the opportunity to follow the non-verbal things I like to put to the service of the words. Keeping in line with my English-

'I've highlighted the effect of music transforming "the world's mourning into the glory of paradise"'

language decision (intelligibility), I thought that the phrase 'ora pro nobis' is not too unfamiliar and I much prefer the beauty of those pure vowels over the English alternative. So it is a small but deliberate compromise! The challenge I set myself was to find ways to accentuate beautiful sounds in the English language.' He does this by using the organ to 'reinforce the vocal lines sonically for acoustic potency. This makes it all the more dramatic when contrasting the accompanied versus unaccompanied sections of the piece. I wanted the mood to be celebratory but highlighting the effect of music transforming "the world's mourning into the glory of paradise."

In 2005 Daniel Knaggs set himself the mammoth task of composing a new *Ave Maria* annually for the next 50 years. 'This was the time when I was deciding to alter my path from voice performance to composition, and my first noted piece was *Ave Maria no.1*. As I was continuing

to grow [as a composer] I wanted to have another shot, which brought about *Ave Maria no.2*. I felt I was only scratching the surface, so around then I decided I'd like to make this into a 50-year project, resulting in a sort of "rosary" spanning half a century. I've just finished no.13, and as the project unfolds it continues to provide me with a terrific challenge of saying something new each time while showing my growth and evolution as a composer and a person from year to year. The premieres for these were mostly a labour of love for most of the first decade. Starting with no.8, they have been commissioned and already there are ensembles and organisations seeking to commission future ones in advance.'

Another adventurous undertaking is his *Book of Visions* project to 'spread awareness of the organ's greatness and of its relevance to the creation of new music.' Although he doesn't play the organ, he says, 'Like all the other instruments I compose for but don't play, I study them and reach a point where I can practically play them in my

imagination. Much of what I have learned about the organ has come from my friend and colleague the amazing young organist Monica Czausz, and Crista Miller, director and organist at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Houston, who taught me a lot when I was working on my organ symphony. I have learned much from my mistakes! I have really come to love the organ, partly because of its versatility and partly because it is a whole orchestra condensed into one instrument. Hearing good organ music performed well is a real joy to me.'

And what is his vision for the future? 'I would very much like to continue having opportunities and time to compose, mostly out of my desire to communicate. I've really enjoyed teaching and watching my students grow and flourish in their composing, so I envisage a balance between composing, teaching and other forms of work – much like now!' <http://danielknaggs.com> ■