

Ascensions

for SATB chorus, traverso,
baroque violin, viola da gamba, and organ
music by Carson P. Cooman (Op. 803)
texts by Jakob Balde

I. Sinfonia

II. To Mary on the vigil of her Assumption

III. A Votive Song

IV. The Heliotrope—the mind of man turned to God

Ascensions (2009) for SATB chorus, traverso, baroque violin, viola da gamba, and organ was commissioned by and is dedicated to the Cornell University Chamber Singers, Holland J. Jancaitis, director.

The work is a cantata consisting of an instrumental *sinfonia* followed by choral settings of three poems by “neo-Latin” poet Jakob Balde, S.J. (1604–68), hailed as the “Horace of Germany” and considered one of the greatest Latin poets of any era.

In the case of the three poems selected, Balde’s vivid imagery and mastery of Latin poetics are put in service of religious expression. The poems are filled with countless allusions to the classical poetic tradition; notably, he creates a strong correlation between the Virgin Mary of his Christian tradition (Balde was a Jesuit priest) and the goddesses invoked in classical Latin poetry. Thus, Balde uses the older forms to express something that was, for him, contemporary and relevant. (An analogue to this use of language is the idea of creating new music to be played on “period instruments.”)

The opening *sinfonia* begins with an ascending pattern of triads, which returns throughout the work. The forward momentum is interrupted several times before the movement settles tonally. The first choral movement employs a bouncy momentum to set the celebratory poem on the Virgin’s assumption. The second movement is a prayerful song on the acceptance of death; it is spare and meditative, unfolding as a series of sectional canons over several drones. The final movement returns to the celebratory spirit of the opening; this time, instead of the Virgin’s journey, the poem describes the speaker’s journey and compares a purposeful sea voyage to a directed life.

Balde’s poems are provided in their original Latin and in two translations. One is a free translation in rhyming poetic English created by James J. Mertz, S.J., longtime professor at Loyola University. The other is a newly-created literal translation by Edward J. Vodoklys, S.J., Senior Lecturer in Classics at the College of the Holy Cross.

Carson P. Cooman, January 2009, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

PERFORMANCE NOTES: The composer prefers a classically-informed Italianate pronunciation of the Latin (“church Latin” is acceptable). (It is important that “V” always be pronounced as “V”, not as the “W” sound often used by classical Latinists.)

The work is conceived for a chamber choir, as a larger choir would not balance the timbres of the baroque instruments. It is suggested that 16–24 singers be employed (no fewer than 12).

As with much early repertoire, dynamic and expressive markings are kept to a minimum. It is expected that director and performers will inflect lines expressively and naturally. The organ part is notated for a small portatif organ with pull-down pedal (with no independent pedal stops). If played on a larger instrument, this smaller registration plan should be kept in mind so as to create balance with the instruments and choir.

I. **Sinfonia**

II. **To Mary on the vigil of her Assumption**

Ad D. Virginem assumptam in eius pervigilio

Liber III, Ode VII

Quo die terris properans relictis
Tota migrasti super astra Virgo,
Floribus stratum tibi tergus incur-
vavit Olympus.

Dulce te visa gradiente caeli
Carmen auditum resonare. Qualis
Ista per nigrae loca senta silvae et
Horrida tesqua,

Qualis ascendit Dea? tota pulchra
Gaudiis gemmat liquidis suoque in-
nixa Dilecto volucres per auras
Floribus halat!

Talis in seram, sua regna, noctem
Luna cum venit, tenuatur Arctos,
Pallet Arcturus positoque ferro
Languet Orion.

Inter has voces magis elevata
Bracchiis Nati superas id omne,
Quod Deus non est, animumque toto
Numine mergis.

Merge: dum dulci maris e profundo,
Quod superfusum bibis, una saltem
Gutta distillet lacrimasque nostri
Temperet orbis.

— Jakob Balde, S.J.

O Virgin on what day, complete, you went
In soul and body from this world of ours
To speed beyond the stars—Olympus bent
His back for you and covered it with flowers.

When rising you were seen by skyey choirs
Sweet song was heard: "This one who cometh here

What Lady she, through country spiked with briars
In darkland wood and over wasteland sere?

What goddess here ascendeth? All in sheens
Of sparkling gems, her beauty washed in showers
Of joy, she shines. On her beloved she leans
And through light winging winds she breathes of flowers.”

When such as she has come—the Lady Moon
To tardy (her own realm), Arctus fails,
Arcturus loses color, and so soon
His bow laid by, Orion droops and pales.

Among these voices, lifted by your Son
In his arms rest, O lifted higher, higher
Beyond all that which is not God, you’ve won,
You dip your soul in godliness entire.

So dip: and while you drink of floods which spill
Their surplus from that sea’s sweet-tinctured deep,
Pray grant us that one drop at least distill
For tempering the tears our world must weep.

— paraphrase translation by James J. Mertz, S.J.

On this day hastening from abandoned lands
you have migrated above all the stars, Virgin;
for you Olympus bent its back strewn with flowers.

As you were seen approaching, the heavens
resound with a sweet song heard. What sort—
through those thorny places of the dark forest
and the bristling desert wasteland—

What sort of Goddess ascends? Totally beautiful
she adorns herself with limpid expressions of joy
and propped up on her own Beloved, through swift
breezes she is fragrant with the scent of flowers.

Such as when, into the late night, her own realms
The Moon comes, Arctus the Great Bear is waning,
Acturus dims and, with his iron sword set aside,
Orion languishes.

Among these voices, you, lifted up further
by the Infant’s arms, rise up above all that
which is not God, and you bathe your soul
With God's all encompassing spirit

Bathe, while in the sweet depth of the sea
you drink that which has flowed over you; Let one
drop, at least, distill and temper the tears of
Our world.

— literal translation by Edward J. Vodoklys, S.J.

III. A Votive Song

Pro euthanasia sive felici morte: Carmen votivum

Liber IV, Ode XLIX

O Diva, vitae praeses et altera
Spes vatis, olim cui mea me super
Servum dicavi; da, priusquam
Fata citent oculosque claudant,

Da poenitentes et lacrimas sacro
Dolore laetas in mare Creticum
Quascumque proiectura noxas.
Tum tenera mea fila dextra

Abscinde, Virgo; neu fragilem colum
Tres fabulosae praecipitent anus;
Diffido. Tu devolve nostram,
Iure tuam potiore lanam.

Hoc esto votum, sic precor ultima
Ex cordis urna vita fluat, meus
Sic stagnet in maioris aevi
Oceanum gracilesque bullas

Aeternitati misceat Isara.
Sic elabora, sic bene praepara
Perambulandum luctuosae
Mortis iter placidoque somno

Compone manes. His voveant opes
Aedemque ponant, caedat hic impares
Agnos pavimentumque sparsis
Visceribus linat hostiarum:

Ast ipse supplex, ipse ego taeniam
Gestabo vittasque: ipse tibi cadam
Evincta circum fronde lauri
Victima procubitura ad aras.

— Jakob Balde, S.J.

O Lady, thou my guide and second hope,
To whom I've vowed myself a serf to be,
Grant ere the angels close my eyes in death,

That penitential tears from contrite heart
Wash in the ocean of God's mercy
All the stains of wayward years.

Do thou then, Lady, cut the tender thread;
Weave thou from tangled yarn
A finer tapestry of love and fear.

Be this my prayer: let life flow forth
From my heart's urn into the sea
Of limitless eternity.

Guide thou its way, as in a pleasant dream,
Through labyrinthine halls of death
To rest eternal.

May one man offer thee his wealth,
Or build a shrine; another lay
His gifts upon thy sanctuary floor.

But I, on bended knee
With sacrificial fillet in my hand,
Will fall beneath the stroke of death,
A victim at thy altar's shrine.

— paraphrase translation by James J. Mertz, S.J.

O Divine one, Guardian of life and
Another Hope of the prophet to whom
Above me once I declared myself a servant
Grant, before the Fates rush and close my eyes

Penitent tears rich in sacred sorrow to flow
Into the Cretan sea for the purpose
Of casting forth any harmful behaviors.
Then with your right hand cut off my

Slender thread, Virgin; Nor may the three
Fabled Old Women Fates hasten their
Fragile spindle. I despair. You unroll our
Wool, your wool by stronger right.

Let this be my vow: thus I pray that my life
May flow from my heart's ultimate urn.
Thus may my life flow into the Ocean
Of a greater age and may the Isere river

Mingle its graceful droplets with eternity.
So slip away, so prepare well
The road of grief-causing death that must be
Traveled, and in placid sleep

Compose the shades. To these let them vow
Riches and build a shrine. Let this one kill
The inferior lambs and smear the pavement
With sacrificial animals' scattered innards.

But I myself as suppliant, I myself will
Wear the ribbons and fillets: For you I will
Fall bound around with laurel frond
A victim about to lie out on the altars.

— literal translation by Edward J. Vodoklys, S.J.

IV. The Heliotrope—the mind of man turned to God

Heliotropum sive mens hominis ad Deum versa

Liber IV, Ode XLVIII

Iamque adeo toti nutu pendemus ab uno,
Alea iacta semel.
Numinis imperio commisimus omnia: tanti
Sit retinere nihil.
Iusserit: in Libycis stivam ducemus arenas
Caucaseove iugo.
Iusserit: Ionia remos lentabimus unda
Carpathioque freto.
Observent timidi mergum fulicasque marinas,
Quid meditentur aves
Litoreae, fallax quo vento strideat aer,
Quid nova luna coquat,
An tristes vultu protendat lurida nimbos,
Anne serena micet,
Dormiat, an refluxum vesano concita cornu
Arietet Oceanum.
Si Deus ire monet, numquam retinebit Orion
Nubilus inter aquas,
Ut gladio findat mediae fundamina navis,
Tutior assere erit.

Sed neque Phoebeis aetatem metiar annis,
Pendulus a radio.
Ille meas quo non alter formosior, horas
Temperat, ille meus
Sol maior parvique faber totoque videndus
Altior axe scopus.
Huc desiderium iaculetur pectoris arcus,
Quanta pharetra patet.
Certior huc pleno, quo meta remotior, ictu
Nostra sagitta volat.

— Jakob Balde, S.J.

In deep submission to the will of God
I've vowed my all;
To his control I've left each act
Without recall.
Should he command—on Libyan sands
I'd make my way.
Or on Ionian Sea I'd set my sails
And anchors weigh.
Let timid souls look on the dangers dark
That lie ahead;
I'll view the care-free gulls maneuvering
Far overhead.
What matters it whence blow the stormy winds,
Or what new fear
The moon in misty veil portrays, or threat
In clouds appear.
If God should call, not e'en Orion's sword
Would frighten me
Nor keep me from embarking on a raft
In choppy sea.
I shall not measure life by months and years
In God's embrace,
For he will soothe the hours, as he notes
Each single trace
Of my good will, submissive to his own
In love's requite.
I'll safely live; my goal is fixed in God
Who leads aright.

— translation by James J. Mertz, S.J.

And now to that purpose we hang upon one nod
Once the die has been cast.
More commanding of Spirit, we have entrusted all
Let it be of so great import to retain nothing.

If he should have ordered, we will lead the ploughhandle on
 Libyan sands or the Caucasus' ridge
If he should have ordered, we will bend the oars in Ionian wave
 And Carpathian Sea
Let the timid observe the gull and seabirds
 Whatever shorebirds may ponder
By what wind the false air may whistle,
 What the new moon may conjure up:
whether it presents sad clouds with a sallow face
 Or serenely suddenly flashes forth,
Let it sleep, or if, provoked by a frenzied horn,
 Let it violently strike Oceanus as it flows back.
If God warns him to go, never will cloudy Orion
 Hold back among the waters
So that he might split with his sword the foundation
 Of the middle of a ship, a beam will be safer.
But I shall not measure the age by Phoebian years
 A little pendulum from a ray of light.
That one, than whom no other is more beautiful,
 Regulates my hours, that greater sun of mine
And maker of the small sun and the stalk that must
 Be seen as loftier than the entire celestial axis.
Hence let the bow of the breast hurl desire
 As much as the quiver extends its range.
Hence with more certainty, our arrow flies
 With its full blow where the marker is more remote.

— translation by Edward J. Vodoklys, S.J.

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