

# FREDERICK FRAHM

## John the Baptist

### CHARACTERS

Gabriel, tenor  
Zechariah, bass  
Elizabeth, mezzo soprano  
John, baritone  
Mary, soprano  
Chorus, SATB

### LIBRETTO

#### 1. Apparition of the Angel to Zechariah

Organ Voluntary – “*day of obligation*”

[ZECHARIAH, a priest before God, enters a dark church with a single lit candle. He lights additional candles as well as incense at the high altar, and the church slowly fills with light. The light reveals an angel, who is GABRIEL, standing next to the altar. ZECHARIAH is frightened.]

#### GABRIEL

Do not be afraid, Zechariah,  
for your prayer is answered.  
Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son,  
and you will name him John.  
You will have joy and gladness,  
and many will rejoice at his birth,  
he will be great in the sight of the Lord;  
he will turn many to the Lord;  
he will make ready a people prepared for the  
Lord.

#### ZECHARIAH

How will I know that this is so?  
I'm an old man, and my wife is getting on in  
years.

#### GABRIEL

I am Gabriel!  
I stand in the presence of God!  
I have been sent to speak to you  
and bring you this good news.

But now, because you did not believe my  
words, which will be fulfilled in their time,  
you will become mute, unable to speak,  
until the day these things occur.

[ZECHARIAH raises his hand to his mouth,  
making no sound. He remains terrified.]

#### CHORUS

“How shall I know this?”  
Zechariah disbelieved the fact.  
“How shall this be?”  
Mary doubted not this thing.  
How shall we hear the angel's tidings?  
Glad tidings, and great joy, are a sign  
from the hand of God.

#### 2. Visitations

[ELIZABETH, is seen alone, apparently  
pregnant, and in a simple domestic setting.  
She is an older woman, who appears fretful  
and joyful at the same time. GABRIEL narrates  
the scene from a distance. MARY is a younger  
woman, equally fretful for her inexplicable  
condition.]

Organ Voluntary – “*my soul magnifies the  
Lord*”

#### GABRIEL

Elizabeth, though she was barren, conceived.  
For five months she hid herself,  
wondering what the world would think.

Then, she said:

ELIZABETH

God has acted.  
He has taken away my shame,  
and raised me up.  
Among women, I am no longer the least,  
for God is pleased to do this to me.

GABRIEL

Then, in her sixth month,  
I went to Mary.  
Finding her in Nazareth, I greeted her:

CHOIR

Ave Maria, gratia plena,  
Dominus tecum.  
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,  
et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus.  
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,  
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,  
nunc et in hora mortis nostrae  
Amen.

GABRIEL

Do not be afraid, Mary,  
God is with you.  
You will conceive and bear a son,  
and you will name him Jesus.  
He will be great, the Son of the Most High,  
He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,  
His kingdom will have no end.

MARY

How can this be, since I am a virgin?

GABRIEL

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
The power of the Most High will  
overshadow you.  
This child will be holy;  
the Son of God.  
Elizabeth, in her old age,  
has also conceived a son;  
For with God, nothing is impossible.

MARY

Here am I, the servant of the Lord;  
let it be with me according to your word.

ELIZABETH

Blessed are you, Mary.  
And why has this happened,

that the mother of my Lord comes to me?  
As soon as I heard your voice,  
this child leaped for joy.

[ELIZABETH *gently rubs her abdomen.*]

And Mary said,

MARY

Magnificat anima mea Dominum,  
et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salvatore  
meo, quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae.  
Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes  
generationes, quia fecit mihi magna,  
qui potens est, et sanctum nomen eius,  
et misericordia eius in progenies et progenies  
timentibus eum.

Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,  
dispersit superbos mente cordis sui;  
deposuit potentes de sedes  
et exaltavit humiles;  
esurientes implevit bonis  
et divites dimisit inanes.

Suscepit Israel puerum suum,  
recordatus misericordiae,  
sicut locutus est ad patres nostros,  
Abraham et semini eius in saecula.

### 3. Birth of the Baptist

[ZECHARIAH *is seen seated at a table, with books and paper on it. He looks worn for his penance. GABRIEL remains at a distance narrating the scene.*]

Organ Voluntary - "He is to be called John"

GABRIEL

Elizabeth gave birth to a son.  
On his naming day, his father's name was  
chosen for him. But his mother said:

ELIZABETH

No; he is to be called John.

CHOIR

What? None of your relatives has this name!  
Zechariah, what will you call the child?

[ZECHARIAH, *still dumb, stands, approaches a large poster board, and writes in very large letters filling the board: J O H N.*]

CHOIR  
Alleluia! What then will this child become?

GABRIEL  
Then Zechariah, no longer mute, sang a hymn:

ZECHARIAH  
Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel,  
quia visitavit, et fecit redemptionem plebis  
suae: Et erexit cornu salutis nobis  
in domo David pueri sui.  
Sicut locutus est per os sanctorum,  
qui a saeculo sunt, prophetarum eius:  
Salutem ex inimicis nostris,  
et de manu omnium qui oderunt nos:

CHORUS  
Veni, redemptor gentium,  
Ostende partum virginis,  
Miretur omne saeculum:  
Talis decet partus Deum.

Ad faciendam misericordiam cum patribus  
nostris: et memorari testamenti sui sancti:  
Jusjurandum, quod juravit ad Abraham patrem  
nostrum, daturum se nobis; Ut sine timore, de  
manu inimicorum nostrorum liberati,  
serviamus illi. In sanctitate et justitia coram  
ipso, omnibus diebus nostris.

CHORUS  
Praesepe iam fulget tuum,  
Lumenque nox spirat novum,  
Quod nulla nox interpolet,  
Fideque iugi luceat.

ZECHARIAH  
Et tu puer, propheta Altissimi vocaberis:  
praeibis enim ante faciem Domini parare vias  
ejus: Ad dandam scientiam salutis plebi ejus:  
in remissionem peccatorum eorum:  
Per viscera misericordiae Dei nostri:  
in quibus visitabit nos, oriens ex alto:  
Illuminare his qui in tenebris et in umbra mortis  
sedent: ad dirigendos pedes nostros in viam  
pacis.

CHORUS  
In viam pacis.

#### 4. John in the Wilderness

Organ Voluntary – “desert flowers”

[JOHN is seen alone, center stage. He is a  
younger man, simply dressed, at peace with  
the solitude of his surroundings. GABRIEL  
stands at a distance narrating the scene.]

GABRIEL  
John became a man.  
He was gracious and beautiful,  
Though he loved his family,  
He chose solitude and contemplation.  
One day, he left his home,  
Without taking leave.  
In the desert solitude,  
His heart was at ease.  
The dry air, the bright sun,  
The beasts and the birds,  
The flowers and the quiet,  
Caused him regret for having delayed so long.  
Zechariah and Elizabeth searched for him,  
And found him not.  
They worried deeply, with fear and concern,  
Calling their servants, they said:

ZECHARIAH and ELIZABETH  
John is missing, go to the desert.  
If you find him there, bring him home.

CHORUS  
[agitated] John, we've been looking for you!

JOHN  
[calmly] Here I am.

CHORUS  
Why are you here?

JOHN  
This is where my heart is.

CHORUS  
Your parents are worried.

JOHN  
God is with me.

CHORUS  
They want you to come home.

[JOHN is silent, annoyed, disappointed, but  
eventually respectful.]

JOHN  
I will obey.  
But I will return,

For my heart is in the desert.  
And God calls me to prepare the way.

## 5. John, the Baptist

Organ Voluntary – “*the only Son from heaven*”

[GABRIEL *is seen alone, center stage.*  
JOHN *is seen, older now, and his appearance*  
*commands authority.*]

### GABRIEL

John, now known as the Baptist,  
appeared in the wilderness of Judea,  
preaching repentance and baptizing in the  
River Jordan.

### CHORUS

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.”

### GABRIEL

When John saw many Pharisees and  
Sadducees coming for baptism,  
he said to them:

### JOHN

You brood of vipers!  
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to  
come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Even  
now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;  
every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut  
down and thrown into the fire.  
I baptize you with water for repentance,  
but One who is more powerful than I comes  
after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.  
He will baptize you with the Spirit and fire.

### GABRIEL

Then Jesus came to be baptized. John knew  
his station, and was humbled, but he  
consented. As Jesus came up from the water,  
the heavens were opened and the Spirit of  
God descended like a dove. A voice from  
heaven said:

### CHORUS

This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased.  
This is my Son.

### ELIZABETH

Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
Miserere nobis.  
Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
Miserere nobis.  
Agnus dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
Dona nobis pacem.

## 6. The Death of John

Organ Voluntary – “*Salome’s Sarabande*”

[GABRIEL *is seen alone, center stage. It is now*  
*dark as he tells of the martyrdom of John.*  
*Salome, Herod, and Herodias move slowly*  
*behind him, a dance of death.*]

### GABRIEL

King Herod was intrigued by John, but he was  
afraid of him. He thought John a holy man, and  
he protected him. One day, John said to Herod:

### JOHN

You cannot have your brother's wife. The law  
forbids you.

### GABRIEL

Herod was gripped with fear, and guilt.  
Herodias gained his confidence, and soon  
would gain the Baptist's head for her shame.

### CHOIR

On Herod's birthday, a great banquet was  
planned. A lavish party with music and wine,  
sumptuous food and decadent attire.

### GABRIEL

Herodias made a design in her heart, it was  
simple: her beloved Salome would dance.  
Herod would be pleased; he would offer her  
the world if she desired it. She would ask for  
John's head on a plate.

### CHOIR

All things came to be. John was arrested, and  
his head was doffed from his shoulders.

### GABRIEL

What were you looking for?

### CHOIR

A reed shaken by the wind?

GABRIEL  
What did you see?

CHOIR  
Someone dressed in soft robes?

GABRIEL  
What man did you hope to find?

CHOIR  
A prophet?

O for thy spirit,  
holy John, to chasten  
lips sin-polluted,  
fettered tongues to loosen;  
so by thy children  
might thy deeds of wonder  
meetly be chanted.

Lo! a swift herald,  
from the skies descending,  
bears to thy father  
promise of thy greatness;  
how he shall name thee,  
what thy future story,  
duly revealing.

Scarcely believing  
message so transcendent,  
him for a season  
power of speech forsaketh,  
till, at thy wondrous birth,  
again returneth,  
voice to the voiceless.

Thou, in thy mother's  
womb all darkly cradled,  
knewest thy great Monarch,  
biding in His chamber,  
whence the two parents,  
through their children's merits,  
mysteries uttered.

Praise to the Father,  
to the Son begotten,  
and to the Spirit,  
equal power possessing,  
one God whose glory,  
through the endless ages,  
Ever resoundeth.

Organ Voluntary - "*The Great Forerunner*"

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### **Libretto adapted by the composer from:**

Holy Scripture, Gospels of St. Luke and St. John.

*Ave Maria* (Luke 1:28, 40-42, and the Breviary of 1568)  
*Magnificat* from the Latin Vulgate (Luke 1:46-55)

Vita di Sancto Giovanni Baptista  
by Lucrezia Tornabuoni de Medici (1425-1482)

### **Hymn translations:**

W. J. Blew (O for thy Spirit, Holy John, to chasten)  
*metrical form of Ut Queant Laxis* (1852)