

Preface to the Collected Works

INTRODUCTION

Frederick Frahm's compositions have been familiar to me since our shared college days. His organ, choral, handbell, art song, and cantata output has always been staple fare for my congregations, ensembles, and recital programs. Frahm has trusted me with many of his experimental works and first drafts, and it is always a new path to tread with myself, my singers and players. His unique musical language permanently expands the common idiom wherever I make music.

His organ oeuvre encompasses hundreds of pieces, more or less delineated as chorale based *Gebrauchsmusik* or more virtuosic concert pieces. His chorale preludes are profoundly rooted in the Lutheran tradition, with a clear affinity for the German composers of the early and mid twentieth-century. Paul Kickstat, Ernst Pepping, and Helmut Walcha would easily recognize Frahm as one of their own, with his chorale *præludia* never failing to present a theological exposé of text and tune.

Frahm's vocal compositions, whether choral, art song, or stage, are conceived textually, with primacy of word and meaning as their fabric. His setting of the English language in solo song rivals any modern American composer in the art song genre, including Daniel Pinkham and Ned Rorem, in my estimation. He is an astonishingly well-read man, of poetry, theology, history, theater, and art, of many places and periods – all those things that constantly inform a composer.

An important aspect of Frahm's upbringing was his exposure to twentieth-century visual art by his mother. It is her great love, and she passed it wholesale to the young Frahm. She taught him how to *look*, how to *see*, just as a musician is taught to *listen* and *hear*. This training, together with his early fascination with liturgy and the organ (along with his obsession with the 1962 horror film *Carnival of Souls* and its hallucinogenic cinematography and improvised theater organ score), leads Frahm to wonder if even today his mind was not formed to perceive synesthetically. I mention this because four of the works in this collection are bound to specific art works, and this bears significant weight.

Since I let the cat out of the bag with *Carnival of Souls* above, it must go on record that Frahm and his younger brother are lifelong devotees of classic horror cinema. Frahm's imagination is saturated with cinematic images and film scores, from the razor-sliced eyeball of 1929's *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, to the demonic, psychological horror of Dario Argento's *Le Tre Madri*, to the very latest Ridley Scott Promethean horror opera. Again, this information will be brought to bear in the discussion of this particular collection.

As with any self-aware composer, his work continues to evolve, now forty years hence from our first collaboration. As I hope to have demonstrated above by citing his wide ranging, yet highly specific influences, Frahm's particular gift is that of distillation, crystallization, enfleurage, if you will, for lack of a single word to describe his process. A cursory glance at these organ scores will immediately reveal him as a minimalist, but upon second encounter reveal a surprising lyrical facility. Despite his strict architecture, all of his "bricks" contain something singable, something melodic, some element that is tantalizingly trying to shape words. My analysis (not his) of his bricks relates to a vocal standpoint, a brick of recitative with or without *arioso*, a brick of *aria*, a brick of *chorus*, a brick of a *chorale*, a block of *sinfonia*. Hold each of

these new works, or prisms, to the light and the projected spectrum fans out into a cantata, an opera, a play, an oratorio, no longer in narrative form, but in a timeless, clarified, adamant compression.

In a note originally attached to one of the pieces in this volume, Frahm writes, "This music struggles for breath when there is plenty of room to breathe, the sections are striking (if not adverse) in their variety, yet they find themselves gathered together, the final passage attempts resolution but leaves many questions unanswered. Metaphoric and contradictory, yes, anxiety, heartache, grief, all present... *Yet there is hope knowing that disparate things can be gathered in a frame of negative space and by their assembly have meaning.*" (Emphasis mine.) Though diverging in detail, this descriptive statement is valid for every one of these new works.

Of the twenty-two pieces in this volume, Frahm rarely calls for a forte dynamic, even temporarily. In another odd reversal, all but four of the pieces end quietly, rather than with his wonted big finish, with any larger dynamics occurring in interior sections. His dynamic indications tend to occur stepwise, with a change of stops, seldom invoking a gradual crescendo or decrescendo.

A mindful observance of Frahm's tempo markings is essential in the performance of his music. In particular, the slow tempi are not suggestions, but a challenge to the player to control themselves and allow the music to unveil itself without shame.

He really means it when he prescribes ♩ = 40.

"INSPIRATIONS"

I find it dangerously facile to speak of a composer's "inspirations." (Yes, I use quotations marks to denote some disdain.) That word diverts my attention to entertaining programmatic works and amateurish muses. In Frahm's case, sources or elements might be more appropriate words. In the case of this new collection, he draws from his typical panoply of sources, but freshly viewed.

Three pieces scattered across this collection are based on snippets of old Japanese court poetry, a monumental artistic field unto itself, spanning a millennium. Frahm crystallizes these poetic shavings into delicate, clock-stopping shards, without a rumor of cultural appropriation.

Another source cutting through these assembled works is Frahm's love of early and mid-twentieth century painting. Four Surrealist (broadly defined) paintings are the basis for a mind-bending transformation from sight to sound, with Frahm's unerring artistic judgment accomplishing the bridging of mediums.

THE EXTRAORDINARY YEAR

Frahm experienced a veritable paroxysm of composing in 2021. He remarked to me how the specific artistic elements mentioned above coalesced into a new technical vision for him this year, tightening his architectural method even more distinctly.

Having spoken of this collection in general, I will present remarks on each group, as well as offer personal responses to most of the individual pieces.

The group called **Abstracts** relies on splinters of text from scripture, the Book of Common Prayer, and other liturgical sources. None of that is unusual for him, but in this grouping of pieces, there is a marked absence

of chorale tunes or any recognizable cantus firmus. Each piece is a précis of an already small fragment of text, without allusion to any preexisting music related to a given fragment. One wonders whether these are meant to be played in divine worship on their eponymous observances, or if an abstract truth, as advertised, is to be found in another context. These **Abstracts** are intellectual and introspective, and not a little confounding. However, I fancied evocative elements in a few of them.

- *Ossa Arida* quickens the dry bones with breath.
- *Pentecost* eschews Frahm's frequent opening recitative, and bashes into glossolalia.
- *Trinity* also begins abruptly, in this case with an exposition of, maybe, the Three Persons.

Concert Works are derived from a dissimilar array of literary and visual prompts.

- *Beautiful Ghost*, one of the Japanese poetry pieces; the title is spot on.
- *Canticum de Anima*, no Ur-quote is provided, but that soul, to whomever it belongs, sings with joy.
- *Cenotaph* exudes exquisite mourning and sorrow.
- *Deep Mirror*, another Japanese source, reflects distress and disappointment, and is not a glass into which I wish to gaze.
- *Embroidering the Terrestrial Mantle* springs from Spanish painter Remedios Varo's 1961 Surrealist/Irrationalist work of the same name and evokes the great industry of creation. She considered Surrealism as an "expressive resting place within the limits of Cubism, and as a way of communicating the incommunicable," a thought not incompatible with Frahm. Some of her paintings bear an uncanny resemblance to the Surrealist creations of Giorgio de Chirico, who appears below.
- *Great Age, Behold Us* is enigmatic to me, perhaps because I do not wish it to permeate me.
- *I Am Ezra* unnerves with itchy reed solos and kaleidoscopic triplet passages. Do look up the word "ommateum."
- *Santiago* The couplet from Percy's familiar hymn speaks for itself. As for the title, what manifestation of St. James as person or place is unclear.
- *Tesserae* was first individually published with "bright *talavera* images in an attempt to lighten up what is a somewhat unsettling piece," according to Frahm. I found that both music and images instantly called to mind the gorgeous and lively 2017 boardgame *Azul: Summer Pavilion* by Michael Kiesling, where players compete to finish mosaics with Portuguese *azulejo* tiles. This could become Frahm's first game pairing.

Floral Pieces are fragile, pretty at a distance, yet breathtakingly complex upon microscopic examination.

- *Daffodils, being the Poetry of Christ* by its very title, but also by the delicacy of its rocking thirds in a central passage, happily calls forth comparison with the famous tenor aria from Benjamin Britten's 1943 *Rejoice in the Lamb*, yet here hangs upon a funeral sentence. Perhaps the homage to daffodils is a laying to rest of Frahm's early work and residence in Puyallup, Washington.
- *Flower in a Valley* is based on German Surrealist Paul Klee's *Blume im Tal* from 1938. Klee's well-defined fields of color, separate yet necessary to each other, are a bold representation of Frahm's compositional architecture.
- *White Chrysanthemum* strikes me as the most literal and programmatic item in this entire collection, an impossible search for a nearly invisible flower. Does the frangible, frozen mum remain unfound and unplucked?

These three **Theatre Pieces** are endlessly entertaining, and they truly belong in a theater played upon a theater organ. They call forth buzzing kinuras and fat tibias with nervous tremolos, and a rich toy counter under second touch. Taken together, they create a variety show I want to take my slightly boozy friends to after a nice dinner out. Frahm initially excluded *The Great Machine* from this collection, but I objected. I think it is organic to this section and consider it a fourth work in this genre.

- *Préambule* to what? This presents itself as an overture full of witty character themes. I want to see the whole show!
- *Arlecchino*, 1964 might be the cornerstone of this whole collection, in terms of personal significance to the composer. Based on Italian Surrealist/Futurist Gino Severini's 1964 etching, Frahm, like countless composers before him, recognizably addresses the harlequin figure, but in his peculiar musical language. The Severini image even looks like midcentury attempts at redefining music notation and analysis, and the piece sounds as if it is being performed from the image as score. (Future graduate candidates studying Frahm may find autobiographical numerological morsels embedded in this work but beware the Trickster.)
- *Vaudeville* is a gas-lit variety show unto itself, with act after act of burlesque comedy, songs and dances, and freakish talents on display. I believe it may be the middle-aged Frahm's *billet doux* to the film *Carnival of Souls*.
- *The Great Machine* is a brilliant cinematic work founded upon Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico's 1925 canvas of the same name. Art critic Robert Hughes wrote, "...de Chirico could condense voluminous feeling through metaphor and association... It [his work] contracts the near and the far, enchanting one's sense of space." De Chirico, founder of the *scuola metafisica* art movement that fundamentally influenced later Surrealists, inscribed his own young self portrait with "*Et quid amabo nisi quod ænigma est?*" ("What shall I love if not the enigma?") The moment I laid eyes on the score, the moment I first listened to it, my sight was clouded with images from Fritz Lang's pioneering 1927 German film *Metropolis*. In its near century of existence, the film has been rescored by at least two dozen different composers; I would not hesitate to attend a viewing with a completely new score by Frahm if this piece is a herald of its greatness.

SUMMARY

After combing through this collection, Frahm's love of, obsession with, and debt to the arts of the first two-thirds of the twentieth-century become undeniably clear. Rarely can an artist distill with such purity the flavors and aromas of his predecessors into a single medium. Just as the angels' share is lost from an aging cask, leaving behind a more precious liquid, so too does Frahm extract a superior bottling from earlier labors. Every piece is a *bon mot*, a bonbon, a bourbon. Frahm's brash bootlegging of earlier artistic schools into his personal compositional architecture builds new houses of sound for us to inhabit. Go live in that neighborhood and sit at his table.

FTLI+

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