

Ivo Antognini

Interview with the
2020 ACDA
Brock Memorial
Composition Composer

with Tim Sharp



Each year, the American Choral Directors Association commissions a “recognized composer to write a choral composition in an effort to perpetuate quality choral repertoire.” The fee for the commission is paid from the Raymond W. Brock Memorial Endowment, a fund established in 1991 to honor the life and contributions of Raymond Brock, who previously served as administrative assistant for ACDA. The Brock is one of the foremost commissions available to composers of choral music. The commissioned works are premiered in even years at each of the six ACDA region conferences and in odd years at the national conference. ACDA’s 2020 Brock Commission piece, *There is that in me*, was composed by Swiss composer Ivo Antognini (b. 1963).



Tim Sharp: Ivo, please tell our members something about yourself and what led you to choral composition.

Ivo Antognini: I was born in Locarno, in the South of Switzerland. My parents were not musicians, but in our family we often sang folk songs, and I was always trying to find the missing tone in a chord. At the age of eight my father gave me an old piano, and that was an amazing discovery, an event that literally changed my life. I immediately started writing my first “compositions,” and a few months later my parents, seeing my enthusiasm, sent me to a piano teacher. After classical studies I became interested in Jazz, which I studied and played for several years. Starting in the ‘90s I began composing soundtracks for films, documentaries, commercials, and more. In 2006 I had a kind of revelation at a concert with the Calicantus Children’s Choir; I realized that all the musical experiences I had previously accumulated could be synthesized and transformed into choral music to make something really special. From that moment on, I basically have written only choral music, mainly a cappella.

Sharp: What does receiving the ACDA Raymond Brock Memorial Commission mean to you?

Antognini: It is something I never expected. I am truly honored by this prestigious commission. I live in a small village, and seeing my name next to that of famous composers makes me feel proud. A curiosity: Gian Carlo Menotti, who received the Brock in 1997, was born and grew up less than one mile away from where I live!

Sharp: Tell us about the piece you wrote for this occasion. What inspired you and how did you choose the text?

Antognini: I chose a poem by Walt Whitman, taken from his “Song of Myself.” It reminded me of an experience I had during my adolescence in the woods near our home. One day I had a strange feeling of happiness; it was not the typical kind of happiness that one might feel when playing with friends or upon receiving good news; rather, the awareness and marvel of being part of something grand and stupendous but at the same time inde-

scribable—our Mother Earth. It was a truly beautiful experience, a sort of meditation in front of all creation, and I will never forget that day. Reading Whitman’s poetry took my mind back to that special time. I like to think that the poet tried with these verses to describe emotions I myself also felt as a young boy.

Sharp: In March 2020, your piece *There is that in me* will be performed by six different choirs at the ACDA Regional Conferences. Will you attend one of them?

Antognini: Yes! I will be in Salt Lake City at the Western Regional Conference, where the Riverside City College Chamber Singers conducted by John Byun will perform my piece. I would have preferred to also be present at the other five conferences, but I had to choose one. I look forward to working on the piece with the choir and enjoying their performance. It is always such a touching experience to listen to your own composition for the first time ever, especially if you have to fly thirteen hours to get there.

Sharp: How much time do you dedicate to composition? Tell us a little about the way you work.

Antognini: I dedicate very little time to composition when it comes to actually playing the piano and sitting at the computer to finish the work. But from the moment I begin working on a new piece there are many occasions during the day to think about it: for example, when I’m driving my car, when I’m cooking, when I’m walking, when I’m waiting for someone, or when I’m about to fall asleep. These are all ideal situations where something can happen to me. And if that occurs I don’t let the inspiration escape, but I try to keep it somehow in my mind. However, I usually start from the text that I have read endless times, trying to memorize it. I sing it, I recite it, seeking a particular rhythm on certain words. But I don’t write or play anything yet. Instead I try to visualize colors and sounds, to hear the voices singing. It’s kind of imagining a soundtrack for a movie that you only have the script for.

Sharp: You are a part-time composer. What is your main job? Where do you teach?

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Antognini: I am professor of ear training and piano at the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana in Lugano, a small university of music. I have taught there since 1985, and I am still having fun, especially because by teaching ear training I deal with several aspects of music: melody, intonation, harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, composition, improvisation, analysis, and the history of music. And the beauty of our school is that despite being small, it welcomes students and teachers from all over the world.

Sharp: In your opinion, what are the qualities that a choral music composer should have?

Antognini: First of all, a choral composer should be honest with him or herself, because what they writes represents them, in every way. A composition that is made public is like a self-portrait, a testament. In every new piece that we create, we should try something unusual, a little bit different, explore alternative paths, even if that leads only to an unnoticeable change in our way of composing. But it is essential to be curious, like a child, to have an open mind, to listen to different types of music. By saying this I do not mean that every new piece has to be something totally unexpected or revolutionary; however, from a composer we can expect something more complex and interesting than a piece with three identical verses and a refrain that begins with A minor, F major, C major and G major...

Sharp: Where and with whom did you study composition?

Antognini: I'm a self-taught composer. As a young man I studied the masterpieces of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Ravel, Honegger, Bartok, Schönberg, Berg, Stravinsky, and many others. At that time, in the '80s, you were obligated to buy every single score, and they cost a lot! Everything was more complicated and expensive than nowadays. There was no internet and no IMSLP; sometimes you had to wait for more than a month before receiving the book you had ordered at the music store! But perhaps, exactly for that reason, you really studied the scores, until the last note, you spent enough time. In addition, I

still have most of these books and I use them with my students nearly forty years later!

Sharp: What do you like most about choral music?

Antognini: First of all, I like its simplicity. It is surprising that we can create such complex music using only our voices. We are not talking about sophisticated musical instruments; we are talking about two very short vocal cords that vibrate in our throat. It's something magical and a really big challenge for the composers, who have to deal with the technical and physical limits of the voice. I like to see the emotion of the choristers when they are singing. There are no filters in choral music. You can not hide yourself; you are alone with your voice. Another aspect that puts choral music in a class of its own is that there is a text. This creates a communication between the composer, the conductor, the performer, and the audience.

Sharp: I know you live with your family in a small village with only 300 inhabitants. Do you think this has an influence on the way you compose?

Antognini: It is essential for me to live in a quiet place. I'm always in search of silence. I'm constantly escaping from noisy places. I wake up very early in the morning to have that outer and inner peace that allows me to be creative. It is only by making silence inside of me that I can create something. I don't think I could compose if I lived in a big city, or at least if I did, my music would be very different. I like to remember this beautiful sentence: "Music is silence that, dreaming, starts playing."

Sharp: How would you describe your choral music?

Antognini: I don't like labels very much, but I can tell you what I like and what I don't like. I'm not interested in pieces that, after listening to the first minute, you can tell what's going to happen. I like sparkling and brilliant chords, but I can't stand dissonances in bad taste. I'm unable to stay in the same key for a long time; I get bored quickly and go somewhere else. I also have a soft spot for the medieval modes. I don't like long pieces, almost never. I love harmony; it is an aspect of the music that

fascinates me so much, along with melody and counterpoint. It intrigues me to work with complex rhythms, especially in fast situations. And, last but not least, I'm a close friend of word painting, that's for sure!

Sharp: Where do you get the inspiration to write your music?

Antognini: It is essential for me to be in contact with nature. This is my primary source of inspiration. The sea and the wind stimulate me, the mountains and the sun calm me down, walking in a forest makes me feel alive, recharges my batteries. I enjoy watching animals, from the tiny little ant to the immense whale; they are fascinating and often mysterious, incomprehensible. Smelling the fragrance of flowers in spring is something incredible.

It is difficult to say how I transform these emotions onto staff paper, but I know that all of this is in my music. Thanks to music I am also lucky enough to be able

to travel to other cultures, other ways of thinking, other types of music, which are certainly a source of inspiration. Finally, I should also give a great tribute to my musical loves, which are Bach, Beethoven, Debussy, Ravel, Al Jarreau, and Keith Jarrett.

Sharp: What message would you like your music to leave?

Antognini: I like to think that with my music I can leave a positive message, a message of hope. I am convinced that by listening to music we can reach a level of feeling where the spirit rises as in no other circumstance. Music is a therapy; it is good for those who write it, those who study it, those who direct it, those who perform it, and finally those who listen to it. If everyone sang in a choir or played in an orchestra, perhaps the world would be a more enjoyable and harmonious place to live in. ■

Selected Discography

Canticum Novum
The choral music of Ivo Antognini
Salt Lake Vocal Artists

Sacred Songs of Life & Love
South Dakota Chorale
Pentatone

Angele Dei
Corale Zumellese
CNI Music

Invisible Stars
UCD Choral Scholars
Signum Records

To Bethlehem
Kantorei of Kansas City
Resonus

Out of the deep
Golden Gate Men's Chorus

Perpetual Twilight
UCD Choral Scholars
Signum Records

Come and sing unto the Lord
BYU Singers

O filii et filiae
Calicantus Children's Choir

Published Works

Mixed Choir

Aimhirgin
SATB divisi, English horn
Alliance Music Pub.

Alleluia
SSATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Angele Dei
SSATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Ave Maria
SSATTB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Ave Maris stella
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

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Beati omnes
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Canticum novum
SSATB a cappella
Walton Music

Clamaverunt Justi
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Dos Palabras
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Dream Land
SATB divisi a cappella
PH Publishers

Faces
SSATBB a cappella
Ed. Peters

Gloria in excelsis
SSATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

I am the rose of Sharon
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Invictus
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Jesu dulcis memoria
SSATTB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Jubilate Deo
SSATBB/SATB a cappella
Walton Music

Laudate Dominum
SSATB a cappella
Walton Music

Life has...
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Life is a circle
SATB divisi a cappella
De Haske

Lux aeterna
SATB divisi a cappella
G. Schirmer

Music is everywhere
SAB, piano
De Haske

O filii et filiae
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

O gloriosa Domina
SATB divisi a cappella
Boosey & Hawkes

O magnum mysterium
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

O nata lux
SATB divisi a cappella
G. Schirmer

O quam suavis est
SATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Pater noster
SATB divisi a cappella
Ferrimontana

Peace
SATB divisi, oboe
Alliance Music Pub.

Puer natus est nobis
SATB divisi a cappella
ECS Publishing

Remember
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Silent night
SATB divisi a cappella
G. Schirmer

Take the train
SATB, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

There is another sky
SSATB a cappella
Ed. Peters

There will come soft rains
SATB divisi a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Those tender words
SSATB a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

Ubi caritas
SATB divisi a cappella
Colla Voce

Verbum caro
SATB divisi a cappella
Colla Voce

War
SATB divisi, oboe
Alliance Music Pub.

Treble voices

Agnus Dei
SSA a cappella
Mark Foster

Ave Maris stella
SSAA a cappella
Alliance Music Pub.

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Canticum novum
SSSAAA a cappella
Walton Music

Dormi Jesu
SSAA a cappella
Walton Music

Ecce quam bonum
SSA, piano
Carus Verlag

Great Spirit
SSA, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

Ici-bas
SSA, piano, opt. cello
Ferrimontana

Kyrie eleison
SA, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

La mia stella
SA, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

Le problème
SSAA a cappella
Ed. Labatiaz

Les éléphants savent
SA, violin, cello, piano
Walton Music

O filii et filiae
SA, cello, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

O Magnum Mysterium
SA, cello, piano
Alliance Music Pub.

Pardon, j'ai pas bien compris
SA, violin, cello, piano
Walton Music

Regarde si c'est vrai
SA, violin, cello, piano
Walton Music

Schweyzzersody
SSA a cappella
Ferrimontana

This Song
SA, piano
PH Publishers

Wah-bah-dah-bah-doo-bee!
SSA, piano
Ferrimontana

Male voices

O Fortuna
TTBB divisi a cappella
PH Publishers

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