

## Agnus Dei Review for ARS

by Glen Shannon

“Agnus Dei” is a new piece created especially for the ARS, commissioned by Chaz Warren and composed by Daniel Hay in 2024. The piece is scored for three choirs of five players each. I brought it to the Rocky Recorders Workshop in Denver in April 2024 for the very first reading hot off the press, and it garnered lots of fans in the Denver Recorder Society. Including all repeats and played at a moderate tempo, the performance is just around 5 minutes.

The parts are easily playable by all skill levels (we had three soprano-only newbies at the workshop), the lines are melodic, and there are very few accidentals throughout, in the open key of C/A minor. Harmonies can be intriguing, with several big fuzzy chords in the tutti moments, though overall the sound is very pleasing and consonant, not jarring or angular.

The musical structure is generally antiphonal, with each choir mostly sticking together in a call-response conversation, but there are plenty of communal passages where all parts are playing together. Melodic fragments are used extensively in imitation and octave doubling among the choirs, and in the final section, the main motive appears in a slower and more dramatic form, imparting a strong sense of dignity to it.

The tessitura is fairly high; there are 2 Sopranino (“N”) parts, 3 Soprano parts, 3 Alto parts, 3 Tenor parts, 2 Bass parts and 2 Great Bass parts. Fortunately there are no unisons on high notes, so it does not have any dangerous intonation risks. Most of the music sits in the comfortable range for each size, with a couple higher notes occurring here and there. Both Great Bass parts have low notes out of range of the F basses. The choirs are set up as NSAAT, TBBGbGb (suitable for strings and soft reeds), and NSSAT – 2 high choirs on the left and right, flanking a low choir in the middle. It is important to keep the choirs seated together, rather than have the parts spread out and overlapping, which would diffuse the antiphonal sound. Keeping them together also helped me as the conductor, so I could confidently cue the right groups at the right times!

The three choirs take turns introducing themselves right from the start, and all parts are fully engaged throughout the piece. The group had little trouble counting rests and coming in at their correct times, as the long periods of rest typical of polychoral music are generally absent and interactivity among the choirs is high. Chaz Warren’s typesetting is clear at first sight; measure numbers appear at the start of each system (professional default) as well as every 5 measures, and rehearsal letters keep the sections neatly delineated.

I thoroughly enjoyed leading the Rocky Recorders Workshop in this new work! The intricacies of imitation and side commentary revealed themselves more and more with each reading, and I recommend programming this piece at your next large gathering.