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# RESEARCH *Report*

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## Franz Liszt's Oratorio *Christus*

by  
David Friddle

One need think merely of [Liszt's] *Christus* to know a work whose effect has still to dawn. Perhaps the day has almost come when contact will be re-established with its tone, its intentions, for our time is again seeking God; this search characterizes it better than do the most outstanding technical achievements.<sup>1</sup>

Arnold Schönberg,  
*Arts & Ideas*

Arnold Schönberg wrote these words in 1911. Much of his essay is highly critical of Liszt's innovative compositions; his insights about the oratorio *Christus*, however, were both accurate and prescient. Far and away the largest example of its genre, *Christus* is an expansive work requiring not only large instrumental and vocal forces; it requires a conductor who is knowledgeable about Liszt's musical language and rhetoric. The formidable

challenges of this work have undoubtedly contributed to the limited number of public performances and recordings. With the approaching centennial of Liszt's birth in 2011, there exists an excellent opportunity to reintroduce this neglected masterpiece to scholars and performers.<sup>2</sup>

### Genesis of *Christus*

From its inception Liszt conceived of *Christus* as an overview of the life of Jesus depicted in musical tableaux. He first spoke of his idea to Wagner in July 1853 and, as befits a three-hour work, *Christus* had a long gestational period. Indeed, Liszt's first obstacle was finding a suitable text. Liszt considered inviting the poet Georg Herwegh, Peter Cornelius, and Princess Carolyne Sayn-

Wittgenstein to help him prepare the text; in the end, however, he himself selected passages from the Bible, the Catholic liturgy and various medieval hymns to assemble the libretto.<sup>3</sup>

Four years later, during rehearsals of Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*, Liszt wrote to the Princess Carolyne, "As soon as my Elisabeth is finished, we must compose *Christus*, along the lines that we have set for this work."<sup>4</sup> Living in Rome, Liszt was besieged by so-



Franz Liszt

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cial obligations that made a concentrated effort to complete *Christus* difficult; he even complained about the lack of uninterrupted time to his organ pupil Alexander Gottschalg in April 1863.<sup>5</sup>

To escape the hectic pace, he moved into the monastery of the Madonna del Rosario outside Rome in June of 1863. There he fully devoted himself to composition, going so far as to have a dampened, upright piano installed in his monastic cell. Even though he declared *Christus* complete in October 1866, he subsequently inserted two previously composed works—*Die Gründung der Kirche* (The Foundation of the Church) and *O Filii et Filiae* (O Sons and Daughters)—expanding it to fourteen movements. Even by nineteenth-century standards the performance forces required for *Christus* are exceptional: double winds with English Horn, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, tympani, bass drum, cymbals, and the first use of tubular bells, harp, organ and harmo-

nium, Soprano, Mezzo, Alto, Tenor, Baritone, and Bass soloists, an off-stage treble choir with woodwinds, chorus, and strings.



The first page of the autograph of *Christus* in the British Library

### History of the manuscript

Liszt's usual method of composing was to first sketch, then make a first draft, and finally a fair copy for engraving. The autograph manuscript of *Christus* consists of two parts: the twelve movements for orchestra and chorus, and Liszt's piano reduction. On the first folio of the piano reduction Liszt wrote, "Aufgefundene Manuscript von Fräulein Schmalhausen, und derselben freundlichst verehrt. F. Liszt. February, 86." (This manuscript was found by Miss Schmalhausen and I gave it to her out of gratitude.)<sup>6</sup>

The manuscript came into the possession of the British Library via an elliptical route. Lina Schmalhausen was one of Liszt's many pupils in Weimar and was his primary caretaker during the last days of his life in Bayreuth.<sup>7</sup> Chronically short of money, she was disliked by other Weimar pupils; indeed, they accused her of pilfering some of Liszt's manuscripts in order to sell them—a charge that was not without merit. Nevertheless, the characteristically generous Liszt made a

gift of the *Christus* manuscript to her; the unusually careful inscription was to protect her from any possible accusations of theft after his death.

Schmalhausen first offered the manuscript for sale to the trustees of the British Museum in 1889. Edward Scott replied on their behalf:

I find on looking at the M.S. again that Liszt designedly left it incomplete when he gave it to you because he says the missing (no. 6) part was 'as published in Leipzig.' But of no. 13 there is no trace. The highest price therefore that I can offer you for it is £30.<sup>8</sup>

Sophie Peters replied on behalf of Lina Schmalhausen:

Learning from your letter that the manuscript is incomplete, she quite understands your not laying greater value on it, yet, as she prizes that manuscript very highly, she would not like to part with it for the price of 30 pounds and begs you to return it to her.<sup>9</sup>

In 1892, Lina, desperate for money, wrote again.

Having sent you Liszt's manuscript of *Christus* last Wednesday the 6th, I should be very glad to know whether it has safely reached you. In 1889 you offered to buy it for the sum of £30, I had not then been able to decide to sell it, but as I am at present in a little money difficulty, I should now take that amount which you then offered for it. I should be very much obliged & grateful if you would kindly do so.<sup>10</sup>

The official purchase date for the manuscript, ADD #34,182, is 14 May 1892. It contains 113 double-sided paper folios and bears the dates 1863, 1865, and 1866. Liszt used brown ink for the initial notation and subsequently made extensive emendations—phrase marks, articulations, tempo indications, dynamic markings, etc.—in colored pencils. It is thought that copyists used the manuscript to prepare the orchestral parts. The largest folios are 30 cm wide by 44.5 cm high, although there are smaller folios as well. An extant fair copy for the first section of the oratorio, which includes movements 1–5, is held in the Goethe-Schiller Archiv in Weimar. Although the notation is not by Liszt, there are many

I. Theil - Part I  
Weihnachtsoratorium - Christmas Oratorio  
I. Einleitung - Introduction  
"Rorate celi desuper et nubes pluant justitiam;  
aperiat terra et germinet Salvatorem."  
(Isaie. 45: 8)

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corrections and additions, including rehearsal letters—in his distinctive handwriting. This copy was prepared for the performance of the Christmas portion in Rome (1867), and revised for publication in 1871. It includes a second version of “Hirtengesang an der Krippe” that is transposed up one whole tone.

#### Editorial methodology

Like Beethoven, Liszt was a deliberate composer. There are many sections in the manuscript that are either crossed out in colored pencil or pasted over with another piece of manuscript paper. Large portions of various movements that are crossed out in the manuscript appear in the first edition, however, published in 1872 by J. Schuberth & Co. of Leipzig and New York; there are also numerous performance indications in the manuscript that do not appear in any published edition.

Consequently, there is no way to determine the editorial process that Liszt used between the time that the manuscript was completed and the time

when the first score was published. Not even the copy of the Christmas portion of *Christus* in the Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv helps to unravel the conundrum because, with the exception of a few corrections and the addition of rehearsal letters, there are few clues as to how Liszt transformed the manuscript into the first printed edition.

Minus a fair copy of the entire score in Liszt’s hand, or corrected galleys or proofs, there is no way to reconcile the manuscript to the 1872 Schuberth edition, the production of which Liszt oversaw. Researchers cannot accurately determine whether markings in the manuscript were inadvertently omitted from the score and overlooked by Liszt in the proofing process, or if he himself deleted them. It is impossible to clarify how or why the many crossed-out sections in the manuscript found their way into the printed scores, or to resolve the differences between the underlaid text and the libretto in the front matter. Finally, there is no way to state unequivocally that the printed score that has come

down to us is really what Liszt intended.

Such a claim is not as far-fetched as it might first appear. There are multiple errors in the score: the omission of a natural sign that would cause a transposing instrument to play a concert E-sharp against a concert E, to give but one example. There are also many instances where articulations are applied to every brass part except the Tuba; and since in the printed scores the Tuba shares a staff with the Bass Trombone, an editor must decide if the staccato mark over the Bass Trombone also applies to the Tuba; in some instances, Liszt provides the Tuba with its own separate mark; in others it is clear that one articulation sign is meant for the paired instruments on a single staff.

Years of research have yet to uncover a verifiable printer’s copy of the manuscript or even the corrected printer’s plates—either from Schuberth or from C.F. Kahnt, which published the second edition. The orchestral parts from the 1873 performances in Weimar and Budapest are presumed lost. In his Liszt

Table 1. Symmetrical ordering, by topic, of movements in *Christus*<sup>12</sup>

THE INCARNATION			EARTHLY MINISTRY				THE ATONEMENT						
Prophecy	Angelic Hymn		Earthly Glory			Earthly Glory			Angelic Hymn	Eschatology			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14

memoir, August Göllerich states that Liszt gave C.F. Kahnt an errata sheet for *Christus* in June 1886; Liszt intended that these corrections be published with the Kahnt score in the front matter;<sup>11</sup> unfortunately this document is also lost.

In a score as large and complex as *Christus*, there are literally hundreds of pieces of information on every page. Overlooking mistakes is commonplace in music publishing and composers do not always find errors in engraving. Consequently, more than a few mistakes passed into the printed scores undetected.

#### Structural and Descriptive Analysis of *Christus*

Liszt distributed the fourteen movements into three parts:

- I. Weihnachts-oratorium
  1. Einleitung “*Rorate cæli*” (Isaiah 45: 8) segueing into
  2. Pastorale und Verkündigung des Engels “*Angelus Domini*” (Luke 2: 10–14)
  3. Stabat mater speciosa (Hymne)
  4. Hirtengesang an der Krippe
  5. Die heiligen drei Könige (Marsch) “*Et ecce stella*” (Matthew 2: 9)
- II. Nach Epiphania
  6. Die Seligpreisungen “*Beati pauperes spiritu*” (Matthew 5: 3–10)
  7. Das Gebet: “*Pater noster*” (Matthew 6: 9–13)
  8. Die Gründung der Kirche “*Tu es Petrus*” (Matthew 16: 18)
  9. Das Wunder “*Et ecce motus magnus*” (Matthew 8: 24–26)
- III. Passion und Auferstehung
  10. Der Einzug in Jerusalem “*Hosanna, benedictus*” (Matthew 21: 9)
  11. “*Tristis est anima mea*” (Mark 14: 34–36)
  12. “*Stabat mater dolorosa*”
  13. “*O Filii et Filiae*” (Oster-Hymne)
  14. “*Resurrexit*” “*Christus vincit*”

Liszt did not set out to create a narration of the life of Jesus; rather, he selected fourteen scenes from the life of Jesus and composed for each what are, in effect, descriptive tone poems. As in the “*Pastorale und Verkündigung des Engels*,” where a soprano soloist, followed by the women of the chorus, announces the nativity to the shepherds. The English Horn introduces a pastoral

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melody in 12/8 time that creates an appropriately idyllic mood. "Hirtengesang an der Krippe" continues the musical atmosphere, beginning with the pipe-like calls of the woodwinds; indeed the strings do not enter until m. 73. "Die heiligen drei Könige" is a stately march that begins with dotted figures and open fifths; the middle section changes to a more lyrical, pious character when the Magi encounter baby Jesus.

In "Das Wunder," Liszt creates an extremely effective storm scene that suggests the tossing about of the boat containing Jesus and his disciples. After an extended exposition, the men of the chorus shout for help; nonplussed, Jesus quietly calms the menacing weather. "Der Einzug in Jerusalem" depicts the festival that surrounded the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, complete with full chorus and all six soloists singing "Hosanna." The highly chromatic, torturous harmonies of "Tristis est anima mea" create a mood of anguish and fear, appropriate for the scene of Jesus in Gethsemane. The longest movement, "Stabat mater dolorosa," is a companion to the third movement "Stabat mater speciosa;" in fact, some of the text is identical. In "Stabat mater dolorosa," Liszt uses the Latin hymn of the same name as the melodic and harmonic basis

for the entire movement. An expansive work of more than thirty minutes, it represents Liszt's personal association with grief and conflict. It is highly dramatic, filled with imaginative textual painting and some of the most sensuous choral writing of the entire Romantic era. An offstage chorus of women or boys (Liszt specifies either), singing the Easter hymn "O Filii et Filiae," announces the resurrection. A victorious conclusion for orchestra, chorus and full organ based on the Latin hymn "Christus vincit" concludes the oratorio.

#### Comparison of *Christus* to Earlier Oratorios

Traditionally oratorio was narrative-based and contained all the elements of un-staged opera: soloists portraying characters, choruses that either punctuate the unfolding plot or stand independent of the surrounding action, and recitative. Depending on the composer, the orchestra can be merely an accompanimental appendage or a full-fledged partner in the dramatic action. Liszt broke with this tradition and created a work—one he called his "musical last will and testament"—that drew upon older models while significantly branching off into new musical, formal, and dramatic spheres.

Except for the brief passages in "Das Wunder" and "Tristis est anima mea" where Liszt identifies the baritone soloist in the score as *Christus*, there are no characters. The soloists do not portray specific individuals as much as they give voice to more universal emotional responses to the mood and text. So, when the mezzo-soprano sings the beginning of "Stabat mater dolorosa," Liszt permits the listener to assign one of the historical women in the Passion story—Mary, Martha, or Mary Magdalene—to her voice or to simply identify with the singer as a kind of everyman—a person like ourselves who reacts viscerally to scenes of horror and despair.

Liszt dispenses with recitative entirely. Since he is not relating a narrative *per se*, there is no need to propel the plot forward, as had traditional recitative. It is not hyperbole to suggest that Liszt invented the precursor of the film score. In place of traditional narration, Liszt creates a sequence of aural images that invite the listener to conjure his or her own personal story—his own moving pic-

tures—a private theater that is unique to each individual and draws on his life experiences and psychological makeup.

As applied to *Christus*, the term tableaux is both fitting and misleading. In the sense that Liszt illustrates one particular scene from the life of Jesus, the term—traditionally defined as "a vivid or graphic description or a striking incidental scene, as of a picturesque group of people"—is appropriate. A

third definition—"an interlude during a scene when all the performers on stage freeze in position and then resume action as before" is inaccurate. Liszt's music is anything but static; indeed, from his fluid orchestrations to his thematic transformation to his keen sense of dramatic pacing, the scenes are free-flowing musical poetry.

Until *Christus* no oratorio contained movements for orchestra alone.

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**Unpublished Corrections and Abridgments**

The score held by the National Széchényi Library in Budapest—the Schubert 1872/4 edition, with plate number 4934 contains an inscription on the second folio in Liszt's hand.

Hans Richter, in dankbares Erinnerung seiner meisterhaften Direction dieser Oratorium, bei der Fest Aufführung in Pest am Sonntag 9ter November 1873.

ergebenit F. Liszt  
19ter Nov: 73, Pest.

(Hans Richter, in grateful memory of your masterful direction

of the oratorio at the festival performance in Pest on Sunday, 9 November 1873.)

Hans Richter conducted what has always been considered the first complete performance of *Christus* in Budapest; Liszt attended rehearsals and the performance. In Richter's score there are several significant corrections in Liszt's hand that have never been incorporated into a published edition:

"Einleitung," No. I:

- second bar after letter F (m. 111)—marked "Bis," indicating that he wanted this bar repeated;
- twelfth bar after letter Q (mm. 349–351)—changes in the flute parts;

- letter S (m. 531)—addition of a fermata in the first beat above the oboe part.

"Die heiligen drei Könige," No. V:

- seventeenth measure after letter I (m. 204)—natural was inserted before the Vn. I part.

"Stabat mater dolorosa," No. XII:

- ninth bar after letter A (m. 39)—"4 Viertel" ([Conduct in] four beats) is written above the clarinets. Liszt had already marked that section "Alla breve taktieren" (Conduct by the half note).

In the first performance of all three portions of *Christus*—which Liszt con-



Franz Liszt, *Christus*, "I. Einleitung," mm. 348–351.

Table 2. Comparison of Abridgements in *Christus*

Liszt's 1873 Performance Cuts	Richter's Score	Liszt's Own Kahnt Score
1. "Einleitung, Pastorale" third bar after letter F to the fourth bar after letter Q		2. "Einleitung, Pastorale" letter R to letter S
		3. "Stabat mater speciosa" one bar before letter E to letter T
4. "Hirtengesang an der Krippe" letter E to letter I	4. "Hirtengesang an der Krippe" letter C to letter G	
5. "Die heiligen drei Könige" fifth bar before letter C to the third bar after letter F	5. "Die heiligen drei Könige" twelfth bar after letter B to letter F	
9. "Das Wunder" seventh bar after letter K to the second bar after letter O		
11. "Tristis est anima mea" second bar of letter to the eleventh bar of letter G	11. "Tristis est anima mea" fifth bar after letter D to letter G	
12. "Stabat mater dolorosa" a. from the last bar before letter T to the ninth bar of letter Y b. last bar before letter Dd to the second bar before letter li		

ducted—substantial cuts were made. These abridgements were subsequently published as part of the front matter in the 1874 Schubert edition bearing the plate number 5211 (the remainder of the oratorio is identical to the 1872 edition, which bears the plate number 4934); this edition is the only source of Liszt's cuts. Traditionally the November 1873 performance in Budapest, at which Hans Richter presided, has been said to be the first performance with no cuts. Interestingly, however, the Richter score in the National Széchényi Library (wherein the above corrections were noted in Liszt's

hand) contains a second set of cuts in Liszt's hand. Moreover, Liszt owned a C.F. Kahnt score of *Christus* that, until recently, was held in the Liszt Musica Academy. This third score contains yet another distinct set of abridgments.

**Conclusion**

Liszt attached extraordinary importance to his oratorios—*Christus*, *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth*, and *St. Stanislaus*—and other religious music—such as the *Missa solennis*, *Ungarische Krönungsmesse*, *Missa Choralis*, *Via crucis* and the *Cantico del Sol di San Francesco*.

He also left a legacy of harmonic and formal innovations within these masterworks. Shortly after he arrived in Rome—where both *Christus* and *Die Legende von der heiligen Elisabeth* were composed—Liszt wrote that "After having, as far as I could, solved the greater part of the Symphonic problem set me in Germany, I mean now to undertake the Oratorio problem..." adding that "...to me it is the one object in art...to which I must sacrifice everything else."<sup>13</sup>

There have been limited performances of *Christus* in the 20th century;

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consequently Liszt's last musical will and testament has never acquired the audience it deserves. After the completion of *Christus* Liszt wrote, "When and where [*Christus*] will ever be heard is of no importance to me. The writing of my compositions is for me an artistic necessity and the fact that they are written is enough for me..."<sup>14</sup> Liszt's

remarkable attitude about the fate of his largest work demonstrates both his great maturity and an awareness of the vicissitudes of the musical world in which he lived. Embraced by audiences, *Christus* was uniformly rejected by the critics who regularly railed against his music, his aesthetic, and his vision of the future.



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#### Notes

1. Schoenberg, *Arts and Ideas*, ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 445.
2. To this end, I am preparing a new, critical edition of *Christus*. Supported by a grant from the Theodore Presser Foundation and the University of Miami Frost School of Music, I traveled to London to study the autograph manuscript in the British Library; to Weimar where I researched *Christus* at the Goethe-Schiller Archiv and the Anna Amalia Bibliothek; to the Sächsisches Staatarchiv in Leipzig to investigate the archive of C.F. Kahnt, one of Liszt's publishers; and, finally, to Budapest to work in the Liszt Museum and the National Széchényi Library. My discoveries have been surprising, enigmatic, frustrating, satisfying. And the history of *Christus* as revealed in my investigative research is a fascinating and compelling narrative.
3. Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Final Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 255.

4. Paul Munson, "The Oratorios of Franz Liszt." PhD diss., Univ of Michigan, 1996, p. 64.
5. "The Christus Oratorio progresses only slowly on account of the many interruptions that I had to endure this winter." Ibid.
6. A similar inscription to Fraülein Schmalhausen is found on the title page of the Fifteenth Hungarian Rhapsody for Piano.
7. For a chilling account of Liszt's death at the hands of his daughter Cosima Wagner, and the ministrations of Lina Schmalhausen to the failing Liszt, see Alan Walker, *The Death of Franz Liszt: Based on the Unpublished Diary of His Pupil Lina Schmalhausen*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2002).
8. Previously unpublished letter from Edward Scott on behalf of the Trustees of the British Museum, dated 14 December 1889, British Library "Correspondence Relating to Purchases, Etc., 1889-91, Folio 132.
9. Previously unpublished letter from Sophie Peters (for Lina Schmalhausen) to the Trustees of the British Museum, dated 18 December 1889, British Library "Correspondence Relating to Purchases, Etc., 1889-91, Folio 149.
10. Previously unpublished letter from Lina Schmalhausen to the Trustees of the British Museum, dated 9 April 1892, British Library "Correspondence Relating to Purchases, Etc., 1889-91, Folio 86.
11. Paul Munson, e-mail message to author, 23 March 2004.
12. Munson. 1996, p. 79.
13. Patrick Kavanaugh. *The Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 97.
14. Hermann Wilske. 1998. Program notes for Franz Liszt's *Christus*. Henriette Bond-Hansen, soprano; Iris Vermillion, mezzo-soprano/alto; Michael Schade, tenor; Andreas Schmidt, bass; Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart; Krakauer Kammerchor; Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart; Helmut Rilling, conductor. Hänssler Classic 98.121. Three compact discs.



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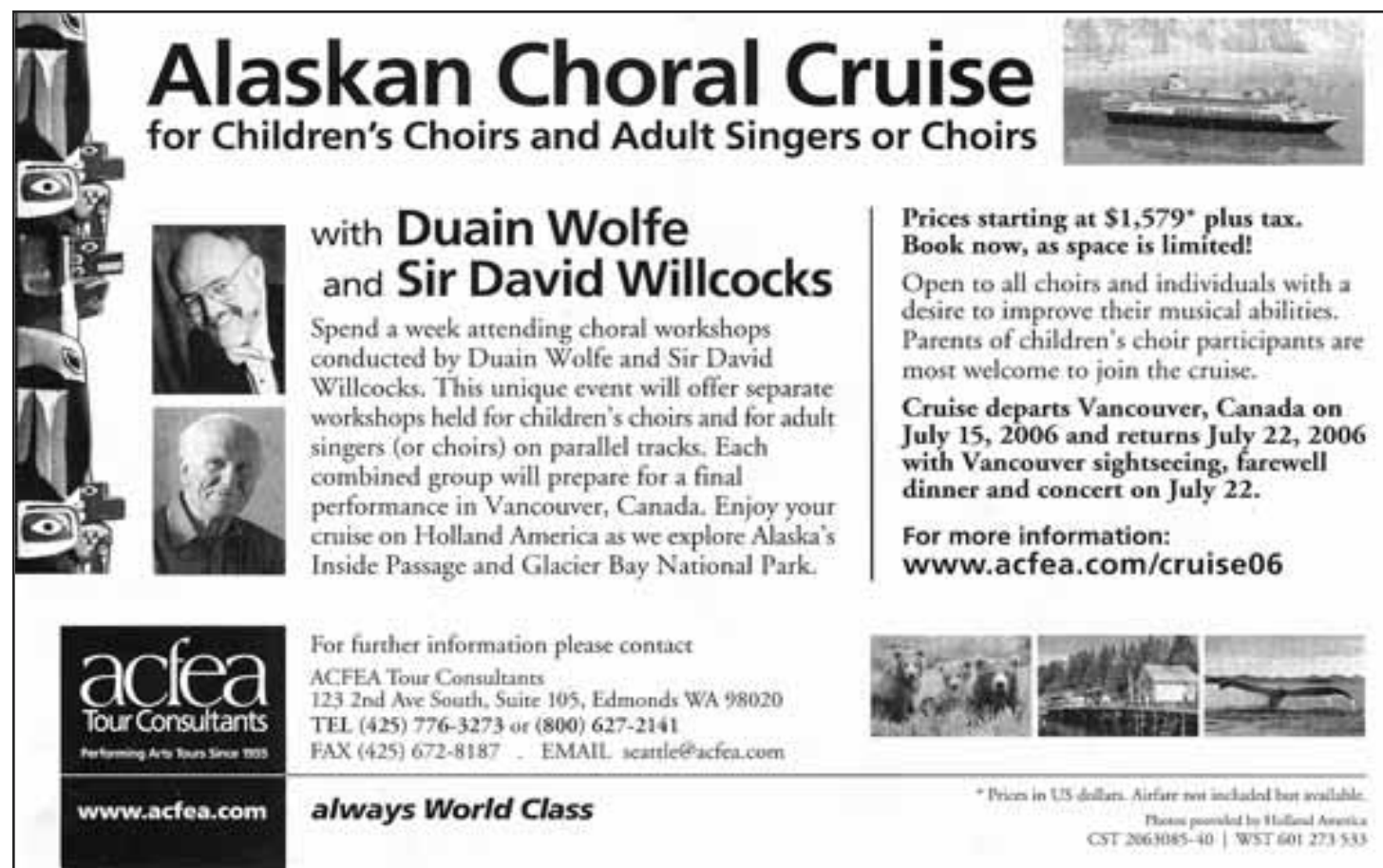
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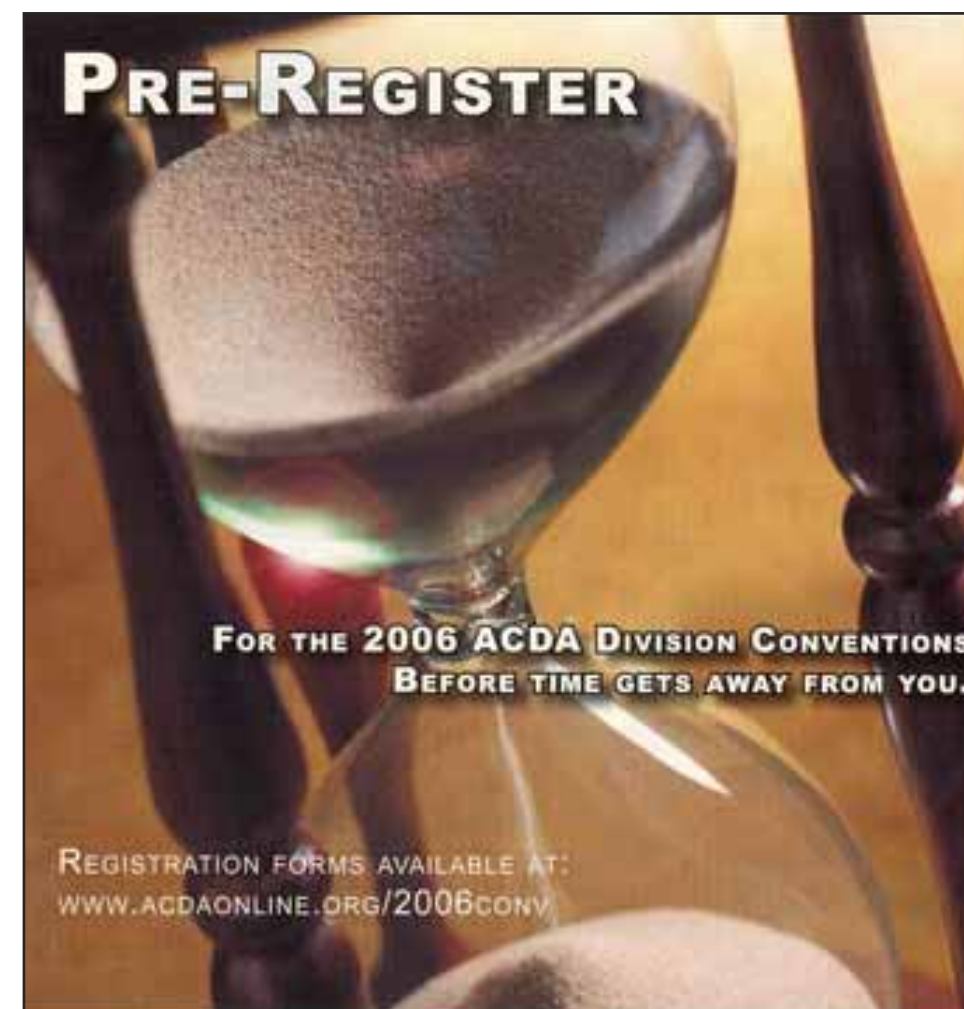
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