

OU CHOIR – 24 APRIL 2010 – INTRODUCTIONS BY BILL STRANG

BRITTEN: JUBILATE DEO – no introduction

1. BOWIE: WELCOME, HAPPY MORNING

That was almost, but not quite, the first piece of music by Benjamin Britten which I encountered, when I was given it to sing as a treble in the choir at my / then new school, in a performance which I calculate / may have taken place in July 1962. What seems remarkable to me now / is that it had / only received its first performance in the previous October.

The man responsible for this bold policy was my teacher William Bowie, and this concert goes some way to celebrating his memory for, just as the performance of new music by the likes of John Gardner, Wilfred Mellers and Michael Tippett became routine, so we were frequently given pieces that he himself had composed, and here is one of them dating from the other end of the decade which will inform much of the narrative of tonight's programme.

2. BLITHEMAN: IN PACE

However, it was not all new, and modern, stuff. The other polarity was the vocal polyphony of the Renaissance which was brought alive for us / in the most natural way possible, by singing it.

John Blitheman was admitted as Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in the 1550s and held that position until his death. His keyboard music was an important influence on his pupil John Bull. However, only one piece of Blitheman's choral music survives. 'In pace' is an evening piece, intended to be sung at Compline, the final office of the monastic day. It follows an old-fashioned pattern and so may have been written early in his career. It alternates polyphony, which at the time would have been 'modern', with the older style of plainsong.

3. ORGAN SOLO

The real reason, or inspiration, if you like, for invoking the memory and music of William Bowie in this concert is that, as well as being the Head of the Music Department at the Royal High School in Edinburgh, he had until recently been the organist at St. George's Church, Charlotte Square.

When James Craig designed the New Town of Edinburgh in 1767, he envisaged / George Street as its central axis, with an elegant square at either end. In 1791 the façade of the north side of Charlotte Square was designed by no less an architect than Robert Adam (who was also, incidentally, a former pupil of The Royal High School): it now houses the First Minister of Scotland's residence. On the west side of the square Craig envisaged / a church as the focal point, as our programme illustration indicates, and this was designed by Robert Reid, a pupil of Adam's, and completed in 1814. So it was, in a chronological sense at least, the culmination of the whole scheme.

Unfortunately, by the middle of the twentieth century the church was in a seriously unsafe condition, which not even its fashionable congregation could rescue, and it had to be closed. The organ that had been built for it by the famous 'Father' Willis in 1882 / was homeless until, in 1967, it was bought by this church, St Mary and St Giles, and installed here.

When Andrew Storer, its current custodian, demonstrated it to me last year, I was very struck by the beauty of some of the individual stops, particularly the gentler ones, and some of these will be evident in this first solo slot, which deliberately comprises music from the late Romantic period when the organ was built.

I'm happy to pass the responsibility for demonstrating this to Paul Daggett, who is going to play the Rhapsody No.1 by Herbert Howells, written in 1915.

4. QUORUM

Although St George's Church, the building, closed, its congregation amalgamated with that of the very beautiful St Andrews Church at the other end of George Street, much as St Giles here was to join with St Mary's, and Bill Bowie also kept the choir going as St George's Singers, which developed a profile as a rather sophisticated independent chamber choir. Sometimes it would join the school choir for joint concerts. So this evening the OU Choir welcomes as its guest, Quorum which, in this case shares, not a conductor, but several members / with the OU Choir, and they are going to sing for us now.

They specialise in singing renaissance sacred music, and have chosen to begin with three pieces from the period of the English Reformation. The first, by Farrant, uses contrapuntal textures like the Blitheman. The Tallis and Byrd pieces, yielding / to the liturgical requirement for greater simplicity, are more chordal, though with subtle rhythmic details in the texture to keep it buoyant. And various instances of the very English fondness for false relations – deliberate clashes in the harmony made by sounding adjacent notes simultaneously.

5. J.S BACH: JESU, MEINE FREUDE

It will be transparent by now that the experience of singing under the direction of William Bowie has informed my own activities with the OU Choir. The circumstances are quite different in many ways but they share the quality of putting together termly concerts on the basis of one short rehearsal a week – in that case 45 minutes after school on Wednesdays, in the present, an hour at lunchtime on Thursdays.

The groups may also share the quality of not knowing where they are being taken. So the OU Choir may not realise it is being steered through all six of Bach's surviving motets. Next, therefore, comes its latest offering from this sequence. *Jesu, meine Freude* was almost certainly written for the memorial service of Johanna Maria Rappold [Kees in Grove work list] in 1723. She was the widow of the Leipzig postmaster, a reasonably ordinary person to have stimulated such a substantial piece.

It is unique amongst Bach's motets/ in using a chorale as its basis, although in this respect it follows a pattern established by his uncle, Johann Christoph Bach. The subject of the motet might be summed up as the delight of the Christian in the contemplation of Jesus, of optimism in the face of death and joyful anticipation of union with Christ. Bach selected six verses of the chorale and alternated them with five from the Bible – the Book of Romans, chapter 8. One commentator identifies a change of emphasis between the first half, which concentrates on the body which takes / its leave / of the earth, and the second half / which focuses on the spirit / which takes refuge / with God.

I mention this mainly to draw attention to the symmetry which pervades the whole work, so that the first and last movements, or sections, are identical musically, while the second and second-to-last are based on the same musical themes, the third and third-to-last are embellished versions of the chorale, and so on. And right in the middle, the sixth section is a fugue which is pivotal in terms of this shift from flesh to spirit, but also musically, for Bach regarded fugue as a symbol of the immaterial.

I've developed these points slightly in the notes which I've added to the translations available in your programme.

INTERVAL

6. SCHÜTZ: JAUCHZET DEM HERREN

It might be two or three years since Anna Page asked if the OU Choir might come to Stony and give a concert in aid of the organ fund. I was keen to do something if possible, for reasons that will by now be apparent, and then it transpired that the choir needed an alternative venue during what we were warned would be a disrupted period when building works would render one of our regular performance venues impractical. So I'm enjoying the irony that the builders have started here just in time for our visit.

Another reason, however, was that this building offers us the opportunity to take advantage of the galleries for repertoire involving spacially separated groups.

The most famous venue for music of this kind is St Mark's in Venice, where there is a series of separate galleries along each side of the church. However, it seems that the split choir music was intended to be performed in the fairly limited area of the chancel, where there was an organ on each side to accompany performers. Heinrich Schütz was the greatest German composer of the seventeenth century, and the first of international stature. He did much to establish the traditions of high craftsmanship / and intellectual depth that Bach was to inherit.

However, as a young man he went to study in Venice with Giovanni Gabrieli, thanks to the offer of a grant / from the Landgrave of Marburg. On his return he took up a post as Kapellmeister / to the royal court at Dresden, which was to remain his base for the rest of his long life.

Jauchzet dem Herren, one of his earliest published works, is a very straightforward application of the characteristic Venetian polychoral style. Nevertheless you can hear Schütz experimenting / with a whole variety of textures and gestures for the second choir to respond to.

7. YE GATES, LIFT UP YOUR HEADS

Schütz made dozens of Psalm settings throughout his long life, culminating, if I remember correctly, with Psalm 119, in 8 books, published the year before he died at the age of 87.

The Scottish church has its own particular tradition of singing psalms in metrical translations, of which the most widely loved is perhaps Psalm 23, 'The Lord's my shepherd' sung to the tune 'Crimond'.

Last month, when I went back to Edinburgh to rummage around the archives looking for background information for this concert, I discovered something I had not known before, that the first minister of St George's Church, Dr Andrew Thomson, had written one of the best-known Scottish psalm tunes. Thomson was

a fairly passionate evangelical, an early advocate of the abolition of slavery, a fervent educationalist and a composer.

A newspaper cutting from 1962, when St George's was relinquishing its individual identity, says that the congregation continued to sing this tune at least four times a year at communion.

I realize that taking, or offering, communion only four times a year will horrify some of you but, of course, the emphasis is different in the Presbyterian church. So I am happy tonight to restore the relationship between this psalm and an organ on which it must often have been played.

8. BOWIE: THREE MASTS

We return now to two pieces by William Bowie. He was attracted to the work of the Cornish poet, Charles Causley, another schoolmaster writing in his spare time. There was a 'Cowboy Song' with piano accompaniment, in a wry Coplandesque style, and this haunting setting of 'Three Masts' which re-interprets the hill of Calvary in terms of nautical imagery.

I've put into the exhibition a lovely note about Charles Causley, written by a second-form pupil – the young writer's point being that Causley's wartime experience in the navy informed much of his poetry.

9. BOWIE: FAITH

The Royal High School had a very good hall of its own, capable of holding 600 boys, albeit fairly tightly squeezed on wooden benches around a central oval well and with galleries supporting organ cases, rather like this building.

Several times a year, however, Bowie would take the choir to other venues. So we sang evensong at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral and broadcast television services from the historic / Canongate Church. The most regular away fixture was St Giles Cathedral, the High Kirk of Scotland.

Harry Whitley, its minister, was a bluff, rosy-cheeked man, from the generation which had served in the war in its youth and had now risen to positions of leadership in the community. As a Chaplain to the Queen he also sported robes of the brightest scarlet and these added a splash of visual colour to the processional improvisations which the rather flamboyant organist, Herrick Bunney, would whip up – on, incidentally, another, and bigger, Willis organ. Whitley himself was a considerable orator, earning praise / from the *Sunday Times* drama critic, no less, for 'one of the finest feats of oratory it has ever been my good fortune to hear'.

On another occasion he preached a sermon on the text 'And what is faith? Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes us certain of realities we do not see.' – in the course of which he challenged Bill Bowie to set this text to music for the next visit. And so in due course the manuscript appeared and we set to work to learn another new piece.

10. QUORUM

You may not have realized that that piece ended on a chord of D major, but you no doubt appreciated the strength of the trombone note in the pedal department [PAUL to play]. Now, I think of that as my note – which is to say / it is made by the pipe I have sponsored.

One purpose of this concert / is to advocate this instrument to you, to help to raise money towards work which urgently needs to be done on it – and I can assure you that, having got a bit closer to it in recent weeks, it does need the work done. Another way for you to contribute is to sponsor a pipe, and you will find leaflets around explaining how to do so. It doesn't have to be anything as vulgar as the one I chose – there are some little gentle ones too and they're cheaper, but do please consider making an additional contribution in this way. Now you're lucky we're not in St Mark's, Venice because, with its multiple organs, that would have cost even more to renovate.

But that's where we're going back to now – and not just back, but backwards in time. When Schütz went there to study in 1619 he would have missed Giovanni Croce by a decade. Nevertheless the style of split groups of performers goes back a good bit further and Quorum have returned now to sing an example of this for us. This is a more solemn piece, but nevertheless the same principles apply as you heard in the Schütz piece: one group sings a phrase which the other group repeats, usually with a short overlap. In this case, however the sections allocated to each group are longer. And another feature is that both groups eventually sing together so we have the richness of 8 parts sounding simultaneously.

The second piece, although also a prayer, is more lively, as befits the mention in the text of triumph and ascension, and it ends with an Alleluia in triple time which is very characteristic of the Venetian style of this period.

11. ORGAN SOLO: KARG-ELERT

The piece Paul is going to play this time is the triumphal march on 'Nun danket alle Gott' by Sigfrid Karg-Elert, from his *Chorale-Improvisations*, Opus 65, which were written between 1908 and 1910. It's an elaboration of the tune familiar in English-speaking countries as 'Now thank we all our God'.

Although Karg-Elert composed in a diversity of genres, he achieved fame and his greatest success through the organ works he wrote somewhat late in his career at the instigation of his friend Max Reger. In 1931-32 Karg-Elert went on an extensive concert tour of the USA sponsored by the Willis Organ Company. In the same year, the company carried out the second of two rebuilds and enlargements of this organ.

I've asked Paul specifically to play this piece because it was something of a favourite of Bill Bowie's, and I certainly heard him play it on several occasions.

12. KUHNNAU: TRISTIS EST ANIMA MEA

Johann Kuhnau / was Bach's immediate predecessor as Kantor of St Thomas's Church in Leipzig.

It is perhaps unfair on Kuhnau that history / remembers him mainly in relation to Bach, because he was a considerable composer in his own right, mainly of keyboard and choral music. He received his early musical training as a chorister in Dresden, where he may well have encountered the aged Schütz. A man of great and varied intellectual talents, he also trained and practised as a lawyer, and was a prolific theorist, a talented linguist, a poet and author of a satirical novel on what he considered to be the shallow and superficial trends in contemporary music.

The piece we're going to sing conforms to the traditional church style, in keeping with the traditional Latin text. It is conservative in texture but extremely

expressive within the bounds of the style. Bach himself thought well enough of this motet to make an arrangement of it with additional instrumental accompaniment.

13. BRITTEN: ANTIPHON

Benjamin Britten wrote hardly any solo music for the organ, but used it in interesting ways in the accompaniments of his choral music.

He was essentially a vocal composer, the most inventive and sensitive to the setting of English words since Henry Purcell, and as such, an inspiration to many younger composers like William Bowie, in the mid-twentieth century. Here he latches on to the imagery of the first few lines of the poem – ‘below’ and ‘above’ – and asks that the three soloists be placed in a gallery, apart from the choir – which, of course, we take pleasure in being able to do.

This is one of Britten’s less-performed choral pieces, and I wonder whether Bowie became aware of it through contact with Arthur Oldham, who had been Britten’s amanuensis and his only private pupil in the 1940s. By the sixties Oldham was in Edinburgh, directing the music at St Mary’s Catholic Cathedral, and creating the Edinburgh Festival Chorus.

14. GABRIELI: MAGNIFICAT

One of the advantages of joining forces is that you can schedule pieces that would be beyond the repertoire of either group. And so it was that the school choir was joined by St George’s Singers to perform a setting of the Magnificat which required three separated groups. And that is the advantage we have with Quorum today.

However my formative experience went further than that, for these two choirs joined Edinburgh’s three cathedral choirs for a massive performance of Gabrieli’s Magnificat / and Thomas Tallis’s magnificent 40-part motet *Spem in alium* [in St Giles, St Mary’s and McEwan Hall] which has recently also been performed in this church. At something like sixteen that was a truly indelible experience, and one which I have wanted to share with tonight’s singers.

In 1587 Giovanni Gabrieli published a collection of music by himself and his recently deceased uncle, Andrea, who had preceded him as principal organist of St Mark’s. Presumably one purpose of this edition was to gather together a number of previously unpublished works by Andrea which his nephew considered worthy of perpetuation, and so the precise year of composition is not known.

But it is a celebratory piece on a big scale, reflecting not only the Byzantine grandeur of that building, but matching the elaborate ceremonies through which Venice projected its wealth and success.

The instrumentation is not indicated but I’m using an edition published [in 1957] by C.F. Simkins which allocates all the parts to voices, and to this I’ve added supportive organ accompaniment.

And so we finish this evening by bringing together Quorum, and the Open University Choir / in the galleries / and with the organ of this church / to perform Andrea Gabrieli’s 12-part, three-choir setting of the Magnificat.