

## **OU CHOIR – 23 APRIL 2016 – SPOKEN INTRODUCTIONS**

### **YE GATES (St George's, Edinburgh)**

That piece is a reworking of an old Scottish hymn which has fascinated me for decades and draws on my family connections with the Orkney Islands. On this St George's day we are going to be giving a concert of predominantly Scottish music – a coincidence which seems entirely satisfactory, to me at least. But lest I alienate what I presume to be a predominantly English audience when we've barely started, I'll clarify that the pretext is the inclusion of music associated with a church named for St George, for which the magnificent Willis organ now housed and newly restored in this church was originally built.

St George's Church in Edinburgh faces along George Street, the east-west axis of the New Town which was planned in the late eighteenth century just a few decades after the Second Jacobite Rebellion of 1745-6. The street names in the New Town were consciously chosen as a unionist statement: St Andrew's Square at one end was to have been mirrored by St George's Square at the other. Unfortunately there already was a George Square in Edinburgh so, to avoid confusion, it was named Charlotte Square instead, after the queen. Subsidiary streets were named Thistle Street and Rose Street, after the floral emblems of Scotland and England.

When the population of the New Town increased to a certain point the town Council was required by law to provide this second church, which opened in 1814. Its first minister was Andrew Thomson, a leading anti-slavery campaigner and keen amateur musician. He named this psalm tune 'St George's, Edinburgh' after this new church.

### **O SEND THY LIGHT FORTH (Invocation)**

That is not the only hymn to have been written by Andrew Thomson, although it is the best known, is still used in Scottish churches today, and must have been played hundreds of times on this organ. In 1820 Thomson published a whole book of *Sacred Harmony* for use in his new church and this includes twelve more hymns of his own. For this project he enlisted the collaboration of the choirmaster of Paisley Abbey, Robert Archibald Smith, and in 1823 persuaded him to become the third Precentor of St George's – the precentor being the man in charge of the music. It seems unlikely there was an organ in St George's at this stage, although the hymns were published with simple accompaniments 'for Organ or Piano Forte' which have minimal independence.

In 1825 they published another volume of *Sacred Music* and it's only fair to let you hear one of Smith's more enduring pieces. Like 'St George's, Edinburgh', 'Invocation' 'makes use of separation in the harmonies for responsive parts to good effect'. I quote from a short book about the church by Alec Hope, whose father Arthur Hope was for many years Session Clerk of St George's – a fact not known to me when we were both studying at Durham. The dialoguing effect to which Alec refers seems to indicate a fairly high level of expectation if these hymns were intended to be sung by the whole congregation. (But we will not require that of you this evening.)

### **DOXOLOGY**

*Sacred Music* also contained older tunes, harmonised in four parts, as well as arrangements from Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn, which I have to say I found rather opaque until I came across one attributed to Handel, from *Messiah*, and realized not to expect too much. The first phrase of 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' was followed by a

new answering phrase; then the first phrase was repeated, and so on. Full credit to them, though, for employing Martin Luther's trick of putting familiar repertoire to new use.

Some other tunes are quite pedestrian, some harmonisations awkward. But one piece which stood out immediately for its control and poise was a doxology by John Thomson, the son of Andrew Mitchell Thomson.

The doxology is literally a song to the glory of God, such as the 'Gloria in excelsis' in the Mass and the 'Gloria Patri' appended to the recitation or singing of the psalms and canticles. The Scottish presbyterian church threw out many of the Catholic rituals which the Anglican church retained, but it clearly developed quite rich and elaborate traditions of its own, and one of these was the addition of doxologies to some of their hymns and psalms. The 'Halleluiah' at the end of 'Ye gates' is a built-in doxology, but Smith composed several to be added to hymns written by others, and a few of them are surprisingly elaborate. Here, however, is the one by John Thomson, published when he was only twenty years old.

### **BENEDICTUS**

Just four years later John Thomson began writing a piece on a much larger scale, a setting of the Benedictus: in its proportions and disposition it might have come from a late Haydn mass. In the same year his younger contemporary Mendelssohn visited Scotland and they became friends. With Mendelssohn's encouragement Thomson subsequently continued his studies in Germany. Mendelssohn rated Thomson's music highly and John Purser in his massive book *Scotland's Music* has pointed out that Mendelssohnian traits in Thomson's chamber music and indeed Schumannesque fingerprints in his songs pre-date the works of these better-known composers by several years.

When the post of Professor of the Theory of Music at the University of Edinburgh was created in 1838 Mendelssohn wrote a recommendation for Thomson who secured the job. Unfortunately he died after only eighteen months in post, but within that interval he conducted the first annual concert in memory of General Reid, founder of the Chair of Music. For this event he wrote analytical notes about the music in the programme, and I was delighted to learn that he is remembered as the first person in Britain ever to write such programme notes. His successor in both post and practice was Donald Tovey – and the tradition is of course still followed today.

I have, however, been unable to find out anything about why or for whom Thomson wrote his Benedictus, or even whether it was performed in his lifetime. It's intended for solo quartet, semi-chorus, chorus and orchestra, resources which are beyond those we have available this evening, but I thought it deserved an airing all the same. So my arrangement contains all the right notes, and they will be performed in the right order, though not necessarily sung and played by the people Thomson intended.

### **O HOLY BABE**

Alexander Mackenzie was the ninth Precentor and Choirmaster of St George's, from 1870 to about 1880. There was still no organ in the church at this stage, and it was he who pressed the Kirk Session to raise the funds to have one installed. This seems to be in character, inasmuch as, when he subsequently became Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in London at a time when its fortunes and reputation were at a low ebb, he quickly and strategically established good relations with the other music

colleges and was largely responsible for the creation of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, which to this day guides, inspires and examines the musical progress of millions of music students worldwide. No doubt some of you have flourished – or perhaps you felt you were suffering – at its hands.

We're going to sing a movement from one of his oratorios – a neatly self-contained piece, with memorable melodic invention and quite complex but well-controlled Romantic harmony. However, it emerges from a context of dramatic accompanied recitative and fluently manipulated leitmotifs obviously inspired by Wagner's structures and strikingly reminiscent of Elgar's more popular *Dream of Gerontius* which was just six years in the future.

### **HARK HOW TH'ADORING HOSTS**

We now come to a piece which was not only written for the choir of St George's Church but for the actual organ we are using in our concert today. It was written by a man who was primarily a successful lawyer though he came from a family of engineers which had made its fortune building the Panama Canal. Robert Finnie inherited enough money to be able to buy not one, but two grand houses in the south of Scotland, in each of which he had rooms reconfigured by the architect Sir Robert Lorimer as oak-panelled music rooms into which he incorporated substantial pipe organs.

Lest this seems altogether too remote I'll add that his son became a Conservative MP and Under-Secretary of State for Scotland in the late 1930s; his grandsons Rory and Eckwere famous folk singers in the 1960s, among the first to develop their careers through successful television profiles – a tradition which is continued by his great-grand-daughter Christabel's husband, the jazz pianist Jools Holland.

During the First World War McEwen briefly acted as caretaker organist at St George's.

The tune 'London New' is not his own, but he clearly enjoyed reharmonising it and adding increasingly complex interludes and accompaniments for the organist.

### **WIDOR (Symphony No. 5 in F minor, First movement)**

I'm delighted that this evening we have Paul Daggett as our organist.

I'm also pleased that he has chosen, as his solo, a piece by the great French organist and composer Charles-Marie Widor specifically because Widor was a champion of the greatest French organ-builder of the nineteenth century, Aristide Cavallé-Coll, who directly influenced Henry Willis's style of organ building.

The piece Paul has chosen is additionally appropriate because it was published in almost the same year in which the original 2-manual and pedal version of the organ now in this church was built.

The fabulously virtuosic Toccata which forms the Finale of Widor's Fifth Symphony is one of the best-known pieces of organ music ever written. Paul has chosen to play the first movement which is hardly less technically demanding. It is not in what is sometimes called first movement as well as sonata form, but is rather a set of variations on the quite long theme announced at the start. They explore a variety of different textures and moods which display the range of tone colours of which the instrument is capable.

## **BRUCKNER**

This next item is based on very recent research which has established that Bruckner was secretly a Scottish Presbyterian.

Just joking – he was a pious Catholic with an intense dedication to the Virgin Mary. He was also a brilliant improviser at the organ, although he left behind almost no written-down organ music. But he did use organ accompaniments, or reinforcements in some of his motets, and he was also fond of trombones. So he was an obvious choice for this concert.

## **INTERVAL**

### **ANTIPHONARY**

There's been a theme of the precentors and choirmasters of St George's, Edinburgh having a strong educational dimension to their careers. It's present from the earliest years. So it's entirely appropriate that our next composer, Liz Lane, is currently tutoring an Open University course in which students learn the basics of musical theory and make their own attempts at song-writing.

Recently she has arranged her beautiful piece *Silver Rose* for OpenUpMusic, the UK's first disabled-led orchestra, and that was performed last weekend in Bristol Cathedral.

*Antiphony* was written for the RAF symphonic wind band and later arranged for brass band. I'm particularly grateful to Liz for having made a further arrangement specially for this concert and for the resources available today.

We've reproduced her note about *Antiphony* and its connection with Berkeley Castle in the programme.

### **ROCK AND CASTLE**

The last organist of St George's church, William Bowie, was also Head of the Music Department at The Royal High School, which at that time was housed in a rather grand neo-classical building perched on the side of the Calton Hill. But in much earlier times it had been located at Holyrood when the abbey was founded there by King David I in 1128, and it is thought that before that the monks had run a school at the other end of what is now the Royal Mile, in the castle itself. At any rate the school shares with the city the iconic symbol of a turreted castle sitting on a rock, and it was appropriate when a new Rector was installed in January 1965 for Bowie to find and set a text which links this symbolic landmark to the theme of faith, trust and dedication.

### **HAST THOU NOT KNOWN?**

Bill Bowie was a very accomplished organist, a very skilful choirmaster and an inspirational teacher. When I was a very young OU summer school tutor I sometimes introduced the choir to Bowie's short male-voice pieces, *Harmonious Young Men*. A middle-aged man in one of my tutorial groups, who had kept a conspicuously low profile, asked if I had known Bowie: yes, I had, he was my school music teacher. He then told me that he had done his music teaching practice with Bill Bowie and still considered him the best music teacher he had ever encountered. This man, whose name I regret I can no longer remember, then revealed that he had until recently been one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools.

During my time under his tutelage Bowie established for the school choir bookings in St Giles Cathedral, as well as St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral. For Battle of Britain Sunday, 1966, he wrote this next piece, which contains the beautifully apt line 'On eagle's wings they mount, they soar; Till past the cloudy regions here, they rise to heav'n above'.

## **FAITH**

The presiding minister on that occasion was Harry Whitley, himself a decorated soldier with wartime experience, and a very considerable orator – his obituary reports that literary critics from the national broadsheets made a point of attending his sermons during the Edinburgh Festival.

The pulpit of St Giles cathedral has been witness to many scenes, amongst the most famous being the Sunday morning in 1637 when Jenny Geddes, taking exception to the introduction of a new prayer book, is alleged to have hurled her stool at the minister yelling, 'Daur thoo say mass in ma lug?' – which being interpreted is 'How dare you say the Mass in my hearing!'

On the occasion of the Battle of Britain service the challenge came from the other direction. Harry Whitley preached a sermon on the subject of faith based on a text from Hebrews during which, acknowledging the choir's performance, he challenged Bowie to set his chosen verses for us to sing when we next visited. And so he did. And so we did.

## **RUTTER GLORIA**

John Rutter's Gloria received its first performance in May 1974, the year in which the Open University's first music course came out. John was employed as a music copyist for this course, and its books of scores contain a good deal of music in his distinctive stylish hand.

Later, as a half-time lecturer in the 1980s he wrote units on orchestration and musical structure for the OU's first nuts-and-bolts course, and materials on Mozart and Schubert which I've always thought rank amongst the most brilliant the music department has produced. He had a knack of making each teaching unit feel like the music of the particular composer he was discussing.

John is, however, properly better known for his large output of original music. Born in London, he studied music at Clare College, Cambridge, where he wrote his first published compositions, and conducted his first recording while still a student.

This all-round approach has characterized his subsequent career. After being Director of Music at Clare for several years, he formed the Cambridge Singers as a professional chamber choir primarily dedicated to recording. Not content with that, he then formed his own recording company, through which he has been able to promote his own compositions.

He's also a popular lecturer and guest-conductor, not only in Europe but also in North America and Australasia.

It was in the USA that he directed the first performance of his Gloria, which was commissioned as a concert work by the Voices of Mel Olson.

This is what he says in his own sleeve-note:

The Latin text is a centuries-old challenge to the composer: exalted, devotional and jubilant by turns. My setting, which is based mainly on one of the Gregorian chants associated with the text, divides into three movements roughly corresponding with traditional symphonic structure.

I suppose the plainsong he means is the one that goes like this:

SING: first line of plainsong

You'll hear the first three notes of it

SING: (B flat - C - E flat)

as the main theme of his first movement:

SING: first choral phrase of movement I

And it also rises at the end to the fifth note of the scale

SING: De-o. So it traverses the same space as the plainsong.

This spanning of a fifth is a characteristic shared by other themes as well:

SING: Lau-da-mus te

Well, you've heard enough from me this evening and if it's got to the point where I've also started to sing, it must be time to hand back to the choir, for John Rutter's Gloria.

Bill Strang

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