

An ENGLISH CHORAL TRADITION

Finzi – Hunt – Holst – Howells

Sumsion – Vaughan Williams

Worcester Cathedral Choir,

Director: Donald Hunt Organist: Adrian Partington

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An ENGLISH CHORAL TRADITION

Much of the perceived Englishness of music written in this country during the last century stems from the West Country, spearheaded by the massive influence of Ralph Vaughan Williams, and it is interesting that all the composers represented on this disc were either born in, or had close associations with, Gloucestershire. Worcestershire and Herefordshire. The other counties irrevocably linked with the Three Choirs Festival, were no less fertile in compositional terms, but their culture was rather different, dominated as it was by the high romanticism of Edward Elgar.

The Vaughan Williams influence sprung from the music of the land, embracing Gregorian chant and folk song, as well as absorbing the virtues of the classical polyphony of the time of Palestrina – a fusion of styles that would always be likely to find favour in the realms of church music; the style is distinctive and unmistakable in its tone and voice.

The major work here is the Mass that Vaughan Williams wrote for Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers, a group of friends and pupils who gathered together each year to sing a repertoire of early music from the Italian and English Schools. The work was always intended for liturgical use, and there were some notable performances during 1923 both at Westminster Cathedral under Sir Richard Terry and also, interestingly, in St. Thomas' Church, Leipzig, but the first public hearing was given by the City of Birmingham Choir in the previous year. The Mass owes so much to the late medieval tradition combining, as it does, all the recognisable elements of polyphony, rhythmic fluency and subtle use of the modal system, even though the title suggests a contemporary tonality of G minor. For all this the work is a personal expression in the composer's inimitable style, revealing a fascinating synthesis of an up to date method fashioned out of the antique. The work is laid out very much like that of the *Tallis Fantasia for Strings*; in fact, with its scoring for double choir and four soloists, it is the vocal counterpart of that brilliant orchestral work. The composer sanctioned alternative English words in order to satisfy the sensibilities of the Anglican Church, and two of the movements from this version were sung at the Coronation of Elizabeth II in Westminster Abbey.

Vaughan Williams is also represented by the motet, *Lord, thou hast been our refuge*,

composed in 1921. It combines a setting of Psalm 90 with Isaac Watts' metrical version of the same Psalm, *O God, our help in ages past*, with the fine tune St Anne, written by William Croft, to which the hymn is usually sung. This fascinating work begins with a semi-chorus chanting a pseudo-plainsong setting of the Prayer Book words against a distant background of the hymn. This gives way to a long unaccompanied stretch of writing, beautifully expressing the pathos of the Biblical text, before an organ interlude in a remote tonality leads to a triumphant peroration in which the St Anne tune is dominant. Holst, a close friend of Vaughan Williams, wrote little liturgical music, the *Nunc Dimittis* only coming to light at the time of the composer's centenary in 1974. It was written for the choir at Westminster Cathedral, where it was first sung at Easter in 1915. It is scored for eight verses unaccompanied, and exploits the whole range of choral sonorities, especially in the exuberant Gloria.

God is gone up is one of several short choral works by Gerald Finzi that have been absorbed into the Cathedral repertoire. Using some texts from the Sacramental Meditations of the 17th century poet, Edward Taylor, the anthem was written for the 1951 Festival of St Cecilia at St. Sepulchre's, Holborn. It reflects Finzi's sensitive response to English prose and poetry, which was the hallmark of his distinctive style. The opening and closing moods of the anthem are ceremonial, while the middle section beautifully expresses the reflective passages in the poem.

Herbert Howells was devoted to the music of Vaughan Williams, having been 'bowled over' on hearing the *Tallis Fantasia* at its première, but his own music was much more complex – a development of the music of Stanford, of whom he was a pupil. But this is not to say that it is any less sincere; indeed, the two pieces here show an enormous depth of sincerity and emotion, which few composers were able to translate into the language of the liturgy. *Like as the hart*, a setting of verses from Psalm 42, is a prime example of the art of combining simplicity of construction with 'rapturous ecstasy'. Howells never sinks into the realms of hedonism in search of spirituality. This lovely miniature was conceived when the composer was snow-bound at a Cotswold retreat in 1941.

Howells wrote no less than twenty settings of the Evening Canticles during his life, each

Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Misere nobis.
Suscipe deprecationem nostram,
Qui sedes ad dextram Patris.
Miserer nobis.
Quoniam Tu solus sanctus;
Tu solus Dominus;
Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe.
Cum Sancto Spiritu,
In Gloria Dei Patris.
Amen.

[10] CREDO

Credo in unum Deum
Patrem omnipotentem,
Factorem coeli et terrae
Visibilem omnium et invisibilem;
Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum,
Filium Dei unigenitum;
Et ex patre natum ante omnia saecula,
Deum e Deo, Lumen de Lumine;
Deum verum de Deo vero;
Genitum, non factum;
Consubstantiali Patri;
Per quem omnia factis sunt;
Qui propter nos homines.
Et propter nostram salutem,
Descendit de coelis
Et incarnatus est Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine,
Et homo factus est;
Crucifixus etiam pro nobis
Sub Pontio Pilato
Passus et sepultus est;
Et resurrexit tertie die,

Secundam scripturas;
Et ascendit in coelum.
Sedet ad dextram Patris;
Et iterum venturus est
Cum Gloria judicare vivos et mortuos;
Cuius regni non erit finis.
Et in Spiritum Sanctum,
Dominum et Vivificantem,
Qui ex Patre Filoque procedit;
Qui cum Patre et Filio simul adoratur et
conglorificatur;
Qui locutus est per prophetas
Et unam sanctam Catholicam
Et Apostolicam Ecclesiam.
Confiteor unum Baptisma in remissionem
peccatorum.
Et expecto resurrectionem Mortuorum
Et vitam venturi saeculi.
Amen.

[11] & [12] SANCTUS & BENEDICTUS

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt coeli et terra Gloria tua.
Osanna in excelsis!
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini
Hosanna in excelsis!

[13] AGNUS DEI

Agnus Dei
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Miserer nobis,
Dona nobis pacem.

Gloria patri et filio et spiritu
Sancto. Sicut erat in principio
et nunc et semper et in saecula
saeculorum. Amen.

Soloists; Richard Powell (treble) *Trevor Owen* (tenor)

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the
beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.

Lord, thou hast been our refuge – Ralph Vaughan Williams

Lord, thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made, thou art God from everlasting and world without end. Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men; for a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday, seeing that is past as a watch in the night.

As soon as thou scatterest them, they are even as a sleep, and fade away suddenly like the grass. In the morning it is green and groweth up, but in the evening it is cut down, dried up and withered. For when thou art angry all our days are gone: we bring our years to an end as a tale that is told.

The years of our age are three-score years and ten, and though men be so strong that they come to four-score years, yet is their strength but labour and sorrow, so passeth it away and we are gone.

Turn thee again, O Lord, at the last. Be gracious unto thy servants. O satisfy us with thy mercy and that soon: so shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.

And the glorious majesty of our Lord be upon us. O prosper thou our handiwork.

Mass in G Minor Ralph Vaughan Williams

[8] KYRIE

Kyrie eleison!

Christe eleison!

Kyrie eleison!

[9] GLORIA

Gloria in excelsis Deo

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis,

Laudamus Te, benedicamus Te,
Adoramus Te, glorificamus Te,
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.
Domine Deus, Rex coelestis
Deus Pater omnipotens!
Domine, Fili unigenete, Jesu Christe
Domini Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,

one adopting a new approach to the words, as well as endeavouring to capture the spirit and ambience of the building for which it was written. The *St Paul's Service*, dating from 1951, is arguably the finest of the series, with its expansive phrasing and highly charged drama. The *Magnificat* is a perfect setting for the great spaces and notorious echo of that famous building.

Herbert Sumsion was organist and master of the choristers at Gloucester Cathedral for 39 years, during which time he was closely associated with all the composers represented on this disc. His compositions, almost all assigned to the service of the church, are noted for their craftsmanship and devotional content; although clearly influenced by the Vaughan Williams school of composition, Sumsion is still able to speak with an individual voice, as in the motet, *In exile*, written in 1981 for the writer of these notes. The setting of Psalm 137 is scored for double choir, and is a rare example of Sumsion's writing for unaccompanied voices.

Psalmody, in the version of Psalm 67 from the New English Bible, is the inspiration behind the anthem, *God be gracious*, published in 1987, and first performed by Worcester Cathedral Choir. There is an important organ part that at the outset features motifs on which the whole work is based. The opening is contemplative, mostly featuring the trebles, but there is a marked change of character for the middle of the anthem as the mood turns to one of rejoicing, exemplified by rhythmic vitality and syncopation. The quiet music of the beginning returns, this time with an additional short passage for unaccompanied voices, but a solo voice brings the work to an end with the words, *God grant us his blessing*. The harmonic language is possibly not in keeping with the remainder of the works on offer, but the composer is well aware of his musical roots, and is privileged to be included with such exalted names in pursuit of an active and progressive tradition in the church and society in general, which is the great strength of the *English Tradition*.

Notes by Donald Hunt.

God is gone up – Gerald Finzi

God is gone up with a triumphant shout;
The Lord with sounding trumpets' melodies:
Sing praise, sing praises out,
Unto our King sing praise seraphic-wise!
Lift up your heads, ye lasting doors, they sing,
And let the King of glory enter in.
Methinks I see Heaven's sparkling courtiers fly,
In flakes of glory down him to attend,
And hear heart-cramping notes of melody
Surround his chariot as it did ascend:
Mixing their music, making every string
More to enravish as they this tune sing.

Like as the hart – Herbert Howells

Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks: so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God; yea, even for the living God. When shall I come to appear before the presence of God? My tears have been my meat day and night: while they daily say unto me, Where is now thy God?

Soloist: William Carslake

Magnificat (St. Paul's Service)– Herbert Howells

My soul doth magnify the Lord: and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his hand-maiden. For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me: and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him, throughout all generations.
He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel: as he promised to our forefathers,

Abraham and his seed for ever.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall, world without end. Amen.

In exile – Herbert Sumsion

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee, O Sion. As for our harps, we hanged them up upon the trees that are therein. For they that led us away captive required of us a song, and melody, in our heaviness: sing us one of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth: yea, if I prefer not Jerusalem in my mirth.

Soloist: Ian Bell

God be gracious – Donald Hunt

God be gracious to us and bless us. God make his face to shine upon us. That his ways may be known on earth, and his saving power among all the nations.

Let the peoples praise thee, O God: let all the peoples praise thee. Let the nations rejoice and shout in triumph: for thou dost judge the people with justice and the nations of the earth. Let the peoples praise thee, O God: let all the peoples praise thee.

The earth hath given its increase, and God, even our own God, will bless us. God grant us his blessing, that all the ends of the earth may fear him.

Nunc Dimittis – Gustav Holst

Nunc dimittis servium tuum
Domine secundum verbum tuum
in pace: quia viderunt oculi mei
salutare tuum: quod parasti ante
faciem omnium populorum: lumen
ad relevationem gentium, et gloriam
plebes tuae Israel.

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant
depart in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared before the
face of all people. To be a light to lighten
the Gentiles, and to be the
glory of thy people Israel.