

BATH CANTATA GROUP

Bath's longest running chamber choir

Musical Director – Neil Moore

Benjamin Britten

Festival Te Deum Op 32

1913 -76

for mixed choir, soprano solo and organ

Tracey Hansford

soprano

Benjamin Britten was born on the 22 November, 1913, the feast day of St. Cecilia, patron saint of all musicians. As we near the end of a wonderful year of music performances celebrating 100 years since his birth, it is fitting that our concert should begin with a work Britten wrote for the Centenary Festival of St. Mark's Swindon, in 1945.

As conscientious objectors, Britten and Peter Pears (his tenor friend for whom so much of his music was written) had been in America from the start of the war but returned towards the end, in 1942. Britten soon started work on his first great opera 'Peter Grimes' which was to be the first production at the newly re-opened Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1945. He took 2 days off from working on 'Peter Grimes' on 8 and 9 November, 1944, to write the 'Festival Te Deum'!

In the first section, simple melodies, mostly in unison and in a free rhythm are accompanied by quiet regular organ chords. A gradual crescendo then has a suddenly quiet minor passage, strangely to the words 'Heav'n and earth are full of Thy Glory'. Britten was obviously more interested in the musical construction than the meaning of the words.

Soon the organ chords change as the tempo quickens at 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ' where unaccompanied voices alternate with busy organ interludes and more varied combinations of voices and organ occur.

The opening tempo and organ chords return as a soloist sings 'O Lord save Thy people', the choir soon join in gently but with great determination at 'O Lord in Thee have I trusted' and the final words 'Let me never be confounded' which the soloist repeats quietly.

Claudio Monteverdi

1567 – 1643

Beatus Vir

**for 6 part choir,
2 violins and continuo**

The Italian composer Monteverdi wrote a huge amount of music in his long life ranging from both sacred and secular vocal works to both Latin and Italian words, to dramatic works which include his first great opera 'L'Orfeo'. This was before the time of purely instrumental compositions so he either wrote for unaccompanied voices or used instruments (very skilfully) in vocal works.

Beatus Vir was published in 1640 as part of a huge collection of his sacred music. This setting of Psalm 112, 'Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord', has become a favourite amongst his many shorter works.

He used material from his own popular canzonetta 'Chiome d'oro' and as a result created a modern attractive style unusual in church music of the time.

The violins sometimes support the voices but often have rather jolly interludes between the vocal phrases. The ostinato bass line marches firmly through the piece, turning into a jolly triple rhythm for the 'jocundus' section ('A good man is merciful and tender') where duetting sopranos and tenors are featured.

After this, the memorable opening bars return and a splendid 'gloria' brings this attractive work to a grand conclusion.

* * * * *

Benjamin Britten

A Hymn to the Virgin

for unaccompanied double chorus

A setting of Anonymous words written about 1300, this is a very early Britten work composed in July 1930 at Gresham's School, Holt. He was actually in the school sanatorium during his last few days at school. There was no music manuscript paper within easy reach so he drew the staves on pages from an ordinary exercise book! He wrote it originally in B flat minor but the published copy is in A minor. It is Britten's first surviving piece of church music.

Britten began composing when he was 5, he had piano lessons at his pre-preparatory school and by the age of 8 was composing prolifically pieces which he called symphonies, songs, waltzes though not really recognisable as such as he was not sure what the terms meant!

When he was about 10 he began viola lessons and, through his teacher, was introduced to Frank Bridge who broadened Britten's knowledge of all aspects of music and was a fierce critic of his compositions with emphasis on 'good technique'.

From Gresham's School he went to the Royal College of Music. After the admission interview (Vaughan Williams and John Ireland were on the panel) John Ireland said 'what is an English public school boy doing writing music of this kind?'

The poem alternates English and Latin words. Britten sets the English lines for the choir and the Latin for the solo quartet.

A gentle and fluent work, fresh and innocent, it belongs strongly to the tradition of English religious music though perhaps influenced by plainsong in the Chapel at Gresham's.

The music of the first verse of 9 lines is repeated with obvious needed adjustments for the second verse.

The last more animated verse still uses the same thematic material but in a fuller texture and with more combinations of choir and solo quartet. Having reached a climax, it relaxes to the original tempo and a peaceful slow ending 'Maid mild, mother, you are fulfilled'.

A Hymn to the Virgin (1930) †

Words:anon., c. 1300

Of one that is so fair and bright
Velut maris stella as the star of the sea
Brighter than the day is light,
Parens et puella: mother and maiden:

I cry to thee, thou see to me,
Lady, pray thy Son for me,
Tam pia, so tender
That I may come to thee,
Maria!

All this world was forlorn
 Eva peccatrice, Eve having been born a
 sinner,
 Till our Lord was yborn
 De te genetrix. Of you, his mother.
 With ave it went away
 Darkest night, and comes the day
 Salutis; of salvation;
 The well springeth out of thee.
 Virtutis. Of virtue.

Lady, flow'r of everything,
 Rosa sine spina, rose without a thorn,
 Thou bare Jesu, Heaven's King
 Gratia divina. By divine grace,
 Of all thou bear'st the prize
 Lady, queen of paradise
 Electa: chosen:
 Maid mild, mother es
 Effecta. You are fulfilled.



From the original manuscript of *A Hymn to the Virgin*, July 1930

He was sixteen and a half when he left school with an open scholarship for composition at the Royal College of Music in London. During that August, while he was waiting for the new term to begin, he happened to be at a tennis party in Lowestoft where one of the guests asked him what career he intended to choose. Britten said that he intended to be a composer. The tennis player was astonished. 'Oh!' he said, 'but what else?' It was impossible to try to explain that composing was not just a hobby. The casual, devastating remark came as a warning of what to expect in the future.

Johannes Brahms

1833 – 97

Geistliches Lied Op 30

for mixed choir and string orchestra

Brahms was born in Hamburg and his music upholds German classical tradition in spite of powerfully Romantic characteristics in his works. His output of instrumental music was not as great as the vast quantity of vocal music, ranging from solo songs to the great German Requiem. He had great interest in earlier music but had a large library from all periods, some was collected for him by his well travelled friends Robert and Clara Schumann. His interest in all aspects of the technique of musical composition was fuelled by this library. Another musical friend was Joachim for whom Brahms wrote his Violin Concerto.

Joachim also composed and there was a period where both were studying contrapuntal techniques closely and exchanging pieces for mutual criticism. Geistliches Lied (Holy song) was written during this time in 1856 though it was not published until 1864.

The 17th century poem emphasizes trust in God and the gentle lyricism of the setting belies its technical mastery for the voices are canonic throughout.

The accompaniment was originally written for organ but for this performance it is transcribed for strings by Neil Moore. It is also imitative and often has more flowing lines than the steady and slow vocal parts.

The three verses are clearly defined with the same music for the first and third verses. A final 'Amen' section brings a peaceful and quiet conclusion.

* * * * *

Anton Arensky

1861 – 1906

Variations on a theme of Tchaikovsky

Op 35a for string orchestra

The Russian composer Arensky came from a musical family, his doctor father was a keen amateur 'cellist and his mother an excellent pianist who gave him his first piano lessons. By the age of 9 he had already composed some songs and piano pieces.

At the St. Petersburg Conservatory he was taught by Rimsky-Korsakov and later, at the Moscow Conservatory he himself taught Rachmaninov and Scriabin. Here, he also came into contact with Tchaikovsky and was much influenced by him.

Amongst his compositions the short works are the most satisfactory, particularly songs and piano music. His suites for two pianos are still much loved by pianists.

Arensky wrote his second String Quartet Op 35 in 1894 and adapted the slow movement for string orchestra in the same year as Op 35a, these Variations, as a tribute to Tchaikovsky who had died the previous year.

The 'theme' is one which many of us will know well. Tchaikovsky wrote 16 Children's Songs, the fifth is called 'Legend'. It appears in the Oxford Book of Carols as 'The Crown of Roses' with the English translation beginning 'When Jesus Christ was yet a child'.

- Theme** A straightforward transcription of the song played quietly by five part strings
- Var 1** At a slightly faster speed, 'cellos begin the melody which is then imitated by the upper strings
- Var 2** A more animated and busy version of the theme in triplets mostly in the upper strings moves on to
- Var 3** Peaceful and in the major with the 1st violins having a version of the melody throughout
- Var 4** is lively with pizzicatos and syncopations giving a very different character to the music
- Var 5** features 'cellos and double bass with the melody throughout. A little roudade of a tune imitates on upper strings and only a few bars are without it
- Var 6** Strong and rhythmic, the original theme seems lost but it is still there in highly decorated form
- Var 7** Haunting, muted figures accompany the theme which seems now almost an illusion
- Coda** has a more straightforward reminder of the melody from which the music has grown. It is mostly quiet with a busier central section and final bars of fragments of melody becoming slower and quieter until the pizzicato final cadence.

It is altogether a delightful tribute to a composer greater by far than Arensky himself.

INTERVAL

Wine and soft drinks available in Church and foyer.

J S Bach

1685 – 1750

Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme

BWV 140

Tracey Hansford soprano

Rupert Bevan tenor

Peter Hodgson bass

Bach wrote five annual cycles of cantatas for every Sunday and feast day. Most of them were written in the first few years of his stay in Leipzig where he was Kantor at the St. Thomas School from 1723 until his death. He was widely involved as well in the musical life of the city's churches.

This cantata was written for the 27th Sunday after Trinity on 25 November 1731. Being the Sunday before Advent the emphasis in the text is preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus, 'the Bridegroom', returning to take the Church as his 'Bride'. The chorale or hymn tune melody used in the cantata was by Philipp Nicolai.

1. Chorale

Wachet auf

Sleepers, wake, a voice is calling....

Awake the Bridegroom comes, Alleluia!...

Be prepared to meet Him now!

As is usual in these cantatas, the first verse is an elaborate setting for the choir. It starts with a pervasive dotted rhythm which will return frequently. The sopranos sing the melody in simple slow note form whilst each line is enfolded by the other three voices weaving a complex texture under it with added roulades from the orchestral strings.

2. Recitative

Er kommt, der Bräutigam kommt!

He comes, the Bridegroom comes!...

He brings you to the wedding feast...

Behold Him coming!

The tenor announces the arrival of the Bridegroom and exhorts the wise virgins to prepare to meet him. The reference is to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew's Gospel, the prescribed reading for the day.

3. Duet

Wann kommst du, mein Heil?

When will you come, my saviour?
I am coming for your sake.
Open the great hall for the heavenly feast
Come, Lord Jesus!
I come, beloved Soul.

The ecstatic conversation between Jesus (bass) and the Soul (soprano) (Bridegroom and Bride) is accompanied by yearning phrases from the solo violin which become increasingly urgent and excited.

4. Chorale

Zion hört die Wächter singen

Zion hears the watchmen singing...
She awakes and arises in haste...
We all follow to the hall of joy
And participate in the great supper there.

The tenors in unison sing the chorale while the strings have a flowing lyrical melody. The whole is one of the best loved and best known movements in all the Bach cantatas.

5. Recitative

So geh herein zu mir

So go in with me, my chosen Bride...
Forget the grief, the pain...
At my left hand you will find peace
and at my right, the heavenly kiss.

Jesus' compassion and tenderness is captured in this bass recitative. He comforts her, and the effect is shown immediately in the following duet.

6. Duet

Mein Freund ist mein!

My friend is mine
And I am yours
Nothing shall divide our love
Together we will ascend to rosy heights of heaven
To dwell in love and joy.

This can only be described as a love duet with solo oboe taking an important part in the feeling of almost childlike joy expressed by the singers.

7. Chorale

Gloria sei dir gesungen

Angels and men sing 'Glory' to you...
No eye has ever seen nor ear ever heard
such great joy.

The choir sing a straightforward harmonisation of the third verse of the hymn with the orchestra supporting the vocal lines. Its strength reinforces the simple message of the words.

Programme notes by Edna Blackwell

Honorary Friend of BCG

Musical Director 1978 - 2013

Bath Cantata Group

is the longest established chamber choir in Bath. We meet on a Thursday evening in St. Stephen's Centre. We extend a friendly welcome to new members and have a non-frightening system of integration into the choir, not formal auditions. If you would like to join us, please introduce yourself to a choir member or contact our chairman, Helen Chalmers on 01225 310624 or by email helenchalmers@tiscali.co.uk

Chairman: Helen Chalmers

Musical Director: Neil Moore

Accompanist: Jamie Mason

Sopranos

Mayveen Blackwell, Pat Cadey, Valerie Hazelwood, Juliet Godfery, Cressida Lyon
Angela Pater, Elaine Pratt, Helen Reeves, Cathy Snowise, Pam Wilson
and guest Julia O'Connor

Altos

Kate Beeching, Helen Chalmers, Celia Denee, Annas Dixon, Ceris Humphreys
Julia Hardy, Rosalyn Hodson, Helen Jones, Margaret Königsfeldt
Catherine Mitchell, Judith Pepler, Evelyn Symes, Jessica Webb

Tenors

Eric Hodson, Richard Lewis, Baris Yalabik

Basses

Antony Branfoot, Richard Brooke, Peter Hodgson
Peter Jennings, James Scott, Mark Tinsley
and guest Rick Fitzsimmons

We are most grateful to Wiltshire County Music Library for the loan of vocal and orchestral scores.

The Orchestra

Leader : Matthew Taylor

Violins

Matthew Taylor
Robert Baker
Uli Bergmann
Martin Cawte
Kelly Edwards
Kath Jenkins
Hannah Lake
Rosie McNiff
Ruth O'Shea
Claire Stobie
Judith Wadsworth

Violas

Michael Bevan
Michelle Falcon
John Lade
Julia Page

'Cellos

Kathryn Hugh
Matthew Penrose

Double Bass

Alex Proudfoot

Oboes

Simon Naylor
John Lade

Cor Anglais

Ros Pendry

Bassoon

Penny Birnstingl

Corno da Caccia

Colin Bloch

Organ

Nick Thorne

* * * * *

In case of emergencies at St. Stephen's, exits are located as follows:

1. Through the main front door and the east door in front porch
2. Through the door by the font (Baptistry)
3. Through the side chapel
4. From the gallery, go downstairs and exit as 1 above
5. Choir and orchestra exit through the vestry

Exit for those needing a ramp/avoiding steps is through side door (east) in front porch

Friends of Bath Cantata Group

Friends of Bath Cantata Group enjoy advance information, receive concert tickets automatically and are very welcome at various social events held by the choir. If you would like to become a Friend, please contact: **Celia Denee on 01225 742666 or email c.denee@btinternet.com**

* * * * *

Future Concerts

Saturday, 15 March 2014 at St. Stephen's Church, Lansdown

Fauré Cantique de Jean Racine

Elgar The Spirit of the Lord is upon me

C P E Bach Magnificat

Saturday, 17 May 2014 St. John's Church, South Parade

(with Bradford-on-Avon Choral Society)

Elgar The Dream of Gerontius

* * * * *

Bath Cantata Group is registered as a charity.

Visit our website for details about the choir and its history

www.bathcantatagroup.org.uk

(soon to be **www.bathcantatagroup.co.uk**)

and we are on Facebook www.facebook.com/bathcantatagroup

or tweet @bathcantata

Donate to BCG while you shop during November - using Waitrose green tokens