

## Mendelssohn, Bruckner, Whitacre, Stainer

### Hear my prayer

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy has a good claim to be considered the greatest prodigy in musical history. Although Mozart was composing fluent, sometimes large-scale, pieces in his childhood and teens, almost none of his juvenilia have actually survived in the repertoire, whereas Mendelssohn's Octet (written aged 16), *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture (17), *Fingal's Cave* Overture (20) and *Italian* Symphony (24) are masterpieces which have never slipped from the repertoire since their first publication.

Mendelssohn showed an interest in sacred choral music from an early age, and wrote two oratorios - *Elijah* (which RCS will be performing on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2012) and *St Paul*. He also wrote a number of other sacred choral works, among which one of the best known and best loved is tonight's setting of an adaptation of Psalm 55, *Hear my Prayer*.

The composition of this psalm took place towards the end of Mendelssohn's tragically short life (he died aged only 38 in 1847), being completed on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1844. It was originally composed in German as *Hör mein Bitten* and dedicated to his friend Wilhelm Taubert. The English version of the text, which was approved by Mendelssohn, is by William Bartholomew, an English lyricist, librettist, composer and writer who was, by profession, a chemist. It was given its first performance in English at a concert arranged by Bartholomew's wife in January 1845. It is possible that Mendelssohn modelled it on English verse anthems, having studied examples by Purcell, Croft and others provided by Thomas Attwood, the organist at St Paul's Cathedral. Mendelssohn was immensely popular in England, partly because of his friendship with Queen Victoria, regularly visiting this country to conduct, and writing several works specifically for England. Mendelssohn sets an adaptation of the first eight verses of the Psalm. The narrator, in an initial treble solo, beseeches God for protection against the enemy, expressing both fear and anger in the more dramatic section commencing at the words "The enemy shouteth, the godless come fast", the chorus reinforcing these feelings. The final section is the famous "O for the wings of a dove." Here the narrator and chorus wish that if only they could fly away from this turmoil, they would seek a quiet, peaceful place in which to spend the rest of their days. This section is far from the sweet, even twee, piece that detractors and parodists have made of it. The desperation of the plea for delivery from danger is palpable in "In the wilderness build me a nest and remain there forever at rest."

### Christus factus est

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

The character and circumstances of Bruckner's life could hardly be more different from those of Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn came from a wealthy, urban, upper middle class banking family of Jewish origin (though they converted to Christianity when Felix was 8 years old), whereas Bruckner was from poor, rural, Catholic peasant stock. Mendelssohn was a self-confident musical child prodigy, whereas Bruckner wrote nothing of any real quality until he was 39 years old (though he did compose a substantial amount of very conventional, utterly unremarkable music before this) and was racked by self-doubt throughout his whole life. Mendelssohn wrote works of quality in almost all musical forms, whereas Bruckner wrote almost nothing but the nine symphonies and some sacred choral pieces (most of which, like tonight's piece, are very short). Even their lifespans were contrasted: Mendelssohn was dead at 38 while Bruckner reached a respectable 72 years.

There can be no doubt that Bruckner's true greatness lies in his symphonies, but the neglect of his choral pieces is unjustified: the three large-scale masses of his maturity are masterpieces, and among the shorter motets (of which he composed about 30) are a number which can claim to be miniature masterpieces, such as tonight's *Christus factus est*.

The text of this gradual comes from Philippians 2:8-9, and is used as part of the Mass services during Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday. Bruckner set this text three times, of which this is the last, and completed it in 1884 (just after his seventh symphony and *Te Deum*). It was dedicated to Father Otto Loidol of the Benedictine Monastery of Kremsmünster, who had also been the dedicatee of another motet *Locus iste* some 15 years before. Its construction is positively symphonic, and it is a prime example of the way that Bruckner gradually develops harmonic tension, building from a quiet start to a bold climax before easing away to a pianissimo conclusion.

### **Lux aurumque, Sleep**

### **Eric Whitacre (1970- )**

The American composer Eric Whitacre was born in Nevada in 1970 and has become one of the most popular classical composers of the present day. He only began to have an interest in classical music after he joined his college choir and sang in a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*. Indeed, he managed to major in music education at Nevada State University without being able to read music. The experience with Mozart's *Requiem* led to his composing his first piece, a setting of Edmund Waller's poem *Go, lovely rose* at the age of 21: "I wrote it down as best I could and had some friends help me with the harmonic spelling... I'd never had a formal composition lesson, I taught myself by ear." He went on to study at the Juilliard School in New York under John Corigliano, and has gone on to enormous success in many branches of music. As early as 1997, his album *The Music of Eric Whitacre* was named by *The American Record Guide* as one of the top ten classical albums of that year. His instrumental piece *Ghost Train* (written when he was only 23) has been performed several thousand times in over 50 countries.

One of his most ground-breaking innovations has been the Virtual Choir, which consists of individual performers uploading their performances of a single voice part of a particular piece on video via YouTube, which are then combined into a choral performance. The first two pieces that he has used for the Virtual Choir have been tonight's pieces, *Sleep* and *Lux aurumque*. In 2011, Virtual Choir 3 made use of *Water Night* and received 3,746 submissions from 73 different countries.

*Lux aurumque* (Light and gold), which dates from 2001, is a setting of a poem by Edward Esch. Whitacre decided to set the poem in Latin rather than English and had it translated by Charles Anthony Silvestri. The effect, writes the composer, is to give harmonies which "shimmer and glow". The sound world of this piece is very typical Whitacre: slow-moving cluster chords of unresolved dissonance. Melody and rhythm are of minimal importance, texture and an almost Zen-like sense of stillness are all.

The story of *Sleep* is rather more tortuous. Whitacre was commissioned by a Texan lawyer and music-lover, Julia Armstrong, to write a setting of her favourite poem, Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, in memory of her parents. Whitacre agreed and completed the setting (it had even had its world premiere in Austin, Texas in 2000), only to find that Robert Frost's estate had absolutely forbidden any settings of this poem. A long legal battle ensued, but the estate remained immovable, saying that he would not be allowed to use the poem until it went into the public domain in 2038. After a period of depression about this outcome, Whitacre decided to ask Charles Anthony Silvestri (who had translated *Sleep* into Latin) to set new words to the music which he had already written.

Whitacre has written "Tony wrote an absolutely exquisite poem, finding a completely different (but equally beautiful) message in the music I had already written".

## **The Crucifixion**

**John Stainer (1840-1901)**

When John Stainer was born in 1840, he entered a world centred on the choral tradition of the Anglican Church, which he would never leave. His father was a schoolmaster who gave him organ lessons from a very early age, and in 1849 he became a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, soon becoming one of the leading solo boys (singing at the funerals of J.M.W. Turner in 1851 and the Duke of Wellington in 1852). In 1854 (aged 14) he became organist at St Benedict's and St Peter's in the City of London, moving to St Michael's College, Tenbury shortly afterwards. He entered Christ Church, Oxford as an undergraduate in 1859, was appointed organist of Magdalen College in 1860, and university organist in 1861. In 1872 he became organist at St Paul's Cathedral and began a series of very necessary reforms, increasing the size of the choir from 18 to 36, improving their salaries, and expanding the repertory and the number of services sung. He was knighted in 1888, but in the same year had to resign as organist of St Paul's because of failing eyesight (he had lost the sight in one eye at the age of 5 through an accident). He became Professor of Music at Oxford in 1889 and Vice President of the Royal College of Organists. He retired in 1899 and died suddenly at Verona whilst on a holiday in Italy in 1901. His compositions were almost exclusively of church music, including two other oratorios, *The Daughter of Jairus* and *Mary Magdalene*, but although popular at the time, few have survived. He himself considered his compositions "rubbish", but at least in the case of *The Crucifixion* he was unfairly hard on himself.

*The Crucifixion* was written in 1887 for St Marylebone Parish Church, where Stainer's former pupil, William Hodge, was organist, and where it has been performed every Good Friday since that year. The text was provided by the Revd. William Sparrow-Simpson, the son of a friend and colleague at St Paul's. Stainer's inspiration was the Passions of Bach, with their use of chorales in which the congregation could join (as a 13-year-old, Stainer had taken part in the first English performance of the *St Matthew Passion*). In order to fulfil a genuine need in the repertoire, the style used was intentionally simple and "easy", with just organ accompaniment and solo work which did not require highly trained voices, so that ordinary parish choirs would be able to perform it. It was an immediate success and remained a central part of the celebration of Holy Week in many Anglican churches for decades. Like much of Victorian art, it went out of fashion between the two world wars, but has retained the affection of many. Barry Rose has written of *The Crucifixion* "To [Sparrow-Simpson's] words Stainer added his music, writing some of the most memorable hymn-tunes we shall ever hear, and showing a rare sense of understanding in painting the text with music that is both thoughtful and dramatic, whilst also giving us the sublime and unsurpassed unaccompanied setting of 'God So Loved The World'."

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