

## **Programme notes for seven motets by Bruckner, one motet by Brahms and Chilcott *St. John Passion***

### **Seven Motets**

### **Anton Bruckner (1824–1896)**

Anton Bruckner was born in 1824 to a father who was a teacher and church organist and from whom he gained his early musical education. His early years followed a conventional path which could have seen him following his father's career progression, but at the age of 13 his father died and Anton joined the choir of St Florian's church near Linz, continuing his musical studies there until he left aged 18. He then obtained a number of small village posts, but in 1845 Bruckner gained the position of first assistant teacher at St Florian's, continuing to study music and to compose, becoming the full time organist in 1854. The following year, when Bruckner was already 31 years old, he decided to take a correspondence course in harmony and counterpoint with Simon Sechter, a highly respected teacher and composer at the Vienna Conservatoire who kept his own compositional technique up to scratch by writing a fugue every day, leaving over 5000 at his death aged 79 in 1867.

The following year the post of organist at Linz Cathedral became vacant, but Bruckner's chronic insecurity and self-doubt was such that he was afraid even to apply. It was only when his friends discovered on the day of the interviews that he had not applied that, in effect, they hijacked him and took him to the Cathedral. He won the post easily and moved to Linz in 1856, remaining there for 13 years but continuing his course with Sechter. One of the rules which Sechter imposed on all his pupils was that they must refrain entirely from original composition while studying with him, and Bruckner's self-doubt led to his unquestioning obedience to this edict. He continued his studies with Sechter for six years until 1861, but even then his insecurity meant that he still felt he had to apply for a diploma from the Vienna Conservatoire, as though to prove to himself that he was truly competent. He took the examination and one of the examiners, Johann Herbeck, said, "He should have examined us! If I knew one tenth of what he knows, I'd be happy".

Although Bruckner was now able to compose again, he still felt unequal to the task and decided to study form and orchestration with Otto Kitzler, a practical, forward-looking musician who was ten years his junior. However it was not so much his formal teaching which was of paramount importance to Bruckner as Kitzler's introduction of the composer to modern music, particularly that of Wagner. Wagner's music had an overwhelming effect on Bruckner and seemed somehow to break the dam that had held back his own compositional abilities. However he did not become a mere follower of Wagner, but ploughed his own furrow; where Wagner's compositions were almost exclusively operas, Bruckner's were almost exclusively symphonies, eventually numbering nine (the Ninth being unfinished at his death). His insecurity never left him, however, and the result of this was that well-meaning but mistaken friends persuaded him to make cuts and revisions to his symphonies which have left us with a multitude of different versions and considerable disagreement about which edition is the "correct" one to use. In 1867, Sechter died, but again Bruckner was too lacking in self confidence to apply for his post at the Vienna Conservatoire. As with the Linz post, only at the forceful insistence of his friends (especially Herbeck, the man who had been one of his examiners in 1861) did he apply. Also as at Linz, he won the position, and moved to Vienna in 1868, remaining at the Conservatoire until ill health forced him to resign in 1891. He died in 1896. Although a church musician and internationally acclaimed organist (he gave a series of hugely successful organ recitals at the Albert Hall and the Crystal Palace in 1871), like Fauré, he seemed to have little personal interest in this branch of music, leaving

nothing of any significance for the organ and fewer than 20 short choral pieces from his post-1861 compositional maturity. The choral pieces, however, do show real quality, expressing his devout Roman Catholicism and deep knowledge of 16<sup>th</sup> century choral music.

### **Ave Maria**

This piece dates from May 1861, and is the first work Bruckner was able to compose after Sechter's embargo. It was first performed in Linz Cathedral by the Liedertafel Frohsinn, an amateur male choral group of which Bruckner was conductor, though it must have been augmented for the occasion. It is unusual in that it is in seven parts, SAATTBB. The first section alternates the three-part female choir with the four-part male one, the seven parts only coming together at the name of Jesus. The blazing major key "Jesus" and "Sancta Maria" is followed by a wonderfully affecting diminuendo as the choir asks the Virgin to intercede for us sinners.

### **Tota pulchra es**

Written in 1879 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his friend and supporter Franz Josef Rudigier becoming the Bishop of Linz, this motet was one of the few compositions that Bruckner produced during his deep depression following the poor reception of his third symphony. Each section begins with a solo tenor whose line is then developed by the full choir, with brief support from the organ. Bruckner saves one of his most startling chromatic shifts for the words "Mater clementissima" when, in the space of four bars, he wrenches the key down a semitone, from D minor to D flat major, to express the wonderment of this mercy.

### **Locus iste**

The text is for a gradual which celebrates the dedication of a church, and Bruckner was commissioned in 1869 by his old friend Bishop Rudigier to set it for the ceremony of dedication of the Votive Chapel in the new cathedral in Linz. The setting is of great simplicity with chromatic harmonies only in the central part on the words "irreprehensibilis est" before the opening is repeated with modifications.

### **Os justi**

Composed in 1879, the year he began his Sixth Symphony, this motet was dedicated to Bruckner's friend Ignaz Traumihler who was director of music at St Florian's and a committed adherent of the Cecilian movement. This movement believed that church music should be purely diatonic and based on what they believed the style of Palestrina to be. Bruckner therefore composed a piece in the Lydian mode (on the piano, this would be a white-note scale beginning on F) which strictly followed these tenets; there is not a single accidental in the motet. *Os justi* shows Bruckner's deep knowledge and understanding of renaissance polyphony.

### **Christus factus est**

In contrast to *Os justi*, *Christus factus est* is full of modulations and chromaticism. The text from Philippians 2:8-9 is used during mass on Maundy Thursday and was set by Bruckner three times, tonight's being the last one, composed in 1884 and the longest and most complex of the three. The motet begins quietly and mysteriously, but grows towards a *molto fortissimo* climax at "illi nomen, quod est super omne nomen" (a name which is above all names) when God exalts his son. However, as with almost all Bruckner's motets, the ending is quiet and reminiscent of the slow movements of his symphonies.

### **Ecce sacerdos**

This is probably the most extravert of all of Bruckner's motets, with a dynamic range from *ppp* to *fff*. He broke off work on his Eighth Symphony in 1885 to compose it to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the Diocese of Linz. To give an appropriate sense of magnificence to the proceedings, Bruckner accompanies the choir with the organ and three brass instruments, harking back to the sonorities of the Gabriellis in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice. Even here, however, Bruckner chooses to end the motet *molto pianissimo*.

### **Inveni David**

This motet for four-part male chorus and four brass instruments was written in 1868 for, and dedicated to, the Liedertafel Frohsinn. The final Alleluia section seems to be influenced by Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, which Bruckner was fond of using as a basis for his organ improvisations.

### **Geistliches Lied, Op. 30**

### **Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)**

Although only published in 1864 (hence its high opus number), this motet was written in 1856 when Brahms was 23 years old, and sets the words of the 17<sup>th</sup> century German poet Paul Fleming. The young composer seems to be demonstrating his technical mastery by writing a technical *tour de force* in the form of a double canon at the ninth with two different lines imitated between the soprano/tenor and alto/bass parts. What is far more impressive, however, is that Brahms managed to produce an extraordinarily beautiful piece out of what could have been just a clever technical exercise. At the time he composed it, Brahms was making a study of renaissance choral music, and its influence is clearly audible in the motet (he even gives it a time signature of 4/2 as a nod to 16<sup>th</sup> century practice). Its mood of hope is a direct precursor to that of the *Deutsches Requiem*.

### **St. John Passion**

### **Bob Chilcott (born 1955)**

Bob Chilcott was born in Plymouth and entered musical life at an early age. He sang in the choir of King's College Cambridge as a boy treble (and was the soloist in the world famous recording of the Fauré *Requiem* made in 1967 under Sir David Wilcocks) and as a tenor after his voice broke. In 1985 he joined the King's Singers, performing with them for 12 years. He left them to concentrate on composing in 1997, becoming one of the most prolific and best-loved choral composers of the present day. His compositions have enjoyed a wide popularity, particularly in this country and the USA, where he has a longstanding association with the New Orleans Crescent City Festival.

Chilcott has said that he had the good fortune to sing the role of the Evangelist in both of Bach's Passion settings on a number of occasions and had vivid memories of singing Renaissance Passion settings during his time as a chorister at King's College, Cambridge: "It is the austerity, the agony and ultimately the grace of this story that has inspired me to write this piece". The *St John Passion* was commissioned for Matthew Owens and the choir of Wells Cathedral and was first performed in Wells on Palm Sunday 2013. Unsurprisingly, Chilcott felt a certain apprehension in attempting to follow in the footsteps of Bach and more recent works by Arvo Pärt and James MacMillan: "There are such incredible models to look up to, which of course made me nervous. With the St John Passion, you're taking on

something deeply rooted in western music and also deeply rooted in Christian theology.”

Chilcott’s experiences in singing Bach’s Passions both as a chorister and soloist informed his own setting at a fundamental level. He decided to use the text from the King James Bible (Bach had used Luther’s translation, the German equivalent) and he interleaves the biblical narration with four meditations which are used like the arias in Bach’s Passions. However Chilcott uses settings of English poems written between the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries rather than words written specifically for him, as Bach had: “Poets of this period, it seems to me, began to articulate the human dimension of religion. Montgomerie writes about being unwilling to quit the world and its pleasures, even though he finds a way out in his love for Christ. He’s not ready to let go of what he knows on earth and that’s something with which I can identify. It’s that idea of being human, which is also there in the language of ‘Jesus, my leman’—‘Jesus, my love’. Many of us, myself included, struggle with thoughts about faith and belief. I grew up in the church as a chorister and have been so involved ever since with sacred music, which is why I think a lot about the role music might play in one’s own spiritual journey.”

Chilcott also followed the example of Bach in a less straightforward way by including five hymns in which the congregation can participate. However, he differs from Bach’s use of chorales (and, indeed, Stainer’s use of hymns in his *The Crucifixion*) by making use of the texts of well-known hymns but setting them to his own music. “I had never written hymns before and was wary about setting texts that are so closely attached to well-known melodies. The hymns were one of the ways in which I was able to unify the parts of the St John Passion.”

Even the distribution of the voice types continued Chilcott’s homage to Bach, with a tenor for the Evangelist and baritones for Christ and Pilate, and smaller parts being able to be sung by members of the choir. The accompaniment is for a small instrumental ensemble of viola, cello, brass quintet, timpani and organ. The Evangelist is accompanied by the viola and cello, Pilate by two trumpets and Christ by the three lower brass instruments and organ.

Perhaps Chilcott’s most profound debt to Bach is in his wish to make the congregation feel a living part of the story being unfolded: “I want to connect with people. That is the world of music-making I’ve always wanted to inhabit. It is the greatest thing to be able to engage an audience in music and words, to give them a space for reflection, which is why composing for the liturgy is so important to me. With the St John Passion, I hope I have been able to do that not just through the work’s drama but through the combination of narrative, hymns and meditations.” The *St John Passion* consists of three parts. Part One opens with an English translation of the sixth-century Latin hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt*, which proclaims at the outset that Christ’s death is a victory which saves humanity, though the music feels anguished rather than triumphalist – indeed Chilcott uses the same music for the crowd’s shouts of “Jesus of Nazareth” when Jesus asks them whom they seek. The events of Christ’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane are narrated, followed by the first hymn, “It is a thing most wonderful”, which speaks of Jesus’ love for mankind. Peter’s denial of Christ is followed by the first Meditation sung by the choir to anonymous words written in about 1615 which tell of the author’s grief at his sins and desire for forgiveness. The second hymn, “Drop, drop, slow tears” to word by Phineas Fletcher, ends Part One unexpectedly in a major key, perhaps to indicate that the terrible sadness of the events must be seen in the context of their purpose to save all mankind

Part Two recommences the narration in the Judgment Hall. The string ostinatos and the agitated vocal line of the Evangelist bring a sense of menace which is enhanced by the trumpets heralding the entrance of Pilate. The crowd's anger is met with indifference by Pilate, but Jesus' answer of Pilate's question with another question rouses his anger. Jesus' answer hovers between major and minor, mirroring our own emotional ambiguity at the events unfolding. The second hymn, "Jesu grant me this I pray", again suggests solace, a feeling continued by the second Meditation where Christ walks among mankind's saved souls, imagined as flowers ("his faithful lilies"). Chilcott sees the solo soprano as a personification of Christ's mother whose love for her son is eternal, as His is for all mankind. The narration then continues in the Judgment Hall where, at the insistence of the priests and the crowd, Pilate condemns Christ to death. The third Meditation, "Away vain world", which closes Part Two is a resigned farewell to a world which, whilst consisting only of vanity, still exerts a strong hold on us. In the final stanza the poet is reconciled to this, realising that "Christ, these earthly toys Shall turn in heavenly joys" and the Meditation ends with a repeated "I fear not".

The concluding part continues the narrative as Pilate makes a final attempt to save Jesus, but is overwhelmed by the fury of the crowd. A solo cello laments at the death sentence, and Jesus is taken away. The third hymn, "There is green hill far away" balances our sorrow at the events with the message of hope they bring. The Evangelist tells the events of the Crucifixion, the section beginning with a continuation of the solo cello's lament. The final Meditation depicts the grief of the three Marys and the disciple John at the foot of the cross, referring to Jesus as "my Leman", an archaic word meaning "loved one". The impassioned solo soprano declaiming above the choir in the final section is especially moving. The final section of narration, again begun by the solo cello, tells of the death of Christ and is followed by the concluding hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross". In this hymn, we, the witnesses of all that has happened, embrace these events and acknowledge the change that they have wrought in us: "Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all".

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