

## Music Notes 2016 – Carol Service: *A Ceremony of Carols* by Benjamin Britten

This service is in many respects just like our more usual carol services – that is, a service of readings and Christmas hymns. However, rather than the more usual sequence of choir items from various sources and composers being interspersed between them, the choir will be singing the individual movements of a single work by the British composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), the *Ceremony of Carols*. This is a work for three upper voices – two soprano/treble lines and one alto line – accompanied by harp.

This sequence of carols was written in the implausible surroundings of the M.V. Axel Johnson, a Swedish cargo vessel, on which Britten and Peter Pears were returning to the UK after a stay in the United States that lasted from 1939 to 1942. Leaving in mid-March, they finally arrived in Liverpool more than four weeks later. During that time, they had been largely confined to their cabin, which was small, miserable, and airless, and with the benefit of an adjacent refrigeration plant that had a noisy compressor running constantly. There was also the constant threat of being torpedoed by a U-Boat to consider. Out of this unpromising environment, however, came fresh and delightful music that Pears described in his diary from the time as *very sweet and chockfull of charm*. He was right. The journey took them via a stop in Halifax in Nova Scotia, and by chance, Britten found a book of medieval poems there that provided most of the texts for the sequence.

The work opens with unaccompanied plainchant *Hodie Christus natus est* – the antiphon for the Vespers of the Nativity – as the singers process in. This was a pattern to be repeated many years later in his three Church Parables – essentially chamber operas – which also start with monks processing into the performing space singing plainchant.

The chant is followed by the first accompanied carol, *Wolcum Yole!*, to a 14<sup>th</sup> century text. Although pagan Yule is in the title, the new-born babe is welcomed first, as are St. Stephen and John, The Holy Innocents, Twelfth Day, the New Year, Candlemasse, the Queen of Bliss (i.e. the Blessed Virgin Mary) and all of us present. The second carol has become familiar to carol service congregations, because it also works well with just an organ accompaniment, and so features in more “ordinary” carol services as a standalone item. It is a setting of the 14<sup>th</sup> century *There is no Rose of such virtue*. The music is based on a repeating C – F pattern in the bass that sticks to its guns almost all the way through as the choir moves in delicate chords above, which are answered by the harp even higher. At the end of each medieval English phrase comes a little Latin tag: *Alleluia*, *Res Miranda* (a marvellous thing), *Pares forma* (of equal form – a reference to the Persons of the Holy Trinity), *Gloria in excelsis* (Glory in the highest), *Gaudeamus* (Let us rejoice), and *Transeamus* (Let us journey). With the last of these, the underlying harmony change as we travel to a distant key, and then back

again. The choir gently intones each piece of Latin in unison as the harp slows and comes to a stop.

The third carol is really in two parts: first a solo for a second soprano voice, again a 14<sup>th</sup> century anonymous text, *That yongë child*, describing Mary cradling the baby Jesus and singing to him, joined by the voice of the nightingale, who in comparison is hoarse and falling short of the beauty of the Virgin's singing. Immediately thereafter, the harp begins the gently rocking motion of *Balulalow*, the well-known text by the sixteenth century brothers and literary collaborators James, John and Robert Wedderburn.

The fourth carol is to a 14<sup>th</sup> century text entitled *As dew in Aprille* also known to us as *I sing of a maiden*, under which title it has been set by many composers. The text gives us a picture of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who has been kept sinless in order to be worthy to be the Mother of God. The voices interplay with one another almost like children scampering about before reuniting in praise of the Virgin. Next comes a really breathless setting of a poem, *This little babe* by the sixteenth century poet Robert Southwell. The harp sets up an agitated rhythm, picked up by the choir, who start by singing in unison. Then they break into a canon, two voices against one, and then into a complex triple canon before pulling back together for an ever accelerating final line.

Next comes an interlude just for the harp, a gentle piece giving us time for reflection. Much use is made of harp harmonics, which have a beautiful bell-like ring, and the whole thing has a quasi-fantasy quality, as though picturing in some idealistic way the stable, the manger, the animals and visitors standing in awe and wonder, the whole scene suffused with radiant starlight.

Next comes a chilly poem, again by Robert Southwell. The title in the score is *In Freezing Winter Night*, but it is also known as *New Prince*, *New Pomp*, Southwell's own title, and even as *Behold a silly tender Babe*. The first part of the carol emphasizes the cold, freezing conditions (obviously informed by an English perspective on the weather around Christmas...) and the harp appears to be illustrating flurries and gusts of snow dropping through the trees to the ground. The situation is bleak, the inns are full, nobody willing to help, the babe lying among farm animals. And then a piece of magic happens: the key changes subtly, and so does the interpretation of the scene. Understood aright, the poet says, the stable is a Prince's court, the crib a throne, the beasts symbols of his status and his wooden dish the plate of a King. The Prince, the poem says, has come from heaven, where it is *this* kind of pomp, not the showy courts of men, that is prized. As the carol proceeds and against even more intense insistence from the harp, a solo voice encourages us to approach and pay homage to this King and to praise the humble pomp *which he from heav'n doth bring*.

This is in many ways the emotional heart of the cycle, with a depth of meaning in the text that is matched by the beautiful, shifting, and colourful accompaniment.

Next, a poem by the late fifteenth century poet William Cornish, the *Spring Carol*. This, a little forward glance at the return of new life in the Spring, is set as a duet for two solo voices. They sing of the delights of nature and the goodness of God in making its sustenance available for us, encouraging us to give thanks to him. Lest it be thought that Britten had just got bored with Christmas, its function here is to give us a glimpse of the promised new life that the baby is bringing into the world.

The final carol is one that we are used to hearing at the *start* of carol services: *Adam lay y-bounden*. This, another anonymous text, this time from the fifteenth century, is essentially the same that we are used to hearing in settings by Boris Ord, Philip Ledger, Peter Warlock, and others. Britten begins his version with a strong declaratory statement by harp and choir: *Deo gracias! – Thanks be to God!* The harp begins a rapid pattering taken up by the choir who rattle energetically through the first verse before once again breaking off with *Deo Gracias!* The second verse follows the same pattern. In the third, the excitement, however, mounts and the choir rises up to an ecstatic statement: *Blessed be the time that apple taken was, Therefore we moun singen Deo Gracias!* At the last, the harp sweeps repeatedly down from top to a low chord as the choristers pile their praises one on top of the other, finally coming together in a single held chord.

And then it is over: the choir begins once again to sing the *Hodie* chant and processes once again out of the church, bringing this ceremony to a close.