

Music Notes 2017 – Remembrance Sunday

At the Solemn Eucharist service this Sunday of remembrance, we will be hearing the *Requiem* by Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924). This has become the composer's best-known (at least since the end of *Listen with Mother* on the wireless) and best-loved work, in spite of the composer Poulenc's (1899–1963) comment that it was *one of the few things I really hate in music*. The composition of the work actually took place over a number of years. Fauré began it in 1887; and one might have thought that the drive to write it had been triggered by the death of his father two years earlier. Fauré himself debunked this, saying with self-conscious inappropriateness that he had composed it *for fun, if I may be allowed to say that*". As it so happened, his mother died after he had already begun the composition, breathing her last on New Year's Eve of 1887, and so one might think that *this* had been the reason that he had hastily finished the first version of the *Requiem*, so that it could be used at her funeral. There is, alas, no evidence of this at all, although the first recorded use did indeed take place at someone else's funeral sixteen days after her demise. The order of service for her requiem is not, unfortunately, available, so we just don't know what was used for that.

In his first version of the work, Fauré included the *Introit & Kyrie, Sanctus, Pie Jesu, Agnus Dei* and *In Paradisum*, and it is just these five movements that were used on 16th January 1888 at the church of La Madeleine in Paris, where Fauré was organist. The accompaniment was organ, harp, timpani, and strings. The next year, he added a movement called *Hostias*, which he then expanded in 1890 with additional material to form the *Offertoire* movement that we have today. At the same time, he took a piece he had written totally independently in 1877, the *Libera me* and added this to the collection of movements, thereby necessitating also the inclusion of a solo baritone for this "new" movement, alongside the treble soloist needed for the *Pie Jesu*. At the same time, he added two bassoons, four horns and two trumpets to the orchestra.

The next part of the story is partly down to surmise, but it is generally believed that his publisher, Hamelle, then got involved. (As a kind of health warning, I should point out that non-French music publishers revel in telling negative stories about French music publishers – it's an old and honourable tradition, and one that I intend fully to uphold here, as an admittedly non-French publisher.) Hamelle felt that this was a piece with legs, but only if it could be presented in the concert hall. So, Fauré was prevailed upon to consider a re-orchestration to symphonic proportions, which was finally completed during 1899 and 1900. Now, Fauré was a very busy man at this point in his life and almost certainly delegated the task of orchestration to one of his students, most probably his favourite, Jean Roger-Ducasse (1873–1954), who had already completed the task of preparing the vocal score for publication. He (or whoever it was) added in flutes, clarinets, and trombones, thereby implying a

bulking up of the number of string players to match the rest of the orchestra acoustically. Slightly bizarrely, and certainly unconventionally, there is just a single line of violins, but two independent viola parts, as there had indeed been in all the previous versions. This gives the music a somewhat darker and yet warmer quality at the same time.

It is difficult to know whether the next part of the story is the fault of Roger-Ducasse or Hamelle or both, but the final published score was full of peculiar misprints and mistakes, some of them obvious, but others plausible enough to be persuasive. Fauré is known to have been very, very careful over the publication of his scores, and to have paid extremely close attention to making sure that the publisher got it right. On the other hand, even someone as assiduous as he could not entirely overcome the French music publishing tradition, and so the first editions of the works he personally supervised through publication do still contain inaccuracies – as all newly published scores tend to do – but nothing like the havoc in the third version of the *Requiem*. This alone does suggest that the more naïve Roger-Ducasse was simply too inexperienced to restrain Hamelle's terrible impact on the score.

One of the most pernicious slip-ups comes at the end of the *Sanctus*, where, in the original and second versions, a solo violin is meant to play a glorious phrase two octaves above the rest of the texture. In Hamelle's hands, alas, the octave marking was omitted, so for decades thereafter and in most performances today, instead of a sweetly singing high ethereal solo line at this point, suggesting the voice of an angel singing before the throne of God, there is a comparatively dowdy, if pretty, little tune at ordinary pitch. The difference is enormous, but remained unknown for some seventy years, because nobody went back to the very first version, the second version (only ever used liturgically) was lost, and the third version was the one that slowly spread around the world. Then in the early 1980s, the well-known composer and choral director John Rutter (b.1945) was pottering around in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris when he came upon the manuscript of the second version in Fauré's own hand. Perusing it, he quickly became aware of the differences between it and the hitherto known third version, and the immaculately reliable Oxford University Press brought out a definitive and very accurate edition of this version a few years later. Now, lest it be thought that this makes the second version authentic and the third to be disparaged sniffily, the fact is that Fauré himself used the third version (with corrections to the misprints) in his own concert performances for the rest of his life; so make of that what you will!

The theology of the *Requiem* is interesting, because Fauré doesn't set the text "straight". In a few places, he modifies the original words, and he is often highly selective about what he uses and what he leaves out. For example, most of the *Dies Irae* is completely missing, with just one phrase from it included in the *Libera me*. Fauré was not at all keen on the concept of hell, and seems to have had no time for

purgatory either. Death was, if anything, a gentle release from this world into the peace of the life hereafter, essentially a comforting and “universalist” position. The word *Requiem* (*Rest*) is emphasized – at the very outset, of course, but most tellingly at the end of the *Agnus Dei*. After the *Lux aeterna* section of this, the accompaniment builds to a dramatic pause, before the opening music returns with powerful effect, this time with a subtle but profound change of the harmony, before the movement is rounded off as it began. *Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them*: this is the focus of Fauré’s outlook as expressed in this work.

Evensong will begin with an *Introit* by the British composer David Bednall (b.1979). Born in Sherborne, he studied at the Queen’s College, Oxford, before becoming Organ Scholar at Gloucester Cathedral under David Briggs (b.1962), with whom he studied, before moving on to be Sub-Organist and then Assistant Organist (these title details are of immense significance...) at Wells Cathedral – succeeding our own Rupert Gough in the latter position. Today, he is Sub-Organist of Bristol Cathedral, Organist of Bristol University, and a busy composer. Composed for Tom Williams, a close friend of the composer’s, whose grandfather, George Ryall, had recently died, *The Souls of the Righteous* was first performed at St Materiana, Tintagel, during a tour of Cornwall in 2008 by the Bristol University Madrigal Ensemble, of which Tom Williams was then Director.

The canticles at Evensong are by Charles Wood (1866–1926) and comprise the second of his two settings in E flat. Wood, whom we think of as having contributed so much music to the English church, was actually born in Ireland, and his early musical experience was at St Patrick’s Cathedral in Armagh, where his father sang in the choir. Later, he was among the very first intake of students at the Royal College of Music, studying under Stanford (1852–1924) and Parry (1848–1918). Later, he was to succeed Stanford as Professor of Music at Cambridge. His influence today is still pervasive. Thanks to him we have the music to which we sing the hymn *This joyful Eastertide* and the standard versions of *Ding! Dong! Merrily on high*, as well as of *Past three o’clock, King Jesus hath a garden*, and *A virgin most pure* – and, as John Donne would say, “thou art not done, I have more”, although that is enough to be going on with for now. Nevertheless, when Wood died in 1926, even the obituary in *The Musical Times* drew attention to his essentially retiring nature, pointing out that, whereas the names of Stanford and Parry would have meant much to the general public at the time, Wood’s name would have meant very little to most people. Nevertheless, the writer of the obituary draws attention to an overheard remark from a knowledgeable writer with a broad awareness of the continental musical scene: *Wood is the best teacher of composition in Europe*.

He was above all a composer of well-shaped melodies and refined accompaniments that sound as though they always go where they should. One could, perhaps, disparage it as all very well-manicured, but isn’t that delightful at Evensong? This

setting, which certainly fits that description, was performed in Wood's lifetime, but only published in 1934 after his death. It is set throughout for four voices and organ. The *Magnificat* is in a somewhat rollicking triple time, but lest it might appear to be the "waltz of the Blessed Virgin", Wood finds many ways to subvert any impression of trite runaway music, while nevertheless using the rhythmic impulse to convey a certain lightness, perhaps even a child-like quality that must surely be part of the Virgin's youthful character. The *Nunc Dimittis*, meantime, is consciously more four-square in its construction, and yet builds on its fundamental stability to create a climax of tremendous power. Each of the canticles concludes with the same marvellously broad "shock and awe" *Gloria Patri*. The fact that it comes around twice identically allows us to repeat the enjoyment of the organ chord that bursts on the harmonic senses at *world without end*. If there is any justice in the world, you will helplessly rise at least a few centimetres from the floor at this moment.

The book of the prophet Habakkuk does not spring immediately to mind as a source of texts for musical composition, and yet this is the place that the text for the anthem, *For lo, I will raise up*, was found by its composer, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). Habakkuk is one of the shortest books in the bible, and concerns itself with five oracles concerning the Chaldeans – whom we know more familiarly as the Babylonians – followed by a song of praise to God. Nevertheless, song of praise or not, Habakkuk takes the opportunity – relatively rare in scripture – to rail somewhat against God, demanding to know why God doesn't do something about the manifest injustices on earth. You might say that it is an early manifestation of the so-called "problem of evil": if God is good, how can there be evil in his world? Alas, this falls outside the scope of these notes, else you could be provided here with the definitive answer to this knotty problem.

The anthem was composed in 1914, very much in the shadow of the outbreak of the First World War. We are, perhaps, not as aware as we should be what a massive psychological shock it was for the UK to find itself at war with Germany. To the extent that the British army and the soldiers of the German states had been on the same battlefield previously, it was generally as allies, especially as far as Prussia was concerned. Some of the German states sided with France in the Napoleonic War, but the tendency was strongly for cooperation of all kinds across the North Sea. For example, we tend to speak of Waterloo as a British victory; most internationally-minded historians see it as a predominantly Prussian victory – not that Wellington and his Seventh Coalition didn't play a vitally important role, of course. The trading relationship, meantime, had been strong and mutually beneficial all the way back to the Hanseatic League of the medieval period. Britain obtained its monarchy from Hannover from 1714 onwards – and still does, in the sense that it is George I's direct descendants who form the Royal Family today, and who reportedly still principally celebrate Christmas on 24th December, as is the case overall in Germany.

Musically, the German-speaking territories had been the undoubted leaders of the pack over such a long period of time, with one major composer after another coming from what we now know as Germany and Austria. There is some discursive fun to be had wondering whether this paralyzed British music intentionally, accidentally, or not at all – that is, that we were regarded (and regarded ourselves as) as *Das Land ohne Musik* (a land without music) because we were either held in thrall to a semi-conscious policy of German cultural hegemony, or because we were in stupefied awe at what they were doing, or simply because our composers just weren't up to the task for other, more internal reasons. Regardless of whichever of these explanations is your preference, the fact is that a combination of the friendly relationships between the territories, the long tenure of Queen Victoria on the throne (and let us not forget the cultural impact of Prince Albert with his role in introducing Christmas trees and cards to this island and the realisation of his dream to establish a museum quarter in central London), and the copious volume of German music in our concert halls and on the parlour piano meant that a composer and Professor of Music such as Stanford saw Germany, with its rich cultural, philosophical, scientific and theological contributions to humanity, as a kind of ideal. For him, Brahms had had the last word when it came to exploring the outer edges of modernist music. When war broke out, he was personally devastated and felt somehow betrayed. The Royal Family – famously – felt the need to change their family name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to the English-sounding Windsor, clouding (not for the first time in our history) the fact that sovereignty over this island has more often than not been about wider European relationships than something genuinely minted in England. Stanford's reaction was, in part, to write this anthem.

For lo, I raise up is a highly dramatic work. Verse 6 of the first chapter of Habakkuk says *For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which march through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling-places that are not theirs*. In case we are swayed by mention of the Chaldeans into missing the point, Stanford omits them, so that God just raises up *that bitter and hasty nation*, and there is little doubt whom Stanford had in mind for this description. Warming to his theme and cooperating with Habakkuk as his librettist for the vision, he builds a picture of violence and destruction visited on the land. But he also follows the prophet's vision in which he comes to realization that with God, all is never lost. The music shifts into a quite different mood, and God answers with a reassurance of peace and justice. In a marvellous image, he says *For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*. A couple of weeks back, we had that wonderful hymn, *God is working his purpose out* at the Solemn Eucharist, in which each verse ends with this promise. It was, apparently, new to some people, but it is well-worth appreciating and allowing Habakkuk's vision to be our own.

When he wrote the anthem, Stanford would not have known that a war that many thought would be over by Christmas would stretch on for more than four years and

kill millions of people – nor yet that it would be followed by a deadly flu pandemic that dwarfed the eighteen million killed in action, carrying off somewhere between three and five times as many people across the world. In the face of this, Habakkuk's railing against God, but his ultimate confidence in God's mercy, are two sides of the same human coin. Stanford's anthem captures the reality of this remarkably and movingly.