



## FRIENDS OF ST MARY'S BARNES

CELEBRATION OF HERBERT HOWELLS  
CHORAL EVENSONG  
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### ADDRESS BY PAUL SPICER

In an age when church congregations are decreasing, when church choirs are the exception rather than the rule, when you are more likely to hear a guitar than an organ and when we are constantly hearing about the need for change in order to attract people to church it seems strange that Howells's church music still holds such fascination for so many. And yet it is partly what Howells offers us which underlines why church music is so important. These days people refer to 'spirituality' and being 'spiritual' and may not attend church. They may get their spiritual 'kicks' from a CD player and from reading, but as that prescient, wise, priest/poet R.S.Thomas said in his poem *The Moon in Lleyn* 'In cities which have outgrown their promise people are becoming pilgrims again, if not to this place, then to a recreation of it in their own spirits'. However people choose to nurture their souls, one way to feed the imagination and unleash that rush of spiritual ecstasy is through the medium of Howells's soaring phrases.

In order to begin to understand Howells's style it is important to recognize that whilst he was not actually a believer himself (some would say how remarkable this is) he was deeply affected by the beauty of words, the power of religious imagery and, perhaps most importantly of all, the extraordinary environment in which his music was - and is - most often performed. I am fortunate in living in the Cathedral Close at Lichfield and I recently attended Evensong on the Feast of Dedication when the choir sang Howells's *Gloucester service* and the more rarely heard *Coventry Antiphon*. Sitting in the front of the Nave with all the action taking place up in the Quire I had a vision of interlocking arches, of a wonderful soaring vault extending down to the apse, of candles flickering all the way down the line of choir stalls and the outside light gradually fading. Into this visual experience came the aural one of Howells's Magnificat. The boys' voices creating that impression of Mary's sense of wonder in those opening words 'My soul doth magnify the Lord'. Howells's musical line (which becomes two interweaving lines) snakes upwards like incense, seemingly moulding itself to the curvature of the vaulting. All this may seem fanciful but it is not. Howells was a supreme painter in music. He was the arch-

impressionist. He felt his task to be the conjuring of an atmosphere which feeds the listener's imagination and creates a sense of spiritual ecstasy which would engrave the textual imagery on the mind. Fascinatingly, he also said:

"I have never been able to compose a note of music without either a place or a building in my mind".

Howells believed in the 'fitness' of offering only the very best of one's ability for the purpose. His stated 'credo' in an article for English Church Music (RSCM) in 1966 said:

"It may be that the future of English Church-and-Cathedral music is hedged with difficulties and doubts. I fear the gross threat of a 'pepping-up', the cheap surrender to popularity, the insidious and melodramatic 'putting down the mighty from their seat', tonal elephantiasis encouraged by the misuse of outsize organs, the careless denial of idiomatic fitness. These are inherent dangers. They must be countered by men of genius who from time to time shall offer the Church works of supreme fitness".

This demonstrates his passion for the task - a task which he really only came to in earnest when he was in his fifties in the 1940s around the time he took up the post of acting organist at St John's College, Cambridge (1941-45), standing in for Robin Orr who was away on active service in the second world war. 1944 had seen the first performance of his *Collegium Regale Te Deum* and this seemed to open the floodgates of inspiration which led to the great canon of evening canticle settings, anthems and other liturgical music for which he is now best known.

Howells had once said of Stanford's *Beati quorum via*

"Let that motet stand for works that by any criteria are not only highly accomplished, but profoundly human and of surpassing fitness".

There is that word again, and here too, a benchmark against which we can measure his expectations. In addition, consider the import of what the poet Robert Bridges once wrote and how it would seem to underscore everything Howells achieved in this field:

"If we consider what sort of music we should want to hear on entering a church we should surely, in describing our ideal, say first of all that it must be something different from what is heard elsewhere; that it should be a sacred music devoted to its purpose, a music whose peace should still passion; whose dignity should strengthen our faith; whose unquestioned beauty should find a home in our hearts to cheer us in life and death. What a powerful good such music would have".

In 1962 Herbert Howells wrote an anthem called *A Sequence for St Michael* for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of St John's College Cambridge. For a text he turned to Helen Waddell's matchless translations of medieval Latin poetry. Waddell was a genius in creating in her translations poetry out of poetry. She once wrote: "The scholar's lyric of the 12<sup>th</sup> century seems as new a miracle as the first crocus: but its earth is the leafdrift of centuries of forgotten scholarship". That one word 'leafdrift' raises that whole image to a new plane of imagination. That sentence has as much power in the beauty and truth of its imagery as the music which Howells made from her translation of Prudentius's *Take him, earth for cherishing* written for President Kennedy's memorial service in Washington Cathedral.

Her translation of the Alcuin poem which Howells set in his *Sequence for St Michael* included this powerful and sensitive mystical image: "Thou with strong hand didst smite the cruel dragon, and many souls didst rescue from his jaws. *Then there was a great silence in heaven, and a thousand thousand saying 'Glory, to the Lord King'*". The idea of the totality of that silence, and the gradual murmur of those countless souls uttering their near silent prayer of thanks for deliverance and praise, is quite overwhelming and is something which can be felt in our religious buildings, fed by their *leafdrift* of centuries of prayer. Howells obviously felt it intensely as his setting has the choir singing with almost half voice, very quietly before the basses and tenors lead off from the depths at 'Glory to the Lord King' whilst the sopranos float above them using the word 'glory' as if they were angels watching from above. It is a vivid example of Howells's picture painting and also the clearest possible pointer to the way his own imagination worked, colouring the text which spoke to him so vividly, leading him to the creation of his unique style.

But this extended anthem also has its roots in another kind of picture painting. It starts with two shouts of 'Michael' from the choir – two impassioned, despairing shouts which make two points: first, that even in 1961, twenty-six years after his son Michael's death, Howells was still raw with the agony of that passing. Second, that part of Howells's attitude to religion focused on the fact that he did not believe there was anything after death. Thus, where for some there would be the hope of reunion in an afterlife, for Howells there was despair at the total loss where no further meeting would happen. This is what feeds the despair in these *cries de coeur* and what makes them so intensely powerful.

Howells's love affair with the church was life-long. As a boy he was taken by his father to organ recitals in St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol and he spent much time in Gloucester Cathedral, becoming a piano pupil of Herbert Brewer there at the age of thirteen (1905) and an articulated pupil (a kind of organ scholar but with academic music lessons alongside) with Ivor Gurney and Ivor Novello (would you believe!) in 1909. When he moved to London to study with Stanford at the RCM in 1912 that irascible Irishman packed him off to the recently completed Westminster Cathedral to hear Richard Terry's pioneering choir singing their ground-breaking performances of renaissance polyphony and Tudor church music. 'Polyphony for a penny m'bhoys' – the price of the bus fare from South Kensington to Victoria Street. The effect on the young Howells was powerfully immediate and shaped his whole approach to composition. The *Mass in the Dorian Mode* was the first result, and then came a number of other pieces of Latin church music written for Terry and his choir. Among these are the beautiful double choir *Nunc Dimittis*, a setting of *Haec Dies* and the perfect little fauxbourden setting of *O salutaris hostia* all of which point to his natural ear for choral sonority and a prodigious technique.

Vaughan Williams observed Howells's 'intuitive affinity' with the music of Tudor composers like Byrd, Tallis, Gibbons and Weelkes which can best be seen in two key points of compositional style: his use of contrapuntal points to maintain linear flow and build subtle textures, and, in his organ and keyboard music in general, a predilection for using stylized dance forms from this and later periods (pieces like

the *Siciliano for a High Ceremony*, the *Saraband for the Morning of Easter*) and pieces suggestive of, or in homage to the period like *Master Tallis's Testament* or the *Preludio Sine Nomine*. The effect, like Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*, was to produce music which is both rooted in the finest music of our national past, and yet which is absolutely of its time. Richard Terry himself wrote of Howells's first set of clavichord pieces (*Lambert's Clavichord*) that the experiment might have been dangerous had the attempt been merely to reproduce the idiom, however:

'Luckily the first attempt has been made by one whose creative musicianship cannot be called in question; whose sympathy with both the Tudor instruments and Tudor composers is undeniable, and above all it has been made by one who is content (out of the plenitude of his critical knowledge of Tudor music) to reproduce the spirit of the old music rather than to give us a mere reproduction of its mannerisms or a repetition of its clichés'. His music is modern inasmuch as he uses chords and progressions unknown in Tudor times, but the *spirit* of the old composers is there all the while."

In fixing his pennant very firmly to the mast of church music in his maturity Howells was recognizing the power of music to affect many aspects of church worship and its power to draw people in and connect with them. It is every bit as much a mission and a ministry as that of the priesthood and it is difficult to imagine one without the other. Howells' music is a rarified experience. This is not music to draw in the masses. It is not music to be broadcast from loudspeakers across a football stadium with massed congregations. It is a private spiritual experience and his aim was to conjure a very specific atmosphere. This is music addressing a God who is firmly in his heaven and where his angels minister for him on earth. It is music of dignity, distance and also incredible passion, which creates an intense sense of wonder in the listener. It is musical impressionism - very much parallel to what was being so successfully composed in France by the likes of Debussy and Ravel - or in church circles, Maurice Duruflé. But if you have ever been to Choral Evensong in an English cathedral on a dusky November evening and been drawn into the unique atmosphere and mood you will know exactly how Howells has bottled the whole experience in his music. It is intensely moving. Arthur Machen once commented on the special 'aroma' of London and asked why some scientist couldn't bottle it. But Howells has done precisely that in his unique music for the Anglican church.

The power of this music is acknowledged world-wide. Why else would Howells, an English composer, be asked to write the motet for the memorial service for John F. Kennedy in Washington cathedral? His music spans the continents as it spans counties and generations. No other composer has so many of his works performed in church and cathedral services up and down the country and across the world. Indeed, I know that just down the road at St. Michael's Barnes last Sunday Howells' Gloucester Service and *Haec Dies* was sung at Evensong, and at King's, St. John's and Trinity Colleges in Cambridge a couple of weeks ago there was a positive feast of Howells in honour of his birthday (17 October) coupled with music by his teacher, Stanford. It is an extraordinary legacy and one in which the people of Barnes should feel an intense pride as coming from within their midst.

Quite why Howells fixed on Barnes as his home, I am not sure, except that it is obviously a lovely place to live, is close to London, and easy to get to South Kensington and St Paul's Girls' School - where he was the part-time Director of Music - by bus. It is also close to the river, has a beautiful common and is also near that wonderful open space which is Richmond Park. Just after his marriage to Dorothy in 1920 they lived in a flat at 44, Castelnau and they stayed in Barnes for the rest of their lives. Their next house was 'Redmarley' in Station Road, in the garden of which Ursula kept a cage of about 25 budgerigars which made a lot of noise. Herbert loved watching them but couldn't bear the noise they made and Ursula came down to breakfast one morning to find that the birds had flown - the cage was empty. No-one owned up, but suspicion rested with you know who! In 1941 Barnes was bombed in the blitz and the Howells family home was destroyed. Heaven knows how much original material was lost in that bombing. The Howells family took off to Cheltenham for a short while but soon returned to rent No.11 Beverley Close. On 23 March 1946 they moved into No. 3 Beverley Close, the first house which they had actually purchased (with some financial assistance from Lady Olga Maitland) and in which they remained for the rest of their lives. It is wonderful that this long sojourn in that house has now been commemorated by an English Heritage blue plaque. I remember visiting Howells there one day when he was rather old and had become rather infirm. The old injury he had sustained in January 1967 when he ran for a bus, tried to jump on board the back of an old Routemaster bus, missed, fell heavily and broke his femur, was a constant source of trouble. He used a walking stick for some years after it. The fact that it was the *wrong bus* naturally compounded the sense of injury! I remember him showing me a postcard from Stanford which showed CVS as a hen and his five students who had been chosen as Carnegie Trust publication winners, and of which Howells was one, as her five chicks! I also remember having to help lift him up off the floor where, for some reason, he had decided to sit and then regretted it! Through all these problems of old age (he had a hip replacement and a prostate operation in 1969) he remained outwardly cheerful - at least to visitors. It was his poor daughter Ursula who bore the brunt of his unwillingness to accept the fact that he was old, rather infirm and no longer able to cope by himself, as exemplified by the fact that he nearly burned the house down while trying to cook on one occasion.

In 1953 Howells' residency in Barnes was reflected in a very special invitation when he became the first President of the Barnes Music Club (as it was then called). He remained an active supporter of the club for the rest of his life. This is a good example of the composer in the community. As you will know, it is an extremely successful society and remains very active.

For someone for whom people and places meant so much Barnes was a hugely important sanctuary for him. With its lovely mixture of town and country, it is one of London's most desirable suburbs and this was extremely important for Howells who wrote so much music at 3 Beverley Close. The immortal code which he put at the end of all the works written there; 3: BC, which had many children asking their choirmasters awkward and amusing questions over the years marked his pleasure in acknowledging the little bit of suburbia which gave him the space and created the right atmosphere for him to create the 'masterworks' which Dean Milner White of

King's Cambridge and later York Minster so presciently felt he could following the writing in 1944 of the Collegium Regale Te Deum - the work which kick-started Howells' revolutionary new style for the liturgical offices of Church of England. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It is wonderful that the music of Herbert Howells is beginning to be recognized as an extremely significant part of that extraordinary period when Stanford was issuing a production line of important composers, all of whom had their own highly individual styles: Vaughan Williams, Holst, Ireland, Bliss, Dyson, Gurney, Bridge, Benjamin, Moeran, to mention just a few of those whose music revolutionized music in this country in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But while many of these composers went on to write music for the church, none focused his attention so completely on it, or gave it such a unique treasure-trove of music which has lifted the whole experience of church going onto an altogether higher plane. It is an extraordinary achievement and it is wonderful that his spirit continues to live on in uplifting performances of music which treads that fine line between spirituality and sensuality which was in many senses the hallmark of the man.

*Biographical note*

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