

If you should ever be blessed to be far enough from the cacophony of civilization when a heavy snow falls, you can even hear the very music of the iced dew's delicate descent. It is the repainting of a landscape in a thousand hues of white. It is the dance of the wind. - R.C. Sproul Jr.

How the Midland Railway inspired some of Britain's finest choral music



Johann Sebastian Bach, John Rutter, Benjamin Britten and Hubert Howells all wrote wonderful Christmas music. Some is well known to modern audiences, some less known. In our next concert the choir will introduce you to some pieces that you may not know – as well as a few favourites, of course.

One thing they all have in common – they were composed to be performed in a church, and Christ Church Cathedral offers the ideal choral acoustic.

Composer Philip Cooke writes “I’m not sure if Britten ever really bettered [*A Hymn to the Virgin*]. The piece is free from the mannerisms that are prevalent in much of his later work and there is a sense of innocence and maybe even naivety which is somewhat endearing and which is not present in other pieces. Yes, if you didn’t know the piece you might not guess it was Britten, but along with Walton’s *Drop, drop slow tears* and Howells’ *A Spotless Rose* I think it marks one of the high points of English choral music in the first part of the twentieth-century.”

High praise for two of the works you will hear at our Christmas concert.

Despite its quality, little has been written about *A Hymn to the Virgin*. The work isn’t mentioned

at all in the 450 page *Britten Companion* (Faber, London, 1984).



It is one the oldest surviving choral works by Britten, written in his sick bed as a seventeen year old schoolboy. He was an intelligent and successful student, with a particular aptitude for maths. He won many awards, and for one of his prizes he chose *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Here he discovered an old English carol

dating from around 1300 entitled *A Hymn to the Virgin* and wrote an arrangement for double chorus during a spell in the school sanatorium.

The piece was first performed at a concert given by the Lowestoft Musical Society in St. John’s Church on January 5, 1931, and fittingly was one of only two pieces by Britten to be performed at his funeral in 1976.

Hubert Howells showed considerable promise as a youth, and won many prestigious prizes. He often spoke of sitting with Ralph Vaughan Williams at the premiere in September 1910 of that composer’s *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*.



They sat together for the remainder of the concert, sharing Vaughan Williams’ score of Edward Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius*. Both these composers influenced his later work.

In the 1920s it seemed that Howells would become one of Britain’s most prominent composers, with Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst and Delius. That didn’t happen.

Many factors led Howells to settle for a secure life, at the expense of his undoubted creativity. He was affected by his father’s bankruptcy, which led to social rejection in their small community. In 1915 he became ill and was given six months to live. As a

patient at St Thomas' Hospital he was given the previously untried treatment of radium injections to his neck, twice a week for two years.

He was never comfortable promoting his own works, and was hypersensitive to criticism. He never recovered from the death of his only son from polio in 1935.

In the period 1916 – 1920 he received a grant from the Carnegie Trust to assist in editing the Latin Tudor repertoire that R R Terry and his choir were reviving at Westminster Cathedral. It gave him a comfortable income and allowed him to absorb the English Renaissance style which he loved and would evoke in his own music. His first significant works for choir, the *Three Carol-Anthems (Here is the Little Door, A Spotless Rose and Sing Lullaby)* were written around this time.

He held teaching appointment at the Royal College of Music until well into his eighties, and rarely declined requests to examine or adjudicate. His busy life certainly paid the bills, but limited the time available for composition.

He spoke of composing *A Spotless Rose*: "This I set down and wrote after idly watching some shunting from the window of a cottage....which overlooked the Midland Railway [in Gloucester]. In an upstairs room I looked out on iron railings and the main Bristol to Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging. I wrote it and dedicated it to my mother – it always moves me when I hear it, just as if it were written by someone else."



We have no doubt that it will move you too. It's an excellent selection of Christmas music, and you'll also have the opportunity of singing along with the choir in some more traditional Christmas carols.

In a small town in Texas a shop window featured a nativity scene in which one figure stood out - the three wise men were wearing firemen's helmets. A visitor decided to ask what it meant. He asked the lady behind the counter about the helmets.

She replied: "People these days never do read the Bible!"

The visitor told her that he did, but couldn't recall anything about firemen in the Bible.

She jerked her Bible from behind the counter and jabbed her finger at a passage. "See, it says right here, 'The three wise men came from afar.'"

Fun and games for December parties



Teenage celebrations

Teenagers can be more difficult to "loosen up" than their younger brothers and sisters, and very often they need a lead at the beginning of a party.

If the party is outdoors a variation of the old game of Statues can make an amusing "find your partner" game. Slips of paper on which are written the ideas are given to the girls and corresponding ones to the boys. Girls then pose as statues, or act the idea on the lawn, and each boy can search for the girl representing the idea written on his slip.

Nonsense themes, like "Making a milk shake", "Car going up a hill", "Getting up on a cold morning", or "Bird learning to fly" are the most successful.

The numbers game is another good mixer. Girls wear numbers, and the boys their meanings. All the paper slips are drawn out of a hat, and the boys and girls search for partners. There are dozens of ideas, such as "52 cards in a pack", "31 days in December" and so on.

For a dance novelty try the "mixed choice". One couple begins dancing. When the music stops the boy chooses another girl and the girl another boy. After a while the music stops again, and partners choose new ones from the sidelines, until everyone is dancing.

- from *Australian Home Beautiful*, December 1948

Not only was Bach a talented composer, his organ playing was sensational – especially his footwork. He was invited to play in the Court Chapel for an audience which included Prince Frederick, later King of Sweden. His performance was described by an onlooker: "His feet, flying over the pedals as though they were winged, made the notes reverberate like thunder in a storm, till the Prince, *cum stupor admiratus*, pulled a ring from his finger and presented it to the player."

a festive CHRISTMAS celebration

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