

Nantwich Choral Society

Britten

SAINT NICOLAS

HYMN TO ST. CECILIA

Fauré

REQUIEM



SATURDAY 16th NOVEMBER
1991

The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30 p.m.

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA
Leader: Andrew Long

THE TREBLES OF CHRIST'S HOSPITAL
Director of Music: Peter Allwood

Jeffrey Cresswell, tenor

Philip Ravenscroft, bass

Joy Roberts & Heather Bridger, pianoforte
Michael Bridger, organ

conducted by
Stephen Buckman



HYMN TO SAINT CECILIA

Benjamin Britten

The Hymn, for five-part unaccompanied chorus is a setting of three poems by WH Auden about St. Cecilia, patron saint of music. Britten had known and worked with Auden since 1936 and, in his wake went to America in 1939. By Spring of 1942, Britten had grown very homesick and decided to return to England. Before he left he had begun work on a set of three Auden poems "A Song To St. Cecilia" which had been dedicated to him as his birthday was on the 22nd of November - St. Cecilia's Day. Britten had not completed them before he left, but his journey home proved inspirational and the *Hymn To St. Cecilia* was finished, as the score says, "at sea" on the 2nd April 1942.

As the patron saint of music, there are many musical references, throughout the three poems, to song and instruments beginning, for example, with a poem describing Cecilia singing in "a garden shady". The three poems are joined by the Litany:-

Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
To all musicians, appear and inspire:
Translated daughter, come down and startle
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

Musically, each of the poems has a distinguishing feature. The first "In a garden shady", uses an ostinato or repeated, bell like motif which is heard in the tenors at the opening. The second "I cannot grow" is a sprightly fugue, lively and a contrast to the gentler first poem. The third poem "O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall" employs a motif introduced by the basses, again an ostinato though faster moving than the first. The text of this last poem describes the violin, flute, drum and trumpet and Britten very cleverly uses solo voices to imitate the instruments. For example the violin is depicted by the voice singing the notes of the open strings on a violin. The drums are depicted by a solo voice on a repeated note with the interest arising from the rhythm.

This work marks the end of a period in Britten's music. His return to England coincides with a severing of ties with Auden and the facile sophistication which that poet represents. His next composition, "A Ceremony Of Carols", in its use of childrens voices, medieval texts and a simple accessible style was the start of a new period which would also include the Cantata "St. Nicolas".

SAINT NICOLAS

Benjamin Britten

Saint Nicolas, Bishop of Myra exists more in legend than in fact, thanks to a fictitious C19th biography by Methodius. This credits him with many miracles and good deeds which, in turn, made him patron saint of many including merchants, sailors, perfumiers, apothecaries and particularly as protector of children. We know him best, nowadays as Santa Claus.

His association with boys and merchants made him the perfect subject when Lancing College was to celebrate its centenary in 1948 and asked Britten to write something for the occasion.

It is one of the first important works in which Britten uses childrens voices. The librettist was Eric Crozier, who had been the producer for Britten's "Rape Of Lucretia" and librettist of "Albert Herring". The first performance of *St. Nicolas* was at the opening concert of the Aldeburgh Festival in 1948. E M Forster described the work as "One of those triumphs outside the rules of the Art".

After an *Introduction* in which the chorus call upon Nicolas to tell his story as a simple man, eight episodes from his life reveal his saintliness. After *The Birth Of Nicolas*, in which he grows from a pure and innocent child to a proud and innocent man, *Nicolas Devotes Himself To God*, having given

away all his lands and goods to help the needy. He *Journeys Into Palestine* on a ship of godless men who mock his warning of a storm, but when the storm hits them, Nicolas saves them all by prayer. At the end of the journey, *Nicolas Comes To Myra And Is Chosen Bishop*. This section leads straight into the hymn "All people that on earth do dwell". In *Nicolas From Prison*, he tells how the church suffered under the Roman Emperor Diocletian and calls upon his persecutors to turn to Christ. *Nicolas And The Pickled Boys* describes the miracle by which three boys were brought back to life from the butcher's salting pot. Some of the other legends associated with the Saint are described in the next section, *His Piety And Marvellous Works*. In *The Death Of Nicolas*, the choir intones the *Nunc Dimittis* while Nicolas goes joyfully to meet Death, his Lord and Christ. Finally all, the orchestra and vocal forces come together in another hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way".

INTERVAL

REQUIEM

Gabriel Fauré

1. Introit and Kyrie 2. Offertory 3. Sanctus 4. Pie Jesu 5. Agnus Dei 6. Libera me 7. In Paradisum

Fauré's "little requiem" is very different from any of the other well-known C19th settings of the mass for the dead, since it eschews the terrifying clamour of Verdi and Berlioz and yet is much more expressive and unacademic than Cherubini or Brahms. Instead, Fauré, through his choice of texts and orchestral sonorities, emphasises eternal peace for the departed and consolation for the bereaved, in a very personal way. He himself said that he had "instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper. After all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ, I know it by heart! I wanted to write something different."

Fauré was, for a long time, organist and choir master of the church of the Madeleine in Paris and his *Requiem* was first heard at a burial service there in January 1888. This first version did not yet include the *Offertory* or the *Libera me* and the orchestra consisted only of a handful of strings (without violins, except for one solo in the *Sanctus*), organ, timpani and harp. Extra parts (mainly brass) were added later, and the "complete" work was first performed in January 1893. Until recently, however, the piece has only ever been heard in a version made in 1900 by one of Fauré's pupils at the suggestion of his publishers, who, keen to turn the work into a popular concert piece, required a more "conventional" orchestration. Although this last version is the one now most familiar to us, the orchestral forces being used this evening should help us to see the *Requiem* in something closer to its original, more sombre hue.

The word "Requiem" ("rest") is the key to the whole work; it is the first and last word which the choir sings and occurs in every movement but the *Offertory* and the *Sanctus*. It is also probably why Fauré chose to include the passages *Pie Jesu* and *In Paradisum* which are not usually found in a *Requiem Mass*, the latter being taken from the Burial Service. Even the brief, but all the more dramatic, reference to the Day of Judgement in the *Libera me* subsides into a repeat of the opening prayer "Rest eternal grant them, O Lord, and light perpetual shine on them", and at the end of the *Agnus Dei*, Fauré repeats both the words and the music of the beginning of the *Introit*.

This is, above all, an intimate and tender *Requiem*. Fauré himself said that "It is as gentle as I am myself".

Colin Bromelow