

Nantwich Choral Society

21st Anniversary Season

FAURÉ REQUIEM

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
DONA NOBIS PACEM
AN OXFORD ELEGY



SATURDAY 29th JANUARY 1994

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

NANTWICH SINFONIA

(Leader: Andrew Long)

Catrin Ley, *soprano*

Philip Ravenscroft, *bass*

Colin Bromelow, *speaker*

Joy Roberts, *pianoforte*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman



VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872 - 1958)

AN OXFORD ELEGY

Vaughan Williams composed "An Oxford Elegy" in 1949 and it was first heard in November that year at a private performance in Surrey. On that occasion the instrumental music was arranged for string quartet and piano, the full orchestral version not being heard until the work's first public performance in Oxford in the summer of 1952. Tonight we shall be hearing it in another version, halfway between, using strings and piano.

In "An Oxford Elegy" Vaughan Williams set verses from two poems which had always haunted him, "The Scholar Gypsy" and "Thyrsis" by Matthew Arnold. Vaughan Williams said that he was "tired of choral works in which one couldn't hear the words" and so decided to give the main burden of the text to a speaker whilst the chorus often sings without words adding a haunting quality to the orchestral sound, reminiscent of music for the film "Scott of the Antarctic" which he had recently composed. Indeed this haunting quality is more important in the piece than the actual words of Arnold's poetry, which evoke the memory of an idyllic pastoral England already lost. To the elderly composer, then living in drab post-war London, this must have seemed like a poignant echo of those golden summers of his youth and of the world which had been swept away by the Great War.

DONA NOBIS PACEM

That same lost world is also at the heart of the cantata "Dona Nobis Pacem", composed in 1935 but incorporating the "Dirge for Two Veterans" which Vaughan Williams had written before 1914. This sombre setting of a poem by Walt Whitman follows the frenzied clamour of "Beat! beat! drums!" which together form a commentary on the horror of war and its aftermath. The first movement of the cantata contrasts the soprano's ethereal supplications with the frantically impassioned pleas of the chorus.

Vaughan William's aim in writing the cantata was to highlight the growing danger of war in Europe, and if by the time the work received its London premiere in February 1938 the confident optimism of the finale rang rather hollow, the final prayer for peace and "good-will toward men" has a timeless relevance.

INTERVAL

REQUIEM

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845 - 1924)

1. Introit and Kyrie 2. Offertoire 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 Madeline in Paris and his **Requiem** was first heard at a burial service there in January 1888. This first version did not yet include the **Offertoire** 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 **Offertoire** 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