A Ceremony of Carols

MISSA BREVIS · A HYMN TO THE VIRGIN · A HYMN OF ST COLUMBA
JUBILATE DEO · DEUS IN ADJUTORIUM MEUM

THE CHOIR OF WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL
SIoned Williams harp JAMES O'DONNELL organ
DAVID HILL Master of the Music
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(1913–1976)

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Front illustration: The Adoration of the Shepherds by Rembrandt (1606–1669)
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HINDSIGHT affords us the luxury of knowing that with the appearance of Britten’s first choral publication, *A Boy was Born*, in 1933, a major figure in the setting of words to music had established himself. A figure, in fact, who was later to be adjudged a worthy successor to the great Henry Purcell as a setter of the English language.

If Britten’s subsequent choral works are markedly different in textures and word-settings to *A Boy was Born*, it must be remembered that nine years separated it from the next choral piece, *A Hymn to St Cecilia*, a period during which the young composer wrote his first opera, *Paul Bunyon*. Both the *Hymn to St Cecilia* and *Paul Bunyon* were to words by W H Auden, whose verse transformed Britten’s approach to word-setting. From this period too, came *A Ceremony of Carols*, giving further proof of Britten’s mastery in matching word-rhythms to melodic lines.

The works contained on this record date from 1930 to 1962, thus spanning nearly four decades that reveal the fascinating progress of a developing master of song – the greatest this country has been able to call its own for more than three hundred years.

**A CEREMONY OF CAROLS, Op 28**
for treble voices and harp

Britten’s first work for boys’ voices was written (together with the *Hymn to St Cecilia*) during the composer’s perilous voyage home from America in 1942.

This cycle of medieval and sixteenth-century poems is preceded and followed by the plainsong antiphon ‘Hodie’ from the Christmas Eve Vespers, the source of some of the melodic cells used in various sections of the work. As with the earlier *Hymn to the Virgin* Britten clearly saw in this cycle the chance to write music that would blossom in the reverberant acoustic of church or cathedral. This may be heard in the canonic writing in ‘This little Babe’ which precipitates its vocal lines with awe-inspiring power amplified by the natural acoustic to truly dramatic effect; an effect which can scarcely be imagined from an examination of the score and a knowledge of the slender forces employed. Similarly, in ‘In freezing winter night’ the use of canonic writing greatly adds to the extraordinary atmosphere, as does Britten’s employment of plain and elaborated versions of the same melodic line which are heard simultaneously. Throughout this fifteen-minute masterpiece Britten blends elements of modal, major and minor tonalities in a wide chromatic range that achieves great variety despite the obvious limitations of compass entailed in writing for treble
voices. At the centre of *A Ceremony of Carols* lies the ‘Interlude’ for solo harp based on the plainchant. Its bell-like harmonics and its use of the pentatonic scale inevitably remind one of the Balinese gamelan orchestra to which Britten had been introduced for the first time shortly before leaving America. Bell sounds are also to be heard in ‘Wolcum Yole!’ and ‘Adam lay i-bounden’, an idea the composer was to develop more fully in the opera *Peter Grimes*. Britten was not alone in his love of such sonorities; both Rachmaninov and Stravinsky, influenced no doubt by early and strong influences of the Russian Orthodox Church, professed a lifelong fascination with the sound of bells.

1 PROCESION [1’35]

Hodie Christus natus est:
    Today Christ was born:
    today the Saviour appeared:
    today on earth the angels sing:
    the archangels rejoice:
    today the righteous celebrate saying:
    glory to God in the highest.
    Alleluia!

2 WOLCUM YOLE! [1’21]

Wolcum, Wolcum,
Wolcum be thou hevenè king,
    Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum, born in one morning,
Wolcum for whom we sall sing!

Wolcum be ye, Stevene and Jon,
Wolcum, Innocentes every one,
Wolcum, Thomas marter one,
Wolcum be ye, good Newe Yere,
Wolcum Twelth the Day both in fere,
Wolcum seintes lefe and dare,
Wolcum Yole, Wolcum Yole, Wolcum!

Candelmesse, Quene of bliss,
    Wolcum bothe to more and lesse.
    Wolcum, Wolcum,
    Wolcum be ye that are here, Wolcum Yole,
    Wolcum alle and make good cheer.
    Wolcum alle another yere,
    Wolcum Yole. Wolcum!

ANONYMOUS (14th century)
There is no rose of such vertu
As is the rose that bare Jesu.
Alleluia, Alleluia,
For in this rose containèd was
Heaven and earth in litel space,
Res miranda, Res miranda.

By that rose we may well see
There be one God in persons three,
Pares forma, pares forma.
The aungels sungen the shepherds to:
Gloria in excelsis, gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gaudeamus, gaudeamus.

Leave we all this worldly mirth,
and follow we this joyful birth.
Transeamus, Transeamus, Transeamus.
Alleluia, Res miranda, Pares forma, Gaudeamus,
Transeamus.

ANONYMOUS (14th century)

That yongë child when it gan weep
With song she lulled him asleep:
That was so sweet a melody
It passèd alle minstrelsy.

The nightingalë sang also:
Her song is hoarse and nought thereto:
Whose attendeth to her song
and leaveth the first then doth he wrong.

ANONYMOUS (14th century)

O my deare hart, young Jesu sweit
Prepare thy creddil in my spreit,
And I sall rock thee to my hert,
And never mair from thee depart.

But I sall praise thee evermoir
with sangës sweit unto thy gloir;
The knees of my hert sall I bow,
And sing that richt Balulalow.

JAMES, JOHN and ROBERT WEDDERBURN
AS DEW IN APRILLE [1’05]

I sing of a maiden that is makèles;
King of all kings To her son she ches.
He came al so stille There his moder was,
As dew in Aprille As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flour. That falleth on the spray.

He came al so stille He came al so stille
To his moder’s bour, There his moder lay,
As dew in Aprille As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flour. That falleth on the spray.

Moder and mayden was never none but she;
Well may such a lady Goddes mother be.

ANONYMOUS (c1400)

THIS LITTLE BABE [1’31]

This little Babe so few days old, His camp is pitchèd in a stall,
Is come to rifle Satan’s fold; His bulwark but a broken wall;
All hell doth at his presence quake, The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes,
Though he himself for cold do shake; Of shepherds he his muster makes;
For in this weak unarmèd wise And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
The gates of hell he will surprise. The angels’ trumps alarum sound.

With tears he fights and wins the field, My soul, with Christ join thou in fight;
His naked breast stands for a shield; Stick to the tents that he hath pight.
His battering shot are babish cries, Within his crib his surest ward;
His arrows looks of weeping eyes, This little Babe will be thy guard.
His martial ensigns Cold and Need, If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
And feeble Flesh his warrior’s steed. Then flit not from this heavenly Boy.

ROBERT SOUTHWELL (1561–1595)

INTERLUDE [4’13]

Harp Solo
IN FREEZING WINTER NIGHT [3’56]

JEREMY UNWIN, FRANCIS SHEPHERD treble

Behold, a silly tender babe,
in freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies.
Alas, a piteous sight!
The inns are full; no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed.
But forced he is with silly beasts
In crib to shroud his head.

This stable is a Prince’s court,
This crib his chair of State;
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
The wooden dish his plate.
The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The Prince himself is come from heav’n;
This pomp is prizèd there.

With joy approach, O Christian wight,
Do homage to thy King.
And highly praise his humble pomp,
which he from Heav’n doth bring.

ROBERT SOUTHWELL

SPRING CAROL [1’10]

MARC STEVENS, ROBERT OGDEN treble

Pleasure it is to hear iwis the Birdès sing,
The deer in the dale, the sheep in the vale,
the corn springing.

God’s purveyance for sustenance,
It is for man.

Then we always to give him praise,
And thank him than.

WILLIAM CORNISH (d1523)

ADAM LAY I-BOUNDEN [1’11]

Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
Adam lay i-bounden, bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter thought he not to long
Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
And all was for an appil, an appil that he tok.
As clerkès finden written in their book.

Deo gracias! Doe gracias!
Ne had the appil takè ben, the appil takè ben,
Ne hadde never our lady a ben hevenè quene
Blessèd be the time that appil takè was.
Therefore we moun singen.
Deo gracias!

ANONYMOUS (15th century)

RECESSION [1’58]
(See ‘Procession’)
MISSA BREVIS IN D, Op 63
for boys’ voices and organ [10'50]

Written in 1959 for the boys of Westminster Cathedral and their then director, George Malcolm, the Missa Brevis is one of Britten’s first works to a Latin text. Not being a ‘living’ language it cannot be expected that even Britten could set Latin with the freedom that he brought to English, French and Italian; instead he employs his Latin texts as ‘phonetic material’, rather in the manner of Stravinsky. That said, this little work is an undoubted masterpiece which somehow manages to relate the character of his music for children with proper observance of the liturgy.

George Malcolm’s training had produced a singular timbre in the boys’ choir quite different from the bland tone of the ‘cathedral’ tradition. This timbre, which had the ‘edge’ of a wind instrument, allowed Britten to use the voice parts in an instrumental manner that is as refreshing as it is delightful. The work involves much organization of motifs; for example the Kyrie begins with an inversion of the Gloria’s plainsong intonation and is an impassioned plea for peace. The Gloria is set in a lively 7/8 rhythm first heard in the organ pedals before being taken up by the singers. The plainsong phrase is punctuated by bar-long chords and there is an interesting flowing scalewise tune heard first at ‘Qui tollis peccata mundi’.

The bell-like Sanctus is a marvellous example of Britten’s aural imagination with its climactic ‘Hosanna’, and the preceding passage of triplets at ‘Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua’ written so knowingly for a cathedral acoustic. The following Benedictus immediately establishes a profoundly moving mood of quiet fervour before the final outburst of ‘Hosanna’. The Agnus Dei is an agonized prayer for peace in which the voices’ short phrases are pitted against an insistent ostinato pedal and dissonant chords from the organ’s manuals. The work ends as if the world were exhausted in its search for peace.

[13] KYRIE [2'05]

Kyrie eleison.
Lord, have mercy.
Christe eleison.
Christ, have mercy.
Kyrie eleison.
Lord, have mercy.
GLORIA [2'53]

BENEDICT ROGERSON, ROBERT HOLMES, ROBERT OGDEN treble

Gloria in excelsis Deo,
et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.
Laudamus te, benedictimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te.
Gratias agimus tibi
propter magnam gloriam tuam.
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis,
suscipe deprecationem nostram.
Qui sedes ad dextram Patris,
miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus,
tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe.
Cum sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris.
Amen.

GLORY to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men of good will.
We praise you, we bless you,
we worship you, we glorify you.
We give you thanks
on account of your great glory.
Lord God, King of heaven,
God, almighty Father,
Lord, only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.
You who take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us,
receive our prayer.
You who sit at the right hand of the father,
have mercy on us.
For you alone are holy, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the most high, Jesus Christ.
With the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

SANCTUS AND BENEDICTUS [3'26]

MARC STEVENS, ROBERT HOLMES treble

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis.
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis.

Holy, holy, holy
Lord God of Hosts.
The heavens and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

AGNUS DEI [2'26]

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata
mundi, miserere nobis.
Dona nobis pacem.

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins
of the world, have mercy on us.
Grant us peace.
In *A Hymn to the Virgin* Britten perhaps comes nearest to the traditional conception of English church music. Based on an anonymous text its antiphonal echo effects and regular bar-groups invest this delightful little work with a naïve and gentle form of expression that is direct in its appeal and totally persuasive in its language. It dates from 1930, a notable offering from a composer on the very threshold of his career.

Of one that is so fair and bright
*Velut maris stella,*
Brighter than the day is light,
*Paren et puella:*
I cry to thee, thou see to me,
Lady, pray thy son for me,
*Tam pia,*
That I may come to thee,
*Maria!*

All this world was forlorn
*Eva peccatrice,*
Till our Lord was ybore
*De te genetrice.*
With ‘Ave’ it went away
*Salutis;*
Darkest night, and comes the day,
*Virtui.*
The well springeth out of thee,

Lady, flow’r of everything,
*Rosa sine spina,*
Thou bare Jesu, Heav’n’s King,
*Grattia divine:*
Of all thou bear’st the prize,
Lady queen of paradise,
*Electa:*
Maid mild, mother
*Es effecta.*

**ANONYMOUS (c1300)**

The words of this hymn are attributed to St Columba (521-597) and Britten’s setting of them dates from the very last days of 1962. The work is simple in the best sense of the term. Its craftsmanship is as unerring as is its sensitivity to the text. St Columba was founder of the monastery of Iona and from the island shrine he made missionary journeys to the Highlands of Scotland.
Regis regum rectissimi
prope est dies Domini
dies irae et vindictae,
tenebrarum et nebulae,
Regis regum rectissimi.

Diesque mirabilium
tonitruorum fortium,
dies quoque angustiae,
maeroris ac tristiae.
Regis regum rectissimi.

In quo cessabit mulierum
amor et desiderium
nominumque contentio
mundi hujus et cupidio.
Regis regum rectissimi.

ST COLUMBA (attrib)

ST DEUS IN ADJUTORIUM MEUM ... [6'15]
for unaccompanied choir

From 1934 to 1939 incidental music for films and radio plays were significant in Britten’s early development of certain creative disciplines. At the end of the war the composer again interested himself in incidental music, collaborating with Ronald Duncan in the latter’s This Way to the Tomb (1945). (It was the same author who, at about the same time, adapted André Obey’s treatment of the Lucretia legend for the chamber opera The Rape of Lucretia.) This Way to the Tomb is divided into two parts, Masque and Antimasque, and whilst the Antimasque has been described as satirical to a point of amiable banality, the music for the Masque is all vocal, much of it choral, and includes the setting, here recorded, of Psalm 70, ‘Deus in adjutorium meum ...’, for unaccompanied voices.

Deus in adjutorium meum intende,
Domino ad adjuvandum me festina.
Confundantur et reverantur,
qui quaerunt animam meam.
Avertantur retrorsum,
et crubescent, qui volunt mihi male.
Avertantur statim, crubescentes,
qui dicunt mihi: Euge, euge, euge.

Make haste, O God, to deliver me:
hurry to help me, O Lord.
Let them be ashamed and confounded
that seek after my soul.
Let them be turned back
and shamed that wish me evil.
Let them be turned back at once that ashamedly
say of me: There, there.
Exsultent et laetentur
They shall rejoice and be glad with you,
in te omnes qui quaerunt te, et dicant semper:
all those who seek you, and they will continually say:
Magificetur Dominus:
May the Lord be made great:
qui diligunt salutare tuum.
those who cherish your salvation.
Ego vero egenus et pauper sum:
But I am an inadequate pauper:
Deus adjuva me, adjutor meus,
God, help me, my helper,
et liberator meus es tu: Domine ne moreris.
you are my liberator: Lord, do not delay.
Gloria Patri et Filio
Glory to the Father, and to the Son,
et Spiritui Sancto.
and to the Holy Spirit.
Sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper,
Just as it was in the beginning, both now and always,
et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.
and for generation after generation. Amen.

PSALM 70

This setting of the 100th Psalm was written in August 1934 and intended as a companion piece to the *Te Deum in C* which preceded it by some three weeks. Britten decided against publishing this first Jubilate setting and it did not appear in print until 1984. The composer had, however, produced a second Jubilate setting in 1961 at the request of the Duke of Edinburgh.

The original *Te Deum* of 1934 has been described by Peter Evans as ‘self-consciously economical’ and earlier by Constant Lambert as ‘drab and penitential’. Such criticisms could scarcely be applied to the *Jubilate Deo* which already bears the imprint of a genius at word-setting and contains several characteristic harmonic shifts to intrigue the ear.

O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands,
serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song.
Be ye sure that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise;
be thankful unto him, and speak good of his Name.
For the Lord is gracious and his truth endureth from generation to generation.
His mercy is everlasting, for the Lord is gracious.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.

Notes by PETER LAMB