Programme

Motet: My soul, there is a country — C. Hubert Parry (1848-1918)

Anthem: Faire is the Heaven — William Harris (1883-1973)

Cantus Missae – Mass in E-flat — Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901)
- Kyrie
- Gloria
- Credo
- Sanctus/Benedictus
- Agnus Dei

Interval

Requiem — Herbert Howells (1892-1983)
- Salvator mundi
- Psalm 23
- Requiem aeternam (1)
- Psalm 121
- Requiem aeternam (2)
- 'I heard a voice from heaven'

Anthem: Bring us, O Lord God — William Harris

Earth Song — Frank Ticheli (b.1958)

****

Programme Notes

My soul, there is a country

Hubert Parry is best known for his choral music. His rousing anthem 'I was glad' written for the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902 and the iconic, patriotic 'Jerusalem' are both well-known. No less well-known to choral singers is his cycle 'Songs of Farewell' written towards the end of his life. The six songs in the cycle are deeply philosophical, dwelling on the transitory nature of earthly existence and the hope of a continuing life beyond. **My soul, there is a country**, a setting of words by Henry Vaughan (1622-1695), is the first motet in the cycle. It signals Parry's intention to probe the Christian vision of the afterlife, painting a picture of a blissful and tranquil world to come: 'There is a country far beyond the stars'(verse one); 'There, above noise and danger, Sweet Peace sits crowned with smiles' (verse two); finally, in verse five, there is 'One who never changes, 'Thy God, thy life, thy cure.'

Faire is the Heaven

William Harris was organist at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, for more than 30 years from 1933. During this time he tutored the then Princess Elizabeth and her sister Princess Margaret. Written in 1925, Faire is the Heaven is perhaps his best-known work. It is a spacious and expansive setting for double choir of a text drawn from a long poem by Edmund Spenser (1552-1599). It paints an idyllic picture of Heaven – a place of 'endless perfectness'. In his setting, through changes of mood, Harris vividly describes heaven in pictorial terms: its 'bright Cherubims', 'eternal burning Seraphims' 'Angels and Archangels' and 'the glorious face of the Divine, Eternal Majestie'. The setting is masterful –

colourful, deeply reflective, sometimes calm but, at certain points very exciting, and always designed to bring out the joyful yet profound meaning of the text.

Cantus Missae – Mass in E-flat

Josef Rheinberger was a prolific composer of operas, symphonies and choral works but is remembered almost exclusively today for his organ compositions which include 20 sonatas and about 100 shorter works. He was what we term today a 'child prodigy'. When only seven years old he was already serving as organist at Vaduz parish church in Liechtenstein where he was born, and his first composition was performed a year later. When only 12 he entered the Conservatory in Munich to study piano, organ, harmony and counterpoint. He made such good progress that, by 1853, he was active as an organist in several Munich churches. Six years later he was appointed an instructor at the Conservatory; he returned there in 1867 and remained as a teacher until his death. He also held the position of Court Kapellmeister, the appointment in 1877 he greeted with great pleasure.

In his later years his letters indicate that he saw his real calling in church music and although now best known for his organ music, he wrote many choral works, among them 18 masses. The Mass in E-flat (bearing the title ***Cantus Missae*** on the title page of the first printing in 1879) is an absolute masterpiece. It is the only one of his masses written for two four-part choirs. Sound craftsmanship, demonstrated in smooth contrapuntal writing combined with a rich harmonic palette, mark him out as one of the outstanding composers of church music of his day. The ***Cantus Missae*** clearly demonstrates his sound learning and reverence for the past. He paid tribute to the *a capella* ideal with performances of masses from the late Renaissance period by Palestrina, Viadana and Hassler; and from the classical period, masses by Mozart and Haydn. Three different ties to the past can be found in this Mass in particular: the vocal polyphony of the Roman and Venetian school (Gabrieli's use of divided choirs springs to mind as we hear the beginning of the *Agnus Dei*); the counterpoint of Bach and his contemporaries (the fugal section *Cum sancto spiritu* at the end of the *Gloria* is a good example) and the music of Beethoven that stems from his middle creative period. The result is a work of great beauty that flows with apparent ease, but which must have cost the composer many hours of thought and meditation before arriving at a finished product.

Requiem

It used to be thought that Howells composed his highly personal ***Requiem*** in 1935 as an emotional reaction to the death of his eight-year-old son Michael. However, further research has shown that the work was originally composed in 1932 and modelled on a little-known work 'A short Requiem' composed in 1915 by Walford Davies (1869-1941), one of Howells' teachers at the Royal College of Music, in memory of those killed during the First World War. Michael's death might have been the reason why the composer suppressed the work which was re-assembled from his manuscript in the Royal College of Music and not released for publication until 1980.

For his text, Howells draws on the Psalms, the Latin Mass for the Dead and the Book of Common Prayer. The first movement, though given a Latin title, uses the time-honoured English text: 'O Saviour of the world, who by thy Cross and thy precious Blood, hast redeemed us, Save us and help us, we humbly beseech thee'.

The second movement, a setting of Psalm 23, opens with a trio of soloists – soprano, alto and tenor – who almost chant the first few verses. The whole choir, using a basic *parlando* style, enter at the words 'Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil'.

The first of two hushed settings of the Latin text *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine* ('Give them eternal rest, O Lord') follows the 23rd Psalm. From *Et lux perpetua luceat eis* ('Let perpetual light shine upon them'), Howells divides his choral forces into two, greatly enriching the harmonic content to paint a glorious picture of eternal light.

The fourth movement, a setting of Psalm 121, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills', opens with a baritone solo, followed by the full choir who are instructed by the composer to declaim the text with rhythmic freedom. The movement ends with the choir holding down its final chord over which a tenor soloist sings the psalm's opening phrase to a subtly-altered melody line.

The second setting of *Requiem aeternam*, written for single choir, though, as elsewhere, with occasional divisi, forms the fifth movement. The highlight of this movement comes again when Howells reaches the phrase *Et lux perpetua;* the sopranos climb up to reach a wonderful climax before the music descends and lessens in volume as the phrase *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine* is quietly repeated.

The last movement sets the familiar text from *Revelation* used in the Burial Service. A tenor soloist announces the opening phrase: 'I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write'. The choir responds with the words to be written: 'From henceforth blessed are dead which die in the Lord'. The work ends in tranquillity as the baritone soloist and choir affirm 'They rest from their labours'. In the words of one writer, the Requiem is 'a wonderful heart-aching work of searing beauty.'

Bring us, O Lord God

After Herbert Howells' **Requiem**, there can be no more suitable text to follow than John Donne's vision of Heaven found in Harris' anthem, **Bring Us, O Lord God**. In eight parts, Harris captures the spirit of Donne's text so effectively. Soprano voices rise high into the upper register as they sing of: 'the house and gate of heav'n, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light.' After a world which has 'no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, one equal eternity', we reach another climax as the choir sings of a 'glorious dominion' and a 'world without end'. A gentle repetition of a single word,'Amen', ends this powerful setting.

In **Earth Song**, the American composer, Frank Ticheli, sets his own words to describe in non-religious terms his view of the state of the earth and its problems. In the first part of the song he gives us a picture of a scorched earth which 'cries out in vain', and 'the torn heart cries out in pain'. But in the second half of the song, the elemental force of music transforms darkness into light, conflict into peace. For Ticheli, it is music and singing that has been his refuge; through darkness, pain and strife, he says, 'I'll sing, Be, and Live'. Peace descends on the world as the choir reaches the final cadence.

****

Our next concert

Saturday, 13 June at 7.45pm

St George's Church
Castle Street, Kendal

Treasures of the Spanish Renaissance
Juan Cererols: *Missa de Batalla*
Victoria: *Magnificat*
Motets by Juan Esquivel, Francisco Guerrero
Sebastian Lopez de Velasco and their contemporaries
with
The English Cornett & Sackbut Ensemble
Director: Gawain Glenton