

Hyfrydol



No. 102

St Swithun's Choir e-newsletter

August 2022

The program for August

The Celebration of Psalms is our big event for August. Rehearsals for Evensong, the Goulburn weekend and the Foundation Concert are all in the month's program as well.

Last month – July

The Covid threat stills looms, but for us perhaps not so large as before. We have had several people absenting themselves, and thank you to them, because of close contact. But our numbers are steadily rising; on the last Sunday of July we had 24 voices in the choir. Our more usual 30 voices can't be far off.

Peter Gilkes led a couple of intense learning sessions for the up-coming Foundation Concert presentation of Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. And he stepped into the Choir Director's role for a week when Phillip was isolating. Thank you Peter.

Peter Hamilton directed several learning sessions on Thursday evenings as we worked on the Celebration of Psalms concert. Thank you Peter.

The Foundation concert for 2022

In October we shall present our annual fund-raiser for the Swiz Cultural Foundation. The main item on the program will be Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. Our exposure to music by Britten has been limited to his version of the Jubilate, so we take this opportunity to introduce the composer to our readers.

Edward Benjamin Britten, Baron Britten OM CH (22 November 1913 – 4 December 1976) was an English composer, conductor, and pianist. The following is an edited version of a piece by Daniel Felsenfeld, an American composer and author.

The curious case of Benjamin Britten

The British composer Benjamin Britten is well documented on disc and in print, frequently performed, lionized by many – especially those in the opera world – and often referred to as The Greatest British Composer Since Purcell (which either praises him or damns him with faint praise). But music history is most often taught as a recounted lineage of aesthetic successions, influence writ large, a slew of begettings and begats, epochal waxings and wanings, dawns and dusks, ideas giving way to other ideas, the churning of centuries in the service of progress. While a sequential narrative is a necessary contrivance for those who need to address totality – one has to start (and end) somewhere – it leaves little room for counterargument, for those working outside the metanarrative.



Benjamin Britten

And so Benjamin Britten is left stranded outside the conversation.

Britten grew up middle class, which in the United Kingdom of the First World War meant quite a bit. Until that time, genius – real Mozart- or Beethoven-level genius – tended to originate from either the aristocracy or within bohemian squalor and burbling chamber pots. Britten had things easier than most. He so adored his childhood that he spent a lot of time pondering, through his music, how to return. He endured a customary, excellent/terrifying Dickensian education that taught him to "do a good day's work" without undue fuss and to fear his superiors. When he made

his move to London, he fell in with the usual bohemian circle of many an artist's youth — his circle just chanced to include W.H. Auden. It is hard to imagine more opposite poles: Britten the deep still waters, Auden the effusive raconteur whose annoying gregariousness belied his capacity for nuanced thought and its passionate expression. Yet this dyad makes more than perfect sense: one can imagine the long, British discussions between them. At one point Auden offered succour to a young Britten about to play a piano concerto in public, assuring him it would be an aid to the seduction of a certain someone — who ended up being tenor Peter Pears, Britten's lifelong companion and muse.

After brief stints in New York City and Long Island's Amityville, Britten became an international celebrity. He wrote early works for the Boston Symphony, built (like Wagner, and like him only in this way) his own opera house, and enjoyed the company of a famously insular and complicated clique of people. He wrote operas for his own touring company as well as for the coronation of Elizabeth II. He arranged folk songs and wrote symphonies in homage to spring; he wrote cello pieces for his friend Rostropovich and made a requiem mass from the poems of a trench poet and pacifist; he wrote a ballet based on gamelan music and made several "operas" for church based on parables and Noh theatre. His output is as wildly varied as anyone's — as that of Mozart, Richard Strauss, or even Leonard Bernstein. His surface naiveté often belied his artistic stubbornness: he intentionally misread a commission from Japan in order to write the piece he wanted to write (*Sinfonia da Requiem*), and he based his grandest opera (*Gloriana*) — a commission to celebrate the coronation of Elizabeth II — on a scurrilous and less-than-popular book among the royals.

This précis of his career helps little in reasoning him out, however. His talent is not the question, as few since Mozart have demonstrated such effortless prolificacy, have come by their music so quickly and with such ease (Britten could write a full-length opera like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, soup to nuts, in one unrushed summer). In fact, Britten's barely-precedented level of mastery made his better efforts seem the product of no effort whatsoever.

But mere fluency is a parlour game; the work produced has to say something essential. In Britten's case it often says something not only essential but essentially British. Britten's music is not only deeply British, but speaks to and of a certain type of essential Britishness. He does not rely exclusively on folk tunes, ballads, pastorales and music hall to make his mark, but neither does he shy away from them, borrowing from all of these genres, melding them into a music of his own specific design. Before *Peter Grimes*, no British composer since Purcell had written any enduring operas, and Britten's tale of the potentially murderous outsider in a seaside fishing village — replete with church hymns and drinking songs — fit the bill.

Also essential to understanding and appreciating Britten is his way with words — not as a writer of prose (for he was less than gifted in this area, or at least fancied no side career as an essayist) — but as a setter of texts to music. Britten possessed the composer's gift for finding the appropriate words to match his music (rather than the other way around), telling the stories he knew he could tell effectively. But more than that, he had a gift for rendering the words into music.

Felsenfeld has more to say on Britten. His full article may be read on

<https://www.listenmusicculture.com/features/the-curious-case-of-benjamin-britten>

Psalms

Peter Hamilton has planned an exciting program of readings and music, all firmly based on the Psalms. We shall present it on Saturday evening, 20 August, in the church. There is lots of congregational inclusion in both readings and music, so it is up to choir members to make sure the church is full! High tea will be provided by the choir afterwards.

We have spent time through July re-acquainting ourselves with Herbert Howells' *O Pray for the peace of Jerusalem*, which is included in the celebration; Howells' interpretation of Psalm 122.

In the Book of Common Prayer (1662) version of the Psalm, which composers have used, the words are:

- ¹ I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.
- ² Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.
- ³ Jerusalem is builded as a city that is at unity in itself:
- ⁴ Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord.
- ⁵ For there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David.
- ⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.
- ⁷ Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.
- ⁸ For my brethren and companions' sakes, I will now say, Peace be within thee.
- ⁹ Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek thy good.

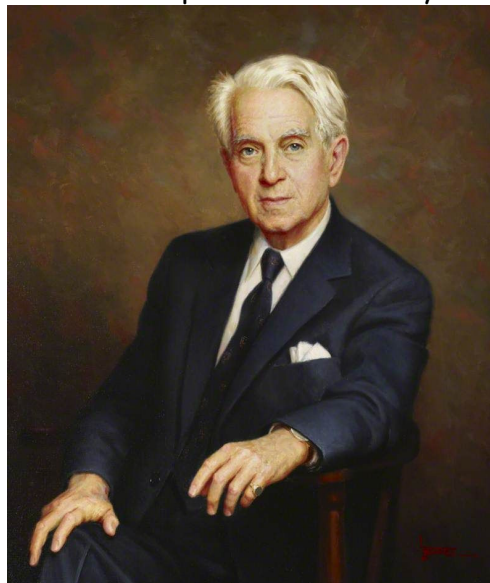
Parry set verses 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7 to music in his great anthem *I was glad*. We shall be singing this several times this year, in Goulburn Cathedral and in our own Foundation concert in November.

Howells used verses 6 and 7 in his anthem *O pray for the peace of Jerusalem*.

Following is an excerpt from an Evensong sermon delivered in The Collegiate Church of St. Mary, Warwick, near Birmingham, UK, by Katherine Dienes-Williams, a New Zealand-born organist, conductor and composer, Organist and Master of the Choristers at Guildford Cathedral, on Sunday 16th March 2014:

The author, John Eaton, in his commentary on the Psalms, describes Psalm 122 as 'A Song of Zion, appreciating Jerusalem as the city of the Lord's house, the goal of pilgrims, where his name and presence are praised in the gathering of his people, and his justice effected by the house of David.' Eaton sees this psalm as part of the autumn festival - a festival centred on the Lord's kingship, and on the renewal of the royal office on earth (the man chosen to be the servant of the Lord's kingship). Eaton also notes that the psalm's poet makes use of the pilgrim's experience, either during the journey or after it.

This is the psalm poetry which Herbert Howells chose to set to music, as he and his wife were snowed in in a cottage in Gloucester in January 1941. To pass the time, Howells wrote four anthems at the rate of one a day. The first of these is '*O pray for the peace of Jerusalem*', and it has an unusually simple musical texture for Howells, with long expressive unison phrases. Apart from a brief central climax at the words 'and plenteousness within thy palaces', it is a suitably restrained piece. In looking at this setting from a musical perspective, it is interesting to note the length of the melodic phrases and the yearning interval of the open 5th - a pure interval, a pure space



between two notes marking the words 'O pray'. This gives something of a sense of longing to the command. There is a further rising interval colouring the word 'Jerusalem' - perhaps an unconscious thought to its high position above sea level. Throughout the piece, I have always felt that the music establishes a contemplative mood - it feels as if the composer is reminiscing, whilst in the more urgent middle section he recalls something of a journey as the music passes through new keys - at once both a pilgrimage and a prayer.

Portrait of Herbert Howells, artist unknown

We can only speculate how Howells was able to respond so well to the psalm text. We know that he was the youngest of six children, and that his father owned a building and decorating business and played the organ at the local Baptist Chapel. Howells' family was not otherwise particularly musical as such. However, Howells was drawn to music from a young age and used to ask if he could go home from school to write music. The chance of a boy in Lydney hearing any music written by great composers was virtually non-existent

at the start of the twentieth century. There was little in the way of musical activity outside the church, and the music of the church was mostly limited to hymns, at a time when neither words nor music were at their most inspired. To study music at all, it was necessary to go to London or at least some sizeable town. Unfortunately, Howells' family suffered from severe financial problems and his father's eventual bankruptcy considerably reduced any local standing the family might have had. Fortunately, the local squire, Charles Bathurst (later Lord Bledisloe) introduced the young Herbert Howells to the organist of Gloucester Cathedral, Sir Herbert Brewer. At the rather late age of 14, Herbert began music lessons from Brewer. These were ostensibly piano lessons but in fact they covered much more. The Bathurst family helped with the finances, and eventually Charles Bathurst persuaded Brewer to accept Howells as an articled pupil. This system, which has died out in our cathedrals and churches, enabled a young musician to receive a thorough grounding in church music and keyboard playing, as well as harmony and counterpoint leading to composition, and the pupil would assist the cathedral organist with his duties. Howells was surely influenced by the architecture and beauty of Gloucester Cathedral and the sound of the organ and choir in that atmospheric acoustic.

Howells was already aware of beauty in various forms, as he would go to churches with workmen from his father's decorating firm - so he had an early understanding of beauty in architecture. Later, the composer recalled an occasion when he was out riding with a local baker and witnessed a radiant sunset. This early sensibility to beauty is a quality that is so often apparent in his music. Sheer beauty of sound is a characteristic of just about all that he composed on his personal journey as a composer - from a young boy visiting churches, then on to Gloucester Cathedral and to London to the Royal College of Music at the age of eighteen on an open scholarship. As a person, Howells deeply deplored war and violence. His writings show the deep and sometimes overriding sense of anxiety he experienced both during and after the Second World War - in fact, his family were bombed out of their home in September of 1940, just a year before tonight's anthem was composed.

The full sermon may be read on:

<https://www.guildford-cathedral.org/worship/sermons/2014/KDW16March>

Goulburn

Those coming to Goulburn on the weekend of 24 and 25 September should by now have booked the accommodation they will need. Some are arriving on Friday evening, others on Saturday morning.

On Saturday afternoon we shall rehearse our own contributions to the Sunday music, then combine with the Cathedral Choir to rehearse pieces we shall sing together. Then we shall repair to a venue, to be chosen by the Goulburn Choir Director, for dinner.

St Saviour's Cathedral, Goulburn



On Sunday we will join the Cathedral Choir in singing Choral Eucharist at 10 am, possibly including a baptism or two. Then we shall present Evensong at 5 pm. Between the two services, at 3:30 pm on Sunday afternoon, we shall present a short concert program, with the Cathedral Choir.

The program for the day will include several big pieces: *I was glad*, the coronation anthem by Hubert Parry, Louis Lewandowski's *Psalm 150*, Roger Quilter's *Non nobis Domine*, and Thomas Tertius Noble's *Evening Canticles*. All are now within our repertoire, and quite familiar to us.

The only music that will not be familiar to us will be Peter Jewkes' setting of the Communion Service, *Missa sine nomine*, which he composed for the choir of Christ Church St Laurence and is the setting we shall use for the morning service at St Saviour's Cathedral.

The calendar for 2022

Day	Date	Time	Location	Service/activity
Saturday	20 August	5 pm	Swiz	Celebration of Psalms
Saturday	10 September	5 pm	Swiz	Evensong
Sat-Sun	24-25 Sept		Goulburn	Concert and two services
Saturday	29 October	7 pm	Swiz	Foundation concert
Saturday	26 November	5 pm	Swiz	Advent Evensong
Sunday	18 December	9 am	Swiz	Lessons and carols
Saturday	24 December	10 pm	Swiz	Christmas Eve
Sunday	25 December	8 am	Swiz	Christmas Choral Communion

Add to this schedule possible carols on Bannockburn Oval, lessons and carols at local nursing homes and a lunchtime concert at RNS Hospital at dates and times to be fixed.

And for 2023

Mon -Sun	10 - 17 Jul		Salisbury	Choir in residence
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