



Hyfrydol



No. 116

St Swithun's Choir e-newsletter

December 2023

The month ahead

Advent and the Christmas season are upon us once more. Our program is a little lighter than it has been in the past, but busy nonetheless, with the annual visit to Royal North Shore Hospital and the Christmas services.

November

Evensong for the persecuted churches was our early focus for November. The music was listed in last month's Hyfrydol. We had a good and generous congregation. Stuart's sermon topic was based on the psalm we sang: (Psalm 12: 5-8) *Now for the comfortless trouble's sake of the needy; and because of the deep sighing of the poor, I will up, saith the Lord: and will help everyone from him that swelleth against him, and will set him at rest.*

With that event over, we turned our minds to the music of Christmas.

While the choir itself is not involved, a number of choristers are participating in presentations of Handel's Messiah. Rehearsals took place throughout the month. The Hornsby presentation will be on Thursday 7 December in the Hornsby Catholic Cathedral. The Radio Community Chest combined churches presentations are on Saturday and Sunday 16 & 17 December in the Town Hall.

Singing Anthems:

Our editor, in the November *Hyfrydol*, set out the words from the biblical texts to be sung by the choir at the Evensong for the persecuted Christians. How does one chorister feel when singing such powerful words to music that highlights those same persecuted Christians? This chorister is, in one word, *moved*. The composer, John Ireland, has painted musical pictures to reflect each thought and, even now, I hear those musical pictures and am – *moved* . . .

- The gentle sound of the men introducing *Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it*, followed by the choir echoing this sentiment.
- The music then becomes strong and definite, highlighting *Love is strong as death* reiterating *Many waters cannot quench love*.
- Then follows an amazing musical statement underpinning the words *Greater love hath no man than this* then, gently and with a degree of awe, *that a man lay down his life for his friends*.
- What next? Soloists, Soprano and Baritone, sharing the words *Who His own Self bare our sins in His own Body on the tree and that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness*. How clear this message is when heard this way.
- And then – the choir repeats *that we, being dead to sins should live unto righteousness* taking the choir into a musical shout from the hilltops *Ye are wash'd, ye are sanctified, ye are justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus; Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*.
- There follows the instruction *That ye should shew forth the praises of Him who hath call'd you out of darkness into His marvellous light*.
- John Ireland then takes the music quietly down; *I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God, before building strength through the passage that ye present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God, and softly finishing which is your service*.

. . . I am *moved* and could weep.

Lynne

The Crown of Roses

The anthem which Phil has selected for the service on Sunday 10 December is one composed by Tchaikovsky and named by him “Легенда” (*Legend*). The text was a poem by a Russian poet, Aleksey Pleshcheyev, whom Tchaikovsky had met in Moscow in 1866.

In 1881, Pleshcheyev presented Tchaikovsky with a copy of *The Snowdrop*, his collection of children's poems, which bore the following inscription: “To Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, as a token of respect and gratitude for his beautiful music set to my poor words.” One of those poems was described by Pleshcheyev as “translated from the English”, but without attribution. The English poem was actually written by an American, Richard Stoddard, twenty-five years earlier and titled *Roses and Thorns*.

When *Legend* is sung by English-speaking choirs, the words used are usually those of Geoffrey Dearmer, who translated Pleshcheyev's Russian text back into English for the English Carol Book in 1913.

It is interesting to compare Stoddard's original poem with Dearmer's translation from Russian:

Stoddard (1856)

The young child Jesus had a garden,
Full of roses, rare and red:
And thrice a day he watered them,
To make a garland for his head.

When they were full-blown in the garden,
He called the Jewish children there,
And each did pluck himself a rose,
Until they stripped the garden bare.

"And now how will you make your garland?
For not a rose your path adorns."
"But you forget," he answered them,
"That you have left me still the thorns."

They took the thorns, and made a garland,
And placed it on his shining head;
And where the roses should have shone
Were little drops of blood instead!

Dearmer (1913)

When Jesus Christ was yet a child
He had a garden small and wild,
Wherein He cherished roses fair,
And wove them into garlands there.

Now once, as summer time drew nigh,
There came a troop of children by,
And seeing roses on the tree,
With shouts they plucked them merrily.

"Do you bind roses in your hair?"
They cried, in scorn, to Jesus there.
The Boy said humbly: "Take, I pray,
All but the naked thorns away."

Then of the thorns they made a crown,
And with rough fingers pressed it down,
Till on His forehead fair and young,
Red drops of blood like roses sprung.

The obvious question arises: is the legend feasible?

Allow us to quote from the brief history of roses given in *Gardening with Old Roses*, by Alan Sinclair and Rosemary Thodey (Hodder and Stoughton, 1993):

The rose as we know it is part of the botanical family *Roseaceae*, which includes brambles and raspberries, strawberries and crab apples, hawthorns, rowans and wild cherries to say nothing of apricots, almonds, peaches, pears and the humble orchard apple. Many of these plants have similar flowers, with five petals each, and fruit just like the hips which follow the roses and are such a valuable source of vitamin C. All of these similarities lead to the possibility of a single common ancestor. If so, it must be ancient beyond our imaginings because geologists tell us from the evidence provided by fossils that roses have been in existence for at least thirty-five million years.

From there we leap forward through the ages to some 4,000 years ago, when Minoan goldsmiths made gold pins with single roses on the end. These were discovered in the Molchos tombs on the island of Crete. Somewhere around that time an unknown artist included a rose in a fresco painted on a wall at Knossos, also in Crete. Discovered in the 1920s and identified as the Holy Rose, *Rosa sancta* this early painting depicted a single pale pink bloom It seems that this rose was also widely grown around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and that it was taken in the fourth century by Saint Frumentius from Phoenicia (now Syria)

to Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) where it may still be found in the vicinity of churches. It has also been found in Egyptian tombs.

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Not the painting, but a photograph of *Rosa sancta*

Turning to ancient literature for evidence, we find that the Greek poet Homer, writing in about 700 BC, mentions the rose in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*: in *The Iliad* Aphrodite perfumes the dead Hector with rose oil, and in *The Odyssey* a passage begins, ‘As soon as Dawn, with her rose-tinted hands had lit the east’



Strong’s Concordance points us to the one and only reference to a rose in the Bible, in Song of Songs 2:1, 2:

¹I am the rose of Sharon¹ and the lily of the valley.

²As the lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

So, while there is no direct Biblical reference to a garden in Jesus’ early life, it appears to be entirely feasible that such a garden might have existed.

And now to Geoffrey Dearmer’s words. Peter Hamilton has the following observations:

At Thursday’s rehearsal we read aloud the text of Tchaikovsky’s anthem, and it was revealing. Rapid changes of mood became evident, and a fine rendition of the anthem requires us to adapt our voices to those changing moods.

Verse 1 sets a gentle, almost pastoral scene. We learn of the young Jesus’ horticultural prowess. We are lulled into a sense of peace and security.

Verse 2 blindsides us by describing the pedestrians as “children” when a better description may be a “teenage gang of toughs and hangers-on, looking for mischief”. They pick roses from the “tree” (which suggests the roses are a type of climbing rose) but probably waste the petals on the ground rather than treasure them.

In verse 3 the tenors lead the way, which allows the thought that the teenage boys lead the taunts with their scornful words. The hangers-on, the basses, altos and sopranos join in the abuse. It is important that the scorn in our voices is heard from the beginning of this verse – not held back until after the word “scornful” appears in the text. As the boy Jesus responds to this bullying, instantly our voices change to reflect his innocence. But his response is not naïve. He is not cowed: with quiet strength he tells them to take the flowers, but leave the thorns. Prophetic.

The opening words of verse 4 conceal the menace, but the gang’s violence becomes clear as, instead of leaving the thorns, they use them to create a crown and then assault Jesus, drawing blood.

I count six distinct moods in this short poem. How can we best portray these through our singing?

The answer to Peter’s question will be revealed in our presentation.



Calendar for 2023

Day	Date	Time	Location	Service/activity
Wednesday	6 December	tba	Gordon Quarter	Official opening
Monday	11 December	Noon	RNSH	Carols
Sunday	17 December	9 am	Swiz	Lessons and carols
Sunday	24 December	9 am	Swiz	Morning Prayer
Sunday	24 December	10 pm	Swiz	Choral Communion
Monday	25 December	8 am	Swiz	Christmas Day Communion



Lou has been representing the San Hospital at Corporate Games in Melbourne. She had a podium finish in the 10,000 metres race. Will nothing ever slow her down?!

¹ Biblical scholars have suggested that the said rose was not really a rose, but one of the thorny plants that still grow wild on the coastal plain of Sharon, north of Tel Aviv.