

May 2007 “30th Anniversary Celebration” Concert Program Notes

SERENADE TO MUSIC

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Ralph Vaughan Williams is recognized as being perhaps the most English of English composers. His style is thought to reflect the English landscape, or, as often, the sea which surrounds the English isle. He was also possessed of an acute insight into an audience’s reaction to music, which enabled him to control with great facility the flow of a listener’s emotions. It was this genius which enabled Vaughan Williams to produce for the Coronation of Edward VIII, a quiet, two-minute anthem beginning with a solo boy singing “O taste and see how gracious the Lord is.” In the midst of all the high pagentry and bombast of the other English composers’ contributions, Vaughan Williams’ tiny gem of a piece was an utter sensation.

The *Serenade to Music* was a similarly unique response to perhaps not quite so extraordinary an event. As stated on the score, it was “composed for and dedicated to Sir Henry J. Wood on the occasion of his jubilee, in recognition of his services to music, by R. Vaughan Williams.” This was in 1938, and the “Jubilee” concert, marking Wood’s fifty years of activity as a professional conductor, took place at the Royal Albert Hall on 5 October, 1938. Taking part were contingents of the three top English orchestras, three choral societies, and no fewer than sixteen internationally-acclaimed solo singers, male and female. Their presence was precisely what made the Serenade unique: it was written for these singers, made-to-measure to the point where they are actually identified in the score by their initials. All are given solo passages, however brief, and at climactic moments they join forces in broad harmonies. Most of the original singers are dimly remembered names today, with the exception of Dame Eva Turner, for whom the soaring solo, “How many things by season season’d are to their right praise and true perfection,” was specifically designed.

The words come from Act V of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, when Lorenzo and Jessica are at Belmont awaiting the return of Portia from Venice. The scene is famous throughout for the lyric beauty of the verse:

The moon shines bright. In such a night as this
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise, – in such a night,
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,
And sigh’d his soul towards the Grecian tents,
where Cressid lay that night...

Later, the lovers sit listening to music and gazing at the stars. The words they speak are set to music of the most exquisite sensuous sweetness, belying the adage that only mediocre poetry gains from being set to good music. Vaughan Williams encompasses uncertainties and reflections as well as hedonistic rapture and contentment. One of its greatest admirers on the occasion of that first performance was Sergei Rachmaninov, who, having played his *Second Piano Concerto* in the first half of the concert, joined Lady Wood and other guests in her box for the second half. The conductor, Felix Weingartner, one among those guests, recalled that during the *Serenade* Rachmaninov “sat at the back, his eyes filled with tears.” Later, Rachmaninov told Wood that he had never before been so moved by a piece of music. In view of how severe a man

Rachmaninov was, and how sturdily he maintained his unsmiling public facade, this admission bears special witness to the power of this music.

John Parton, Baltimore, MD

TE DEUM, Op. 103

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

The son of a Bohemian innkeeper who had no plans for him as a professional musician, Antonín Dvořák worked and studied his way from a small village to the rank of internationally renowned composers. Beginning with his violin training from the village schoolmaster, he went on to study at the Prague Organ School. Following his graduation he made a living as a viola player in the orchestra of the National Theater in Prague, working also as a piano teacher, accompanist and composer. Gradually his compositional talent became noticed, most importantly by Johannes Brahms, who was instrumental in awarding Dvořák a prestigious prize (the first of many), and launched his international career. It is not too exaggerated to say that Dvořák became the most famous and celebrated of Czech national composers – yet who had to struggle with his publisher in order to have his name spelled in the Czech way (the way he wrote it!). Nor is it possible to forget the fierce champion that he was of pan-Slavism. In his works we can hear Dvořák’s abundant creativity, his gift for spontaneous melody, and his trademarks of rhythmic variety, harmonic color and intensity. Many listeners have discovered that passages of his music, once heard, are unforgettable.

The *Te Deum*, a centuries-old song text of praise and rejoicing has a definite place in the Roman Catholic and Anglican/Episcopalian liturgy. From the seventeenth century on, the *Te Deum* was used as an official hymn of thanksgiving for special occasions, notably after great war victories or recovery from plagues. As such, it often received immensely splendid settings for numerous performers.

Dvořák set the text of the *Te Deum* in response to a request from his American Patron, Jennette Thurber, who wished him to compose a short cantata for his first concert when he arrived in New York City (1892) to take up his duties as head of the National Conservatory. His British biographer, John Clapham, notes that he “obviously enjoyed writing it. His approach to the text was certainly novel, and resulted in a delightful blend of simple and direct diatonic writing...The cantata opens with a forthright display of jubilation that reminds us of a peal of bells, set against a conflicting triplet rhythm for the kettle drums. In the second part, the noble bass solo, “Rex gloriae,” is set between fine passages for bass choir; and the section “Te ergo quaesumus,” a verse which affected the composer deeply because of the phrase “redeemed by Thy precious blood” is entrancingly set for sopranos above like pulsing accompaniment, and with violins soaring above like an angelic choir. The third part turns into a kind of dance, with perhaps a suggestion of the gamboling of forest fairies.”

The concluding section recalls the opening section, as is Dvořák’s practice, to come to a logical conclusion as well as a transcendent one. The form then, is a trajectory that comes back to its starting point, returning in fuller, more significant form as a result of what has been experienced. Emotionally, we can only concur with what we ourselves have found to be true.

Barbara A. Renton, Ph.D.,
Dominus Musicae Slavicae, Bainbridge, NY

CELEBRATION JAZZ MASS

KAREL RŮŽIČKA, SR.

Intrigued by the inclusion of a “jazz mass” in the offerings of the 1997 Prague Spring Music Festival, and impressed by the participation of the renowned Pavel Kühn Choir, CPC director Frances Motyca Dawson attended the performance at the Church of Sts. Simon & Jude, and came back with a commitment from composer/pianist Karel Růžička to allow her to perform the composition in its American debut in May, 1998 in Columbia. For that performance, as well as the performance tonight, Mr. Růžička and his son, virtuoso sax player, Karel, Jr., played the piano and sax parts as heard on their 1994 award winning CD of the *Mass*.

Commissioned by Antonin Matzner, composition of the *Celebration Jazz Mass* was influenced by Duke Ellington’s *Sacred Concert*, Francis Poulenc’s *Gloria*, and Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, as well as the public’s response to Jaromír Hnlička’s *Missa Jazz*. Following the liturgy of the Latin Mass, the five main parts of *Celebration Jazz Mass* are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, written in a style directly reflecting the gospel and blues roots of jazz, including their contemporary reflections in the present funky style. In addition, the work contains three short blues sections, without voices, including a version of Růžička’s great gospel-inspired *Celebration Blues*, which provides the unifying motif.

Following a bell-like opening, the motif from *Celebration Blues* appears in the first bars of Introitus, shifting immediately into a spontaneous mood, to be followed by a majestic switch-over and finally the first part of the ordinary of the *Mass*, the Kyrie. The jazz authenticity of the sung parts is enhanced by the lively swing pattern of the instrumental accompaniment. The ceremonial choral introduction in Gloria is replaced by an ardent solo thanksgiving, from which an urgent “Jesu Christe cum sancto Spiritu” ensues. The dramatically arched Credo leads from the actual confession to the musically enhanced secret of Incarnation, in which the soloists/instrumentalists get their first chance of improvisation. The entire following contemplative part, composed as a modern jazz ballad, is theirs. The focus of Sanctus is the joyous “hosanna in excelsis,” repeated once more in the actual finale of the *Mass* before the closing prayer and evoking the ecstatic mood of African-American congregations, which bore spirituals as one of the most beautiful fruits of African-American musicality. The touchingly ardent Agnus Dei is replaced by the ceremonious mood of *Celebration Blues*, while the simple melody combined with the words of the most widespread prayer of the Christian world is heard at the humble end of the whole *Mass*.

After the premiere held on October 27, 1991, in the Church of the Most Holy Heart of the Lord, in Vinohrady, Prague, on the occasion of the 19th International Jazz Festival, and the repeated performance at the church of St. Moritz in Olomouc in 1994, the composition was recorded by the Czech Radio and shortly afterwards released on CD by Supraphon, on the initiative of the conductor, Pavel Kühn. It was Pavel Kühn again, who asked Karel Růžička to compose another spiritual work for the same set of musicians before other planned appearances, so as to be able to give a regular-length concert. The result, *Te Deum*, was first performed with the *Celebration Jazz Mass* on July 12, 1996 in Studienkirche St. Michael in Passau, Germany, as part of the 1996 European Weeks of Culture festival.

Barbara A. Renton, Ph.D.,
Dominus Musicae Slavicae, Bainbridge, NY