

## WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL CHOIR VISITS PORTAFERRY

On 24th April 2009 Westminster Cathedral Choir travelled to Portaferry to give a performance of choral works from the 16th-20th centuries. Under the direction of their Master of Music, Martin Baker, they are widely acknowledged to be one of the best Cathedral Choirs in the world and the only one to win a Grammy in the last 30 years.

As the lights dimmed and they mounted the stage in their scarlet robes – 10 lay clerks, all professional singers in their own right, and 20 choristers, the more than capacity audience (standing room only) knew that they were in for a stupendous evening. From the moment they sang their first chord, the tsunami of sound they produced swept all in front of it, taking no prisoners. But, the quality of their singing and Matthew Martin's accompaniment (and performances) left no one in any doubt that this was an utterly memorable evening in the history of this building. The programme included:

Palestrina *Tu es Petrus*  
Palestrina *Missa Tu es Petrus 'Gloria'*  
Taverner *Dum transisset*  
Victoria *Dic nobis Maria*  
Organ de Arouxo - *Tiento y discurso de segundo tono*

F Martin *Messe Gloria 'Agnus'*  
Dupré *O salutaris hostia*  
Harris *Faire is the heaven*  
Organ: *Stanford Postlude in D*

Harvey *Mass 'Gloria'*  
Mozart *Ave verum corpus*  
MacMillan *Changed*  
Holst *Nunc Dimittis*

**Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina** is the preeminent Italian composer of renaissance polyphony. Tonight, the choir will sing two exquisitely beautiful examples of this: *Tu es Petrus* 'Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church..' and the corresponding Mass setting *Missa Tu es Petrus*. The first is a six part motet from his second (1572) Book of Motets. It abandons the antiphon chant and text, instead setting Christ's complete speech (Matt. 6:18-19). It concludes with the same exuberant music that surges upwards at "and to you (Peter) I give the keys of heaven."

**John Taverner's** music dates from the English Reformation. He refined the insular traditions of soaring treble parts and thick, melismatic counterpoint. His settings of the Easter Respond '*Dum transisset Sabbatum*', foreshadow the early compositions of Tallis. The text narrates the visit of the three Marys to the empty tomb of Jesus and closes with a jubilant "Alleluia".

**Tomás Luis de Victoria** was born in Ávila, entering its choir at the age of ten. His first publication was in 1572 and his music is

perfectly accommodated to the voice, both in melody and diction, whether in the dark sombre moods of the lamentations or the exuberant polyphonic phrasing of the piece we hear tonight: *Dic nobis Maria*, from the text for Mass on Easter Sunday: "Tell us Mary, what did you see on the way?"

We know little of **Francisco Correa de Arouxo's** life but in 1599 he received an organ appointment in Seville, though a lawsuit delayed confirmation for six years. In 1608, he was ordained a priest but in 1636 left Seville to take up a post at Jaen Cathedral. In 1640, he was appointed as a prebendary at Segovia Cathedral and remained there for the rest of his life, dying in abject poverty. His surviving works are contained in his *Libro de tientos y discursos de música practica, y theorica de organo intitulado Facultad organica*. Published in 1626, it contains 69 works employing virtuosic figurations often at the expense of contrapuntal development. He makes much use of unusual sonorities and rhythmic groupings. For Matthew Martin, transforming our 1917 Evans and Barr Belfast

organ into its 17th Century Spanish antecedent will be an interesting challenge!

**Frank Martin** is the pre-eminent Swiss composer of the 20th Century. The *Messe*, completed in 1926 but not premiered until 1963, is his most frequently performed work. Its austerity is obvious in the homophonic, medieval flavours but there are nods to Stravinsky and moments of sheer sensual beauty in both the *Agnus* and the *Gloria*. It is especially appropriate for tonight's juxtaposition of performer and host that this Catholic Mass should have been penned by a Calvinist composer!

**Marcel Dupré** was born in Rouen in 1886, into a family of prodigious musical talent. In 1926 he was appointed Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire, where he remained for 30 years and, in 1934 when Widor retired from Saint-Sulpice Dupré, became titulaire in his own right - a post he held until his death on Whit Sunday 1971. *O salutaris hostia* "O Saving Host", is the first of the Quatre Motets published in 1916. It opens with an organ flourish and whilst the instrument is a major feature of the piece, it never dominates but rather works along with the choir developing the themes to their ultimate conclusion.

*Faire is the Heaven* by **Sir William Harris** brings us to 20th Century England. He trained at the Royal College of Music and settled in Oxford where he was organist at both New College and Christ Church. Subsequently, he was Organist and Master of the Choristers at St George's Chapel Windsor for nearly three decades. He is remembered chiefly for his church music of which this anthem, a setting for double choir of a poem by Edmund Spenser, is the outstanding example.

**Charles Villiers Stanford** was born in Dublin, the only son of John Stanford, a Dublin lawyer and amateur musician. He studied in London and in 1870 won a scholarship to Queens' College, Cambridge. In 1873 he moved to Trinity College, a post he held until 1892. His great *Postlude in D* is the last and grandest of the 'Six Short Preludes and Postludes' published in the early 1900s.

**Jonathan Harvey** is an honorary fellow of St John's College Cambridge and one of the great late twentieth Century British composers. His setting of the mass is a wonderfully original and evocative example of this era in British

music and the *Gloria* from the Mass perhaps the most exuberant example of his writing.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** requires no introduction and his *Ave verum corpus* is one of his best loved choral works. In early 1791 his wife, Constanze Mozart, was taking the waters at Baden, near Vienna. During his visits to her Mozart had become friendly with the local school-teacher and choirmaster for whom he wrote this piece for the feast of Corpus Christi. Einstein described how in this brief motet 'ecclesiastical and personal elements flow together'.

**James MacMillan CBE** read music at Edinburgh and Durham Universities before settling in Glasgow. He is an affiliate composer of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and has been appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic. This simple secular setting of texts from Wallace Stevens's *The Man with the Blue Guitar* has a slow alternating organ accompaniment underlying the choir, whose bluesy harmonies clearly express the origins of the piece.

**Gustav Theodore Holst** was born in 1874 in Cheltenham to a family of Swedish extraction. Having studied at the Royal College of Music in London, he became an internationally recognised composer but was also a teacher for nearly 20 years at St Paul's Girls School, Hammersmith. He is most famous for his orchestral suite *The Planets* and his early work was influenced by Maurice Ravel, Edvard Grieg, Richard Strauss and fellow student, and great friend and admirer, Ralph Vaughan Williams. However, his music is highly original being heavily influenced by Hindu spiritualism and English folk tunes. As a result, he is well known for his unconventional use of metre and haunting melodies. His setting of the words of the *Nunc Dimittis* - the 'Song of Simeon', for unaccompanied eight part mixed choir was written in 1915 and was first sung in Westminster Cathedral in April of that year - one of a number of choral pieces Sir Richard Terry commissioned from the leading composers of the day. The opening is typical Holst: a chord built up one interval at a time, where the effect is to create a suspension of time, a device he was later to use in the *Planets Suite*. The music continues as a pastiche of the high renaissance style, with points of imitation and pseudo-Elizabethan cadences.

After the concert Paul Neill, of Quintin Castle, hosted a magnificent reception. The Castle and its grounds have recently undergone major refurbishment and this is undoubtedly one of Ireland's finest Gothick castles. The Castle sits on the rocks above Quintin Bay with stunning views across the Irish Sea. The refurbishment of the terraces, gardens and woodlands, so close to the shore and in such a windswept location, is hugely to Paul's credit.

Many people contributed hugely to this event and we owe a special thank you to our many benefactors and sponsors:

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The concert was arranged in association with St Peter's Cathedral Belfast where the boys from the choir sang again the following evening. Afterwards, Mrs Susan Elliott, American Consul General, hosted a reception for the *friends* and for St Peter's: a perfect way to end what had been a stupendous weekend.