

Salisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 4TH FEBRUARY 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

High Praise in Troubled Times

Following on from two weeks ago, when I wrote a bit about various versions of the Ave Maria, this week I've decided to look at a song of praise, the *Te Deum*. The text of the Te Deum (we praise thee, O God) can be traced right back to the 4th century. It appeared in hymnals (collections of hymns) from the 6th century.

There are many settings of the Te Deum to enjoy; and I have decided to restrict myself to focusing on four versions, although as I type, I've just thought of a fifth which is excellent... but I'll save the fifth one for another newsletter! We'll take a look at the different versions in chronological order. All four Te Deum settings are on my conducting "to do" list!



Firstly, to the version by **Henry Purcell (1659 - 1695)**, composed for the annual celebrations of St. Cecilia's Day (22nd November) in 1694. Normally, Purcell would have composed an Ode for the occasion (you may have heard or sung Purcell's "Ode for St. Cecilia" composed for the 1692 celebrations), but in 1694, Purcell instead chose to compose a **Te Deum and Jubilate**, which were performed in St. Bride's Church, Fleet Street, London, recently rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren in the 1670s, following the Great Fire of London in 1666, when the church was completely destroyed. Being a major musical occasion, Purcell composed not only a full string orchestra but also added the brilliant colour of two trumpets to texts which are often celebratory. The Te Deum also requires soloists (ideally six, but you can get away with four) and choir, who often sing in five-part harmony (SSATB).

Here are the choir of Clare College in action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTs13aYyw9Q>

We jump forward nearly 50 years to a setting by **George Frederic Handel (1685 - 1759)**. To celebrate the victory won by the combined Austrian and British armies over the French at Dettingen in Lower Franconia on 27th June 1743, Handel composed the **Dettingen Te Deum**. The work was premiered on 27th November 1743 at St. James's Palace, in the presence of King George II. By coincidence, the construction and word-setting of Purcell's Te Deum had a direct influence on Handel's, with the chorus often singing in five parts and the employment of at least four soloists. Trumpets are again to the



fore, although Handel takes the orchestration further, with the inclusion of oboes and bassoons. In comparison to Purcell's version which lasts 10-15 minutes, Handel's is closer to 35-40 minutes!

Here is an excellent performance from the Market Church, Halle, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the death of Handel in 2009:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWGEMj70dFw>



For version number three, we jump 134 years ahead to 16th May 1877, when the Irish composer **Charles Villiers Stanford (1852 - 1924)** became permanent organist at Trinity College, Cambridge on a salary of £250 per annum. On being appointed as permanent organist, it was agreed that Stanford and the Precentor would choose (and purchase) the music for chapel jointly (as is evident from the joint signatures in the Trinity music lists). However, this proved to be a contentious plan of action and Stanford eventually declined to continue this practice, refusing to append his name to the music lists over which, he claimed, he had no control! Not to be outdone, Stanford continued to introduce new repertoire to the chapel choir, including his own setting of the Jubilate Deo and **Te Deum in B flat**, Op 10, first sung at Matins on 25th May 1879. The Te Deum was sung again with the Benedictus on the morning of 24th August and the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis were sung in the evening. The Service in B flat, Op 10, marked a major step forward in Stanford's setting of the morning and evening canticles.

I've gone for this recording from Winchester Cathedral choir conducted by David Hill, as this has the orchestral accompaniment, provided on this recording by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbaz9T-RW-M> (this would be great to do in a Festival concert in the Cathedral, perhaps with the Jubilate and a set of evening canticles!)

We fast forward 74 years for our final setting. The **Coronation Te Deum** was composed by **William Walton (1902 - 1983)** for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Walton had been working on a Te Deum setting for the First Night of the Proms in 1944 but had become side-tracked by the incidental music for Henry V. Walton seemed pleased with his work, as displayed in a letter he wrote to the actor Christopher Hassall: *"I've got cracking on the Te Deum. You will like it, I think, and I hope he will too. Lots of counter-tenors and little boys Holy-holying, not to mention all the Queen's Trumpeters and side drum"*. This is a magnificent work and I would go as far as saying that **this piece is one of my top ten favourite choral works** (can you see a pattern emerging)!



To persuade you that this is a great piece, here are the choir of Winchester Cathedral and BSO in action again... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7e2rODzwZWE> ... and if you want to hear the piece in its original context, you can watch the 1953 Coronation service in full here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52NTjasbmqw> The Coronation Te Deum is almost at the end of the service (2 hours, 31 minutes in).

That's all for this week folks, except to quickly remind you about the online zoom session on Wednesday 24th February. See the members section of the choir website for more information.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham