

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 18TH FEBRUARY 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

Allegri's Miserere and other psalm settings



As yesterday was Ash Wednesday, I thought I would take as my starting point a work which is synonymous with this date, the **Miserere** by the Italian composer and priest, **Gregorio Allegri (1582 - 1652)**. Allegri studied music as a puer (boy chorister) at San Luigi dei Francesi. Being intended for the Church, he obtained a benefice in the cathedral of Fermo. Here he composed a large number of motets and other sacred music, which, being brought to the notice of Pope Urban VIII, obtained for him an appointment in the choir of the Sistine Chapel at Rome as a contralto. He held this from 6th December 1629 until his death. Allegri is said to have been a virtuous man, as well as good-natured and generous to the poor and to prisoners. Allegri composed a large number of religious pieces, including motets and several settings of the Mass. He is best known for his setting of Psalm 51, known as the Miserere. I could write more about the Allegri, but decided to subcontract the work to the BBC instead: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yi2n7srJ_v8

With psalm settings in mind, I decided to write a bit about some of my favourite settings of psalms. I've tried to go for pieces and composers that will probably be unfamiliar to you, so that we all have a greater appreciation and wider knowledge of choral music!

I don't think I have featured a female composer in the newsletters yet, or if I have, it wasn't recently, so let's rectify that now with a special mention for the French composer **Lili Boulanger**. Lili Boulanger was born on **21st August 1893** and was a child prodigy. At age two and a half, she was reading music... at five, she was singing Faure songs, accompanied by the composer and at six, she began studying harmony seriously. Amazing!!! Boulanger first came to general notice when she entered and won the prestigious Prix de Rome composition prize in 1913, just short of her 20th birthday. Claude Debussy, who had won the same prize 30 years earlier, noted in a newspaper article that Boulanger's composition would have done credit to an older composer.



Tragically, Lili Boulanger suffered from chronic illness, beginning with a case of bronchial pneumonia at age two that weakened her immune system, leading to the "intestinal tuberculosis" that ended her life on **15th March 1918** at the age of 24.

My introduction to the choral music of Lili Boulanger was purely by accident. Quite a few years ago, I bought a CD of choral music, that by chance had her setting of **Psalm 24** on it, which really made me sit up and pay attention. I particularly love the slightly unusual instrumental combination of brass, organ, timpani and harp. More pieces need to be written for this instrumentation! Here is a version on YouTube which includes the score so you can sing along:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oaDeBhnAo8c>



After the exhilaration of the Boulanger, let's calm things down a bit with **Like as the hart**, a setting of words from Psalm 42 by the English composer **Herbert Howells (1892 - 1983)**. This anthem was composed in a single day in 1941 and published two years later as the third of four anthems "in time of war" for choir and organ. This setting stands out as a miniature masterpiece that connects directly with performers and listeners alike, by being simple and effective, the music only occasionally dipping into four-part harmony. Talking of harmony, listen out for the "shades of blue" in some of the chords! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEYije-RDvE>

I have recently written more about Herbert Howells for the weekly magazine that my church is sending out during lockdown, so to save me repeating myself, you can read more about Howells on page 22 of this pdf:

<https://stfaith.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/11-February-2021-Corona-Chronicle-Vol-43.pdf>

My final psalm setting this week is by the composer **Ernest Walker (1870 - 1949)**. Ernest Walker was a composer, organist, pianist and teacher. Walker was also a writer, he was editor of the *Musical Gazette*, a quarterly publication, from 1899 to 1902 and wrote a number of articles for the 2nd edition of Grove's Dictionary of



Music and Musicians. He wrote articles and critiques for *The Times* and *Manchester Guardian* and wrote programme notes for concerts. His most important literary work was a book titled "History of Music in England", which is still available to buy (I've just checked)! Ernest Walker's essays written over a 30-year period were collected

in the book "Free Thought and the Musician", in which he explains his philosophical, religious and mystical views. Although Ernest Walker is described as a man of unflinching integrity and kindness, he was a man of strong prejudices: he condemned Victorian music: Arthur Sullivan ("disgraceful rubbish") and John Stainer's "The Crucifixion", and he dismissed all medieval music as "pre-artistic"... If you disagree with some of his views, I hope that doesn't put you off listening to and enjoying his anthem titled **I will lift up mine eyes**. I think it's a beautiful setting of words from Psalm 121, with a lovely ascending and descending organ part; and a wonderful shift in harmony in the last few bars. This anthem doesn't quite make it into my top ten, but it nearly does! When the time comes, I would like this at my funeral please... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMXxYyA-qBM>



More about Ernest Walker in this pdf:

<https://stfaith.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/19-August-2020-Music-Newsletter.pdf>

That's all for this week folks, except to say that there is **no newsletter** next week; the Haydn zoom session takes its place! See the choir website and check your emails for all the details.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham