

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 25TH MARCH 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

A Teary Tale

My starting point for this week's ramblings is the text of the famous hymn Drop, drop slow tears by the English poet **Phineas Fletcher (1582 - 1650)**. I thought it would be good (and a bit different) to compare different versions of the same text, so here goes!



My first musical offering is the famous setting by the English composer and organist **Orlando Gibbons (1583 - 1625)**. Orlando Gibbons sang in the choir of King's College, Cambridge between 1596 and 1598. In 1603, he was singing in the Chapel Royal and by 1615 he was an organist there, later becoming the main organist. Gibbons was also noted as being organist of Westminster Abbey in 1623. He died aged 41 in Canterbury and was buried in Canterbury Cathedral.

Here is this version sung by Voces8: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQaLMoPGJzk>

Before I move away from Gibbons, have you ever tried singing the words of "Drop, drop slow tears" to the music of the madrigal "The Silver Swan" (also by Gibbons)? Try it, it works! And if you don't believe me: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDMvYg_-2bk (not the best version, but the only one I could find!)

From the 16th / 17th century to the 21st century (I'm going to come back to the 20th century on page 2) for a version by the British composer and music producer **Thomas Hewitt Jones (b.1984)**. Hewitt Jones was born in Dulwich, South London, into a musical family: his parents are both musicians and his paternal grandparents were both composers. Educated at Dulwich College, he went on to be the organ scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Hewitt Jones was the winner of the 2003 BBC Young Composer of the Year competition, and in 2009 received a BBC Music Magazine "Premiere Album" award for producing an album of the music of Imogen Holst. On 11 July 2016, outgoing Prime Minister David Cameron was recorded humming four notes of an unidentified tune. On the following day, Thomas Hewitt Jones released the sheet music for a "Fantasy on David Cameron": arranged for high/low solo instrument(s) and piano!



Here are Voces8 in action again: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytKOpigjFvU> and link to the score: <https://encorepublications.com/Preview/HewittJonesDropdropslowtears.pdf> (most of the score anyway!)



Back to the 20th century for a setting by the British composer **William Walton (1902 - 1983)**. Church music was never central in Walton's output, however it formed a small but valuable part of his life's work. Walton became a chorister at Christ Church, Oxford at the age of nine. When his voice broke, Walton decided to 'make himself interesting' by writing music. The composer Hubert Parry saw some of Walton's compositions whilst examining in Oxford and is known to have told the Dean "*There's a lot in this chap. You must keep your eye on him*". Walton's first setting of "Drop, drop slow tears" may well have been among these manuscripts, since he was 15 when he wrote it! The version most often heard is the third one, dating from 1930. At the same time, Walton was working on his large-scale oratorio "Belshazzar's Feast", which we'll return to in another newsletter! Here are the choir of Winchester Cathedral in action:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MSnsyigevo>

My final version also dates from the 20th century; and is the final movement of a work by the British composer and pianist **Kenneth Leighton (1929 - 1988)**. Leighton began his musical career as a chorister at Wakefield Cathedral. Encouraged by his mother and the parish priest (who helped obtain a piano), he began piano lessons and while still at school (in 1946) he obtained the Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music (LRAM) in piano performance. Leighton studied Classics at Queen's College, Oxford. After commencing his Classics degree, he began to study simultaneously for a degree in Music. In 1951 he was awarded a Mendelssohn Scholarship, which enabled him to study with the Italian composer Goffredo Petrassi (1904 - 2003) in Rome. On his return from Italy in 1952, Leighton taught briefly at the Royal Marines School of Music in Deal. He held a Gregory Fellowship in music from 1953 in the University of Leeds, and in 1956 was appointed Lecturer, then Reader, in Music in the University of Edinburgh. In 1968, he moved to Oxford University as Fellow in Music of Worcester College. Leighton returned to Edinburgh as Reid Professor of Music in 1970, holding the chair until his death in 1988, six months after being diagnosed with oesophageal cancer.



Crucifixus pro nobis was composed for David Lumsden (father of Andrew Lumsden who is Master of Music at Winchester Cathedral) and the Choir of New College, Oxford in 1961. It is a 20-minute Passion cantata in four movements and is scored for tenor (or soprano) soloist, SATB choir and organ. The text of movements 1 - 3 are by the English poet Patrick Carey (c.1623 - 1657). The first movement [Christ in the Cradle](#) captures the image of winter beautifully, contrasting with the flames and fire in [Christ in the Garden](#). The third movement [Christ in his Passion](#) combines soloist and choir; the tension is built up and up until the musical and emotional release of the [Hymn](#) at the end. The first three movements are best compared with the music of Benjamin Britten. Indeed, Britten and the tenor Peter Pears could easily be the composer and original soloist respectively! The final movement is more along the lines of Vaughan Williams, in particular the second of his Three Shakespeare Songs which I wrote about a fortnight ago. Like all of Leighton's music, it is a bit of an acquired taste; and I would recommend listening to the final movement first. It's a piece that you really have to stop and listen to! Believe it or not, **this is my number two of my favourite choral works!** (click on the links in blue above to listen to each movement)

That's all for this week folks, I hope you're still enjoying (reading) the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham