



with the Elysian Players

Director: Sam Laughton



Christmas in War and Peace

St Paul's, Knightsbridge
7.30pm, Saturday 20 December 2014

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit? (Rosenberg)

*No angel in the sky
Can fully bear that sight,
But downwards bends his burning eye
At mysteries so bright.*

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.* (Tennyson)

The above quotes are placed at the head of the central work in tonight's concert, Judith Bingham's *The Christmas Truce*. It is of course the centenary of this famous event of the First World War, during which German and British soldiers met in No-Man's-Land, exchanged gifts and swapped songs. This forms the starting-point for an exploration of Christmas through years of both conflict and peace in the twentieth century: music of despair, and music of hope.

Once, in royal David's city

Words by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-95)
Solo: Anne Taylor

Henry John Gauntlett (1805-76)

Verses 4-5 arranged by A.H. Mann (1850-1929)
Verse 6 arranged by SL

The first of the now-famous Festivals of Nine Lessons and Carols from the Chapel of King's College Cambridge took place on 24 December 1918, just six weeks after the Armistice. It began, as it has done ever since, with this carol, published in 1848 as one of the 'Hymns for Little Children' by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander, the wife of the Anglican Primate of Ireland. The equally famous tune was added in 1849 by Henry Gauntlett, who had recently played the organ in the world première of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

(solo)
*Once, in royal David's city,
Stood a lowly cattle shed
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed;
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.*

(audience)
*For he is our childhood's pattern:
Day by day like us he grew;
He was little, weak and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew;
And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.*

(choir)
*He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable,
And his cradle was a stall;
With the poor and mean and lowly
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.*

*And our eyes at last shall see him
Through his own redeeming love,
For that Child, so dear and gentle,
Is our Lord in heaven above;
And he leads his children on
To the place where he is gone.*

*And through all his wondrous childhood
He would honour and obey,
Love and watch the lowly maiden
In whose gentle arms he lay:
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as he.*

*Not in that poor, lowly stable
With the oxen standing by
We shall see him, but in heaven,
Set at God's right hand on high,
Where, like stars, his children, crowned,
All in white shall wait around.*

The Holy Boy (A Carol of the Nativity)

Words: Herbert S. Brown

John Ireland (1879-1962)

In Chelsea in December 1913, John Ireland composed a short piano piece entitled 'The Holy Boy', and included it in his 'Four Preludes for Piano'. The words by Herbert H. Brown (his family solicitor) were not added until 1938, and this choral version was then made for the BBC Singers in 1941.

*Lowly, laid in a manger,
With oxen brooding nigh,
The Heav'nly Babe is lying,
His Maiden Mother by.*

*Lo! The way-faring sages,
Who journey'd far through the wild,
Now worship, silent, adoring,
The Boy, The Heav'nly Child.*

*Leave your work and your playtime,
And kneel in homage and prayer,
The Prince of Love is smiling
Asleep in his cradle there.*

*Dim the light of the lantern,
And bare the mean abode,
Yet gold and myrrh and incense
Proclaim the Son of God.*

*Bend your heart to the wonder,
The Birth, the Mystery mild,
And worship, silent, adoring,
The Boy, the Heav'nly Child.*

*Lowly laid in a manger
By Virgin undefiled,
Come worship, silent, adoring,
The Boy, The Heav'nly Child.*

The Christmas Truce

Judith Bingham (b.1952)

Solos: Sally de Frates, Nick Richmond-Smith

This cantata was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 in 2003 and won Judith Bingham the 2004 British Academy Award for Choral Music. She dedicated it 'to my grandfathers, Vivian Thomas MacGowan and Bruce Percy Bingham, who were there'. This is her introduction to the work:

'An R.A.F. flying officer, R.J. Fairhead, observed after the Second World War that if the soldiers along the Western Front in 1914 had refused to go back to fighting after the Christmas Truce, there would have been no 'power-mad dictators' in Europe and WW2 with its loss of millions of lives would never have happened. God's Truce, as many called it at the time, seemed a pivotal moment of opportunity for the western world, and yet the rank and file soldier by and large went back to fighting afterwards with nary a backward glance. One man described it as nothing more than an interval in a boxing match, and indeed many of the extraordinary events that took place still seem based on competition and conflict - football matches (the Germans winning, generally), chasing rabbits and hares, swapping food and souvenirs, and the alternate singing of carols and folk songs.

And yet it is hard to get away from an overwhelming feeling of wonder and compassion when reading about the Truce. The Christmas setting is part of it - the fact that the Incarnation itself took place in a hostile and dangerous setting somehow imbues the Truce with a sense of the miraculous, of God intervening. The terrifying contrast, too, between the sentimental songs sung by both sides; in particular *O Tannenbaum* and *Silent Night*, and the unbelievable level of brutality and dehumanizing violence evokes in us, as human beings, pity for those young men who so easily sacrificed themselves, and regret for the endless chain of conflict that defines our world.

The piece falls loosely into three sections, following the chain of events. At the opening, it is Advent and the men in their separate trenches sing two Advent hymns - a verse from the German chorale *O Jesu Christ, du Höchstes Gut*, and Stainer's hymn *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*. As if in answer to these prayers for help, it begins to snow. (It was the freezing weather that winter that enabled the men to walk easily across No-man's Land to each other.) Now it is Christmas Eve, and each side sings its favourite carol, *O Tannenbaum* and *Silent Night*. The Truce over, the bombardment recommences. Afterwards, the Stainer reprises as if at an interment of the dead. Each of these sections is punctuated by commentaries from the women's voices, acting like a kind of detached Greek chorus. I wanted to avoid using war poetry with all its iconic overtones, and so I have 'poeticized' many eyewitness accounts from both sides, and two newspaper reports, from *The Daily Mail* and *The Manchester Guardian*.

*A great spell has been wrought over the earth, and even I have succumbed to it. Yes, you also. You and I and all of us. Not only our bodies but our souls are in uniform.
I know. It's not easy to explain. Why should there be such agony to bear? Why should the whole world be full of pain?*

German Men: *Erbarm dich mein in solcher Last ...*
English Men: *Come, thou long-expected Jesus ...*

*It was the unreality of silence.
It was the silence of the moon,
It was the silence of the frost-mist.
In that silent night, the stars shone
Over the Forest of the Dead!
Far away, silent blue rockets like
Strange nocturnal birds
Flew over No Man's Land,
Across the frozen mud,
Lights appeared in the frosty air.*

German Men: *O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum ...*

*The soldiers were singing. It was unreal, sublime.
All those songs we used to sing when we were little.
The Christmases of long ago, coming to life again:
Our childhood, the family, the fireside.*

English Men: *Silent Night! Holy Night! ...*
German Men: *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht! ...*

*But now an end to the truce. The news begins again. 1914 darkens over. The lull is finished. The absurdity and the tragedy renew themselves.
They went back to their trenches, back to slaying and being slain. They heard the voice of 2000 years back, but the rulers did not hear and the war went on. Evidently their glimpses of the wiser and better way was interesting, but of no very great practical importance.*

All: *Come, thou long-expected Jesus ...*

*** INTERVAL ***

Un soir de neige (A night of snow)
Poems by Paul Eluard (1895-1952)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

The surrealist Paul Eluard was one of the great poets of the Resistance. Poulenc's lifelong friendship with him produced several major works, culminating in his masterpiece *Figure humaine*. Between the latter's composition and its premiere by the BBC Singers, Poulenc composed this 'little chamber cantata', between 24 and 26 December 1944. Despite the optimism created by the recent liberation of Paris, 'the friction between the bleak coldness of yet another winter of bitter deprivation and the peace of the Christmas season itself give this work a peculiar pungency' (Nicholas Rast).

*De grandes cuillers de neige
Ramassent nos pieds glacés
Et d'une dure parole
Nous heurtons l'hiver têtue
Chaque arbre a sa place en l'air
Chaque roc son poids sur terre
Chaque ruisseau son eau vive
Nous nous n'avons pas de feu*

*Our frozen feet pick up
Great clods of snow
And with deep sighs
We face the coming winter
Each tree has its place in the air
Each rock its place on the earth
Each brook its rushing water
But as for us we have no fire*

*La bonne neige le ciel noir
Les branches mortes la détresse
De la forêt pleine de pièges
Honte à la bête pourchassée
La fuite en flèche dans le cœur.
Les traces d'une proie atroce
Hardi au loup et c'est toujours
Le plus beau loup et c'est toujours
Le dernier vivant que menace
La masse absolue de la mort*

*The pristine snow the black sky
The dead branches the agony
Of the forest full of snares
Shame on the hunted animal
Whose flight is like an arrow in the heart
The tracks of a cruel pursuit
Strength to the wolf always
The most magnificent wolf and always
The last survivor to suffer
The irresistible force of death*

*Bois meurtri bois perdu d'un voyage en hiver
Navire où la neige prend pied
Bois d'asile bois mort, où sans espoir je rêve
De la mer aux miroirs crevés
Un grand moment d'eau froide a saisi les noyés
La foule de mon corps en souffre
Je m'affaiblis je me disperse
J'avoue ma vie j'avoue ma mort j'avoue autrui*

*Woods ruined woods robbed by the ravages of winter
Vessel where the snows amass
Sheltering woods dead woods where without hope I
dream / Of a sea made of shattered mirrors
A surge of cold water seized the drowning victims
My whole body suffering
I grow feeble I am undone
I face my life my death and everything*

*La nuit le froid la solitude
On m'enferma soigneusement
Mais les branches cherchaient leur voie dans la
prison / Autour de moi l'herbe trouva le ciel
On verrouilla le ciel ma prison s'écroula
Le froid vivant le froid brûlant m'eut bien en
main*

*The night the cold the loneliness
They shut me in tightly
But the branches sought a way into my prison
Around me the grass found the sky
The sky was locked up my prison crumbled
The living burning cold had me in its
clutches*

The Weeping Babe

Poem by Edith Sitwell

Solo: Katharine von Schubert

Michael Tippett (1905-98)

On 8 August 1944, a German flying bomb destroyed Whitegates Cottages, Limpsfield, Surrey, two of which belonged to Tippett: and it killed a neighbouring friend, Bronwen Wilson. Tippett had already been commissioned to write a motet for a BBC programme entitled 'Poets' Christmas' to be broadcast on 24 December 1944: and he made it into a memorial for Bronwen.

*The snow is near gone:
The bird's soft flowers
Shine in the thickets and the bowers.
I sing to the spray
Of the world's green Spring.
Lullay, Lullay.*

*Why dost thou weep
My little child?
For the winter heart of the world
O Sun of the Sunless,
Child of the Childless one?
Why weepest thou?
For the Heart of Man
That once was a little child like thee.
And now among the beasts has lain.
Weep not so sore.
Lullay, Lullay.*

*I kiss you and hold you fast from the cold
In my budding breasts
My heart's young leaves.
O little hands and feet wet from thy tears,
O little dayspring that weeps forlorn.
Why must those winter flowers know the cold
Of the world's heart, and those bitter years,
The nails of thy Cross, my sweet flower's thorn.*

The Advent of the Kingdom

Poem by Louis MacNeice (1907-63)

Christopher Rathbone (b. 1947)

The Irish poet Louis MacNeice was a contemporary of John Betjeman and Anthony Blunt at Marlborough College in the 1920s. Christopher Rathbone, organist of the College in the 1980s, composed this 'carol-motet' in 1996, based on lines from 'The Kingdom', a long visionary poem written by MacNeice during World War II.

*Go wherever you choose, among tidy villas or terrible
Docks, dumps and pitheads, or through the spangled moors
Or along the vibrant narrow intestines of great ships
Or into those countries of which we know very little –
Everywhere you will discover the men of the Kingdom.*

*Of such is your future if it is to be fruitful:
Your breaking of bread, your dance of desire,
Your Advent, your Rebirth.*

O magnum mysterium

Carl Rütli (b. 1949)

This setting of an ancient text, in turns luscious and exultant, was completed by the Swiss composer Carl Rütli on Christmas Eve 1991.

*O magnum mysterium et admirabile
sacramentum, ut animalia viderent Dominum
natum, iacentem in praeseptio!
Beata Virgo, cuius viscera meruerunt portare
Dominum Christum. Alleluia. Amen.*

*O great mystery, and wonderful
sacrament, that animals should see the new-born
Lord, lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear Christ the Lord. Alleluia. Amen.*

Three Carol-Anthems

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

1. Here is the little door

Words by Frances Chesterton (1875-1938)

Dedicated to the poet's husband G.K. Chesterton, this setting was completed on 6 September 1918.

*Here is the little door, lift up the latch, O lift!
We need not wander more but enter with our
gift. / Our gift of finest gold,
Gold that was never bought nor sold;
Myrrh to be strewn about His Bed;
Incense in clouds about His Head;
All for the Child that stirs not in His sleep,
But holy slumber holds with ass and sheep.*

*Bend low about His Bed, for each He has a gift;
See how His eyes awake, lift up your hands, O lift!
For gold, He gives a keen-edged sword
(Defend with it Thy little Lord!)
For incense, smoke of battle red
Myrrh for the honoured happy dead;
Gifts for His children, terrible and sweet,
Touched by such tiny hands and Oh such tiny feet.*

2. A Spotless Rose

Words of 14th-century origin, translated by Catherine Winkworth (1827-78)

Solo: David Parker

According to Howells, this carol was written on 22 October 1919 'after idly watching some shunting from the window of a cottage ... in Gloucester which overlooked the Midland Railway. In an upstairs room I looked out on iron railings and the main Bristol-Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging. I wrote it for and dedicated it to my Mother - it always moves me when I hear it, just as if it were written by someone else.'

*A Spotless Rose is blowing,
Sprung from a tender root,
Of ancient seers' foreshowing,
Of Jesse promised fruit;
Its fairest bud unfolds to light
Amid the cold, cold winter,
And in the dark midnight.*

*The Rose which I am singing,
Whereof Isaiah said,
Is from its sweet root springing
In Mary, purest Maid;
For through our God's great love and might,
The Blessed Babe she bare us
In a cold, cold winter's night.*

3. Sing lullaby

Words by F.W. Harvey (1888-1957)

F.W. Harvey was close friends with his Gloucestershire compatriots Howells and Ivor Gurney, both of whom set his poetry to music. Howells, unlike Harvey and Gurney, was prevented by ill-health from fighting in the trenches. After the war, Harvey initially returned to practice as a solicitor, but later pursued a more bohemian lifestyle. Howells dedicated this setting to Harry Stevens-Davis, a City of London banker who became one of his pupils and was one-time organist of Beaconsfield Parish Church.

*Sing lullaby,
While snow doth gently fall,
Sing lullaby to Jesus
Born in an oxen stall.*

*Sing lullaby to Jesus,
Born now in Bethlehem,
The naked blackthorn's growing
To weave his diadem.*

*Sing lullaby
While thickly snow doth fall.
Sing lullaby to Jesus
The Saviour of all.*

Hark! the herald angels sing

Words by Charles Wesley (1707-88) and others

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47)

Verse 3 arranged by Sir David Willcocks (b. 1919)

The 1918 King's Carol Service closed, as it has ever since, with this triumphant Christmas hymn, adapted from words originally written by Charles Wesley in 1739. He was said to have been inspired by the joyous sounds of London church bells heard during a walk to church on Christmas Day. In 1855, W.H.Cummings adapted Wesley's hymn to a version of the second movement of Mendelssohn's 1840 'Festgesang', a cantata composed in honour of the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention of musical type. It is an unlikely marriage of words and text given that Mendelssohn himself had described this music as 'soldierlike and buxom'.

(all)

*Hark! the herald angels sing
'Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!'
Joyful, all ye nations, rise.
Join the triumph of the skies.
With th' Angelic Hosts proclaim,
'Christ is born in Bethlehem!'
Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born King.'*

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold Him come,
Off-spring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail, the incarnate deity
Pleased as Man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born king!'*

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace,
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings.
Now He lays His Glory by,
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born king!'*

THE ELYSIAN SINGERS

Luisa Brennan
Harriet Gritton
Anne Taylor
Katharine von Schubert
Sally de Frates
Helen Dickinson
Katie Robertson
Shinong Song
Jessica Lichtenstein
Jo Reynolds
Helly Seeley

Alice Ruffle
Katie Parker
Francesca Trundle
Kate Tidball
Heather Devine
Rosie Edge
Stephen Cviic
Tony Zacaroli
Richard Warren
John Hayward
Nick Richmond-Smith

Stephen Jones
Martin Hurst
David Parker
Naveen Rajendran
Mark Galtrey
Hugh Gittins
Dingeman Wolfert
Christopher Whitehouse
Mark Brafield

THE ELYSIAN PLAYERS

1st Violins

Ellen Gallagher
Alice Ruffle
Sophie Park

Violas

Lucy Singah
Susanna Hogan
Leo Lang

Double bass

Martin Johnson

Percussion

Tony Summers
Hugh Laughton

2nd Violins

Luisa Brennan
Kate Laughton
Judith Webster

Cellos

Matt Reynish
Alistair Park

Trumpets

Vicky Boyle
Vere Smyth

Organ

Mark Brafield

Sam Laughton

Sam Laughton was organ scholar of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he read music. He now juggles busy careers as a barrister and musician. He is musical director of the Elysian Singers, Craswall Players, Chiltern Camerata and Trinity Camerata, and Director of the Speen Festival. Sam is devoted to conducting and organising the music camps at Pigotts, and is a trustee of two musical charities. He has guest-conducted many orchestras including Oxford Sinfonia, Kensington Chamber Orchestra, Kew Sinfonia, Orchestra of the City and Crendon Chamber Orchestra. And as a keyboard-player he has worked with Oxford Philomusica, the Joyful Company of Singers, ENO Baylis and Garsington Opera.

The Elysian Singers

The Elysian Singers of London, under musical director Sam Laughton, is one of the UK's leading chamber choirs. Known for its adventurous programming and imaginative repertoire, the choir gives concerts both in and outside London, and has recorded widely acclaimed CDs. The Elysians pride themselves on maintaining consistently high performance standards, but a friendly and relaxed atmosphere is also regarded as essential for attracting and keeping good singers. After the choir was founded in 1986 by Matthew Greenall, the group quickly developed a special interest in contemporary music, and has given the world premières of works by John Woolrich, Howard Skempton, Sir John Tavener, John Habron and Paul Stanhope. Matthew was succeeded as music director by Sam Laughton in 2000. The choir regularly performs at venues such as St. Martin-in-the-Fields and St John's Smith Square, and sings with guest conductors, including Jeremy Summerly. It has also participated in festivals around the country, including Spitalfields Festival, Corsham Festival, London Festival of Contemporary Church Music, Malcolm Arnold Festival, York Late Music and English Music Festival. The choir's CD of music by James MacMillan – 'Cantos Sagrados' – received a 5-star rating from BBC Music Magazine. Reviewing 'Songs of the Isles', the choir's 2009 Bantock release, the same publication spoke of the Elysians' 'young, fresh-toned voices, brightly attentive to text without becoming over-punctilious'. There have been several radio and television broadcasts, including the first broadcast performances of Henryk Górecki's 'Miserere' and 'Three Lullabies' on BBC Radio 3, the finals of the Sainsbury's Choir of the Year competition at the Albert Hall, and BBC2's Lesley Garrett Easter Special. Twice in 2011, the choir performed live on Radio 3's 'In Tune', first introducing the première of its latest commission, 'Timepieces' by Ian Stephens, and later the choir's CD, 'The Spirit of Christmas Present', released on Meridian. The choir performed at the Royal Festival Hall in March 2014 as part of a Gala Concert to celebrate the restoration of the organ, performing a specially commissioned work by Sir John Tavener, 'Monument to Beethoven'. The choir's latest CD, 'Timepieces', is now available, featuring works that were given their première performances by the Elysian Singers.

Thanks to the choir's friends and benefactors, including Mr & Mrs P Mynors and Mrs C Cviic.



Forthcoming concerts by the Elysian Singers

Rachmaninoff: Vespers (All-Night Vigil)

7 February 2015 at 7.30 pm, Holy Trinity Sloane Square, London

Miserere: Music by candlelight for Lent and Passiontide

Music by Byrd, Tallis, Sheppard, Bertie Baigent, Mendelssohn, Allegri, Brahms, Gesualdo, Lotti & James MacMillan
17 March 2015 at 7.30 pm, St Martin-in-the Fields, Trafalgar Square, London

The House of the Mind: A celebration of 20th century English choral music

Music by Howells, Finzi, Naylor, Bantock, Harris and Walton
23 May 2015 at 7.00 pm, English Music Festival, Dorchester Abbey, Oxfordshire

Dixit Dominus

Handel: Dixit Dominus & J.S. Bach: Mass in G minor
4 July 2015 at 7.30 pm, Dore Abbey, Abbeydore, Herefordshire
9 July 2015 at 7.30 pm, St James Piccadilly, London

If you would like to join the Elysian Singers' mailing list, please write to
Richard Warren, 20 Downs Road, Beckenham BR3 5JY or email mailinglist@elysiansingers.com.

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