

Sermon for King's College Chapel, 16 October 2011

Howells and Stanford Weekend in Cambridge

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It is a matter for very great celebration that many of us have come here to join in this weekend festival of the music of two composers, Charles Villiers Stanford and Herbert Howells, both of whom made such vital and significant contributions to the repertoire of music for the Anglican liturgy. It is an appropriate coming together not only in that they both had strong Cambridge connections, but that they were as is well known, much loved, if sometimes feared master and favourite pupil. It is a particular pleasure for me to be able to take part in this placing of Howells' setting of Cranmer's eucharistic texts in their proper liturgical context. Opportunities to hear 'An English Mass' in any context are rare enough. Hearing this music as it adorns and lifts our prayers, joining them with those of the heavenly host in the eternal banquet of heaven through our celebration of the liturgy may yet prove to be a unique experience.

It hardly needs me to say that as a composer of church music, Herbert Howells occupies a place at the very pinnacle. His music is a distinctive, inimitable and utterly necessary contribution to worship in the Anglican cathedral tradition in post-war era. Howells was one of very few composers, and of fewer who were truly successful, who gave adequate musical voice to the mystical side of that tradition – a mysticism bound up in sensuous, sinuous musical lines; in the complex, chromatic and bitter-sweet dissonance that the interaction of those lines by no means accidentally engenders. This is music that distracts and engages the senses, that at its best, helps to elevate the meditative and contemplative spirit to newer, higher levels of engagement with the infinite. Yet although we know it to be true, we are still sometimes surprised to remember that this music, so sublimely religious in mood, was composed by a man who had himself firmly rejected the Christian faith.

Yet although Howells had turned his back on the church's teaching and dogma, he was absolutely steeped in its aesthetic. The interactions of architectural space, the play of light refracted through coloured glass onto stonework, the majesty of the language of Cranmer and the King James Bible and perhaps most of all, the sound of

voices in resonant spaces – all of these and more were the influences that had shaped his artistic creed – this if anything, was his religion.

And Cambridge played an essential part in releasing Howells' genius and channelling it in the service of the church. More specifically, it was in this chapel, this space, that the idea that Howells might be just the composer that the church was looking for, was first conceived. Here you might say, is where his talent was spotted.

We can identify the occasion and the work: 2nd February, 1920, the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or Candlemas. The carol-anthem 'A Spotless Rose' was given if not its first performance, we have no information as to when that took place, then certainly a very early one. It had only just been published. The Dean, Eric Milner White, gifted liturgist and patron of the arts, knew quality when he heard it and wrote immediately to Howells, suggesting that he was the man who could inject new life and vigour into English church music. A seed was sown, but this seed did not bear fruit at the time. Howells was a young composer of whom much was predicted, much expected and he had many irons in the musical fire. He was not going to restrict himself to church music at that stage in his career. But move forward twenty years. Howells by the early 1940s had achieved success in many musical genres in that early part of his career, but the late 1920s and the 1930s had also brought frustrations and disappointments. Those years also brought tragedy, in the death from polio of his nine-year old son.

The invitation from St John's College to stand in for their college organist Robin Orr who was on active service, offered Howells an opportunity to re-engage with an area of musical activity that he had long left behind, to re-connect with those architectural spaces and what he invariably referred to as the 'immemorial sound of English voices' within them. Howells' attendance in Cambridge was only required at weekends, and this fitted in well with his teaching at the Royal College of Music. But it was a different kind of life, perhaps a more relaxed and convivial alternative to the pressures and anxieties of wartime London. His London home had after, all, been destroyed in the Blitz. Howells certainly threw himself into the musical and cultural life of the College and of the University. Friendships were made and in some cases renewed. Harold Darke, an old friend for whom the mass we are hearing today was later composed, was performing similar duties in this chapel. In 1942 music by Howells was performed in a concert of music at St John's, billed as being by Cambridge composers. Clearly Howells felt that he was a Cambridge composer, and his association with this university in which St John's made him a Fellow Commoner

and then an Honorary Fellow, may go some way to explaining why, after the war, he declined a very attractive invitation to join Jack Westrup's new Faculty of Music at Oxford.

One very important acquaintanceship was renewed in these years. Towards the end of the war a celebrated meeting took place between Howells, Eric Milner-White (by this time Dean of York) Patrick Hadley and Boris Ord. Milner-White clearly had not forgotten Howells, and now the seed that he had planted in 1920 was about to flower. Recalling that meeting, Howells referred to Milner-White's 'challenge' to the composer to write settings for this college chapel and choir. He also referred to his own promise that if he was to rise to that challenge, it would be on his own terms – which must after all have been what Milner-White was hoping for.

Rise to it, he certainly did and I hardly need elaborate in this place and this company. In the ensuing years, the rest of his composing career, music for the Anglican liturgy, particularly music for evensong – more than twenty settings of the canticles – but also masses and anthems dominated his output and sealed his reputation. Much of it is now core repertoire – though some works, today's mass included, are more rarely heard.

Milner White wrote that the aim of liturgy 'is not to evoke the interest of the passer-by, but to achieve a common prayer before God of which the worshipping Church cannot tire ... Thus gradually, inevitably the quality of prayer rises; its range widens; and liturgy continues to make its silent and immense contribution to the fullest worship of God'. The apostle Paul writing to the church in Ephesus, exhorted his hearers: 'walk worthy of the vocation wherewith you are called'. Of course Paul wasn't thinking about music at all, and he would hardly thank me for applying his words to a non-believer. But I believe that it was Herbert Howells' God-given vocation to beautify and elevate our liturgy with his music and in the discernment of that vocation, Dean Eric Milner-White, this city and university, this chapel and its choir played a part that would be hard to overestimate.