

English Giants

Performed October 29, 2000

The richness of the musical landscape in England is perhaps one of that country's best kept secrets. It was not always the case. During the Elizabethan period, England was the musical center of Europe and composers like William Byrd and Orlando Gibbons were among the most respected musicians of the time. But it was not long before England began to import its most popular composers. Handel became the greatest composer of choral works in the English language and inventor of a unique English art form, the oratorio. Haydn spent seven years in England, revitalizing his career, and was offered the post of royal composer. Mozart spent two years in England as a child (where he played duets with another émigré, J. C. Bach) and at the time of his death was boning up on his English in preparation for a return. Mendelssohn was a frequent visitor to England and was the most popular composer of his day with both the British royal family and the British people.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was a remarkable renaissance in British music which has continued unabated to the present. Composers such as Stanford, Parry, Ireland, Bantock, Delius, Bridge, Arnold, Bliss, Finzi, Brian, to name but a few, are both highly regarded and, more importantly, performed and recorded frequently. This has gone hand in hand with the proliferation of another unique English tradition, local music festivals. There is a strong grass roots quality to many of these festivals, which often involve collaborations between professional and amateur musicians, and a number of important works have been commissioned and premiered at such festivals. Vaughan Williams was the director and principal conductor of the Leith Festival from 1905 to 1953; Holst organized and directed the Thaxted Festival; Britten founded and directed the Aldeburgh Festival.

All this has elevated native composers and their music almost to the status of British Heritage, which has been somewhat of a mixed blessing. There can be a parochial feeling about British music, that it is all well and good for the English but, like cricket or kippers, is an acquired taste for others. The composers mentioned above are hardly household names here and even better known composers like Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst or Britten are best known here for single works. It is unfortunate, for there is a vast body of extraordinary music that is underrepresented in the repertoire, including the two major works on this program.

Handel: *Zadok the Priest*

George Frideric Handel was born in 1685 in Halle, the son of a prominent surgeon at the court of the Duke of Saxony. It was through the Duke's influence that Handel was allowed to study music. A sixteen-year old Handel surprisingly declined an offer of a position at the court of the Elector of Brandenburg, preferring to make his career as an

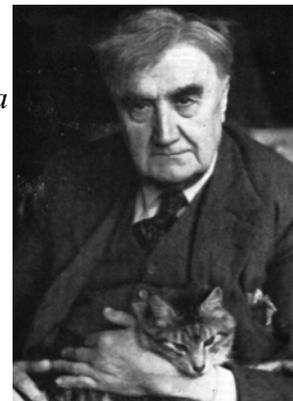
independent musician. Throughout his long career as a keyboard virtuoso, composer and impresario, he often enjoyed the patronage of the nobility, but he accepted few official posts, the most notable being that of kapellmeister to Georg Ludwig, Elector of Hanover and heir to the throne of England, and he actually fulfilled very little in the way of duties. After his appointment Handel immediately sought leave to go to England in 1710, and except for a brief return, spent the rest of his life there. His sojourn in England likely served both his and the Elector's interests. Handel immediately established himself as the premiere composer of Italian opera, but he also served informally as a sort of advance man for the House of Hanover. He quickly made contacts with the important nobility and even the royal family, and was able to pass along useful information to Georg Ludwig. His extended stay in England eventually forced him to resign his position as kapellmeister, but contrary to popular myth he remained on good terms with Georg Ludwig, who acceded to the throne of England in 1714 as George I.

Shortly before his death in 1727, George I appointed Handel to the largely ceremonial post of Composer of the Chapel Royal, and among Handel's first official duties was the composition of music for the coronation of King George II and Queen Caroline. *Zadok the Priest* was one of four Coronation Anthems Handel composed, based on a traditional text and sung after the anointing of the king, signifying that the king had been chosen by God. Although Handel was still largely an opera composer at this time, he was familiar with the anthem form, having composed the eleven Chandos Anthems about a decade earlier.

In *Zadok the Priest* Handel already displays the careful setting of the text which is characteristic of his later oratorios. Each line of text has its own individual melody, and the piece, though short, proceeds in distinct episodes. After an orchestral prelude there is a stately, majestic choral introduction which leads to a lively, dance-like section (reminiscent of the hornpipe in Handel's *Water Music*), followed by a choral fanfare ("God save the King! Long live the King!") The music concludes with the fanfares being intercalated between passages of running sixteenth notes, which are passed between the chorus and orchestra.

Vaughan Williams: *Dona Nobis Pacem*

When Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was asked by the Huddersfield Choral Society to write a piece in celebration of their centennial in 1937, he produced an eloquent plea for peace in *Dona Nobis Pacem*. The prospect of renewed war in Europe was all too real with the rise of Nazism and Fascism, with civil war in Spain and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and was of immense concern to those like Vaughan Williams who had personally experienced the carnage and destruction of World War I. Like many others, Vaughan Williams had been caught up in patriotic fervor and enlisted in 1914, even though he was already forty-two. He served as an ambulance driver with the medical corps and later as an artillery officer. The war was a profound disillusionment to those who had thought to find



something noble or heroic in personal combat, for they experienced instead the widespread use of technology whose sole purpose was mass killing: poison gas, aerial bombardment, automatic weapons. The toll in lives was staggering, with an estimated eight and a half million people killed, but the toll in human spirit was far greater.

In selecting text for *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Vaughan Williams turned to the poetry of Walt Whitman as well as to the scriptures. Vaughan Williams always felt a great affinity for Whitman. He set Whitman in his first major work, *A Sea Symphony* (1911) and continued to return to his poetry throughout his career. Whitman had lived through the Civil War, which rivaled the First World War in ferocity and carnage. Whitman had volunteered in the military hospitals outside Washington, serving not only as an unofficial nurse but also as a sort of morale officer, visiting with the injured men and writing letters for them. The experience was profoundly moving for Whitman and found its way into much of his poetry.

Dona Nobis Pacem is nominally divided into six sections, but the music proceeds without pause. Part I opens with the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God) text from the Latin mass, sung first by the soprano solo. The music becomes increasingly anguished as the full orchestra and chorus enter, repeatedly crying out *dona, dona nobis pacem* (grant us peace.) The chorus fades away leaving the soprano solo to continue repeating *dona nobis pacem* a cappella. As her last note dies away, you can begin to hear the drum beats which begin the next section.

The drum beats and trumpet calls swell as Part II opens, a setting of Whitman's poem *Beat! beat! drums!* The choral writing is economical, mostly parallel fourths, reinforcing the martial character of movement. The relentless pounding of the drums and the trumpet fanfares increase in intensity at each reiteration of the "Beat! beat! drums!" text, a wonderfully graphic image of the irresistible, inexorable force of war as it overwhelms all aspects of everyday life. In spirit this movement seems very close to the portrait of *Mars, the Bringer of War* from *The Planets*, by Vaughan Williams' close friend Gustav Holst. It may seem odd to think of *The Planets* in the context of anti-war music, for Holst clearly had no intent in that direction, but when it was first performed in 1919 most listeners believed that there was a direct allusion to the recent events of World War I. Vaughan Williams clearly understood how that effect was produced.

As Holst had done in *The Planets*, Vaughan Williams provides an immediate contrast with Part III, which opens with a beautiful, peaceful melody featuring a solo violin obligato. The text is Whitman's wonderful poem of consolation, *Reconciliation*, sung first by the baritone solo and then by the chorus. The return of the *dona nobis* music for the soprano solo provides a segue into Part IV.

Vaughan Williams returned to a setting of Whitman's *Dirge for Two Veterans* that he had originally written between 1911 and 1914. The poem is one of Whitman's most poignant and contains some of his most vivid imagery. It is also full of subtle, unsettling contrasts, right from the opening lines:

The last sunbeam
Lightly falls from the finished Sabbath,
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking
Down a new-made double grave.

The movement opens with a funeral march, the steady beat of the drums echoing the second movement. Vaughan Williams' music matches both Whitman's graphic imagery and sense of contrast. When he describes the son and father, falling simultaneously in the same battle, he has the outside voices softly echo the inside voices, a chillingly effective technique. The music swells to a heroic march, but is followed immediately by the spectral image of a grieving mother bearing silent witness to the proceedings, and suddenly the heroic music rings a little hollow. Although the music was largely written before the war began it eerily reflects Vaughan Williams' own experience in the war.

The next section opens with a baritone recitative of an excerpt from a speech made by John Bright, a member of the House of Commons, during the debate on the Crimean War. After another interjection of anguished *dona nobis* music, the chorus enters on a text from Jeremiah, who was describing the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. The text is set in a close canon, as if the listener is hearing both sides in a conflict saying exactly the same words, "We looked for peace, but no good came."

The last section begins again with the baritone, this time invoking the words with which the angel comforted the prophet Daniel. The chorus enters quietly with a reassurance of peace. The music swells and brightens, becoming a brilliant and jubilant paean of praise and glory. The orchestra and chorus fade as the soprano enters again, softly repeating *dona nobis pacem*, with the a cappella chorus quietly adding their assent, an ending not of unbridled optimism, but of hope and possibility.

Walton: *Belshazzar's Feast*

William Walton (1902-1983) was so ensconced during his later life as the "Grand Old Man" of English composers that it is difficult to think of him as an avant garde modernist, yet that was how much of his early work was received. The son of a choirmaster and a singing teacher, Walton had a natural singing voice which earned him a place as a chorister at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford at the age of 10. He conceived a serious interest in music at this time and did so well that he was allowed to enroll in Oxford as an undergraduate at sixteen. He spent much of his time studying the scores of contemporary composers like Stravinsky, Bartok and Prokofiev, neglecting his other studies, and he eventually left Oxford without obtaining his degree.

He did make an important contact at Oxford, Sacheverell Sitwell, who with his brother Osbert and sister Edith comprised Britain's most famous literary and intellectual family. Walton was "adopted" by the Sitwell family, lived with them for a number of years and produced some of his early music, including *Belshazzar's Feast*, in collaboration with them. His first major work was *Façade*, a performance piece in which Walton provided an instrumental background against which a set of Edith's poems was recited. In 1928 the

conductor Sir Thomas Beecham suggested to Walton that he write a viola concerto for the English virtuoso Lionel Tertis. Walton sent the completed score to Tertis, who immediately rejected it as too modern, and Paul Hindemith actually premiered the work at one of Sir Henry Wood's Promenade Concerts, to good success.

Although Walton was now considered a promising young composer, he was still earning a living as a jazz pianist and arranger, so he was somewhat surprised to receive a commission from the BBC for a large-scale oratorio to be performed at the 1931 Leeds Festival. Osbert Sitwell immediately suggested the handwriting on the wall story from the Book of Daniel and agreed to provide a libretto.

The preparation of *Belshazzar's Feast* was not particularly auspicious. Learning that the Berlioz *Requiem*, with its huge orchestra, was also to be performed at the Festival, Walton asked Beecham, who would be conducting, about incorporating extra brass instruments. The conductor, evidently remembering the *Viola Concerto*, sourly replied "You might as well use everything available. You'll never hear the piece again!" Walton often labored over his compositions, and it took him seven months before he was satisfied with his setting of "the god of gold." In rehearsal the chorus found the work extremely trying. The women were scandalized by the text, objecting to singing the word "concubines." The chorus had difficulty with the syncopated rhythms and the work was eventually performed at slower tempi than Walton had intended. The performance, however, was a resounding success and firmly established Walton's reputation. Despite that, *Belshazzar's Feast* was not frequently performed until a recording was issued under the composer's direction in 1958. Since then it has become one of the composer's most frequently performed works.

The Book of Daniel is the source of a number of common phrases in English (having "feet of clay," being cast "into the lion's den," reading the "handwriting on the wall") but the story is perhaps not that familiar. It begins with Nebuchadnezzar, who built the city-state of Babylon into a great empire, not only militarily but also culturally. He was known for the public works he commissioned, including the famous "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" which was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Babylon vied with Egypt for supremacy in the Near East, which is how the Jews came to be involved.

The Egyptians had installed Jehoiakim as king in Judah. In response, Nebuchadnezzar invaded, deposed Jehoiakim, installed his own puppet Zedekiah on the throne, and took Jehoiakim and some young men of his court back to Babylon, Daniel among them. Nebuchadnezzar treated these captives well, employing them to teach him their language and customs. Daniel found particular favor with the king for his ability to interpret dreams, and he became an influential counselor to a succession of Babylonian kings for the next seventy years. Back in Jerusalem, Zedekiah allied himself with the pro-Egyptian factions and Nebuchadnezzar invaded again. This time he sacked and looted Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, put the Israelites to the sword and took the survivors back to Babylon as slaves.

In the Biblical account, Nebuchadnezzar had come to acknowledge the supremacy of the

Lord through the influence of Daniel and a few well-chosen demonstrations of the Lord's might. His willingness to integrate elements of foreign culture and religious belief caused a great deal of friction with the powerful and orthodox cult of the traditional Babylonian god Marduk. After Nebuchadnezzar's death, there was a series of short-lived reigns during which the religious struggles became more pronounced, ending with that of Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's grandson. Internal dissension as well as economic troubles had weakened the Babylonian empire and Cyrus the Great of Persia had invaded.

Instead of leading his troops, Belshazzar stayed in Babylon, where according to the Biblical account, he gave a great feast, drinking wine from the sacred vessels which had been looted from the temple in Jerusalem. Suddenly a disembodied hand appeared, writing upon the wall in Aramaic. Belshazzar's advisors could not explain the words so he sent for Daniel, who interpreted the text as a judgment from God: "Thou hast been weighed in the balance and found wanting." As it happened, the priests of Marduk had been secretly negotiating with the Persians to hand over the city. The Tigris was diverted, the Persians entered Babylon unopposed, Belshazzar was killed and the Babylonian empire came to an end in a single night. Daniel ultimately persuaded Cyrus to repatriate the Jews and the Babylonian Captivity finally came to an end after seventy years.

Belshazzar's Feast is divided into three parts. The first part opens with an ominous blast of the trombone, while a men's chorus intones the prophecy of Isaiah, made some two hundred years earlier, "Thy sons ? shall be taken away and be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." There follows a long lament, which is by turns plaintive, outraged and defiant, ending with a prophecy of the destruction of Babylon.

The second part begins with a recitative by the baritone solo, listing the extensive commerce in which Babylon trafficked, including "the souls of men." Walton uses some of his most distinctive and colorful music to create an image of the bacchanalian feast thrown by Belshazzar. (Hearing this section it is little wonder that Walton also had a significant career scoring films.) The music builds to a climax as the chorus proclaims how Belshazzar and his guests drank wine from the sacred vessels from the temple, immediately followed by ominous chords from the brass, signifying the wrath of God at this sacrilege. Belshazzar is unaffected and proposes a toast to the pagan god of gold. There follows wonderful processional music as each idol is brought forth and the people shout in praise. Walton created music descriptive of each of the gods. The god of gold, which gave him so much compositional trouble, gleams in the torchlight. The god of silver glitters with the sound of bells. The god of iron features an anvil; the god of wood is represented by xylophone and wood blocks; and the god of brass (with tongue firmly in cheek) features a fanfare from the brass section of the orchestra. The feast resumes and again builds to a climax as the people proclaim Belshazzar the "great King of Kings," a gratuitous blasphemy which again earns the ominous chords of God's wrath. The music abruptly shifts mood as the baritone solo eerily describes the appearance of a hand, writing "Mene, mene, tekel upharsin" upon the wall. A men's chorus translates: "Thou art weighed in the balance, and found wanting."

The final section is an exuberant and highly rhythmic song of praise and rejoicing.

Midway through the section the mood becomes more reflective and somber, as if the people are awestruck to think that the great city of Babylon was brought down in a single hour. The jubilation quickly returns as the piece is brought to a rousing conclusion.

Mendelssohn Club presented the Philadelphia premiere of *Belshazzar's Feast* with Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934, a performance that was also broadcast on radio coast to coast. Mendelssohn Club last performed *Belshazzar's Feast* in 1973.

Program notes copyright © 2000 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. All rights reserved

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)