Nowell sing we

The Choir of Worcester College, Oxford

Stephen Farr
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Contemporary Carols
Volume 2

The Choir of Worcester College, Oxford

Nicholas Freestone 9, 13 & 20, Alex Goodwin 3 & Ben Cunningham 19 organ scholars

Stephen Farr conductor & solo organ

About The Choir of Worcester College & Stephen Farr:

'[Worcester College Choir] give performances that radiate a heartfelt glow. [...] The entire sequence, wisely chosen and sung with the utmost expressiveness and skill, is a pure delight.'

The Daily Telegraph

'[...] delivered with captivating charm, considerable beauty of sound and unfussy clarity of detail.'

Gramophone

* world premiere recording
Nowell sing we:
Contemporary Carols, Volume 2

For this, its second recording music for Advent and Christmas on the Resonus Classics label, the choir of Worcester College has again devised a wide-ranging programme, once again including a number of world premiere recordings. Several composers featured have continuing close connections with the choral tradition, with some (Herbert Howells and Lennox Berkeley, for example) firmly established as central figures within it. Others included have more sporadic contact with the world of church and cathedral music, making fascinating and thought-provoking contributions to the repertoire from a different perspective.

Unusually for a work by Herbert Howells (1892-1983), who is established as a major figure in twentieth-century British music, his setting of O Mortal Man (to a melody known as 'The Sussex Mummers’ Carol') remained unperformed until 1994, when it was premiered by the choir of St Paul’s Cathedral under the direction of John Scott. The two manuscripts of the piece, discovered in the library of the Royal College of Music where Howells was a student and later a teacher, are undated: but certain stylistic features suggest it is an early work. The two texted verses, which invite the listener to contemplate aspects of the Passion, as well as the Nativity, of Christ, are separated by a wordless a cappella harmonisation of the melody.

Complexity of texture and rhythm is often an element in the music of Michael Finnissy (b. 1946), Professor of Composition at Southampton University since 1999. However, the Seven Sacred Motets (1993) show him pursuing a more ascetic approach. No more than four vocal parts are required, while rhythmic intricacies are confined to passages recalling the monodies of Hildegard of Bingen; indeed, references to medieval compositional techniques may be found throughout the motets.

Ave regina coelorum, a setting of an eleventh-century troped Marian antiphon, is the fifth piece in the set, and the simplest; it contrasts passages of quasi-plainsong for full unison choir with rapturous cantillations for solo soprano.

Knowledge of the requirements and capabilities of amateur musicians – perhaps grounded in his experience of working as an assistant to Benjamin Britten – informs Colin Matthews’ (b. 1946) setting.
of a text by Sara Teasdale, *The Angels’ Carol*. Matthew's work has been performed internationally, but in this miniature for a local amateur choir he shows himself to be equally attuned to the world of recreational music making. The carol is in simple AABB form, and maintains a gentle ostinato rhythm until its conclusion, when a pleasingly rhetorical interruption heralds the final cadence. Jamie W Hall’s setting of a Middle English poem, *As I lay upon a night*, was likewise composed for amateur singers. Recitative-like verses for soprano and tenor are interspersed with choral passages which respond flexibly to the rhythms of the text and make telling use of changes in dynamic and texture.

With works by Philip Moore (b. 1943), Richard Lloyd (b. 1933) and Grayston Ives (b. 1948), the programme engages with many of the great figures of French tradition – Richard Lloyd and Grayston Ives – contribute works for Advent. The spaces of Durham Cathedral, where Lloyd was Master of the Choristers, are evoked in his setting of the Advent Prose in *Drop down, ye heavens*; a solo soprano, singing as from afar, floats a refrain between increasingly imploring choral interjections. Ives’ *This is the record of John* also explores the potential of antiphony, but to more dramatic effect; tenors and basses intone the narrative portions of the text, interrupted by urgent turba-like outbursts from the full choir. The piece closes in reflective mood, with an extended passage for the full choir, supported for the first time by sustained organ harmony.

Oxford – where Ives (following a successful career as a singer) held the post of Informator Choristarum at Magdalen College – was the birthplace of Lennox Berkeley (1903-1989), who was an undergraduate at Merton College. After studying with Nadia Boulanger, he was taught by Ravel, becoming acquainted with many of the great figures of French music. In *Sweet was the song*, which sets a text from the seventeenth-century Lute-Book of William Ballet, Berkeley displays all the technical finesse found in the music of his distinguished teachers. The use of the organ – sometimes supporting, sometimes elaborating, or commenting on, the choral texture – is especially noteworthy. Similarly elegant economy of means is found in Francis Pott's (*The Salutation Carol*), composed for the Oxford chamber choir Commotio and its conductor Matthew Berry. Writing here for *a cappella* voices, and within a restrained dynamic range, Pott displays a faultless instinct for choral texture and command of contrapuntal line in an idiom which combines a highly personal harmonic language with a sophisticated awareness of the past.

Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012) – a pupil of Lennox Berkeley at the Royal Academy of Music – was one of the most versatile British composers of recent times, contributing works to concert hall, film, and television; he was also active as a jazz performer and composer. He wrote with equal assurance in a range of idioms – including serial and avant-garde – but the three carols included here show his mastery of tonal idioms. The earliest is *Nowell, nowell, tidings true (The Salutation Carol)*, which dates from the 1960s; it contrasts free solo verses with a strictly metrical choral refrain which recurs in varied scorings.

Cathedral music-making was an early formative influence on Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962), a chorister at Canterbury before studying at the Royal College of Music; he is now one of the most active and successful of British contemporary composers. Among his many commissions is *Nowell sing we* written for the choir of Truro Cathedral and their then director Robert Sharpe; it was first performed in December 2006. The verses of the medieval text (in English and Latin) are shared between upper and lower voices, with a rhythmic refrain for full choir which makes striking use of metrical changes to create a sense of restless energy and momentum. John Scott (b. 1956), in his vigorous setting of the medieval Annunciation text *Noval noval*, follows a similar structural approach, but uses two refrains of contrasted character to separate the verses, which employ a greater variety of scorings.

Each year during his appointment as Master of the Queen’s Music from 2004, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934) composed a carol as a gift to the monarch; with Maxwell Davies’
retirement from the position in 2014 it is fitting that one of these works should be included here. In *Kings and Shepherds* The warmth of D flat major and a lilting 6/8 rhythm lend the text (by the great Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown) an appropriately pastoral – even nostalgic – glow.

Serial techniques are, unusually, the basis of Giles Swayne’s (b. 1946) setting of *O Magnum Mysterium*, for upper voices and organ. It was composed for the choir of Westminster Under School after a period in which Swayne had explored alternative methods of musical expression (in his own words, a process of ‘tonal purification’). The 11-note series on which the work is based is heard in its entirety twice: in the minimal organ part (which is directed to be played *staccatissimo*) and in the choral ‘Alleluia’ which precedes the final bars of the work.

The music of Hafliði Hallgrímsson (b. 1941) has been described as ‘eerie and paradoxical’, and paradox certainly seems to be a central aspect of his setting of an ostensibly celebratory medieval text, *Christ was born on Christmas Day*. The vigorous opening, with its fanfare-like quality, is succeeded by a more reflective – even ambiguous – minor key verse, whose march-like tread neutralises the outburst of the opening bars. As the piece progresses, fanfare and march compete, and although the final bars recall the opening moments, the feeling prevails that in this carol joy is not, for some reason, unconfined.

Edmund Rubbra (1901-1986), of the several Oxford composers included here, has the closest connection with Worcester College; he was a Fellow at the college for two decades, and lectured in the newly-formed Faculty of Music. *The Virgin’s Cradle Hymn* (*Dormi Jesu*) is an exquisite miniature in the simplest possible strophic form, whose Latin text (a song of the Virgin to the infant Jesus) Rubbra paraphrased from a print in a German village. Its fluid lines and modest vocal tessitura create an entirely apposite mood of calm reflection.

Regular collaborations with rock and pop artists have been a feature of American composer Nico Muhly’s (b. 1981) musical activity; but in the *O Antiphon Preludes* for organ solo which are interspersed throughout the disc he turns his attention to a more ancient form of musical expression. The piece was written for the English organist James McVinnie, who gave its first performance in Westminster Abbey in December 2010. The plainsong melodies of the Antiphons, which are sung in the days immediately before Christmas, are sometimes quoted directly, but elsewhere appear in fragmentary and inflected form.

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1. Nowell sing we

Nowell sing we now all and some, For Rex pacificus is come.

In Bethlem in that fair city, A child was born of a maiden free, That shall a lord and princë be, A solis ortus cardine

Nowell sing we...

Children were slain full great plenty, Jesu for the love of thee; Wherefore their soulës savëd be, Hostis Herodis impie.

Nowell sing we...

As sunnë shiineth through the glass, So Jesu in his mother was; Thee to servë now grant us grace, O lux beata Trinitas.

Nowell sing we...

Now God is comën to worshipën us; Now of Mary is born Jesus; Make we merry amongës us; Exultet celum laudibus.

Nowell sing we...

Sweet was the song the Virgin sang, When she to Bethlehem Judah came And was delivered of a son, That Blessed Jesu hath to name.

2. The Virgin's Cradle Hymn

Dormi, Jesu! Mater ridet Quaetam dulcem somnum videt, Dormi, Jesu! Blandule.

If thou sleep not, mother mourneth, Singing as her wheel she turneth: Come soft slumber, balmily!

Novel sing we...

3. Sweet was the song

Lula, lullaby sweet babe sang she, My son and eke a Saviour born, Who hath vouchsafed from on high To succour us that were forlorn.

Lalula, lalullaby Sweet babe sang she And rocked him sweetly on her knee.

From the seventeenth century Lute-Book of William Ballet

Richard Rodney Bennett (1936-2012) 5. Puer Nobis

Given, not lent, And not withdrawn – once sent, This Infant of mankind, this One Is still the little welcome Son.

New every year, New-born and newly dear, He comes with tidings and a song, The ages long, the ages long.

Even as the cold Keen winter grows not old, As childhood is so fresh, foreseen, And spring in the familiar green.

Sudden as sweet Come the expected feet, All joy is young and new all art, And He too, whom we have by heart.

Alice Meynell (1847-1922)

John Scott (b. 1956) 6. Nova! nova!

Nova! nova! 'Ave' fit ex 'Eva'

Gabriel of high degree, He came down from Trinity to Nazareth in Galilee

Nova!...

He met a maiden in a place, He kneeled down afore her face. He said 'Hail, Mary, full of grace!'

Nova!...

When the maid heard tell of this She was full sore abashed Iwys, And wened that she had done amiss.

Nova!...

Then said the angel: ‘Dread not you, You shall conceive in all vertue A child whose name shall be Jesu’.

Nova!...
6. Nova! nova! (cont.)

‘It is not yet six months agone
Since Elizabeth conceived John,
As it was prophesied ere long.’

Nova!

Then said the maiden verily:
‘I am your servant right truly.
Ecce ancila Domini’.

Nova!

Anon. fifteenth century (slightly modernised)

Colin Matthews (b. 1946)
8. The Angels’ Carol

The kings they came from out the south,
All dressed in ermine fine;
They bore Him gold and chrysoprase,
And gifts of precious wine.

The shepherds came from out the north,
Their coats were brown and old;
They brought Him little new-born lambs –
They had not any gold.

The wise men came from out the east,
And they were wrapped in white;
The star that led them all the way
Did glorify the night.

The angels came from heaven high,
And they were clad with wings;
And lo, they brought a joyful song
The host of heaven sings.

The kings they knocked upon the door,
The wise men entered in,
The shepherds followed after them
To hear the song begin.

The angels sang through all the night
Until the rising sun,
But little Jesus fell asleep
Before the song was done.

Sara Teasdale (1884-1933)

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)
9. O mortal man (Sussex Mummers’ Carol)

O mortal man, remember well
When Christ our Lord was born,
He was crucified between two thieves,
And crownèd with the thorn.

God Bless the master of this house,
With happiness beside;
Where e’er his body rides or walks,
Lord Jesus be his guide.

Alleluia, Alleluia.

Anon. Traditional
Joseph did whistle and Mary did sing.
And all the bells on earth did ring
– Mary did sing, Mary did sing,
For joy our Lord was born.

O they sail’d in to Bethlehem!
– To Bethlehem, to Bethlehem;
Saint Michael was the steresman.

How the splendour of heaven, high Lord of the skies
Gave help to man
Through his mother’s womb.

Lullaby, lalula, lullaby.
Sweet babe’, sang she,
And rock’d him sweetly on her knee.

From the seventeenth-century
Lute-Book of William Ballet

This is the record of John
when the Jews sent priests and Levites
from Jerusalem to ask him,
‘Who art thou?’
And he confessed and denied not;
And said plainly,
‘I am not the Christ’.
And they asked him,
‘What art thou then? art thou Elias?’
And he said,
‘I am not’.
And they asked him,
‘Art thou the prophet?’
And he answered, ‘No’.
Then said they unto him,
‘What art thou, that we may give an answer unto them that sent us?
What says’t thou of thyself?’
And he said,
‘I am the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
Make straight the way of the Lord’.

Exeter Book (1072)
Tr. C. Kennedy

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John 1:19
Richard Lloyd (b. 1933)
20. **Drop down, ye heavens**

Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour forth righteousness: Let the earth be fruitful, and bring forth a saviour.

Be not very angry, O Lord, neither remember our iniquity for ever: the holy cities are wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation: our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers prais’d thee.

We have sinn’d, and are as an unclean thing, and we all do fade as a leaf: our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away: thou hast hid thy face from us: and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities.

You are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know me and believe me: I, even I, am the Lord, and beside me there is no saviour: I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions: fear not, for I will save thee: for I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer.

**Ave regina coelorum**

Michael Finnissy (b. 1946)
22. **Ave regina coelorum**

Ave, regina coelorum, mater regis angelorum. Funde, virgo ter beata funde

O Maria, flos virginum, velut rosa vel lilium, funde preces Filium pro salute fidelium

Ave, regina coelorum, mater regis angelorum, O Maria virginum, preces pro pregnantibus.

Hail, queen of heaven, Mother of the king of angels. Pour, pour thrice blessed virgin

O Mary, virgin flower, as the rose or lily, Pour prayers of the Son for salvation of the faithful
Ave regina coelorum (cont.)
Hail, queen of heaven,
The mother of the king of angels,
O Virgin Mary
pray for the child.

Richard Rodney Bennett
23. Nowell, nowell, tidings true
(The Salutation Carol)
Nowell, nowell, nowell,
this is the salutation of th'angel Gabriel.
Tidings true there be come new
sent from the Trinity,
by Gabriel to Nazareth,
city of Galilee:
a clean maiden and pure virgin
through her humility
hath conceived the person
second in deity.
Nowell...

When he first presented was
before her fair visage,
in most demure and goodly wise,
he did to her homage.
and said; 'Lady from heav'n so high that
Lordës heritage
the which of thee would born be,
I am sent on message.'
Nowell...

To her came Gabriel with light
and said 'Hail be thou blissful wight,
to be ben clep'd now art though sight'
Redemptoris mater.
At that word that lady bright
anon conceived God full of might;
Then men wist well that she might.
Redemptoris mater.

When Jesu on the rood was pight,
Mary was doleful of that sight
till she see him rise upright,
Redemptoris mater.

Jesu that sittest in heaven light,
Grant us to comen beforn thy sight,
with burde that is so bright,
Redemptoris mater.

Anon. Middle English poem

Nowell...

Art. fifteenth century
Jamie W. Hall
24. As I lay upon a night
As I lay upon a night,
my thought was on a burd
so bright that man clep'n Mary, full of might,
Redemptoris mater.

Anon. Middle English poem

Nowell...
The Choir of Worcester College, Oxford

Sharing its duties with one of the few boys’ choirs remaining in the Oxbridge choral tradition, the Choir of Worcester College, Oxford typically sings two services a week in the eighteenth-century college chapel, providing opportunities for choral and organ scholars. The choir is made up primarily of students from Worcester College together with members from other colleges and from outside the student body.

The mixed choir sings a broad variety of music, from contemporary works by composers associated with the college to medieval English polyphony and a range of music in between. As well as making frequent recordings, the choir performs concerts in and outside of Oxford on a regular basis as well as undertaking foreign or home tours and making day trips to sing services in cathedrals throughout England.

www.worcesterchapel.co.uk

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Soprano
Zoe Bonner
Meredith Hughes
Rachel Knight
Sara Lawson
Elizabeth Morland
Sarah Noyce
Louisa Scott
Kezia St Clere Smithe
Jennifer Snapes
Lucy Taylor
Miriam Thiede

Alto
Rachel Anne Ahlquist
Kay Douglass
Claire Eadington
Eleanor Ferguson
Emma Fox
Giles Pilgrim Morris

Tenor
Jamie Gater
Edward Saklatvala
Michael Solomon Williams
Samuel Williamson

Bass
Jonathan Arnold
Matthew Cheung Salisbury
David Clover
Alan Sheldon
James Sherwood
Stephen Farr

Stephen Farr is Director of Music at St Paul’s Church Knightsbridge, a post which he combines with a busy career as soloist, continuo player, accompanist, and conductor. He was Organ Scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, graduating with a double first in Music and an MPhil in Musicology. He subsequently held appointments at Christ Church, Oxford and at Winchester and Guildford Cathedrals.

A former student of David Sanger and a prizewinning performer at international level, he has an established reputation as one of the leading recitalists of his generation, with a wide-ranging discography to his credit; recent discs for Resonus Classics of music by J.S. Bach, Judith Bingham, and Kenneth Leighton have received unanimous critical acclaim. He has appeared in the UK in venues including the Royal Albert Hall (where he gave the premiere of Judith Bingham’s The Everlasting Crown in the BBC Proms 2011); Bridgewater Hall; Symphony Hall, Birmingham; Westminster Cathedral; King’s College, Cambridge, St Paul’s Celebrity Series and Westminster Abbey: he also appears frequently on BBC Radio 3 as both performer and presenter.

He has a particular commitment to contemporary music, having just completed a PhD in this field, and has been involved in premieres of works by composers including Patrick Gowers, Judith Bingham, Francis Pott, Thomas Hyde, and Jonathan Harvey; he also collaborated with Thomas Adès in a recording of Under Hamelin Hill.

His concerto and ensemble work has included engagements with the Berlin Philharmonic (with whom he appeared in the world premiere of Jonathan Harvey’s Weltethos under Sir Simon Rattle), the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, the Ulster Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the London Mozart Players; he made his debut in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in 2005.

He has also worked with many other leading ensembles including Florilegium, the Bach Choir, the Holst Singers, the BBC Singers, Polyphony, The English Concert, London Baroque Soloists, City of London Sinfonia, Wallace Collection, Academy of Ancient Music, Britten Sinfonia, Dunedin Consort and Players and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

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