

Requiem

Herbert Howells (1892 – 1983)

Salvator Mundi (*O Saviour of the world*)
Psalm 23 (*The Lord is my shepherd*)
Requiem aeternam (1)
Psalm 121 (*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills*)
Requiem aeternam (2)
I heard a voice from heaven

Herbert Howells studied the piano and organ with Sir Herbert Brewer, organist of Gloucester Cathedral, and composition with Sir Charles Stanford at the Royal College of Music. His anthems, and in particular his many wonderful settings of the canticles, place him as probably the greatest composer of Anglican church music.

In 1935 Howells' son Michael died at the age of nine, a tragedy which inevitably cast an immense shadow over the composer's life. Until quite recently it was thought that the *Requiem* was composed in response to Michael's death, but we now know that Howells composed it in 1932 or 1933, originally intending it for the choir of King's College, Cambridge. For some reason the music was never sent to King's, and its existence remained unknown until its eventual publication in 1980, only three years before the composer's own death. After the tragic events of 1935, Howells increasingly associated the *Requiem* with his lost son, so much so that a few years later, when he was composing *Hymnus Paradisi*, a work specifically intended as Michael's memorial and without doubt Howells' masterpiece, he used substantial parts of the earlier *Requiem*, re-scoring it for soloists, large chorus and orchestra.

Fauré and Durufé did not adhere strictly to the standard liturgy in their Requiems, and before them Brahms had gone even further in *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by using his own selection of texts taken from the Lutheran Bible and the Apocrypha. Though musically Howells' *Requiem* could scarcely be more different from the Brahms, there is perhaps a similar spirit at work in the composer's very personal choice of devotional psalms and scriptural passages from both the Catholic and Anglican liturgies for the dead.

Howells' music is much more complex than other choral music of the period, most of which still followed in the Austro-German tradition that had dominated English music for two centuries. Long, unfolding melodies are seamlessly woven into the overall textures; the harmonic language is modal, chromatic, often dissonant and deliberately ambiguous. The overall style is free-flowing, impassioned and impressionistic, all of which gives Howells' music a distinctive visionary quality.

The *Requiem* is written for unaccompanied chorus, which in places divides into double choir. There are six short movements which are organised in a carefully balanced structure. The two outer movements frame two settings of the Latin 'Requiem aeternam' and two psalm-settings. Howells reserves his most complex music for the Latin movements, in which he uses poly-tonality, chord-clusters and the simultaneous use of major and minor keys. In contrast, the psalm-settings are simple and direct, the speech-rhythms of the plain chordal writing arising out of the textual inflections.

One of the earliest and most fundamental influences on Howells was Gloucester Cathedral, with its immense, vaulted spaces and glorious east window. Howells wrote of it as '*a pillar of fire in my imagination.*' He consciously set out to mirror these essentially architectural elements of spaciousness and luminosity in his music, and these characteristics can clearly be heard in the *Requiem*. Significantly, the main climax of the work occurs at the words 'et lux perpetua luceat eis' – 'let light perpetual shine upon them' – a symbol of hope and comfort, confirmed in the closing pages by the final release of tension and the gradual transition to a simple, peaceful D major.

programme notes by John Bawden

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