

The Crucifixion

John Stainer (1840 - 1901)

Stainer was one of the most distinguished musicians of his generation. In 1872 he was appointed organist of St Paul's Cathedral, where he raised performance standards and greatly expanded the repertoire. He was renowned for his considerable scholarship as a researcher into and editor of early music. He was regarded as one of the foremost composers of cathedral music, and was closely involved with the compilation of *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, as well as being music editor of several other important publications. He was an Oxford Professor, a general inspector of music education and held presidencies of several professional bodies. As organist, conductor, composer, teacher and author, the immense contribution that Stainer made to the music of his time can scarcely be over-estimated. As is so often the case, however, all this worthy enterprise has long been forgotten, and today Stainer is remembered simply for *The Crucifixion* and a few rather fine anthems and hymn-tunes.

The Crucifixion is scored for tenor and baritone soloists, mixed choir and organ. It was dedicated to Stainer's pupil and friend William Hodge, assistant sub-organist at St Paul's Cathedral and organist and choirmaster at Marylebone Parish Church, where the cantata was first performed in February 1887, conducted by the composer with Hodge at the organ. In composing *The Crucifixion*, Stainer's intention was to provide a Passiontide cantata written in a musical language and on a scale that would put it within the scope of most parish choirs. Its structure is clearly modelled on the scheme of choruses, chorales, recitatives and arias of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, which in 1873 Stainer had introduced into the Music for Holy Week at St Paul's. The Rev William Sparrow-Simpson, Succentor and Librarian of St Paul's, compiled the libretto, drawing on the Gospel accounts for the narrative elements of the story and writing the texts of the choruses, arias and hymns himself.

The first performance of *The Crucifixion* was well received, but it soon attracted fierce criticism, both for its libretto and its music. The combination of Sparrow-Simpson's shortcomings as a poet and his excessively sentimental language was scarcely a recipe for literary success. Some of the music is also typically sentimental Victoriana, such as the 'Flung wide the gates' choruses and the duet, 'So thou liftest thy divine petition'. Nevertheless, there are also passages of great beauty - the unaccompanied setting of 'God so loved the world', for example, which continues to be performed as an anthem in its own right - and sections of dramatic interest. Stainer's setting of the seven last words from the cross, for four-part men's chorus, is highly effective, especially since it is followed by the stark, unaccompanied final statement from the tenor soloist, 'And he bowed his head and gave up the ghost'. Particularly significant in the overall scheme of *The Crucifixion* are the five hymns, which are designed for congregational participation. Of these, Cross of Jesus must be counted amongst the finest of all hymn-tunes.

How should we view *The Crucifixion* today? Some 120 years have passed since its first performance, and opinions are still sharply divided as to its worth. On the one hand there is the school of thought exemplified by this excoriating critic, writing back in 1971: '*Sparrow-Simpson's appalling doggerel set to Stainer's squalid music is a monument to the inane*'. On the other hand there are many who would agree with the eminent musician Barry Rose, a lifelong advocate of the piece, (his orchestral version has been recorded by the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra and Guildford Camerata) who writes, '*To [Sparrow-Simpson's] words Stainer added his music, writing some of the most memorable hymn-tunes we shall ever hear, and showing a rare sense of understanding in painting the text with music that is both thoughtful and dramatic, whilst also giving us the sublime and unsurpassed unaccompanied setting of God So Loved The World.*' There is little doubt that Stainer's cantata falls far short of the high standards achieved by his contemporaries, Parry and Stanford. But let us not forget that Stainer's aim was a modest one: to provide an extended Passiontide meditation which ordinary choirs could perform and to which congregations could immediately relate. At the time there was no such piece. In this respect he was undoubtedly successful, as the enduring popularity of *The Crucifixion* continues to testify.

programme notes by John Bawden

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