



THE PASSING OF THE SAINTS

Vox Coelestis

Director: Nigel Short

Cathedral & Abbey Church of St Alban

Saturday 7th February 2009

PROGRAMME

THE CONCERT

The traditional Nine Lessons and Carols service at Christmas includes an opening prayer with the line:

*“We remember those who worship on another shore,
and in a greater light”*

Tonight, we recall those saints and martyrs depicted on the great high altar screen in our Abbey. Their stories have inspired some of the most moving choral music ever written, and this concert focuses on that musical and theological link, and includes works specifically written with reference to some of the saints you can find on the screen. The choir will sing from a few different locations, not only for choral effect, but to take the focus away from the singers, and onto the music and the architecture.



**PLEASE RESERVE APPLAUSE UNTIL THE END OF EACH
HALF OF THE CONCERT. THANK YOU.**

THE MUSIC

✠ **Part One - The Music of the Saints** ✠

Introduction

Stephen De Silva - Cathedral Warden & Honorary Canon

Alban Responses *Stephen Darlington*

Written by a former Master of Music (1978-1985), these declamatory responses are regularly used at the start of Albantide services in the Abbey. The second response is **St Alban's** final declaration before his martyrdom.

“Among the roses of the martyrs, brightly shines St Alban. I am called Alban, and I worship and adore the true and living god”



Pax in coelo Plainsong

One of the responses in the ancient Ambrosian Mass

*Peace in heaven, peace on earth, peace to all people
on earth.....*

Sancte Paule Apostole Adrian Willaert (c.1490-1562)

Born in Bruges, Willaert became Maestro di Capella at St Mark's, Venice in 1527, a post he held for over 30 years. Little is known about this work, but imagine the worshippers hearing it in St Mark's at a commemoration of **St Paul** in the 16th century.

*Holy apostle Paul, preacher of truth and teacher of the gentiles,
intercede for us to the Lord who chose you.*

*Paul, honoured man, chosen vessel, by your prayers, make us find
enjoyment in the gifts of heaven, amen.*

Tu es Petrus Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1524-1594)

This is the 6-part version of his setting of these words. The pillars of sound clearly points to **St Peter** as the 'rock', and the whole work has a reassuring feel. Listen for the musical emphasis on "claves regni" - the "keys of heaven".

*[Translation]: Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my
church, and the flames of hell shall not prevail against it, and I
will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven*

Ut queant laxis *Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611)*

Victoria was the most famous 16th century composer in Spain. Many consider him as second only to Palestrina as a composer of sacred polyphony at the time. This 8th century text is a hymn to **St John the Baptist**.

[Translation]: So that your servants may, with loosened voices, resound the wonders of your deeds, clean the guilt from our stained lips, O Saint John



In Manus Tuas *John Sheppard (1515-1558)*

Sheppard was Informator Choristarum at New College Oxford and, latterly, a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. As a singer as well as a composer, he well understood the best ways to compose for the human voice. The text is central to the theme of sainthood.

*Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.
You have redeemed me, O Lord, O God of truth*

Iste Sanctus *Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611)*

This work was one of a set of four, written for the commemoration of martyrs, and probably composed for the choir of Madrid's Monasterio de las Descalzas, where Victoria served as choirmaster for his last twenty-four years.

This is a saint who, for the law of his God, strove even unto death and feared nothing from the words of the impious, for he was founded on a sure rock

Tibi Christe *Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611)*

Another work from Victoria, this time commemorating **St Michael**. The 9th century words of Rhabanus Maurus were translated by John Neale 1851:



*[Translation]: Thee, O Christ, the Father's splendour,
Life and virtue of the heart, In the presence of the
angels, Sing we now with tuneful art, Meetly in
alternate chorus, Bearing our responsive part.*

*Thus we praise with veneration, All the armies of the sky; Chiefly
him, the warrior primate, Of celestial chivalry, Michael, who in
princely virtue, Cast Abaddon from on high.*

*By whose watchful care repelling—King of everlasting grace—
Every ghostly adversary, All things evil, all things base, Grant
us of Thine only goodness, In Thy paradise a place.*

*Laud and honour to the Father, Laud and honour to the Son,
Laud and honour to the Spirit, Ever Three, and ever One,
Consubstantial, co-eternal, While unending ages run.*

Her Sacred Spirit Soars *Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)*

Whitacre takes the contemporary words of Charles Silvestri - a hymn to **St Cecilia**, the patron saint of musicians, and sets them for double choir, in canon. The first phrases rising musically to reflect the title of the work.

*Her sacred spirit soars o'er gilded spires, and breathes into
creative fires a force, in well-tuned chants and chords of countless
choirs..... O shall Cecilia, or shall Goddess Muse reach then to
me across eternal skies?.....*



Bogoroditse Dyevo *Sergei Rachmaninov* (1873 - 1943)

This version of the homage to **Mary**, the “Ave Maria”, is one of sixteen pieces making up the “All-Night Vigil” (also known as the “Vespers”), written in 1915. This work is typical in displaying the immense drama of the All-Night Vigil, from the tremendously atmospheric pianissimo opening, through a thrilling fortissimo as the basses rejoin the other voices, towards the almost imperceptible closing chords which disappear into the dark corners of the building.

Hail, O Virgin, Birth-giver of God, Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee.....

A Song of St Alban *Nigel Short* (b. 1965)

This work was commissioned specially for this concert, using words by the late ‘Ver Poet’ Lois Clark. It recites the journey of St Alban to his ultimate martyrdom.

*Put down your sword, and let the bright steel sleep;
the eagle no longer spreads its wings above your heart;
you have another master now and other vows to keep.*

*Take off your cloak, you do not need its weight
to curb the cold winds now, keep off the rain;
your new-spun cloth has stronger folds to blunt the barbs of hate.*

*And bare your head, your helmet-plumes are grey
with battle dust, the rusty metal dented in the fray;
you have safe protection, now you bow your head to pray.*

*Lay off your life, the new life you have found;
your three-day miracle explodes into eternity, and
flows, rich as a river, on the chosen hill,
scattering crimson roses on the ground.*

INTERVAL: 15 MINUTES

❖ **Part Two - They rest from their labours** ❖



Justorum Animae William Byrd (1543 - 1623)

This is one of Byrd's best-known works, moving from the simplest musical lines to the most intense polyphony, with canonic falling phrases laying the piece to rest at the end.

*The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and the torment
of death shall not touch them. In the sight of the unwise they
seemed to die: but they are in peace*

Holy is the True Light Sir William Harris (1883 - 1973)

Harris was Director of Music at St George's Windsor, and was involved in the coronations of 1937 and 1953. The words, from the Salisbury Diurnal, are treated with a musical radiance and sense of elevation - achieved with the bass part nearly always in the upper vocal register.

*Holy is the True Light, and passing wonderful, lending radiance
to them that endured in the heat of the conflict, from Christ they
inherit a home of unfading splendour, wherein they rejoice with
gladness evermore. Alleluia!*

A Good Night *Richard Rodney-Bennett (b. 1936)*

Written as part of the musical tribute, "Garland for Linda (McCartney)", it was premiered by the Joyful Company of Singers in 1999. Struggling for a suitable text, the composer reached for a book which fell open at the words of Francis Quarles, written in 1632, one in a set of divine poems. The words speak of the passing of a cherished soul:



*Close now thine eyes and rest secure, thy soul is safe
enough..... He that loves thee, he that keeps and guards thee
never slumbers, never sleeps..... Then close thine eyes and rest
secure; No sleep so sweet as thine, no rest so sure.*

Faire is the Heaven *Sir William Harris (1883 - 1973)*

Regarded as Harris' finest work, he sets the words of Edmund Spenser, the 16th century Poet Laureate.

*Faire is the heaven where happy soules have place. In full
enjoyment of felicitie; Whence they do still behold the glorious
face Of the Divine, Eternall Majestie..... As to the Highest they
approach more neare, yet is that Highest farre beyond all telling
Fairer than all the rest which there appeare. Though all their
beauties joynd together were; How then can mortal tongue hope
to expresse the image of such endlessse perfectnesse?*

Song for Athene *Sir John Tavener (b. 1944)*

The words, taken from Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and the Greek Orthodox Funeral service, are used by Tavener to create a pervading serenity as the pain of death subsides and the peace of eternal life approaches. The reference to the "Choir of Saints" seems entirely appropriate to the theme of this concert. The pain

of Christ's death is recalled with his words from the cross, "Remember me O Lord, when you come into your kingdom" with the music reaching its climax at "Come, enjoy rewards and crowns I have prepared for you" at the moment of eventual salvation.



Alleluia. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. Remember me, O Lord when you come into your kingdom. Give rest, O Lord, to your servant who has fallen asleep. The Choir of Saints have found the well-spring of life and door of paradise. Life: a shadow and a dream. Weeping at the grave creates the song. Come, enjoy the rewards and crowns I have prepared for you. Alleluia.

Sleep - Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)

The moment of death is often referred to as a "falling asleep". This work uses the poetry of Charles Silvestri, a Las Vegas-born history teacher, and was commissioned by a Texas mezzo-soprano, whose parents had died within weeks of each other, after 50 years of marriage. The extraordinarily atmospheric opening superbly reflects the words:

"The evening hangs beneath the moon, a silver thread on darkened dune.....I know that sleep is coming soon.....then I surrender unto sleep, where clouds of dream give second sight".

Funeral Ikos - Sir John Tavener (b. 1944)

This serene work is a simple statement of the reward in Paradise for Righteous Souls. The words are part of the funeral rite for Orthodox Priests. It starts with mortality, *Why these bitter words of the dying, which they utter as I go hence? I am parted from my brethren, all my friends do I abandon and go hence".* The journey moves into

the unknown; *“what shall become of me yonder?....only God who hath summoned me knoweth”*. The soul then presents itself to God; *“We go forth on the path eternal.....and present ourselves before the only God eternal.....where then is wealth? Where then is the glory of this world?”* The judgement of the soul then ensues, with *“if thou hast shown mercy unto man.....that same mercy shall be shown thee there”*. Then, finally, at the climax of the piece, Tavener raises the intonation and the dynamic, seemingly lifting the soul into heaven, with the words:



“with ecstasy are we inflamed if we but hear that there is light eternal yonder, that there is paradise wherein every soul of Righteous Ones rejoiceth. Let us all also enter into Christ that all we may cry aloud thus unto God: Alleluia”

I heard a voice from Heaven *Herbert Howells (1893-1983)*

This is the final work of his *Requiem* which was written as his own personal outpouring of grief for the tragic loss of his young son Michael, in 1936. It remained unperformed, and largely unknown, until 1980 - just three years before his own death. The words, from Revelations Ch. 14, bring the theme of this concert - the passing of the souls of the saints into eternal life - to a fitting close:

*I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me: Write, from henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord. Even so, saith the Spirit, for **they rest from their labours.....***

YOUR PERFORMERS

Vox Coelestis was formed in 2005 as a one-off group, by Nigel Short and Simon Filsell to raise funds for the organ appeal at Holy Trinity, Coventry. Since the tremendous success of the first concert, the choir established itself as a purely fundraising group, dedicated to using the enjoyment of the highest-quality singing for entirely charitable purposes. Almost £4,000 has been raised to date. We are delighted to be performing for in aid of the Music Trust, not only through having several current and former St Albans Cathedral Layclerks amongst the performers, but in supporting the future of the choral tradition from which so many of tonight's singers have developed.



Our singers have sung with many other cathedral choirs and distinguished groups, including the Royal Opera House Chorus, Corydon Singers, Joyful Company of Singers, Ex Cathedra, Academy of St Martin in the Fields and Vasari Singers . We are extremely grateful to them for giving of their services free of charge tonight.

NIGEL SHORT (Musical Director)

Nigel started singing at the age of 7 in the choir of St Alphege, Solihull, and studied at the Royal College of Music. He has sung in many of the country's foremost choirs, including St Albans Abbey, Westminster Cathedral and The Tallis Scholars and as a soloist with the English National Opera. After seven years as a member of the world's most celebrated vocal ensemble - the *King's Singers* - Nigel left to



follow his dream of conducting and composing for his own chamber choir, *Tenebrae*. The group has been taken under the wing of Formula One racing champion Jacques Villeneuve, who together with Lady Valerie Solti and James Bowman form the group's Patrons.



SOPRANO

Cath Caunt
Bridget Howarth
Julie Evans
Jenny Filsell
Karen Filsell
Jo Forbes
Alexandra McPhee
Katharine Verney

ALTO

Debbie Alder
Sue Dell
Annika Lindskog
Olivia Maffett
Anastasia Micklethwaite
Janet Willink

TENOR

Simon Colston
Chris Dell
Grayson Jones
Keith Parker
Steve Sanders
Ben Trenchard

BASS

Mark Fenton
Simon Filsell
Jimmy Holliday
David Ireson
Rod McPhee
David Rees-Jones



With sincere thanks to Barry & Helen Forrester, Geoff Bullen and Moira Dean for their help in putting on this event.

Programme design & notes: Simon Filsell