

Seasonal songs of the saints

Alex Hodgkinson leads us through September towards the music of the worship of heaven

ON THE RECORD

For September's red-letter days I offer choral music of sublime serenity. When not displaced by a Sunday, the 8th of the month sees the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We are obviously spoilt for choice when it comes to magnificent settings of Marian texts; I have opted for the great *Ave Maria* by Englishman Robert Parsons (c.1535-1572). Parsons lived and wrote during the most turbulent decades of the 16th century. In his short life he set texts of the new Church of England Prayer Book, but it is his Latin polyphonic works that are most highly regarded. His blockbuster is undoubtedly the 5-part *Ave Maria*.

The motet begins with what sounds like a plainsong incipit, but the piece is actually free-composed rather than quoting or developing extant chant. Excitingly, each entry of the top voice part is one step higher than the last (up to "*Benedicta tu*"), which helps to propel the piece towards an elongated Amen that blooms like a perfect rose.

It is the final track of the disc *Sacred Music* by Robert Parsons, sung by the The Cardinal's Musick and conducted by Andrew Carwood (Hyperion, 2011). The pitch, lower than some performances, gives the texture a richness that is both earthy and luminous. The colour and clarity of the individual vocal lines are riveting.

To consider what Parsons might have written had he lived longer is at once tantalising and heart-breaking. Alongside the notes of this motet in his famous Partbooks, Robert Dow wrote: "You who were so great, Parsons, in life's springtime, how great you would have been in autumn."

● On account of his suave oratory, John, the 4th-century Archbishop of Constantinople, was bestowed with the moniker "Chrysostom" (golden-mouthed). In 1910, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) composed a 20-movement setting of the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, Doctor of the Church, whose feast falls on

September 13. Inspired by both subject and text, the composer wrote quickly. Like Parsons, whilst clearly reminiscent of chant, Rachmaninoff's sequence of prayers, psalms and hymns is entirely original. In a recent recording the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir under Kaspars Putniņš captures the huge range and lavish textures that the music demands (BIS, 2022).

The second movement, "Bless the Lord, O my soul", is the epitome of the Orthodox musical style, with a titanic textural canvas, simple parallel chordal movement, and insistent repetition. Perhaps the best-known movement is the "*Cherubic Hymn*". Sung at the Offertory, it opens with the ranks of cherubim shimmering in the heavens. It takes a sudden, dramatic turn as they sing of the coming of the King, "invisibly upborne by the Angelic Hosts", concluding with an Alleluia of immeasurable beauty.

● On September 17 the Church celebrates another Doctor, Hildegard of Bingen (c.1098-1179):



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Benedictine abbess, composer, poet and mystic. In her *Liber Divinorum Operum* (Book of Divine Works), Hildegard records 10 visions that imagine the relationship between God and creation. The trailblazing early-music group Anonymous 4 recorded the first four Visions on the disc *The Origin of Fire* (Harmonia Mundi, 2005).

As with the others, *Vision II* is bipartite: a verse of chant followed by a verse in two parts. It examines the subject through the characters of Wisdom and her sisters. The two melodies move either in parallel or in symmetry, and the chromatic inflections and dissonant cadences are striking. It is a transcendent experience.

● "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" – the first of the Beatitudes from the *Sermon of the Mount*, as documented by St Matthew, whose feast falls on September 21. Arvo Pärt (b.1935) set the litany in 1990, one of his earliest English-language works. Pärt gives each clause its own harmonic flavour, underpinned by low organ rumbles. The singing rises to a commanding "Amen", followed by a riotous organ cadenza that underlines the profundity of Christ's message. Find it sung by St John's College, Cambridge under David Hill on *Meditation* (SJCR, 2004).

● Michael Tippett's (1905-1998) miniature masterpiece *Plebs Angelica* (Angelic People) was composed for Canterbury Cathedral in 1943, for the feast of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael on September 29 – again, when not displaced as they are this year. Whilst very much in Tippett's own 20th-century dialect, he pays homage to the Tudor musical tradition with weaving, imitative melodies and double-choir scoring. Another great cathedral choir, Christ Church, Oxford, made a fine recording of the work on their 1990 disc *Tippett: Choral Works* (Nimbus), directed by Stephen Darlington.

The vocal lines sound conversational, and each new stanza seems to interrupt the last, affording a thrilling momentum. There are great surges to illustrate the most potent textual imagery (*Virtus Uranica*, for example), and, following Michael's dramatic entrance, each archangel is given his own musical character. The piece culminates in a serene supplication to the Archangels: "transfer us to paradise!" CH

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