

The beauty of sacred sound

Alex Hodgkinson *delights in a 1973 recording of the organist at Notre-Dame, and a selection of other profound religious music*

ON THE RECORD

The cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris is due to reopen later in the year, painstakingly restored following the devastating fire five years ago this month. Amazingly, the celebrated Cavaillé-Coll organ survived with only minor damage.

In the French liturgical tradition, much of the music for the Mass is improvised at the organ, often using the day's plainchant as a thematic basis. 2024 sees the centenary of the birth of Pierre Cochereau, *Organiste Titulaire* of that great church in the second half of the 20th century. Cochereau was the doyen of the art, possessing a rare ability to combine colourful creativity with coherent, often complex musical structures.

Pierre Cochereau: L'Organiste de Notre-Dame (Solstice, 2000) is a 3-CD box set of live recordings of the master, featuring pieces by Bach, Franck, Messiaen and Dupré, as well as his own liturgical and concert extemporisations. The *Quatre Chorals sur des thèmes de Pâques* were recorded at Notre-Dame on Easter Day 1973. In the fourth of the set, the Introduction, Choral, and Variations on *O Filii et Filiae*, Cochereau gives us a kaleidoscopic tour of this quintessential French Romantic instrument: creamy *fonds*, no-nonsense reeds and a tutti that knocks your *chaussettes* off.

The third variation demonstrates Cochereau's contrapuntal skill; the fourth, his nimble virtuosity; his rich harmonic language in the fifth. The fireworks are out for the final variation, during which, alongside *O Filii et Filiae* in various guises, we hear other Easter melodies. The electricity of the live performance is heightened by the gentle murmur of worshippers and tourists in the background.

✦ **From the off, Mascagni's 1890 opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*** was a hit (at the premiere, the composer took 40 – yes, 40 – curtain calls), and marked the beginning of a new era of Italian opera. Early in the drama comes the chorus *Regina Caeli* (The Easter Hymn). Fans of moderation and understatement should look away now.

It is Easter Day in about 1900, and the faithful of a Sicilian village are overheard singing in procession. Santuzza, a peasant girl who has been ostracised by the villagers following a brief and ill-advised affair with a rogue on the rebound, joins the song from the shadows. Sweeping melodies are underpinned by descending chromatic bass lines, all tugging wildly at the heartstrings.

Albeit rather melodramatically, Mascagni makes a profound point: through the Resurrection, God's forgiveness and salvation are open to everyone, and all are called to sing his praise. A *New York Times* critic once described Jessye Norman's magnificent voice as a "grand mansion of sound". This is certainly evident in her recording with Semyon Bychkov and the Orchestre de Paris (Philips, 1991), not least in her thrilling top B at the very end.

✦ **As a student, Herbert Howells** (1892-1983) spent time learning with Westminster Cathedral's first Master of Music, Richard Runciman Terry, a man at the forefront of the Tudor (and other Renaissance) music revival. Howells composed several pieces for the Cathedral

Choir, including Mass in the Dorian Mode, Three Carol-Anthems (Here is the Little Door, A Spotless Rose and Sing Lullaby), and settings of the four Marian antiphons. Only two of the antiphons, *Salve Regina* and *Regina Caeli*, survive.

Howells's *Regina Caeli* shows Tudor influences poured through the filter of his distinctive musical language. Written for double choir, we hear long, melismatic melodic lines, and busy, dense textures. The two choirs come together for the climactic moment, *Resurrexit*, followed by an exciting harmonic shift on *dixit*.

A century after Howells composed Four Anthems of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Owen Rees, Director of Music at The Queen's College, Oxford, commissioned David Bednall to compose settings of the missing two. The college choir recorded the set on their 2018 disc, *House of the Mind* (Signum). The singing is joyful and engaging and yet unfussy, allowing the music and text to speak for itself without being eclipsed by the performers.

✦ **At the start of the new millennium**, Pope St John Paul II designated the Second Sunday of Easter as Divine Mercy Sunday. The piece of choral music most closely associated with the Polish Pontiff is *Totus Tuus*, composed by his countryman, Henryk Górecki (1933-2010), in 1987. Opening with impassioned cries of "Maria!" the piece is in a 20th-century style that might be described as "Holy Minimalism": diatonic, repetitive, mesmeric. It is included on the Holst Singers' disc, *Icon* (Hyperion, 1996), conducted by Stephen Layton, alongside much interesting choral music from the Orthodox Church.

✦ **For the Feast of the Annunciation** (this year transferred to April 8), try *Ave-Maria* by Brazilian composer Cláudio Santoro (1919-89). Santoro skilfully portrays both the wonder of the message and the trepidation of the receiver. Laced with French Impressionist colours and grinding bitonality, the dark harmonic tension is interspersed with flashes of bright light; there are urgent muttering contrasts with chanting that seems to melt. The extremities of the voices are called upon, enriched by the Portuguese consonants.

The Choir of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, perfectly captures this intense, varied soundscape on *Romaria: Choral Music from Brazil* (Delphian, 2015). Happy Easter listening! **CH**



Jessye Norman

Through the Resurrection, God's forgiveness and salvation are open to everyone, and all are called to sing his praise