

Ups and downs

Alex Hodgkinson leads us on to *Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday*

ON THE RECORD

If you are near Oxford, make haste to the Bodleian Library, where you will find on display the autograph of *Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein*, BWV 128 (pictured), a cantata for Ascension by JS Bach. It is one of only four Bach manuscripts in the UK, and among the best-preserved in the world. Seeing the scribbles, blotches, smudges and wonky bar lines brings one almost to within handshaking distance of Bach's genius.

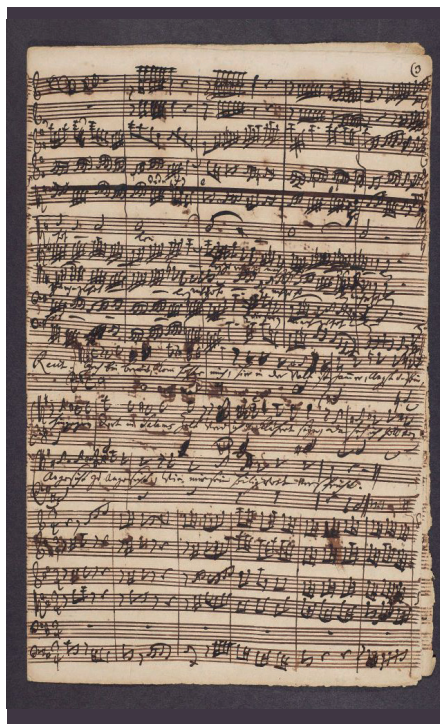
The opening movement is Bach at his most jubilant. As the chorus proclaims Christ's ascent, two horns fight for attention with rapid repeated notes and heavenward leaps. The bass aria, *Auf, auf, mit hellem Schall* ("Up, up, with bright sound"), is accompanied by a frighteningly virtuosic trumpet *obbligato* part – a merry noise indeed. It is a foil to the misery of the preceding recitative, but the celebration does not last long. The aria slides back to accommodate a libretto that doesn't seem too fond of singers or inquisitive believers: "Be silent, rash mouth, and do not attempt to fathom..." Thankfully, there is a jolly reprise.

The fourth movement, *Sein Allmacht zu ergründen, Wird sich kein Mensch finden* ("To fathom his omnipotence, no one will be found"), is a captivating duet. The oboe d'amore and cello dance around the vocal lines. Robin Blaze and Makoto Sakurada are a perfectly matched pair on the Bach Collegium Japan recording (BIS, 2007), conducted by Masaaki Suzuki.

The last 50 years has seen several significant contributions to the Ascensiontide fare. *Ascending into Heaven* (1983) was Judith Weir's first major commission, a sensational debut. The text, by the 11th-century bishop Hildebert of Lavardin, conveys a human desire to follow in Christ's wake. One can hear the influence of Messiaen in the harmonies and Britten in the textures, but it is unmistakably Weir. Choir and organ shimmer at the extremities of their ranges, racing up and down in parallel motion.

The melodies have a folky lilt, but they are made of steel not wood. The final Alleluia is exhilarating, a farewell gesture that can only just be seen through the clouds. In 2011, the choir of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge released *Judith Weir: Choral Music* (Delphian). The singing is vibrant and sculpted.

The symmetry of Ash Wednesday and Ascension being 40 days either side of Easter is reflected in Patrick Gowers's *Viri Galilaei*. The serene opening gives way to a rip-roaring central section – persistent ascent, fanfares, rhythmic excitement, a glissando, and a seriously big tune – before closing with gently



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sparkling angelic tones. Trinity College, Cambridge recorded it on one of Stephen Layton's last discs with the choir, *Anthems Vol. 1* (Hyperion, 2023).

Dry acoustics and a fresh tempo give the Oxford Camerata's recording of Tallis's *Loquebantur varii linguis Apostoli* a thrilling clarity and zeal (*Tallis: Mass for Four Voices – Motets*, Naxos, 1992). In this choral responsory for Pentecost, six loquacious voices envelop the plainsong *cantus firmus*. In their newly found tongues, the disciples' chatter is relentless, sometimes in perfect diapason and sometimes at odds; there are several hot dissonances, including Tallis's signature false relation, a minor third in one of the lower parts against a higher major third. The syllables of "Alleluia" are accented in a variety of ways throughout the piece, a representation of the diverse dialects. The voices all lie within a range of 20 notes, intensifying the hubbub.

Jonathan Harvey's *Come, Holy Ghost* is a theme and variations on the plainsong *Veni Creator*. The rising glissandi of Weir and Gowers are reversed here, as the disciples beckon the Spirit to descend. The winds rush about them and their prayer becomes more insistent. *Deo*, the album of Harvey's music for choir and organ by Andrew Nethsingha and the choir of St John's, Cambridge (2016), is undoubtedly one of the most significant choral recordings of the 21st century so far.

Conductor Alex Patterson has injected a new vitality into the choral programme at Salford Cathedral since becoming director of music in 2020. The choir recently recorded a CD of music by female composers, all of whom, bar Hildegard of Bingen, are living (*Rise Up and Wonder*, Priory, 2023). Emma Brown's *O lux beata Trinitas* has an icy beauty. The range of colours and textures is remarkable considering the voice parts use only three notes each. In *Laus Trinitati*, Hildegard traces a beguiling, majestic path, anchored by a drone. The 12th-century Benedictine abbess is one of the earliest named composers in the history of Western music. Intriguingly, the text refers to the Trinity as *creatorix*: "Praise to the Trinity, [she] who is the sound and the life and the creator of every last thing in life." CH

Alex Hodgkinson is Director of Music at St Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Connecticut