

Music through the centuries

Alex Hodgkinson looks at some choral composers with anniversaries this year

ON THE RECORD

This year sees a plethora of significant anniversaries. Anton Bruckner was born in 1824, while Fauré and Puccini both died a century later. Guillaume Du Fay died in 1474 and the Tudor wizard Robert White in 1574. Gustav Holst died in 1934, ten years after his teacher, Charles Villiers Stanford. Meanwhile Frank Martin, the Swiss composer perhaps most famous for his *Mass for Double Choir*, died in 1974.

● Du Fay's surviving works, both sacred and secular, are as inventive and engaging now as they were half a millennium ago; they represent a significant stage in the development of Western music. Most of Du Fay's music is built on or around existing melodies, either plainsong or folk tunes. He is best remembered for his Mass based on the once popular song *L'homme armé* – “the armed man”.

The motet *Flos florum* is a remarkable example of Du Fay's coalition of the medieval style and emerging Renaissance polyphony. Composed in the 1430s, this miniature for three voices begins with a lavish litany of Marian monikers – “flower of flowers”, “fount of gardens”, “remedy of sorrows”, and so on. The highest part performs a virtuosic dance, sometimes in duet with the middle voice (listen out for *Medicina dolorosa*), and we hear imitation between the parts that is a foretaste of the musical style to come. The simple conclusion, a plea for mercy, includes some arresting chromaticism.

The US-based Lorelei Ensemble performs this (and more Du Fay) on their intriguing album *Impermanence* (Sono Luminus, 2018), alongside modern depictions of Tibetan nomads and phases of the moon by Takemitsu and Peter Gilbert respectively.

● Anton Bruckner was a giant of 19th-century music: composer of 11 symphonies, 17 large-scale choral works, and plenty more. While Bruckner himself was modest and restrained, his music is opulent and emotive. Initially a

church organist, it was not until his late 30s that he began to compose in earnest.

One of Bruckner's earliest pieces is a beautiful *Ave Maria* (WAB 6). Stephen Layton and Polyphony offer a passionate Romantic interpretation on their recording *Bruckner: E minor Mass and Motets* (Hyperion, 2007). The third “*Jesu*” is volcanic, and there is a carefully measured quality to the prayerful ending. The sumptuous acoustic of the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral necessitates a tempo slightly slower than other recordings, lending the performance an even greater breadth and intensity.

● Across the Tiber, CV Stanford remains a mainstay of Victorian Anglicana. He was also drawn to Catholic texts, however, and in 1905 he published his *Three Latin Motets*. All of them have remained popular for over a century, but perhaps the most captivating is *Beati quorum via* (Op. 38, No. 3), with words taken from Psalm 118/119.

Once described as having a kind of “neo-Brucknerian sublimity”, Stanford creates a lush harmonic tapestry with six unaccompanied voices. The unmistakable, expressive timbre and long brushstrokes in *Bluebird – Music of Contemplation*, recorded by the

choir of New College, Oxford, under Edward Higginbottom (Decca, 2000) are hard to beat.

● Although less prolific as a choral composer, Gustav Holst's *Nunc Dimittis* has won Stanford's pupil a spot in the choral hall of fame. The modality and gentle dissonance are unmistakably English, yet Holst's continental heritage is explicit in his compositional voice.

There are many fine recordings, but for something refreshing, try *Sakralne Inspiracje* by Chór Akademicki Politechniki Warszawskiej (Requiem Records, 2022). I particularly like this interpretation because of the distinctly contrasting moods. The opening is appropriately ethereal, whilst *Lumen ad revelationem* has a clear sense of direction and vigour. *Gloria Patri* skips along gleefully, and the climactic *Amen* is engulfing.

● Since George Malcolm's first vinyls in the 1950s, Westminster Cathedral Choir has built a prodigious recording catalogue; one of its most celebrated discs is Frank Martin's *Mass for Double Choir*, conducted by James O'Donnell (Hyperion, 1998).

This Mass is remarkable in several respects. The harmony is dense and expressive; Martin uses dissonance and unexpected shifts to enhance the impact of the text. There is interplay between the two choirs, and sections of polyphony and homophony come in quick succession, providing contrast and momentum. Listen to how the texture builds at the beginning of the Sanctus. Another voice emerges, then another, then another: the heavenly throng.

The Credo is a masterpiece of word setting. *Deum verum de Deo vero* is a moment of unbridled ecstasy, soon followed by the intense agony of *Crucifixus*. *Passus et sepultus est* sinks into despair, without even a hint of musical overindulgence. *Et resurrexit* dances joyfully, but with intimacy that draws us closer.

Composed in 1922 (with the Agnus added four years later), this is Martin's only unaccompanied choral work. So sincere was he in his faith, he desired it not to be performed – he felt it was a “matter between God and myself”. Forty years later he allowed a performance, and the world was given one of the most profound, expressive, life-affirming pieces of sacred music of the 20th century. CH

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