

A CENTURY IN SONG THE 1930S TO 1950S

Following the opening instalment of 'A Century in Song' (CMQ March 2026), we continue the journey through the RSCM's first hundred years with the next three works in the '10 Pieces' project. From the lyrical warmth of the 1930s in Patrick Hadley's *My beloved spake*, through the deeply expressive and searching voice of the 1940s in Herbert Howells's *Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks*, to the poised simplicity of the 1950s in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *O taste and see*, these pieces together trace a compelling arc of musical and spiritual development.

As before, each piece is accompanied by a short introduction to its background, composer and significance, offering both context and practical insight. Taken together, they invite us not only to look back with appreciation, but also to engage afresh with these timeless works.

PATRICK HADLEY'S *My Beloved Spake*

ALEX HODGKINSON

Like Charles Villiers Stanford and Charles Wood a generation before, Patrick Hadley (1899–1973) spent his working life either pacing the hallways of the Royal College of Music or crossing the courts of Cambridge. Hadley's early education was interrupted by World War I, during which he served in the Royal Field Artillery. A serious injury sustained in the final weeks of the conflict led to the amputation of his right leg below the knee – something that inevitably marked the rest of his life.

After the war, Hadley read music at Pembroke College, Cambridge, going on to the Royal College of Music in London to study composition. As both student and, from 1925, a professor, he rubbed shoulders with the luminaries of the English musical scene: Ralph Vaughan Williams, Frederick Delius,

Arnold Bax, and Herbert Howells, to name but a few. Hadley's music – lyrical, tonal but harmonically exploratory, and often electrifyingly dramatic – bears the influence of this milieu. His output includes several cantatas, both sacred and secular, and large-scale symphonic works. Today, he is best remembered for two choral miniatures, both from the mid 1930s: *I sing of a maiden* and *My beloved spake*.

In 1936, Ursula Grottrian, an RCM graduate, wrote to her former teacher to seek advice on music for her forthcoming wedding to Martin York Watson at Ripon Cathedral in May of that year. If she would suggest a suitable text, Hadley replied, he would compose something for the occasion himself. Grottrian proposed verses from the Song of Solomon, which clearly appealed to the composer: 'I had forgotten its strangely moving beauty', he wrote. The result was the radiant anthem *My beloved spake*, which received its first performance before a congregation of over 360 guests and a large crowd of sightseers.

'THE WINTER IS PAST'

Just as Christ calls us from darkness into light through his rising from the tomb, so in these verses the poet is beckoned by their beloved to arise from a winter stillness, a hibernation, into the flowering life of spring. Even in this relatively small-scale work, Hadley reveals a striking symphonic imagination and a keen sense of dramatic contrast. The piece is framed by two thrilling climaxes. The choir opens with a rather spluttering phrase, as if quivering with nervous energy, beginning in unison before bursting into a glorious B flat major chord in the second inversion on 'rise up'. Beneath this, the organ's mercurial cross-rhythms seem to suggest that the world, newly formed, is only gradually finding its natural order.

'For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone', begins the central section, a passage that unfolds the imagery of spring, of new life: flowers appear, birds sing, the fig tree bears fruit, the vine yields its fragrance. Here the musical language turns inward – more restrained and intimate, more harmonically searching. There are some particularly beautiful vocal lines to describe the birds, reminiscent of string quartet writing.

The central section gathers momentum in both dynamic and texture, leading to the final climax: another thrilling second-inversion chord, this time D flat major, crowned by the sopranos' top A-flat on 'arise, my love'. There is a brief moment of searing and tantalizing dissonance in the following phrase, 'fair one', as if to underline the sincerity of the request. Suddenly, the intensity disintegrates to almost

nothing: the dynamic falls from triple forte to pianissimo in just three bars, the texture thins, and the pitch descends to the voices' lowest ranges. The tertiary harmonic tension Hadley has wrought throughout the piece is diffused as the organ draws two tonal centers together, combining the D flat major of the second climax with rising fifth (B flat to F) of the first. The sopranos recall that same interval on 'away', now an octave lower, and the choir settles onto another second-inversion chord; B-flat major eventually prevails, but it is veiled in the hush of triple piano.

A TOUCHING EPILOGUE

In 1974, the year after Hadley's death, Ursula Watson (née Grottrian) donated several letters to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, where Hadley had had been elected to a fellowship in 1938 and spent the remainder of his career. This correspondence offers a vivid glimpse of the compositional process, especially in one letter where Hadley asks Ursula to make six adjustments to the score.

The tone of these exchanges is warmly informal. At one point, Hadley makes a joke at his own expense, claiming to be 'totally ignorant of the ways of the organ', adding 'it would have been useless for me ever to have taken it up after the war, at any rate until they insert foot muscles in wooden legs!'

During the correspondence, the piece affectionally became known as 'My beloved spook' or simply 'spook'. In 1986, 13 years after Hadley's death, Martin and Ursula invited Caius choir to perform the work at their home to mark their golden wedding anniversary – a touching epilogue to a work born of friendship, love and the promise of spring.

For more information regarding the Hadley / Watson letters, please see the excellent blog post by Jenny Sargent, sometime Assistant Librarian of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge: <https://musicb3.wordpress.com/2012/02/03/my-beloved-spook-patrick-hadley-and-a-celebrated-anthem/>

'quote to go here

HERBERT HOWELLS's *Like As The Hart Desireth The Waterbrooks*

PAUL SPICER

Herbert Howells was a sensualist. Much of his music uses a language with a deeply sensuous undercurrent, and it is this, in part, that makes it so irresistible to his many admirers. Yet that strongly emotional response to the texts he sets in no way undercuts the intellectual rigour he learnt early in life – first as an apprentice at Gloucester Cathedral with Herbert Brewer and later in London at the Royal College of Music with Sir Charles Stanford. It is this heady mix of head and heart that makes Howells's music such a treasure trove.

In a broadcast from Christ Church, Oxford in November 1943, Howells spoke about the set of anthems of which *Like as the hart* is the third. He commented that 'The set at first bore the title *In Time of War*, because the words – taken from the Psalms of David – were so apposite to a wartime frame of mind.' But then, he reflected, 'the Psalms are relevant at all times and in all situations: and the anthems (one hoped) useful at any season. So the group dropped the general title.'

In the same talk, he posited a question: 'Does it strike you as an odd thing, in a world of jazz, swing, vast orchestras, mechanized reproduction and radio-transmission, that a man should sit down and write a set of anthems for the church service?' For Howells, this was entirely normal, but only because of the uniquely enduring English choral tradition from which so many musicians have grown. Yet one need only glance at the organ introduction to *Like as the hart* to see that, harmonically at least, the 'jazz' on his list had crossed over into Anglican worship.

ORIGINS AND INTERPRETATION

Howells wrote six anthems initially, but *Ponder my words* was then lost. The remaining five anthems are *O pray for the peace of Jerusalem*, *We have heard with our ears*, *Like as the hart*, *Great is the Lord* and *Let God arise*. *Great is the Lord* was interrupted by an air raid

and completed, according to his diary, at 2am. Howells seems to have taken the air raid in his stride like a coffee break, simply going on into the night to finish what had been started when all was quiet again. All these works – and others, too – were written while snowed up in Cheltenham between 5 and 9 January 1941 right in the heart of the Second World War. *Like as the hart* was written in a single sitting on Wednesday 8 January in a fever of creativity which it is almost impossible to imagine. Howells later decided to discard *Ponder my words* and *Great is the Lord*, leaving the four anthems we now know in the group.

For his text, Howells chose the first three verses of Psalm 42, with their vivid imagery of the hart (or young deer) needing the sustenance of water, just as the Christian soul needs God for nourishment. For Howells, the very word 'desireth' must have stirred his sensuous imagination; even 'hart', now archaic, carries a poetic resonance. A young chorister, encountering the word for the first time, might well read it as 'heart', imagining an altogether different meaning. A clued-up choir director should do some explaining!

After the heady initial bars for organ, the tenors and basses take on the mood with a rising and falling melody. This is given a sensual twist at the false-relation (clash between major and minor thirds) between organ and voices on 'desireth', before the phrase lifts higher for 'my soul'. Howells really knew how to intensify a melody.

The strange and slightly unhappy thing about this anthem is that the altos are almost excluded. They join in at the tutti moments, such as the first forte, 'When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?' But if I were an alto, I would be sad to be so overlooked in such a beautiful setting (rather like the Sanctus of Fauré's Requiem). It is hard to escape the feeling that Howells conceived this anthem as a solo song with Greek chorus-like interjections from the choir. Yet these full-choir interjections, together with his sublime final pages – where the soaring soprano solo tops the texture, adding a layer of richness and further 'desire' to the mood – bring the universality of the quest for God's love into sharper focus.

The final bars are unforgettable: the word 'God' is sustained seemingly without end while the organ weaves its way towards a radiant E major conclusion, a *tierce de Picardie* resolving a work rooted in E minor.

The middle section of the anthem, 'My tears have been my meat day and night', maintains the imagery of the sustenance of water. Here the false relations pile up, especially where the tenors lift to an unexpected E natural after the preceding E flats. The heady sensuality is nowhere more keenly expressed than in

the organ part that precedes the duet between tenors and basses, with sopranos descanting overhead. Howells was simply unrestrained, and the appeal of the setting is undoubtedly because his music connects with our own humanity and our need to express ourselves emotionally.

Howells was a complex man – but perhaps no more so than any other. It is wonderful that he could give us a way of channelling both our spirituality and our sensuality to the greater glory of God.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS's *O Taste And See*

PETER SIEPMANN

The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 inspired a remarkable body of music, combining centuries-old traditions with newly commissioned works by some of Britain's leading composers. The service drew on established ceremonial repertoire – Handel's *Zadok the priest*, of course, and Parry's *I was glad* with its famous 'vivats' – yet alongside these familiar works, new compositions were written to reflect the significance of the event in a modern, post-war context. Among them were contributions by William Walton, whose music embraced the scale and splendour of the ceremony, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, who offered a rather different response in his motet *O taste and see*.

Within the rich musical diet of a coronation, Vaughan Williams's piece stands out for its restraint and intimacy. Its placement within the Communion rite – when the new Queen received the Blessed Sacrament – reflects one of the most sacred and inwardly focused parts of the entire liturgy. Perhaps for this reason, it was also performed at the Queen's funeral in 2022.

The text of the motet is drawn from Psalm 34: 'O taste and see how gracious the Lord is: blessed is the man that trusteth in him', a verse inherently contemplative, inviting personal meditation rather than communal proclamation. Vaughan Williams

responds with a setting that emphasises both clarity and reflection. Its melodic simplicity is characteristic of his later works, in which he often sought to strip away excess and focus on essential musical ideas.

Harmonically, the piece reflects Vaughan Williams's distinctive tonal language, which often blends traditional diatonic harmony with subtle modal inflections through an avoidance of strongly assertive dominant–tonic relationships and root position chords. The final cadence is an interesting case-in-point, moving from chord VIIb through II (thanks to the alto passing note) to I, the bass line in parallel octaves with the soprano. Certainly not the stuff of A level textbooks, but in Vaughan Williams's hands, hugely atmospheric.

Another feature of this final cadence is its 'two-in-a-bar' feel; a hemiola that dilutes the sense of metre, just as the harmony discussed above dilutes the traditional sense of tonal hierarchy. In a similar way, following the beguiling solo statement of the main theme, the overlapping phrase boundaries of the imitative chorus parts give the music an almost weightless quality. The sacred mystery of the Sacrament of the Eucharist is vividly represented here in musical form.

Though deceptively simple on the page, the motet requires a high degree of control and sensitivity in performance. Its simplicity leaves little room for error: intonation, balance, and phrasing must be carefully managed to preserve the piece's delicate character. The soprano or treble soloist, in particular, must convey both technical precision and expressive warmth, as the line demands a natural, unforced delivery. This control is equally important for the choir, where the challenge lies in achieving a unified tone and maintaining a sense of the sacred stillness mentioned above, allowing the music's understated beauty to emerge.

In my experience, some of the most common pitfalls come from overly forced enunciation – the many consonants of the word 'trusteth' must be gently and eloquently formed, just as the vowel of 'him' must be pure, relaxed and not overly bright ('heem!'). And then, of course, there is the usual question of tied quavers in early-20th century English choral music: in bar 24, does the tied quaver belong to the 'm' of 'him', or is it for the vowel with the 'm' placed on the half-beat? I would not presume to dictate an answer, (but would observe that all other terminal consonants followed by punctuation require a quaver off)!

A stalwart of the repertoire for church and cathedral choirs – and also available in a version for upper voices – *O taste and see* is a perfect 'way in' to Vaughan Williams's sound world and choral writing.