

The Esterházy Chamber Choir



Sandy Chenery - Director

*American & British
a cappella choral music*

**St Peter's, Preston Park
Sunday 27 June 2010, 3.00 pm**

The Choir

Sopranos: Emma Champion*, Fran du Corbier, Dilys Goggins, Jancis Ham, Alison Jeffery, Judy Mackerras, Lucy Morgan-Jones, Karen Smith*, Patta Tolputt, Françoise Towler, Diana Uprichard

Altos: Maria Birch, Claire Champness, Sarah Jarvis, Denise Jones, Janet Ormerod, Joyce Phillips, Grainne Sinclair, Liz Webb*, Karen Zeff

Tenors: Michael Bulman*, Timothy Burt*, Robert Carpenter*, John Carroll, John Crossman, Thomas Whalley

Basses: John Astbury, John Burns, Derek Froud, James Pitman, Matthew Spencer*,

*soloists

About The Esterházy Chamber Choir

The Esterházy Chamber Choir was founded in 1993 and is based in Lewes, East Sussex. Comprising up to 34 singers from a wide variety of backgrounds, the choir aims to perform to a professional standard whilst remaining firmly rooted in the fine English tradition of amateur music making. The choir's repertoire spans four centuries of sacred and secular music with an emphasis on *a cappella* singing.

New singers are welcomed. Entry is by audition, usually held following one of our regular rehearsals on a Wednesday evening. There is currently a vacancy for a tenor.

To contact the Choir

To support the choir, to audition or to enquire about hiring the choir for weddings and other special events, please email choir@esterhazy.org.uk. To prevent your email from being identified as spam, please include the word **choir** in the subject field.

The Esterhazy Chamber Choir is grateful to Sussex Community Foundation for funding provided through the Government's Grassroots Grants Programme.

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Programme

Five Spirituals *from A Child of Our Time*

Michael Tippett

1. Steal away
2. Nobody knows
3. Go down, Moses
4. By and by
5. Deep River

Take him Earth for Cherishing

Herbert Howells

Two Scottish Folk Songs

Loch Lomond
Ye Banks and Braes

arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams
arr. Eric Thiman

Water Night
Sleep

Eric Whitacre
Eric Whitacre

Two North American Folksongs

Shenandoah
The Gift to be Simple

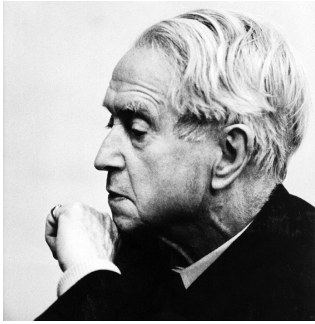
arr. James Erb
arr. Bob Chilcott

Four Spirituals

Look what dey doin to Jesus
Any How
Plenty Good Room
Ride the Chariot

arr. Richard Jackson
arr. Evelyn Pittman
arr. William Henry Smith
arr. William Henry Smith

This afternoon's programme draws together choral music from North America and the British Isles. Howells and Whitacre are British and American composers respectively and are particularly noted for their choral music. Howells was born in 1892 and developed a unique choral style, writing throughout the 20th Century. Many Cathedrals and Collegiate Chapels commissioned canticle settings and anthems from him. However, *Take Him Earth for Cherishing* was composed in response to a



Herbert Howells

commission for a piece to be sung at an American-Canadian Memorial Service for John F Kennedy in Washington in 1964. Howells' son Michael died at the age of nine from spinal meningitis, and his composition *Hymnus Paradisi* was written in response to this tragedy. As part of his preparatory sketches for this work Howells set Latin poetry by Prudentius. However, this was not ultimately included in the work. It was to these sketches

he returned when commissioned to write a piece for JFK's memorial service. This time he used an English translation by Helen Wadell of Prudentius' *Hymnus circa Exsequias Defuncti* and dedicated the motet "To the honoured memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy". Howells was aware of the pained state of the audience who would first hear this music, so his setting begins with a sense of quiet reverence. Quickly the harmonies become thicker, the mood more agitated, leading to an expansive climax at the

words, "Take, O take him, mighty Leader, Take again thy servant's soul." From here the music broadens and dies back until the final repetition of the opening text: "Take him, Earth, for cherishing." The concluding resolution of the motet into B major affirms death as the transformational pathway to eternal light.

Born early in 1970, Eric Whitacre has quickly become established as one of America's most prominent and successful Choral Composers. Again, a unique musical language characterises all of his work. Centred around a clear sense of climax and anti-climax his music uses vocal textures and harmony to build and relax in a striking and atmospheric way. His influences are broad, but clearly distinguishable are elements of minimalism and tonal harmony. Of *Water Night*, Whitacre writes, "The poetry of Octavio Paz is a composer's dream. The music seems to set itself

(without the usual struggle that invariably accompanies this task) and the process feels more like cleaning the oils from an ancient canvas to reveal the hidden music than composing.” The result is music which effectively creates, at times, the stillness of shadow water and at others the surging current of river water. The development of Sleep is more complex. Silvestri’s poem is, in effect, a parody text created for the unusual reason of legal necessity (parody in the sense of applying new words to pre-existing music). Whitacre set Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ in 2000, as a commission from a Texan lawyer/soprano in memory of her parents. He subsequently discovered, to his dismay, that the Robert Frost Estate forbade the poem’s setting to music (although twenty other settings apparently already existed). Forced with the prospect of denying publication of this work until the poem came out of copyright in 2038, Whitacre asked Silvestri to write an alternative text; the structure needed to be maintained, and certain words from the Frost poem, such as the recurring ‘sleep’, needed to be incorporated. It was an elegant solution to a problem that Whitacre evidently and understandably found exasperating.



Cartoon image of RVW

The other music in today’s programme has its roots in traditional or folk culture. Since Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams and others began their tireless and thorough work to catalogue and preserve regional folk songs in Britain, composers have used these melodies which are, by their nature, simple and easily adaptable. Sharp also spent many years gathering folk songs in other countries including North America. Vaughan Williams made many choral arrangements of folk songs and three are represented in tonight’s repertoire. The melodies lend themselves to a variety of treatment sometimes preserving simplicity and clarity, at others layering in complex textures and chromatic harmonizations. For many, any tinkering with folk songs detracts from the original, but others would argue that folk music has always been adaptable, receiving performances in many different guises over hundreds of years. Spirituals have their origins in the US African slave population. The songs were often used as work songs and, having undergone conversion to Christianity, the texts use stories of oppression from the bible to provide a resonance with their own enslavement. The rhythmic energy and drive of African music is often to

be heard in the syncopation of the melodies. Again, composers and arrangers have responded in many different ways to these melodies. The complexity of Tippet's Five Spirituals from *A Child of our Time* is largely due to the numbers of parts including, at times, eight-part chorus plus four soloists. The harmony is kept simple. Contrast this with Pittman's arrangement of *Any How*, the simple four part texture is crowded with passing chromatic harmonies. Similar contrasts can be seen in the folk song arrangements; look out for the harmonies in Thiman's *Ye banks and braes*, the syncopated accompaniment in Chilcott's arrangement of the Shaker tune *The Gift to be Simple* and the haunting canon in James Erb's arrangement of *Shenandoah*.

Take him, earth, for cherishing (Aurelius Clemens Prudentius 348-413, translated Helen Wadell)

Take him, earth, for cherishing,
to thy tender breast receive him.
Body of a man I bring thee,
noble even in its ruin.

Not though ancient time decaying
wear away these bones to sand,
ashes that a man might measure
in the hollow of his hand:

Once was this a spirit's dwelling,
by the breath of God created.
High the heart that here was beating,
Christ the prince of all its living.

Not though wandering winds and idle,
drifting through the empty sky,
scatter dust was nerve and sinew,
is it given to man to die.

Guard him well, the dead I give thee,
not unmindful of his creature
shall he ask it: he who made it
symbol of his mystery.

Once again the shining road
leads to ample Paradise;
open are the woods again,
that the serpent lost for men

Comes the hour God hath appointed
to fulfil the hope of men,
then must thou, in very fashion,
what I give, return again.

Take, O take him, mighty leader,
take again thy servant's soul.
Grave his name, and pour the fragrant
balm upon the icy stone.

Water Night

(Octavio Paz, translated Muriel Rukeyser)

Night with the eyes of a horse that trembles in the night,
night with eyes of water in the field asleep
is in your eyes, a horse that trembles,
is in your eyes of a secret water.

Eyes of shadow-water,
eyes of well-water,
eyes of dream-water.

Silence and solitude,
two little animals moon-led,
drink in your eyes,
drink in those waters.

If you open your eyes,
night opens, doors of musk,
the secret kingdom of the water opens
flowing from the center of the night.

And if you close your eyes,
a river fills you from within,
flows forward, darkens you:
night brings its wetness to beaches in your soul.

Sleep

(Charles Antonio Sylvestri)

The evening hangs beneath the moon
A silver thread on darkened dune
With closing eyes and resting head
I know that sleep is coming soon

Upon my pillow, safe in bed
 A thousand pictures fill my head
 I cannot sleep, my mind's a-flight
 And yet my limbs seem made of lead

If there are noises in the night
 A frightening shadow, flickering light
 Then I surrender unto sleep
 Where clouds of dream give second sight

What dreams may come, both dark and deep
 Of flying wings and soaring leap
 As I surrender unto sleep,
 As I surrender unto sleep.

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