



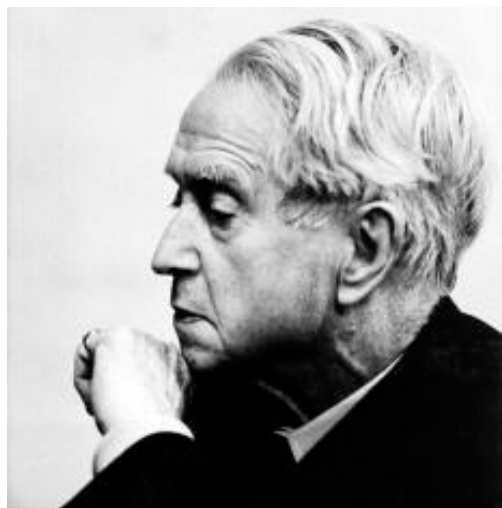
WHAT WE SING

at Saint Bartholomew's

No. 3 **Collegium Regale** (Communion)

by Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

sung on Sunday 5 October 2008 by the boys and men



WHAT WE SING is a scheme that is designed to enhance and complement the music sung by the church choirs throughout the year. We hope that it will help the whole church community to achieve a greater understanding and appreciation of the music that is heard each Sunday. It will also form an integral part of the education and training of the boy and girl choristers, helping them to understand what they are singing about and

to discover the lives and stories behind the music itself.

The hope is that **contributions** will be forthcoming from many different people within the church community. We'll always be delighted to hear from those who wish to write an article for the series. Please contact Fraser Wilson or Fr Andrew McCroskery if you would like to know more.

You can find current music lists and details of future issues on the table at the back of church and also on the internet at www.stbartholomews.ie. In the fullness of time we will also begin to archive the issues there too.

Forthcoming issues

Sunday 19 October: *William Byrd* Mass for four voices

Sunday 2 November: *John Tavener* Funeral ikos

No. 3 **Collegium Regale** (Communion)

by Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

sung on Sunday 5 October 2008 by the boys and men

by Peter Parshall

One of the most prolific and original composers of the twentieth century, the name of Herbert Howells (1892–1983) comes easily to the lips of church musicians. Composer, organist, teacher, writer and broadcaster, Howells remains a major figure in English music. It is not too fanciful a notion to assume that something of his vast ecclesiastical output might be heard daily in cathedrals in these islands; his three choral masterpieces, *Hymnus Paradisi* (1938), the *Missa Sabrinensis* (1954) and the *Stabat mater* (1959–65) are classics; and his chamber and orchestral works plus works for organ, piano and other instruments run into the hundreds.

Howells was born in Lydney, Gloucestershire, the youngest of six children. His father was an amateur organist, and Howells himself showed early musical promise. The family's relative poverty meant, however, that it could not afford anything more musically advanced than local lessons. Howells was a precocious youth and his rapidly expanding local fame brought him to the attention of the squire, Charles Bathurst (later to become the first Viscount Bledisloe and Governor General of New Zealand). Soon, Howells, with Bledisloe as his patron, was travelling regularly to Gloucester for lessons with Sir Herbert Brewer at the cathedral, eventually becoming an articled pupil alongside Ivor Novello and Ivor Gurney, the celebrated English songwriter and poet, with whom he became great friends.

Gloucester and Gloucestershire were at Howells' very core and the county, city and especially the cathedral feature in many of the most significant milestones in his life. Musical references, both oblique and direct, are also common. It was at Gloucester Cathedral in September 1910 that the young Howells had what he later described as one of the most important seminal experiences of his life when he attended the premiere of a mysterious new work by the then little-known Ralph Vaughan Williams. Howells not only made the composer's personal acquaintance that evening, but (as he often recounted) the piece, the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, profoundly moved him:

I heard this most wonderful work, I was thrilled, I didn't understand it, but I was moved deeply. I think if I had to isolate from the rest any one impression of a purely musical sort that mattered most to me in the whole of my life as a

musician, it would be the hearing of that work not knowing at all what I was going to hear but knowing what I had heard I should never forget.

Later he studied at the Royal College of Music in London under Stanford, Parry and Wood. He was briefly Assistant Organist at Salisbury Cathedral in 1917, though his severe illness cut this appointment short. Friends then arranged for a grant from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, whereunder Howells would assist R.R. Terry in editing the voluminous Latin Tudor repertoire that he and his choir were reviving at Westminster Cathedral. Howells took great interest in this work, absorbing the English Renaissance style which he loved and would evoke in his own, and continued it until joining the Royal College of Music in 1920. During World War II, he served as acting organist of St John's College, Cambridge.

In 1935 his nine-year-old son, Michael, died suddenly from polio, and this tragic event is reflected in a number of Howells' subsequent works, in particular *Hymnus Paradisi* which emerged from a *Requiem* that Howells had been writing for King's College Cambridge, before Michael's untimely death. In later life Howells was awarded an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University, and was made a Companion of Honour in 1972. He died in 1983 in London, and his ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey.

King's College was to feature once again in what is, possibly, Howells' most famous work for the Church – *Collegium Regale*. This composition set in train an extraordinary and unparalleled series of works intended for particular buildings. These settings, beginning with *Collegium Regale* and ending with the Dallas Canticles in 1975, are no mere offerings to particular choirs or choir-trainers. Rather, they are all carefully crafted to take into account the acoustic properties of the building for which he was writing. Doubtless, too, the architecture of the buildings in question together with the links to the past represented by the continuation of the liturgy in them, provided inspiration. Howells did not describe himself as a religious man, but then, arguably, some of the best music written for the Church in the twentieth century came from composers who would probably have labelled themselves as agnostic.

Collegium Regale, the only complete service (including music for Matins, Holy Communion and Evensong) that Howells wrote, began with the morning canticles of 1944, shortly followed by those for Evensong in 1945. Only in 1956 did the setting for Holy Communion appear. This is an interesting twentieth-century example of a 'parody' mass (i.e. one that takes other music as its starting point – in this case, Howells' own *Collegium Regale* – and builds a new work around it). It is related to its predecessors in more than idiom and overtones: the Kyrie eleison is opened by the organ introduction to the Magnificat featuring the prominent minor third – a favourite device – and the

Gloria is a recomposition of materials acquired from its older brother, the Te Deum. Christopher Palmer notes that

an ingenious contrapuntal subtlety is the way in which, at 'For thou only art holy', the main theme of the Te Deum (i.e. the initial recurrent idea) is heard in the organ part whilst above it the voices are working with it the opening phrase of the Gloria to the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis.

The Sanctus and Benedictus are also related to the evening canticles. The ending of the Sanctus is an exact copy of the opening of the Magnificat, and this leads into the Benedictus, scored for two-part treble voices, akin both to the end of the Magnificat and also to the opening of the Gloucester service of 1946. A further link may be seen in the Agnus Dei, at the words 'Grant us thy peace', when the two unrelated triads of Eb and A major are interlocked, as they are at the end of the Magnificat, also resolving to D major in the same way.

Kenneth Long, author of *The Music of the English Church*, writes that "[Howells'] style is so strongly individual that almost any two bars are sufficient to identify him". That may be true, but it belies the variety and inventiveness of Howells' music. By turns rhapsodic, elegiac and passionate, his compositions are rarely triumphalist and often impressionistic and, like so many English composers of his time, his music frequently appears nostalgic, although in Howells' case in particular, it tends to reflect the music of sixteenth-century composers, in particular Tallis and Byrd. As Howells himself put it, "All through my life I've had this strange feeling that I somehow belonged to the Tudor period".

Howells' influence as a teacher, at St Paul's School, Hammersmith and for almost seventy years at London's Royal College of Music, is still very much felt to this day. Here at Saint Bartholomew's we can claim our own links: Malcolm Wisener, our former Director of Music, was taught by Howells at the Royal College of Music; and Viscount Bledisloe, who paid for Howells' apprenticeship to Sir Herbert Brewer, was my great-grandfather. Earlier this year, on the weekend of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Howells' death, the choir of Christ Church Cathedral recorded a new disc of Howells' works here in Saint Bartholomew's.

Howells was a man with no quest for greatness but simply a love for music. As noted earlier, he composed in a number of genres, but his choral compositions have stood out as his most enduring work, continuing in an English tradition which has progressed into the twentieth century with as much craftsmanship and beauty in writing as may be found in the works of those sixteenth-century composers for whom he had such high regard.