

Original from 1994
Updated for;
November 21, 1996

Dear Hodie Singers:

Here are a few thoughts about the work which you are now preparing and which you will soon sing. Read these thoughts over and give thanks for the gift of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Make your gift a gift of commitment to bring this music to life, full of meaning, for the people who will hear you sing.

TLG

Hodie (This Day) - Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire (there is a well-known hymn-tune by Vaughan Williams named for his home town).

Written in 1952-53 when Vaughan Williams was 81 years old.

Written for Mezzo-soprano, Tenor, Baritone solos, Orchestra, Chorus,
Children's Chorus

Dedicated to English composer Herbert Howells

Premier performance was on Sept. 8, 1954 at the "Three Choirs Festival"
at Worcester Cathedral

Title comes from the Latin text for Christmas Day Vespers:

Hodie Christus natus est

Today Christ is born

This is the work of a master at the apex of his creative powers and in possession of great wisdom and understanding.

Texts are from the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and works selected from the very best of the great treasure of English poetry (including some work by his second wife, Ursula).

William Drummond (1585-1649)

Hymn - XII (Bright portals of the sky)

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

The Oxen - VII (Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock)

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Pastoral - IX (The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?)

John Milton (1608-1674)

Song - III (It was the winter wild)

Epilogue - XVI (Ring out ye crystal spheres)

W. Ballet

Lullaby - XI (Sweet was the song the Virgin sang)

Miles Coverdale

Choral - V (The Blessed Son of God)

Ursula Vaughan Williams

March of the Kings - XIV (From kingdoms of wisdom, secret and far)

Choral - XV (No sad thought his soul affright)

"Hodie" juxtaposes the biblical narrative of the birth of Jesus (along with text from the Book of Common Prayer) and poetry. The narration is given to the children's choir with some participation by the soloists. The image of purity conjured up by the use of children's voices makes them the perfect vehicle for bringing us the "word of God" as expressed in the scriptures. The small field organ is the only accompaniment for the children so there is very little to draw our attention away from the declamation of the text.

The alternation between scripture and personal reflection is not new with Vaughan Williams. We find that same alternation of the scriptural and the subsequent personal reflections upon the themes of the scripture in the Lutheran Cantatas of Bach and, most clearly, in his "St. John" and "St. Matthew" passions. The poetry in the Bach and in the *Hodie* serves as a sort of "homily" for our meditation, offering us an opportunity for letting our imaginations enrich our spirits. Two contemporary works which also use an alternation of sacred texts and poetry are Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" and Leonard Bernstein's "Mass."

A wonderful example of the imaginative power in the moving from scripture to poetry occurs between the VIth and VIIth movements. This example expresses so painfully the tension between our own "rational" conceptions of reality and the unfathomable mystery of "believing" which is central in the advent of Jesus. It also illustrates the fact that our "rational" conceptions of reality result from the mystery of believing. For reason to have power we must believe that it has power.

At the close of the VIth movement, we hear the narration of Luke 2 which recounts the visit of the angels to the shepherds, and the subsequent visit of the shepherds to the manger where, in fact, they did find Mary, Joseph, and the baby. Vaughan Williams follows this account with the Hardy poem, "The Oxen." It is my favorite moment and is a hint of what stands at the heart of the composer's spiritual predicament as well as that of the agnostic poet, Thomas Hardy. Although the musical setting for this poem is exquisite and excruciatingly beautiful, the text bears contemplation on its own. The pain of doubt is beautifully alarming.

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.

'Now they are all on their knees,'

An elder said as we sat in a flock

By the embers in hearth-side ease.

We pictured the meek, mild creatures where

They dwelt in their strawy pen,

Nor did it occur to us there

To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave

In these years! Yet, I feel

If someone said on Christmas Eve,

'Come, see the oxen kneel,

*In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.*

"Hodie" is full of these contrasting pairings and their success is proof of the creative power possessed by Vaughan Williams in imagining this magnificent work. Another favorite of mine is the use of a poem by George Herbert, the 17th c. mystical poet, to follow the narration about the shepherds return to their fields collectively singing, we are told, "Glory to God in the Highest." Herbert's highly personal and introspective poem gives us a chance to put ourselves there on that night with those shepherds. We are present to such an extent that we can share the excitement, the breathless wonder, the pounding breast of one of those shepherds. The unity of us with the feelings of those shepherds as well as the unity between us and God symbolized by the birth of the Christ child is beautifully summarized by the ending lines.

*His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine
Till even his beams sing and my music shine.*

There are many examples and many favorites among the textual juxtapositions and the illuminating musical forms and styles which go with them. One of the most tender unions is found as we move from the shepherd's personal response, in the lines above, through the children's short narration - "But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" - to the gentle, rocking, cooing music which sets W. Ballet's text: "Sweet was the song the Virgin sang." This is a lullaby (for women's voices only) sung by a mother to her child. It is an enormously private moment, made heart-wrenching by our knowledge of what was to come in the life of this newborn child. So, we are brought to the scene of the "Hodie" through our minds, through our senses, and through our memories.

There are two movements which are *a cappella*. They are both tributes to two major musical influences in Vaughan Williams' life: the chorales of J.S. Bach and the rich store of English folk songs which Vaughan Williams was instrumental in discovering and utilizing. Both of these movements are newly composed but their debt to Bach and to folk song melody are readily apparent. The fact that they are between "noisy" movements makes their simplicity and their immediacy at once apparent and poignant.

The composer chooses for William Drummond's "Hymn" (the imagery of which seems to burst the very boundaries of the universe) his most contemporary musical vocabulary, a vocabulary which practically glistens right along with the Drummond text.

*Bright portals of the sky,
Emboss'd with sparkling stars,
Doors of eternity,
With Diamantine bars
Your arras rich uphold,
Loose all your bolts and springs,*

*Ope wide your leaves of gold,
That in your roofs may come the King of Kings.*

What makes this movement and the entire work so extraordinary is the successful marriage of disparate texts and sores to a varied musical vocabulary. The success is due, in large measure, to the composer's ability to stimulate our imaginations with the juxtapositions of the texts and creating through those juxtapositions a new meaning, a metatext.

To accomplish that and at the same time remind us of our musical heritage is what makes Vaughan Williams a master of music. The references to Bach and to folk song have already been mentioned. Another reference, which is both a tribute to our heritage and an intellectual thrill, is Vaughan Williams' use of a theme from the *Missa Solemnis* (Solemn Mass) by Beethoven. Vaughan Williams sets the text "and she shall bring forth a son" to the melody used by Beethoven to set the text "et incarnatus est" (and was made flesh). Vaughan Williams returns to this melody in the Epilogue when he sets the text "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." These are circles within circles of musical and spiritual meaning.

Another extraordinary thing about this piece is that despite its textual basis and the specifically Christian grounding of its meaning, it is able to transcend that specificity, as I believe all great works of art are able to do, and create for the listener an opportunity to experience the power of mystery and wonder, of talent and human endeavor.

Performances of this work:
1978 and 1979

Rhodes College Singers (Southwestern Singers), Evergreen Chancel Choir and Orchestra with Susan Van Dyck directing the Children's Chorus.
Evergreen Presbyterian Church

1992, 1993, 1994

Rhodes College Singers and the Memphis Symphony with Susan Van Dyck again directing the Children's Chorus
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and the High School Honors Chorus
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception

1995 performance moved to:
Evergreen Presbyterian Church

There are about 20 High School students participating. Schools represented are: Briarcrest Christian School, Collierville, White Station, Millington and Snowden.

The Children's Chorus (65) comes from the Rhodes Music Academy Children's Chorus and from several schools. It will include some children who have already sung this work, a few as many as four times. They will again be directed by Susan Van Dyck and will be accompanied

on a "field organ" by David Ramsey, associate conductor and accompanist for the Rhodes College Singers.

There is a clear need for our young people to be exposed to and have the opportunity to perform great works in these kinds of events. It is important that we all share our talents and our experiences with others in the pursuit of the highest aesthetic possibilities. It is true that we are changed by experiences which occur in community with others in common endeavors. Catharsis is guaranteed.. The hope is that we all emerge from this experience changed to better human beings, inspired to nurture and ennoble our world.