

Music Reflection for September

“All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above”

So runs the refrain of the well-known harvest hymn by Matthias Claudius which most of us will have sung with gusto at Harvest Festival Services over the years – “but how have we used those gifts and for whose benefit?” might well be the rather less attractive corollary which a growing awareness of the impact of climate change upon our environment and God’s gift of Creation, compels us to address.

In my reflection for this month, the season when we traditionally we give thanks for the harvest, I have included pieces that reflect upon God’s wonderful creation, the resources and gifts which that creation provides to us over and over again, and how we use those in a responsible manner so that all of God’s people may enjoy them fairly both now and in the future.

In my youth, in a predominantly agricultural Essex community, harvest festival was one of the highlights of the year. On Saturday the church would be decorated by the ladies of the congregation using the gifts of flowers and every conceivable item of produce grown in the parish; the building would be groaning under the cornucopia of plenty with every windowsill and ledge being adorned with fruit and vegetables, sheaves of corn and, in pride of place at the altar, the much-admired harvest loaf compete of course with mouse. At the back of the church would be sited the “Invalids Table” as it was known where gifts of items such as eggs, preserves, Bovril and ‘Bengers Food’ (remember that?) were encouraged.

The next day, morning and evening, capacity congregations and full choir would sing Psalm 65 and harvest hymns giving genuine and real thanks to God that despite whatever adversities had occurred through the year, once again the harvest was safely in and the autumn cycle of work on the farms would commence. If we were feeling very “woke” (an unknown term of course in those days) we might have a passing reference to the harvest of the sea or indeed the harvest of souls but the emphasis was always very firmly on the land.

On the Monday following the festival the ladies would undo much of the work of Saturday, making up parcels of produce including suitable items from the “Invalids Table” which would be distributed to the sick, elderly and needy in the village. Following this distribution, the bulk supply of fruit, vegetables and anything else edible was packed up and taken to the Diocesan Home for Unmarried Mothers in Buckhurst Hill. The following weekend we would all feast ourselves at the Harvest Supper with home-made entertainment as well as food after which harvest was over until the next year.

In those far-off days when memories of wartime shortages and post-war austerity were all too real, the emphasis in farming was on maximising output of crops, dairy products and livestock to meet home demand and thus straw and stubble were burned if not required and increasing amounts of artificial fertilizers and chemicals were coming into use to increase yields from the land and intensive rearing methods used for example in egg and poultry production. In common with almost every other walk of life, although our gratitude for what we gained from the land was great and genuine, our awareness of the longer-term impact of our gains on the wider world, on the climate and environment that sustains us and on the whole of God’s creation was limited to say the least.

In more recent times, as a consequence of a number of factors including a mixture of greater understanding and the unwelcome direct physical impact of climate change, we are slowly becoming aware of the consequences of our actions not only upon ourselves but others less fortunate especially in parts of our world where the destructiveness of our behaviours in the use of the resources of the planet are already resulting in hardship and disaster.

As we rejoice again in every aspect of the harvest with which we are blessed may we give thanks especially for the increasing awareness of the need to conserve that wonderful creation for the benefit of all, both now and for generations to come. May we all, each one of us, recognise that, every day, not just once a year at harvest, we have a critical part to play in bringing that to pass.

Mention of Harvest Festival will, in many of us, bring to mind the hymn "***Nun Danket Alle Gott***" (Now thank we all our God) which was written in 1636 by the Protestant minister Martin Rinkart and set to the tune we know by Johan Cruger in the 1640s. J S Bach used the tune in his Cantate BWV 79 composed in Leipzig in 1725 for Reformation Day and also in Cantate BWV 657 composed many years later. I have included two settings of the tune here, the first is the setting by Bach for Trumpet and Organ which is played in the Church of St. Paul de Pessicart in Nice by Martin Schröder (Trumpet) and Hans-André Stamm (Organ). The second recording also includes the chorale sung by the congregation at the Frauenkirche in Dresden, Germany (Church of Our Lady), a Lutheran Church, rebuild after being bombed out in WWII. This church has a rich musical heritage of so many great Lutheran composers who played there, including JS Bach – you may also recognise one member of the congregation who, all follow the curious Lutheran tradition of sitting to sing. The trumpet is played by Mathias Schmutzler, I do not have the name of the organist but it is certainly an organ with "bling"!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPE7UXMhwN0&t=29s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Nr0KyOscA&t=161s>

Paradoxically while some of the worst consequences of environmental damage and climate change have been felt in Africa, at the same time some of the most innovative work to increase awareness and tackle those impacts has also taken place there too. "***Conservation Music***" was formed in 2015 by Alex Paullin with the idea of using music to help educate people all over the continent about doing their part to ameliorate issues like rampant erosion, poor soil, lack of water, and overgrazing. The group, which has been active in Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Lesotho, believes that by using the musical medium, the lessons of environmental stewardship are spoken to the heart and the mind simultaneously. A positive tone, easy, memorable melodies, and a rhythm to which to dance make this method of collective communication especially powerful. I have included two pieces for you to view and hear, the first from Zimbabwe and the second from Zambia. If you are interested by these do click on "show more" which will enable you to see a good deal of information.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7ZfJeVoKwo&t=33s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9F9LEEOUGE>

Joseph Addison (1672 –1719) was an English essayist, poet, playwright and politician who is probably best remembered for his successful political career as well as being the joint founder with Richard Steele of "The Spectator" in 1711. In Church circles Addison is probably best known for his poem "***The Spacious Firmament on High***" which, in the most elegant language, describes the various components of the heavens by day and by night and declares the belief that "the hand that made them is divine". The poem has been set to music as a hymn and is often used to celebrate the glory of creation; it has also been arranged as an anthem by Herbert Sumsion (1899 – 1995). Sumsion was a highly talented organist and composer who was at Gloucester Cathedral from 1928 to 1967, he was renowned for his work with the Three Choirs Festival over that whole period. The work is performed here by the Ecclesium Choir.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfPI6-QRDPk>

The need to take action to conserve and protect our environment is keenly recognised by many young people and the Orchestra of the Earth is a manifestation of that. Founded by John Warner himself a prominent young musician, the orchestra believes the climate crisis is the greatest threat facing humanity, and classical music can help avert it. Orchestra for the Earth unites some of the finest young professional musicians and contemporary composers, committed to protecting the world their generation will inherit and using music to motivate others to do the same. I have chosen two pieces to offer you; the first link is to a performance of **Schubert: 'The Shepherd on the Rock'** given for Earth Day 2021 by OFE's Founder John Warner and principal clarinet Dan Mort joined by the soprano Gabriella Noble. Once again do click on 'Show More' for further information. The second link will take you to a lovely performance by the whole orchestra of **Mahler's 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen'** (*I am lost to the world*).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfcT0MJ1cXg&t=17s>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0ZnQg_dzmM

César-Auguste Jean-Guillaume Hubert Franck (1822 –1890) was born in Liege and, unlike a number of musicians who have figured in these reflections, was actively encouraged to pursue a musical career by his father who, not to beat about the bush, hoped to significantly benefit from his son's undoubted talent. In time father and son fell out regarding the direction of his musical career and to our very great fortune the young Cesar became an organist and composer rather than the pianist his father wished. To cut a long story very short suffice it to say that Cesar completely severed relationship with his own family but with the support of his wife's family began to carve out an increasingly successful career as an organist and composer in Paris culminating in his appointment as Titulaire at the new church of Sainte-Clotilde in 1858, a post he held to his death. Sainte-Clotilde installed a new organ shortly after Frank's appointment, this was built by Aristide Cavaille'-Coll who went on to become arguably the greatest French organ builder ever and whose later work included the magnificent and huge instruments in Notre Dame and St. Sulpice. Frank travelled widely in France demonstrating new organs built by Cavaille-Coll and of course his own great talent both as an organist and composer. Many experts would today recognise Frank as the greatest organ composer after J S Bach. Following our theme of creation and the environment do listen to "**Pastorale Op 19**" performed superbly by Balint Karosi – one of today's great organists.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPnLGL2KGzM>

On September 4, 2015 sixteen internationally renowned artists; Paul McCartney, Jon Bon Jovi, Sheryl Crow, Fergie, Colbie Caillat, Natasha Bedingfield, Leona Lewis, Sean Paul, Johnny Rzeznik, Krewella, Angélique Kidjo, Kelsea Ballerini, Nicole Scherzinger, Christina Grimmie, Victoria Justice & Q'orianka Kilcher released an amazing new song called, '**Love Song to the Earth**', which urged world leaders to strive to reach a global agreement during the United Nations climate conference in December of that year. How much impact the song may have had on the conference I cannot possibly tell but to me it is a powerful song which in the first link here is sung by the original artists with graphics produced by Michelle Sherliza, OP a Dominican Sister of Peace based in the USA. The second link will take you to a recording of the same song by The Harmonic Minor Youth Choir an incredibly talented youth choir based in North Cumbria for children aged 8 to 18 years old who decided to use this song to raise money for NHS Charities during the pandemic – well done to them!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAju0353w9I>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNaGhrr8VY4>

The ice caps of the earth's poles have suffered especially from the impact of climate change with melting glaciers impacting sea levels and the habitat of indigenous species being irreparably damaged. As well as being areas of undoubted natural beauty these places have inspired acts of great bravery on the part of those seeking to reach the poles for the first time. The seventh of Vaughan Williams's symphonies, *Sinfonia Antartica* (sic) is based on the score that he composed in 1947-8 for the Ealing Studios film, *Scott of the Antarctic*, about Captain Robert Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1912. The first performance of the symphony, which is scored for a large orchestra and wordless female soloist and chorus, took place on 14 January 1953 in Manchester with Sir John Barbirolli conducting the Hallé Orchestra. The following link is to a digital remastering of the 1954 performance by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult with Sir John Gielgud giving the spoken parts.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvH9rHMuj5g>

"Come ye thankful people come" is one of the best known of all harvest hymns in this country and is also used extensively in the USA at Thanksgiving. The hymn was written in 1844 by Henry Alford (1810-1871) who at the time was Rector of Aston Sandford in Buckinghamshire. Alford was the fifth generation of priests in his family, he was a Fellow of Trinity College and for a time had been Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. Although twice offered a bishopric, Alford declined preferring his life as an academic and minor poet – he did eventually accept Lord Palmerston's suggestion he should become Dean of Canterbury. *Come ye thankful people come* has appeared in a number of versions but almost always set to Sir George Elvey's tune "St George's, Windsor. Sir George was organist at St. George's from 1835 – 1882. The first link will take you to a rather lovely unaccompanied performance of the hymn by an unknown choir whom I can imagine in a country church at Harvest Festival. The second link will take you to what I regard as an attractive arrangement of the hymn tune for organ by the talented and rather larger than life American organist Stephen Aber <https://www.stephenaber.com/> played on the splendid new organ in Hayes Barton United Methodist Church, Raleigh, North Carolina

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYKGPVItGUM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZceckV78jk>

Keith Day