

## Music Reflection for November 2021

**“Remember, remember.....**

.....the fifth of November, gunpowder, treason and plot!”. So runs the first line of the children’s rhyme which many of us will still associate with the excitement of bonfires and fireworks marking the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. November is certainly a month when remembrance is high on the agenda including as it does not only “Bonfire Night” on the 5<sup>th</sup> but also All Saints Day on the 1<sup>st</sup> and All Souls Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> together with Remembrance Day on the 11<sup>th</sup> and Remembrance Sunday at the nearest weekend (14<sup>th</sup> this year).

Each of the days that I mention gives, not only cause to look back and remember what has gone but also, and equally importantly, a relevance to the present plus a significance for the future. In my reflection this month I would like to offer you a few thoughts and some music appropriate to each of those days.

Mention of All Saints Day can conjure up images of individuals in stained glass windows or magnificent works of art all wearing halos; add to this image tales of heroic deeds or great sacrifice and service and it is easy to imagine that the Saints can only be the ‘great and the good’ of the Church.

The celebration of ‘All Saints’ however as opposed to any individual hero reminds us that we all have a collective identity and purpose as members of the family of the Church. Therefore, when we remember the Saints, that “great multitude which no man can number”, we are thinking not only of the great and wonderful recognised heroes of the Church portrayed in stained glass, but rather of individuals of every kind, race and background “whose hope was in the word made flesh” as the Christmas bidding prayer so beautifully puts it. The realisation of that inclusion then gives hope that there is a place for all of us in that disparate collection of people who are gathered “from earth’s wide bounds. In the love and grace of God and his Son, we are all accepted as we are, and welcomed to walk with him as members of that glorious band.

One of the songs most associated with the Saints is the spiritual ***“When the Saints go marching in”***. The song, which is based on the Revelation of St John, originated as a fairly slow Christian hymn in around 1900 but its nature somewhat changed as it became a jazz classic by the end of the 1920’s and of course now it is frequently performed in secular as well as sacred locations. I would like to offer you a gentle performance of the song by the “Sisters of Grace Melodies” from Kenya.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzlieDvSGV0>

By contrast to the last song, I would like to introduce you to an organ piece for All Saints entitled ***“Martyrs, Dialogues on a Scottish Psalm Tune”*** by Kenneth Leighton (1929 – 1988). Leighton was born into a working-class family in Wakefield; recognising his interest in music his parents enrolled him into the choir of Wakefield Cathedral from whence his musical development was rapid having obtained his LRAM in piano performance before leaving school even though the family initially did not possess a piano. Gaining a scholarship to Oxford, Leighton came to the notice of Gerald Finzi and Ralph Vaughan-Williams both of whom encouraged his work which eventually gained him the post of Professor of Music at the University of Edinburgh. Leighton composed over 100 works in his lifetime most of which are regularly performed and recorded. “Martyrs” is a challenging piece for organ duet which charts the martyr’s journey from suffering to glory in heaven; the piece is played here by Bertie Baigent & Robert Pecksmith, two highly talented young organists whose biographical details can be viewed by clicking on “show more” on the video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PK9040JKKY>

Turning then to All Souls Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November we there have the opportunity to remember and pray individually for “the Faithful Departed”, those who have died in the faith of Christ or indeed in faith known only to God. We are invited to show our grief if we wish and we are reminded that those who mourn will be comforted. We are also encouraged to remember that the loved ones we may so miss are not lost forever but are alive and safe with God in that great company of the Saints we were celebrating on the previous day.

I have two pieces to offer you for All Souls Day both written in commemoration of an individual. The first piece is by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b.1935). Pärt apparently showed an early interest in music experimenting with compositions using the upper and lower registers of the family piano – apparently the middle register was damaged! Despite this early handicap Arvo made rapid progress and graduated from the Tallinn Conservatory after which he became a successful composer of film and stage music as well as working for the Estonian Public Radio. Unfortunately, the nature of some of Pärt’s compositions put him in conflict with the Soviet authorities and as a consequence he was silent for some time before returning to composition after converting to the Orthodox church. His return also signalled a new style of composition which has led him to be acclaimed both in Estonia and around the world - Pärt was the most performed living composer in the world from 2011 to 2018. Although he was never able to meet him, Pärt had a huge admiration for the work of Benjamin Britten, following Britten’s death he wrote this lovely ***“Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten”*** which is played here by the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the 2010 Proms.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82-xbhfNR2g>

The second piece for All Souls is by the comparatively little-known composer Frederick Septimus Kelly (1881 – 1916). Kelly was born in Australia but moved to England where he was educated at Eton and Oxford. Frederick Septimus was an accomplished pianist, playing with Pablo Casals and Maurice Ravel, he was also a successful oarsman rowing for Oxford and for England in the 1908 London Olympics. Following the outbreak of war in 1914, Kelly was commissioned into the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve for service with the Royal Naval Division with his friend—the poet Rupert Brooke, and was present when Brooke died off Skyros in 1915. On the death of Brooke Kelly composed his haunting ***“Elegy for String Orchestra ‘In memory of Rupert Brooke’ 1915”***. The first link below is to a recording as composed which is performed by an unknown orchestra; the second is to a vocal recording by AustralianVoices ***of Rupert Brooke’s poem “1914 IV: The Dead”*** set to Kelly’s music. It is a faultless performance but in my view no match for the composer’s setting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK19TZfoHLo&t=3s>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pte\\_d7i9-E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pte_d7i9-E)

For many of us the events of November 5<sup>th</sup> 1605 are now associated with firework displays and social activities centred around a bonfire. Back in the day of course, what was planned to happen was a plot to blow the House of Lords, King James I, his Queen and the heir to the throne all to smithereens and put the 13 year old Princess on the throne as a puppet monarch – high treason it was called then, a grave terrorist threat we would call it today. And the reason for this plot? Well, nothing more or less than religious intolerance and persecution that led a number of Roman Catholic conspirators to contemplate such grave and perilous action.

Robert Catesby, Guy Fawkes and the others involved in the plot paid a grim price for their treason but in England it became the custom to celebrate the deliverance of the King on the anniversary with a special service added to the Book of Common Prayer, bonfires and fireworks; the church service was abolished in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but of course bonfires and fireworks continue to this day. Perhaps as we celebrate the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, we might want to remember 1605 and think about the consequences, in our time, of religious and cultural intolerance, what we can do to mitigate them and how we move to a better future.

Music related to 5<sup>th</sup> November itself is a little limited but I have two alternative pieces for you. The first piece is by the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and is his “***Symphony No 59 in A***” which is frequently known by its moniker “Fire”. It is sometime thought that this title refers to the ‘fireworks’ contained in the lively first movement whereas, the reality is that it relates to the play *Die Feuersbrunst* by Gustav Friedrich Wilhelm Großmann to which some movements of the symphony were used as accompaniment when it was performed at the Eszterházy court at which Haydn was employed. Not letting the facts get in the way of some good music, I hope you enjoy this performance by the Esterhazy Orchestra & David Blum

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6mj8TLWaBM&t=82s>

Perhaps the most well know music in the world associated with fireworks is the “***Music for the Royal Fireworks***” composed by George Frideric Handel in 1749. As with the Haden piece above this lively music has no direct connection with the events of 5<sup>th</sup> November but was rather was commissioned under contract of George II for the fireworks in London's Green Park on 27 April 1749. The music celebrated the end of the War of the Austrian Succession and the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in 1748. I have included firstly a spirited organ transcription of the Overture played by the dazzling Jonathan Scott and then secondly a wonderful performance of the whole suite played at the 2012 Proms by Le Concert Spirituel on original instruments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zX0JfF-r-Vo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNqJ8mED1VE>

I think it is fair to say that an air of solemnity envelops the country as we come to Remembrance Sunday and what I grew up knowing as ‘Armistice Day’ on November 11<sup>th</sup>. It is difficult for any of us to comprehend the scale of suffering in World War One when it is estimated that as many as 40 million people (military and civilian) were killed or injured however, to put that figure into perspective it is equivalent to almost the entire population of Spain today. It is almost impossible again for us to understand the scale of the loss and suffering occasioned or indeed how the assassination of one man, albeit a Crown Prince could lead to such disastrous consequences. Sadly of course mankind has not learned the lessons of the consequence of war and still today, although the numbers are much more comprehensible, the tragedy and loss continue and are every iota as keen for those suffering now as they were over a hundred years ago.

At Remembrance Tide we remember and give grateful thanks for all those who have died and those who continue to suffer as a consequence of war, we give thanks for their sacrifice on our behalf and hopefully, as the servants of the Prince of Peace we can learn the lessons that may lead us to a different future.

One of the most moving elements of the Remembrance Sunday ceremony at the Cenotaph in Whitehall is the music played by the massed bands before the commencement of the service. The following link will take you to a touching performance of three of those pieces by the Band of the Irish Guards; ***"Isle of Beauty, David of the White Rock and Oft in the Stilly Night"***

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REpKfQtm3js&t=69s>

During the Second World War William Walton provided music for films deemed to be of 'national importance'. Lawrence Olivier's Shakespeare epic Henry V in 1943 was the most substantial. His role in patriotic films from 1941 and 42 like 'The Foreman went to France', 'Next of Kin', 'Went the day Well' and 'The First of the Few' was to provide appropriate title music and some underscoring at key moments. Much of this music remained unpublished until 1990, when Christopher Palmer assembled the highlights into ***"A Wartime Sketchbook"*** performed here by the Band of the Royal Northern College of Music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kW-ViB0FoX0&t=78s>

The poetry of Robert Laurence Binyon, CH (1869 –1943) is some of the most evocative ever written with the fourth verse of "For the Fallen" (They shall grow not old) being used every year at Remembrance services up and down the country. Sir Edward Elgar, in his last major choral composition, set three of Binyon's poems to music in a work entitled ***"The Spirit of England, Op. 80"***: performed here by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1wJfKUif90&t=42s>

Malcom Guite is an accomplished poet, writer and musician who is Fellow of Girton College where he was Chaplain. Malcolm's weekly "Poets Corner" item on the back page of the Church Times is a firm favourite of many of us who read that before tackling the rest of the publication. Malcolm was until recently a resident of Linton when he and his wife retired to Norfolk. The following is a sonnet written by Malcom for All Saints - I think it is a lovely encapsulation of the themes of Remembrance and hope you enjoy it too.

*"Though Satan breaks our dark glass into shards  
Each shard still shines with Christ's reflected light,  
It glances from the eyes, kindles the words  
Of all his unknown saints. The dark is bright  
With quiet lives and steady lights undimmed,  
The witness of the ones we shunned and shamed.  
Plain in our sight and far beyond our seeing  
He weaves them with us in the web of being  
They stand beside us even as we grieve,  
The lone and left behind whom no one claimed,  
Unnumbered multitudes, he lifts above  
The shadow of the gibbet and the grave,  
To triumph where all saints are known and named;  
The gathered glories of His wounded love."*

**Keith Day**