

Music Reflection – January 2022

“Arise, shine for thy light is come”

As we emerge from the frantic activity of Christmas, we find ourselves in a new month, a new year and the new season of Epiphany. At the Feast of the Epiphany the Church firstly remembers the visit of the Magi to offer gifts to the infant Jesus but also celebrates the manifestation or showing forth of Jesus to the ‘gentiles’ This means that all of us who are figuratively sitting in darkness, not just the Jews in Palestine at the time, have the opportunity to “see a great light” and to thank God for the greatest gift that we can ever receive, that of his Son coming, in great humility, into our dark world to transform it.

Although I love the Advent message more than any other, I have to confess that I generally find the period before Christmas really difficult to negotiate. I find myself depressed and dismayed by the ever-reducing hours of daylight, resentful of the relentless commercial exhortations to fill myself with artificial jollity for the “best Christmas ever” and increasingly anxious that I am never going to be able to achieve all that is expected of me before the 25th December! But then what happens with the arrival of the day, well, on a practical level I am relieved and perhaps faintly surprised it has arrived despite my lack of readiness and my fears but, much more importantly and seriously, I never fail to be thrilled by the words of St. John in the Christmas Gospel “And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth” - we have received the light!

Returning then to January and Epiphany, we can, I hope, rejoice that the gift we received on Christmas Day is not one that fades or disappoints but rather, in that somewhat hackneyed expression, it is “the gift that keeps on giving”. As we move on into our New Year let’s be glad on a practical level for the daylight that increases day by day and on a spiritual level for the continuing manifestation to us of the love and light of God in the ministry of his Son.

My musical offerings this month are a mixture of sacred and secular pieces all with a connection to light or light coming into our world; as always, I hope you enjoy them.

Mention of “seeing a great light” will lead many of us to the prophesy of Christ’s birth in Isaiah Chapter 9 and from there it is a very short distance to the well-known bass aria “***the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light***” in Handel’s oratorio Messiah. Most of us are familiar with performances of this masterpiece performed by a static bass soloist and orchestra but I would like to offer you something a little different. Claus Guth is a greatly acclaimed German theatre director whose principal focus is opera; in 2008 Guth produced a dramatized version of Messiah at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna with the talented German artist Florian Boesch (b. 17 May 1971) as bass soloist. The singing is magnificent, see what you think about the presentation!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0A_1LovZjc

Reena Esmail (b. 11 February 1983) is an Indian-American music composer of Indian and Western classical music, she is currently composer-in-residence at the Los Angeles Master Chorale and Seattle Symphony as well as being Artistic Director of Shastra, a non-profit organization that promotes cross-cultural music collaboration between the music tradition of India and the West. Esmail was inspired by the words of the 13th century Sufi mystic poet, Rumi; “*Religions are many But God is one. The lamps may be different But the Light is the same*” and as a result wrote her piece

“The light is the same” based on two Hindustani raags or musical frameworks. The piece is performed here by a group at the Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia – like it or hate it I think you will agree with the thought on which it is based.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS_jH0bubQ0

“Break forth O beauteous Heavenly Light” is a chorale familiar to many of us, indeed it was sung most effectively by our own Abington Village Choir at the Carol Service this year despite their being outdoors and in poor light. The chorale was written by Johann Schop (1590–1664) but is best known in the arrangements by J S Bach which figure in his Christmas Oratorio, by which time the tune had become more structured and slower than in the original form. David Biedenbender (b. 1984) is described as a composer, conductor, performer, educator, and interdisciplinary collaborator who has written music for the concert stage as well as for dance and multimedia collaborations; it is said his work is influenced by his diverse musical experiences in rock and jazz bands as an electric bassist, in wind, jazz, and New Orleans-style brass bands. ***“Luminescence”*** is a composition by Biedenbender based on “Break forth.” which I hope you find interesting

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG33ZEfcn6Y>

Continuing with the Heavenly theme I would like to introduce you to a setting by the French composer Jean Mouton (c. 1459-1522) of ***“Nesciens Mater Virgo virum”*** which is an antiphon for the period from the Nativity through to Epiphany describing how the Virgin Mary brought forth “the Saviour of the centuries, Him, the King of the angels” – or in our terms, the light of the world. Mouton’s first job of which we are aware was singer and teacher at the collegiate church in Saint Omer around 1477, he then became a priest and eventually entered the service of Queen Anne of Brittany in 1502. For the remainder of his life Mouton was employed by the French court, often writing music for state occasions—weddings, coronations, papal elections, births and deaths. Indeed it is considered possible that Mouton was in charge of the elaborate musical festivities by the French at the meeting between François I and Henry VIII at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. *Nesciens Mater* is sung here simply impeccably by VOCES8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUooE1usEDI>

Light is of course essential to our life and I for one, as I mentioned earlier, find the shortage of it during the winter months irksome. We generally take light for granted and therefore when, many year ago now, I heard our priest say in a sermon “If the sun failed to rise tomorrow you would not get into this church without my help”, I was puzzled by what he meant; it took me a while to realise that if the gift of light, which we take for granted day after day, did not arrive one morning we would indeed, as my dear priest suggested, not be able to get into church because of the crush of panic stricken folk who would not know where else to turn. Sunrise is never dull even in the dreariest location but in a dramatic landscape it can be spectacular and the Grand Canyon is one of the world’s more dramatic locations. Ferde Grofé (1892 – 1972) was an American musical arranger and composer who was highly successful in both guises, his most well-known orchestral arrangement is probably that of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, where he took Gershwin’s piano composition and arranged it for the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in a form in common use today; his best known composition however is his *Grand Canyon Suite* which opens with ***“Sunrise”***

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc6oYN_2h6g

As I mentioned at the outset, at Epiphany we remember the visit of the Magi to the young Jesus and recognise them as the first of the gentiles to see “the Light of the World” – their visit is prophesied in Ps 72 v 10 “Reges Tharsis et insulae” (“Kings of Tarshish and the islands”). These words have been used as a responsory for Epiphany and set to music by a number of renaissance composers including John Shepherd (1515 – 1558). Shepperd was a gentleman of the Chapel Royal at the funeral of Edward VI and after that remained in the service of Mary Tudor writing much of the material needed for the restoration of the Roman Catholic Latin mass there. **“Reges Tharsis”** is performed here by The Sixteen under the direction of their founder, Harry Christophers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrCIVhAZ6nQ>

The Magi we are told followed a bright star for a huge distance to find the infant Christ. In 1597 Philipp Nicolai wrote his hymn “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” based originally on Ps 45 but which soon became associated the epiphany of Christ. The hymn has inspired a number of choral works over the year by Buxtehude, Bach, Mendelssohn and of course “The Kings” by Peter Cornelius in 1870 but these are at least equalled by the amount of instrumental music also inspired by this hymn. Among the best known of these instrumental works is the organ fantasy **“Wie schön leuchtet uns der Morgenstern”** by Max Reger (1873 – 1916). Born the son of talented amateur musicians, Reger was brought up to appreciate music and given a comprehensive musical grounding but, in common with so many others, his parents wished him to pursue a non-musical career. At first Reger followed his parent’s wishes and trained for teaching, however a visit to the Bayreuth Festival, where he heard Richard Wagner's operas Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg and Parsifal left a deep impression and made Reger decide to pursue a life in music. Reger went on to have a hugely successful musical career and produced an enormous output in just over 25 years, nearly always in abstract forms. A great deal of Reger’s work was for the organ and much of it is ‘challenging’ to use an overworked term. Evan Bogerd, organist of the Westerkerk, Amsterdam here gives a brilliant rendition of **“Wie schön leuchtet uns der Morgenstern”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dNV6vgvYRU>

And so, to conclude, let us remember the light that we believe came into the world at Christmas and is shown to us, not just at Epiphany but on every single day of the year even on those when we may feel that we could potentially be sat in great deal of darkness.

The chorus **“For unto us is born a Son”** concludes the third scene of Part 1 of Messiah and with that I wish you a joyful New Year

There are two links below, the first to a performance by King’s College Choir under a youthful Stephen Cleobury using the authentic 1752 SATB score for male voices and the second a contrasting but equally ‘authentic’ performance by The Academy of Ancient Music and VOCES8

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFBIJgkj_-g

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6m0NfrEn_k

Keith Day

3rd January 2022