

Music Reflection for Easter 2023

Question: What is the next Sunday after Easter?

Answer: Pentecost!

Is Keith Day trying to re-write the Church calendar? Has he finally lost the plot completely? Has the excitement of the coronation all proved too much for the old boy?

Well of course I have to confess to being slightly devious as well as “smart” with my question inasmuch that I did not ask “what is the next Sunday after Easter Sunday” to which of course the answer would have been Easter II or “Low Sunday” as you may know it. The point however that I am trying to make here is that Easter is a whole season of no less than 50 days that runs all the way through from Easter Day until the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down to rest on the disciples.

It may say something of our human nature that most of us would I think immediately recognise Lent as a period of 40 days starting on Ash Wednesday and we are conscious throughout the whole of that time that it is a solemn season of preparation during which we may, in one form or another, be trying to follow a personal discipline of some kind which we then forget in the joy of Easter Day and the volume of chocolate that accompanies it, after which perhaps we feel it is back to normal and life continues as usual. After the bank holiday weekend, we may ask our friends and acquaintances “did you have a good Easter?” and carry on as though it is all over but of course we could not be more wrong or mistaken. After his resurrection Jesus was in no great rush to get off to heaven immediately but stayed, appearing many times to his disciples, and preparing them for the momentous events still to come at Pentecost. We hear that although the disciples were anxious and at times downcast, when Jesus came to them, they were glad and their hearts burned within them. We too like the disciples have a whole 50 days to celebrate the joyful news of Easter and prepare ourselves for the wonderful gift we are to receive at Pentecost so strengthened by that thought – let the party continue!!

The acclamation “Alleluia” figures regularly in our Easter liturgy and that is also the case with much of the wealth of Easter music to which we have easy access thanks to modern technology. I have tried to select a variety of pieces that reflect the joy of the Easter and Pentecost seasons in different ways; I hope you enjoy them.

Nikolai Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov (1844 – 1908) was born into a Russian noble family indeed one of his ancestors was a lover of Catherine the Great; however his own father was one of six illegitimate sons that his grandfather had fathered with a woman of a lower class with whom he was unable to marry and thus he had been obliged to adopt them all. This slightly unconventional background did not disadvantage Nikolai who had a privileged upbringing and although by the age of six he showed talent at the piano, he was said to be a careless pupil. Nikolai followed a career in the Imperial Navy which he continued alongside his increasing musical activity, he eventually became a civilian inspector of military bands and never relinquished his imperial posts despite a successful life as a composer. Rimsky-Korsakov was one of a group of Russian composers who strongly promoted the traditional style of music and that is reflected in his *Russian Easter Festival Overture, Op. 36* played here by the Mariinsky Orchestra under the baton of Gergiev Ulianovsk.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbDYtAHTQoE&t=143s>

Those of you who are kind enough to regularly read these reflections will know that I have a penchant for South African Gospel Choirs of which Wacha Mkhukhu Wachumlilo are an excellent example, here they sing “*Bonang Ho Hlahile Maru*” which roughly translated means Our Lord comes on the clouds of Heaven, Alleluia – that to me seems good message for Easter and Ascension and is certainly sung here with much enthusiasm

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbsfo_l5X4E

Ralph Manuel (b 1951) is a native of Oklahoma City, he has music degrees from Oklahoma City University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and B.H. Carroll Theological Institute of Irving, Texas. He lived in Recife, Brazil, for over 20 years, where he served on the music faculty of the North Brazil Baptist Theological Seminary as a Baptist missionary. He then served for 13 years as Minister of Music and Worship at Heritage Baptist Church in Annapolis. Ralph is currently living in Dallas, Texas, where he is a freelance composer. His works include vocal solos and duets, keyboard solos, duets, and trios (six hands), two major works for chorus and orchestra on Brazilian themes, and over 100 anthems of which *"Alleluia"* is one of the most frequently heard. The anthem is sung here in St Catherine's Church, Kraków by a mixed choir as part of the 6th International Kraków Choir Festival.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6vwxllTTBo>

William Billings (1746 – 1800) is thought to be America's first choral composer. Billings' career did not have a promising start since at the age of 14 his father's death put an end to his formal education and he was set to train as a tanner. Despite this and other handicaps, with a little help from a choir member at a local church and with much self-effort, Billings became well known for his four part a cappella works. In addition to composition Billings developed a reputation for giving singing instruction and for assistance in the establishment of Song Schools which became popular at the time. Despite his success in composition, the inadequate copyright laws in America at the time resulted in his dying in poverty. *"Easter Anthem"* was composed by Billings in 1767 and is sung here by a talented and joyful group of four young singers from Guilford Community Church in Vermont.

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

I find it hard to believe that there is anyone who was watching the Coronation of our King and Queen last Saturday who failed to be stirred in some way by the Ascension Gospel Choir's performance of *"Alleluia"* by Debbie Wiseman (b 1963). Although far from my taste in music it was impossible to do other than admire the skill and talent of the handpicked singers and I am sure the piece will remain in the minds of all concerned for a very long time. Watch it again here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kejfhJb9lMA>

"Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!" is perhaps the best known of all our Easter hymns. The first version of the hymn appeared in a 14th century Bohemian manuscript with the Latin title "Surrexit Christus hodie", originally the hymn had eleven verses but mercifully, by the time it was translated into English in 1708 by John Baptist Walsh for inclusion in his collection of hymns "Lyra Davidica", the number of verses had reduced to three, a fourth verse later being added by John Wesley. The hymn is usually sung to the tune "Easter Hymn" which was composed in a rather elaborate form for the "Lyra Davidica" and later simplified to the version with which we are familiar by William Henry Monk the musical editor of the first edition of Hymns Ancient & Modern.

Paul Fey (b 1998) is a precociously talented young German organist from Leipzig. After formal training in organ and sacred music in Halle, Paul is making a big impact on the musical world with his recordings on some of the best instruments in Europe as well as his increasingly popular compositions. Unless I am very much mistaken, we are going to see a great deal more of Paul Fey, his is definitely a name to watch. In the meantime, however listen to his **"Prelude to Jesus Christ is Risen Today"** and, watch out for the penguins on the pedals!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmjoGi0f0A8>

And so, at last we come to the “next Sunday after Easter” – Pentecost and the great hymn “Veni Creator Spiritus” (Come Holy Ghost) believed to have been written by Rabanus Maurus, a ninth-century saint, German monk, teacher, and archbishop. There have been many variations and settings of this Latin hymn but one of the most outstanding must be the *“Choral varié sur Veni Creator”* by the French composer Maurice Gustave Duruflé (1902 – 1986). Duruflé was a chorister at Rouen Cathedral before studying the organ with some of the greatest French organists of the time, he subsequently graduated from the Paris Conservatoire with first prizes in organ, composition, harmony, fugue and piano accompaniment. With such a glittering array of qualifications it is perhaps not a surprise that in 1927 Louis Vierne nominated Duruflé as his deputy at Notre Dame and from there he became titular organist of St-Étienne-du-Mont in Paris in 1929, a position he held for the rest of his life.

Richard McVeigh is a British organist who most certainly also has a glittering reputation including playing at Beverly Minster, Winchester and Arundel Cathedrals. Richard is now a freelance organist with a very successful ‘YouTube’ channel as well as his own record label. I think I have explained the “Hauptwerk” system previously in these articles but as a reminder this is a revolutionary technique that makes it possible to play the digitally produced sound of an organ in its own location on the keys of a suitably equipped console located elsewhere; this is not a recording of the remote instrument it is a live digital representation in the acoustic of the remote building. Without further technical ado please do enjoy Richard playing virtually on the Aristide Cavallé-Coll organ of Cathédrale Notre-Dame-de-l’Annonciation et Saint-Sigisbert, Nancy. As you will see and hear Richard’s wife Caroline is singing the verses of hymn – you may also spot a rather tiny pupil organist called Hugo at the console

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMxqYUCNFQ0>

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia!

Keith Day

10th May 2023