

Program Notes – Mass Appeal – April 12th 2008

Tonight's concert features works by two of the twentieth century's most influential composers. Both shared a love of folk music and song from their respective countries, and both were greatly admired as educators and philosophers. In titling our program *Mass Appeal*, we were not only pointing to the obvious reference to form and content, but also to the endearing quality of this music, and the great enjoyment that these two giants of modern tonal composition have given millions of listeners over the past 100 years.

Vaughan Williams, whose death fifty years ago we commemorate tonight, was born in the Gloucestershire village of Down Ampney in 1872. His father was Vicar of the village church, and one of his most famous hymn tunes bears the name of this very place. As a student he had played the piano and the violin, and later attended the Royal College of Music, studying with the masters of the time, Stanford and Parry. His education later extended to Berlin and Paris, where he studied with Bruch and Ravel, respectively.

Kodaly's upbringing was not dissimilar. Ten years younger than Vaughan Williams, he was born in Kecskemét, growing up in Trnava (now in part of Slovakia). He too played the violin, and began composing while still very young, despite having little formal musical education. He entered the Liszt Academy in Budapest in 1900, studying with Hans Koessler, but developed a keen interest in the new field of ethnomusicology, writing a thesis on Hungarian folk song in 1905. Around this time, he became acquainted with Bartók, and the two became lifelong champions of one another's music. Kodaly too ventured to Paris, where he studied with the organist Charles Widor, and absorbed himself in the musical culture of France. He returned to Budapest in 1907, and became a professor at the Liszt Academy.

Almost at the same time, Vaughan Williams had discovered English folk songs, many of which were fast becoming extinct. Like Kodaly, he traveled the countryside, transcribing and preserving many. Both men incorporated folk melodies into their composition, being fascinated by the beauty of the music and its anonymous history in the lives of ordinary people. The association with folk music is a regular feature of the works of both composers throughout their careers, and although it is not a particularly relevant contributor to their church music, it is worth noting as it audibly informs all their composition.

All of the music we hear tonight of Vaughan Williams dates from the earlier years of his mature composition. The *Songs of Travel* were composed in 1904 to poems of Robert Louis Stevenson, and the *Te Deum in G* was written for the enthronement of Cosmo Lang as Archbishop of Canterbury. Despite his lengthy involvement in church music, he was described by his second wife Ursula as "an atheist (who) later drifted into a happy agnosticism". This description is almost impossible to believe when one hears the pure mystical beauty of the *Mass in G minor*, written in 1922. In this piece, the composer pays homage to the tradition espoused in the music of Tallis and Byrd. He was inspired by the fine singing of R. R. Terry's Westminster Cathedral Choir, and heard the piece performed

there in 1924, although it is dedicated to Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers, who actually sang the premiere of the work.

Kodaly remained in Hungary until his death in 1967, composing actively and continuing his exhaustive study of folk composition, and developing new ways of educating the young in the art of music. His choral and orchestral output was very prolific, with such notable highlights as *Psalmus Hungaricus* (1923) that you may have heard the OCS sing at Southam Hall in 2006, *Te Deum* (1939), and *Laudes Organi*, written for the American Guild of Organists in 1964. The *Missa Brevis* was originally written in 1943 as an organ-solo Mass in the classical French tradition. In 1947, it was republished as a work for organ, chorus, and soloists, and later the composer added a full orchestration. In either later form, the work begins and ends with an organ or instrumental solo, according to the old liturgical custom.

Although these two writers are very different artists in many ways, we feel that there are a number of strongly unifying characteristics, some of which are explored above. As both men were pioneers in the twentieth century sense of the music of their respective countries, it seems appropriate to quote Vaughan Williams when he wrote that “every composer cannot expect to have a worldwide message, but he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people”. This contribution was truly felt in the case of both composers. They both died as artists in service of their country’s culture, and ambassadors of all that was excellent in the music of both Britain and Hungary.