

Music Listening for the Easter Season—Easter V

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This is the fifth of a series of articles on seasonal choral music which we are not able to experience in person this year because of the necessary restrictions on our being together for worship. However, we are fortunate to have access to a great wealth of music through recordings on the internet. Therefore, I offer the following discussion of several compositions followed by their texts and YouTube links to recommended performances.

A seasonal reflection

Rae E. Whitney was born at Chippenham, Wilts, England. A graduate of the University of Bristol, she began her professional life as a teacher. In 1960 she settled in Nebraska following her marriage to Clyde E. Whitney who was at that time rector of Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church, Scottsbluff. She soon became active in the life of that parish and more broadly in the church. She is now the author of over 500 hymns which are found in a variety of denominational hymnals and collections. In October 2016, when she received the Bishop's Cross (Diocese of Nebraska), Dr. Marty Wheeler Burnett said the follow about Rae Whitney:

“Her topics span the breadth of Christian life and experience. She has frequently chosen to write about women: women of the Bible, women saints, and feminine images of God.

Whitney's groundbreaking texts on these subjects have illuminated topics previously ignored by hymn writers. Her hymns have been set to music by the leading church music composers of our time, and she continues to receive commissions and write new hymns.”

My setting of Rae Whitney's *Myrrh-bearing Mary*—in which the ministry, death and rising of Jesus is presented through the conflated experience of the Gospels' Marys—was composed for *A New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools* (Yale, 1992) at the request of Russell Schultz, its editor. It is a ballad-like art song in four stanzas. The Reverend Mitzi Noble, when a seminarian at The General Theological Seminary, gave the first solo public performance of this setting at a concert of the seminary's *Schola Cantorum* in the spring of 1990. Rae Whitney's text and a link to a recording of that premiere performance is given below.

Myrrh-bearing Mary—David Hurd (b.1950)

Myrrh-bearing Mary from Magdala came
Seeking her Jesus, with spirit aflame;
He had commanded her sickness depart,
She now would thank him for newness of heart.

Myrrh-bearing Mary to Bethany came
Seeking her Jesus who'd called her by name;

There she anointed his feet and his head
With precious oils that were meant for the dead.

Myrrh-bearing Mary to Calvary came
Seeking her Jesus who hung there in shame;
And as the careless and heedless passed by,
Hopeless and helpless she watched her Lord die.

Myrrh-bearing Mary to death's garden came
Seeking her Jesus who'd borne the world's blame;
Heartsick she stood, till she heard the Lord's voice:
"Mary!" he said, "I am risen; rejoice!"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94SnCrQb8_w

The way, the truth, and the life

The Collect for the Fifth Sunday of Easter begins:

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant
us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way,
the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his
steps in the way that leads to eternal life.

This prayer anticipates the language of the gospel reading in which Jesus comforts his anxious disciples, identifying himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The beloved English priest and poet George Herbert (1593–1633) offered his reflection and prayer to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life in "The Call" (*The Temple*, 1633). Herbert's three-stanza poem points toward "love," its final word, and the new commandment which Jesus had already pronounced to his disciples (John 13:34). Herbert's prayer-poem continues to inspire many musical settings, probably the most well-known of which is from *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). This setting has been distilled into many modern hymnals, for example, #487 in *The Hymnal 1982*. Each musical setting illuminates Herbert's words in its own distinctive way. In addition to Vaughan Williams' iconic setting, I will present settings of George Herbert's words by Harold Friedell (1905–1958), William Harris (1883–1973), Richard Lloyd (b.1933), and David Ashley White (b.1944). Two additional settings of *The Call* which have been sung at Saint Mary's in the recent past, but are not included in this article, are by Richard DeLong (1951–1994) and my own unpublished setting composed in 2008. Recordings of these latter two pieces are not available at this time but, hopefully, will be in the future.

More about the composers and the musical settings:

William H. Harris (1883–1973) taught at the Royal College of Music in London from 1923 to 1953. He also served as Organist and Choirmaster at St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle from 1933 until 1961. He is remembered as a beloved choir trainer, whose choristers affectionately called him

'Doc,' and for his varied anthems and liturgical settings. Two great pillars of twentieth century English church music are Harris' 1959 anthem on the John Donne text *Bring us, O Lord God* and his earlier eight-voice masterpiece *Faire is the heaven*, a setting dating from 1923 of a poem by Edmund Spenser (1553–1599). Harris' less well-known setting of Herbert's *The Call*, for choir and organ, richly represents his expressive melodic and harmonic choral style.

Richard Lloyd was born near Stockport, Cheshire. He was a chorister of Lichfield Cathedral (1942–47) and was educated at Rugby School where he held a music scholarship. He studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was an organ scholar. From 1957 to 1966 he was assistant organist of Salisbury Cathedral, then appointed Organist and Master of the Choristers of Hereford Cathedral. In 1974 he moved to Durham on his appointment as Organist and Master of the Choristers of Durham Cathedral. In 1985 he became deputy headmaster of Salisbury Cathedral School, retiring in 1988. Since retiring he has divided his time between examining and composing with more than 600 pieces to his credit. Lloyd's setting of *The Call* repeats the same essential music for the first and last of its three stanzas. The re-voicing of the second stanza features a striking soprano descant.

David Ashley White is Professor of Composition and the C. W. Moores, Jr. Endowed Professor of Music in the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, and Composer-in-Residence at Houston's Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. He served as Director of the Moores School from 1999–2014. White is a prolific composer of instrumental and vocal music. He is one of the most widely recognized American composers of sacred music in our time with numerous commissions and recordings to his credit. His setting of *The Call*, published in 1993, is strophic and employs organ accompaniment. It begins innocently with treble voices singing in unison and expands gradually to a strong climactic ending. Curiously, the organ interlude between the second and third stanzas initially suggests Vaughan Williams' easily recognized opening phrase for *The Call*.

Harold Friedell (1903–1958) was born in Jamaica, Queens, where at the age of sixteen he became organist of First United Methodist Episcopal Church. He studied and later taught at the Juilliard School. From 1927 until 1946 he served a variety of New York area parishes as organist and choirmaster and was eventually appointed to the sacred music faculty at Union Theological Seminary. From 1946 until his untimely death he was organist and choirmaster at Saint Bartholomew's, Park Avenue. Friedell's fluid setting of *The Call* is one of his many fine choral anthems. It respects Herbert's three-verse poem with three distinct but similar sections for four voices without accompaniment. Stylistic unity is preserved which each verse has unique music.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), regarded at the time of his death as “Dean of British Composers” and “Grand Old Man of English Music,” well deserved such affectionate accolades. His works include ballets, operas, chamber music, nine symphonies and a great catalogue of other compositions. His contribution to church music is most remarkable for one who considered himself an agnostic. His many anthems and settings of canticles are core repertoire for church choirs worldwide; his larger choral works are often performed in concert and recorded. His 1921 *Mass in G minor* is often considered the most significant English work of its kind since the sixteenth century, and it has been an inspiration to many composers in the century that has followed. Notably Vaughan Williams was music editor of *The English Hymnal* (1906), a publication which remains a vital

resource for performance and research to this day. His interest in English folksong, from which he derived themes for several of his compositions, manifested itself in many of the hymn tunes and harmonizations which were first published in this landmark hymnal. The elegant simplicity of folksong is evident in his setting of *The Call* which is the fourth of his *Five Mystical Songs*. These songs, which were composed between 1906 and 1911, are scored for baritone and orchestra (with chorus *ad libitum*). Of the five songs, *The Call* is the simplest with spare accompaniment and no provision for chorus. The first and second stanzas have the same melody, but the third varies a bit, beginning in a higher key. It eventually returns to the home key and resolves in a manner similar to the preceding stanzas.

The final YouTube link is to a musical video which may have particular resonance for New Yorkers, particularly at the present time. It will speak for itself from inspiration arising out of the words of Jesus, the poetry of George Herbert and the melody of Vaughan Williams.

Here is George Herbert's text and links to the several musical settings of it.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life!
Such a Way as gives us breath:
Such a Truth as ends all strife,
Such a Life as killeth Death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength!
Such a Light as shows a feast,
Such a Feast as mends in length,
Such a Strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart!
Such a Joy as none can move,
Such a Love as none can part,
Such a Heart as joys in love.

Come, my way— William Harris (1883–1973)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gj5Ad-Nyz90>

The Call— Richard Lloyd (b.1933)

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

The Call—David Ashley White (b.1944)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMbqiIU14Yk>

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life— Harold Friedell (1905–1958)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dLm7RdkMFs>

The Call— Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fZvtyDob9w>

Come, my way—Blackfriar Music, after Vaughan Williams

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3SSCuSMLK4>