

Music Listening for the Easter Season—Ascension and Easter VII

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This is the seventh of a series of articles featuring choral music which many singers long to sing, and many others long to hear sung, but cannot during this time of limited gathering. The Easter season is so rich with choral literature spanning many centuries. I have chosen a small representative sampling of British and American pieces which may illuminate our meditations on this time as we enter the last phase of the Easter Season between from Ascension to Pentecost. Music for the Mass is normally highly portable although some mass settings were composed with intension for particular occasions or seasons either by virtue of thematic content or general musical characteristics. My *Missa Brevis* falls into the latter category, having no thematic association with *Ascensiontide* but nonetheless composed to have a musical character which commends its use at this time of the year. Therefore, I begin with the *Gloria in excelsis* from this mass setting. Several motets and anthems follow: works ranging from Orlando Gibbons (c.1583–1625) to Gerald Finzi (1901–1956), back to William Byrd (c.1540–1623), to Charles Stanford (1852-1924), and finally returning to another composition of mine from 1984.

Here is more information on the compositions and their composers. The texts and YouTube links to recorded performances follow this discussion.

My *Missa Brevis* was composed for and first performed on Ascension Day 1991 when I was Director of Music at All Saints Church, Manhattan. It is dedicated to The Reverend R. DeWitt Mallary, Jr. who was rector of All Saints Church at that time. The *Kyrie* is in Greek and the *Gloria*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* are in Latin. The musical themes of each movement are derived from the rendering of the letters of Father Mallary's name as musical pitches. These pitches are intentionally arranged to achieve upward melodic gestures suggestive of the Ascension. Each movement of the mass is compact and rhythmically straight-forward. The words are presented directly in angular melodic shapes and lean harmonic textures. The mass is scored for four-voices, although solo voices complement the choral parts in the *Agnus Dei*. This unpublished mass setting was already in the repertoire at Saint Mary's before I became Music Director in 2016. It has been sung on Ascension Day or its proximate Sundays for the past three years.

Orlando Gibbons was baptized on Christmas Day 1583 in Oxford, where his father, William Gibbons, was employed as a town musician. He was a chorister at King's College, Cambridge, between 1596 and 1598 while his elder brother, Edward (1568-1650), was master of the choristers. King James I appointed Orlando Gibbons a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal where he served as an organist for the last ten years of his life. He was active as a court musician and served as organist at Westminster Abbey. In his relatively short life, Gibbons composed generously for keyboard, for viols, and for voices in both sacred and secular realms. His sacred works include two service settings, several verse anthems, and several full anthems of which *O clap your hands*, sung this evening during the administration of communion, is one of the grandest. It is an effervescent *tour de force* of

polyphonic writing for eight-voice choir and powerfully presents the text of Psalm 47 (with *Gloria Patri* appended). The probable premiere of this anthem was on 17 May 1622 on the occasion of Gibbons' admission to the degree of Doctor of Music at Oxford.

Gerald Finzi (1901–1956) was born in London. Although he was an agnostic of Jewish decent, and not a self-professing 'Christian' in the traditional sense, several of his most notable compositions are deeply evocative works on Christian texts. Finzi's early studies with Edward Bairstow (1874–1946) at York may have been most formative in cultivating his affinity for and facility in choral composition. Finzi was also nurtured through his friendships with such well-known London composers as Edmund Rubbra, Gustav Holst, Arthur Bliss, and Ralph Vaughan Williams who was instrumental in securing a teaching position for him at the Royal Academy of Music in 1930. Finzi moved to Ashmansworth in Hampshire in 1939. There he founded the Newbury String Players, a group specializing in reviving eighteenth century string music and premiering contemporary works such as those of Julian Bream and Kenneth Leighton. Finzi's 1952 anthem *God is gone up*, Opus 27b, is a setting of a text from the *Sacramental Meditations* of Edward Taylor (c.1646–1729). Its opening fanfare on organ trumpets sets a majestic and triumphal tone even before the eight-voice double choir enters. The second half of Taylor's text is treated with delicacy, after which the anthem repeats the opening stanza, again with grandly opulent sonority.

William Byrd (c.1540–1623), like the slightly older Thomas Tallis (c.1505–1585), enjoyed the favor of Queen Elizabeth I and composed effectively for both the English and Latin Rites of his time. His motet *Non vos relinquam orphanos*, often sung in English as *I will not leave you comfortless*, is a setting of a *Magnificat* antiphon for the first Vespers of Pentecost set for five voices. It was published in the second book of his *Gradaulia* (1607). The text source for this motet is John 14:18 and 16:22 and, as such, is suitable for the interval between Ascension and Pentecost.

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) was born in Dublin and educated at the University of Cambridge where he was appointed organist of Trinity College while an undergraduate. He later studied music in Leipzig and Berlin. In 1882 he was one of the founding professions of the Royal College of Music. In addition, from 1887 he was also Professor of Music at Cambridge. Among his students was a generation of distinguished composers including Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Stanford was a prolific composer whose works included seven symphonies and nine operas. He is perhaps most dearly remembered today, however, for his enduring church anthems and settings for Anglican worship. His motet *Coelos ascendit hodie* is the second of Stanford's Three Motets, Opus 38, It is a fittingly robust anthem for unaccompanied double choir and was dedicated to Alan Gray and the Choir of Trinity College, Cambridge.

My setting of Psalm 57:6-11, *Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God*, was commissioned by the Pasadena Chapter of the American Guild of Organists in 1984. It is designed as a responsorial setting with a refrain which may be joined in by a gathered assembly. It is accompanied by organ throughout. Most of the choral writing ranges from unison to four parts. However, the words "I will sing and make melody" occur twice in the text, as the second half of verse 7 and inserted between verses 10 and 11. At both of these occurrences four the voices enter individually and repeat the phrase in increasingly closer imitation, finally splitting into eight parts separated by only one beat

with the resulting sonic “cloud” hovering over a sustained organ cluster-chord. The desired effect is a dream-like shimmering cloud of choral sound from overlapping melodic fragments. It is one way of musically imagining the heavenly Ascension. Then, in both instances, the returning refrain bursts in to elicit an earthly triumphal response.

Below are the texts of these several choral works and YouTube links to recordings of them.

Gloria in excelsis (Missa brevis)—David Hurd (b.1950)

Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te, gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens. Domine Fili unigenite, Iesu Christe, Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris; qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis; qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram; qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis. Quoniam tu solus Sanctus, Tu solus Dominus, Tu solus Altissimus, Iesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will. We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory. O Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; you take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer; you are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hygc3cVFals>

O clap your hands—Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625)

O clap your hands together, all ye people; O sing unto God with the voice of melody. For the Lord is high and to be feared; He is the great King of all the earth. He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet. He shall choose out an heritage for us, even the worship of Jacob, whom he loved. God is gone up with a merry noise, and the Lord with the sound of the trumpet. O sing praises unto our God: O sing praises unto the Lord our King. For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with the understanding. God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon his holy seat. For God, which is highly exalted, doth defend the earth, as it were with a shield. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMqP5FwlqDw>

God is gone up—Gerald Finzi (1901–1956)

God is gone up with a triumphant shout:
The Lord with sounding Trumpets' melodies:
Sing Praise, Sing Praises out,
Unto our King sing praise seraphic-wise!
Lift up your Heads, ye lasting doors, they sing,
And let the King of Glory enter in.
Methinks I see Heaven's sparkling courtiers fly,
In flakes of Glory down him to attend.
And hear Heart-cramping notes of melody
Surround his Chariot as it did ascend;
Mixing their Music, making ev'ry string
More to enravish as they this tune sing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WI4YQJRcUS0>

Non vos relinquam orphanos—William Byrd (c.1543–1623)

*Non vos relinquam orphanos, alleluia.
Vado, et venio ad vos, alleluia.
Et gaudebit, cor vestrum, alleluia.*

I will not leave you orphans, alleluia.
I go, and I will come to you, alleluia.
And your heart shall rejoice, alleluia.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TUcm6xfk0I>

Coelos ascendit hodie—Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924)

*Coelos ascendit hodie, Jesus Christus Rex gloriae, sedet ad patris dexteram, Alleluia! Gubernat coelum et
teram, Alleluia! Jam finem habent omnia, paatris Davidis carmina, Alleluia! Jam Dominus cum Domino,
sedet in Dei solio, in hoc triumpho maximo, Alleluia! Benedicamus Domino, laudatur Sancta Trinitas Deo
dicamus gratia, Alleluia!*

Today Jesus Christ, the King of glory, has ascended into the heavens, Alleluia! He sits at the
Father's right hand, ruling heaven and earth, Alleluia! Now are David's songs fulfilled, now is
the Lord with his Lord, Alleluia! He sits upon the royal throne of God, in this his greatest
triumph, Alleluia! Let us bless the Lord: let the Holy Trinity be praised, let us give thanks to
the Lord. Alleluia! Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8maeFdlpyvw>

Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God—David Hurd

Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God, and your glory over all the earth. My heart is firmly fixed, O God, my heart is fixed; I will sing and make melody. Wake up, my spirit; awake, lute and harp; I myself will waken the dawn. I will confess you among the peoples, O Lord; I will sing praise to you among the nations. For your loving-kindness is greater than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Exalt yourself above the heavens, O God, and your glory over all the earth.

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