

## **Dodgson *Magnificat* – programme notes (9th March 2024)**

'From the arresting opening to the marvellously conclusive, resigned Amens, **Stephen Dodgson's *Magnificat*** is a true song of praise, direct in its appeal, with bold homophonic rather than polyphonic writing, and an economy of notes that increases the pungency of every false relation.'

Felix Aprahamian  
*The Sunday Times*, 8th June 1975

Inspired by Bach's *Magnificat* and commissioned as a companion piece by the Tilford Bach Society (first performed in 1975 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall), Stephen Dodgson's *Magnificat* employs almost identical instrumentation and vocal forces with some notable exceptions. As Dodgson wrote the following year:

My few departures from Bach's orchestral palette are: my two oboists also play oboes d'amore (often of course used by Bach in other works): my three trumpeters employ mutes at times: Bach's timpanist remains (now with three drums) but also handles briefly side-drums, tamtam, vibraphone and tambourine. The organist, with a subservient continuo-style role earlier on, assumes a more prominent position on reaching the *Gloria*.

Neither the instrumental nor the vocal writing is in any way experimental. In all of its strong links with traditional practice are easy to see. Concerned that the text should be projected with special vividness and dramatic point, there's a purposeful plainness to choral textures, and instrumental decoration is colourful but sparing. I feel I have learned much in this kind of directness through the many scores I've written for BBC and other drama productions.

Employing the full chorus and orchestra, the 'Magnificat' opening is angular and austere, almost as if conveying a sheer sense of stark awe, in its very real sense of fear and wonder. But the movement then breaks into a more fugal playfulness ('et exultavit' – 'and my spirit rejoices') with offbeat near-jazzy statements of 'Magnificat', before the opening overarching 'Magnificat' motif returns more subtly in single voice parts and is passed around against the continuing playful fugal interplay in the other parts.

The opening mood of the second movement 'Quia respexit' (Mary's thoughtful reflection that God has seen 'the lowliness of his handmaiden' and all those that follow shall call her 'blessed') is in complete contrast to the loud, theatrical nature of the first. Solo violas and two flutes initially meander sweetly under the soprano and alto soloists, before the movement builds slowly to fuller orchestration and slightly unsettled, angular harmonies that seem to question. The soprano then continues her contemplations (where Bach sets 'Quia fecit mihi magna...' and Et misericordia eius...' as two movements, Dodgson sets them as one) accompanied by unison violins, solo bassoon, organ and a somewhat melancholically ethereal male chorus.

'Fecit potentiam' introduces the tenor and bass soloists and sees the return of the full chorus. The strength of God's arm and the scattering of the proud are brought vividly to life by the strong accents across the parts, driving timpani, trumpet outbursts and near-grotesque portamenti, further emphasised by silent bars in between. In 'Deposuit potentes de sede', the mighty are put down in recitative style by the tenor soloist with both text and mood changing for 'Et exaltavit humiles' to something quite tender, simple and intimately beautiful as the humble are exalted – much of the singing unaccompanied and the melodic line, haunting in its slightly modal chromaticism, passed between soloist and the upper voices of the choir.

'Esurientes implevit bonus' interestingly employs the exact opposite vocal forces of 'Quia fecit' with its bass solo and upper-voice chorus. Woodwind and strings take turns as soloist and choir sing of filling the hungry with good things in lines laden with gentle Scotch snap rhythms, while the rich who are sent empty away are treated to more frosty, sparse staccato crotchets and orchestration.

The soloists unite in 'Suscepit Israel', initially led by the alto, with Dodgson's playful offbeat rhythmic energy (the side drums contributing their parts) and enjoyably angular melodies reminiscent of the fugal section of the first movement, all the more so as the orchestra quietly and almost menacingly frames the section with the original 'Magnificat' melody.

For the whole Gloria, broken down across four movements, Dodgson returns to the choir. The initial 'Gloria' movement opens with an E minor trumpet arpeggio which almost immediately breaks off into a richly vibrant and joyful D major in a blaze of choir, organ, trumpets and timpani (although always with wandering hints of uncertain minor tonalities interspersed). The choir moves briefly as one through their jubilant declaration before fleetingly passing the motif among themselves and then restating it ever more insistently. The tone suddenly shifts to something almost mystical as thoughts move from the Father and Son to the Holy Spirit – the choir partially unaccompanied in quiet, longer, languid lines before fretful woodwind and trumpet arpeggio patterns build underneath. In this latter section, Dodgson's other-worldly harmonies, so present in his opera *Margaret Catchpole*, tantalisingly whisper through *pianissimo* false relations and flute trills wavering between major and minor seconds, while the altos lead the choir in a quietly resolute statement on a repeated D.

'Sicut erat in principio' ('as it was in the beginning') initially has an almost ghostly quality in its quiet fast staccato choral lines but the movement also has a sense of warm playfulness in its small, emphatic, offbeat statements of 'et nunc et semper' ('now and for ever'). The 'Fantasy on the Gloria' then reprises the mysterious mood from the latter part of the 'Gloria', this time four solo violins taking on the fretful arpeggio patterns, while the 'Magnificat' motif returns and builds in the strings underneath. Two solo flutes lead us seamlessly into the last movement, the 'Amen'. Far from the affirmative upbeat D major of Bach's final bars, we are taken through almost tired chromatic lines in this final movement which the composer described as 'sonorous, resigned, like the deep-breathing of sleep' – our own very final sleep perhaps?

Leonora Dawson-Bowling