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# SOLEMN VESPERS

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): Vesperae Solennes de Confessore (1780) K 339

In early 1779, Mozart had been forced to return reluctantly to Salzburg after unsuccessful attempts to find employment in Mannheim and Paris. He had resigned from Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo's service in 1777 to undertake the journeys involved and with the intention of supporting himself through commissioned work outside the dependency on a sole patron required of a musician appointed to a court. Although court society was already in decline, it was still the customary environment in which a serious professional musician could expect to work. For the first time, and disapproving of the project, his father Leopold had not accompanied him on his travels. The infrastructure for musical commission that he sought had not yet developed sufficiently to provide the opportunities for work that he had sought and his attempts were effectively ended when his mother, who had travelled with him, died in Paris in the summer of 1778. In January, 1779, Leopold formally petitioned the Archbishop on his reluctant son's behalf for the post of court organist. The petition was approved on February 25, with the stipulation that Mozart would compose new works in addition to his court and chapel duties – with the humiliating qualifications, dictated by Colloredo's own preferences, that no piece should last over long and should not deploy operatic conventions! Despite his reluctance to return to a city and a constraining situation which he disliked, or perhaps to compensate, he created some of his most outstanding church music of which the *Vesperae solennes de confessore* in C major and the *Coronation Mass* can be considered as the finest examples, displaying within the structural order of traditional compositional

forms the imaginative originality that is characteristic of his mature style.

In the Catholic liturgy, the prayer service of Vespers is the seventh of the eight daily 'hours', and is held at sunset. The *Vesperae solennes de confessore* were so named because they were written for performance, to orchestral accompaniment, on a day for celebration of a confessor saint, by contrast with the more routine occasion (Sunday Vespers) for *Vesperae de Dominica* (K 321), which Mozart had written a year earlier. The later Vespers were probably written for the feast of St Jerome, the patron saint of Colloredo himself, which is celebrated in September. The liturgical form of the service is fixed to include settings of five specific Psalms and the Magnificat canticle from verses 46 to 55 of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, and performance of each piece is organised according to strict convention, preceded and followed by passages of plainsong antiphon. It is Mozart's imaginative use and transcendence of these limits throughout the work that makes it so distinctive.

From the outset, Mozart appears to defy Colloredo's strictures with an almost operatic immediacy, beginning the first Psalm (No 110, Dixit Dominus) in an emphatic declamation of its opening words, separated and underpinned by vigorous orchestral accompaniment, and continuing at a relentlessly brisk pace until the brief entry of the soloists for '*Gloria patri*'. The movement concludes with the conventional practice of returning to the opening musical themes of '*sede dextris*' for the singing of '*sicut erat*' in principio before an operatic series of

closing *Amens*.

A comparably loosening play with convention of a different kind marks the austere, plainsong-like choral unison of the opening phrase of the second Psalm (No 111, Confitebor) which, as in the first movement, is conventionally reprised for '*sicut erat*' before a flourish of *Amens*. However, the sobriety of the beginning quickly ascends into the expansive elaboration of '*in toto corde*', as the melodic flourishes of '*Magna opera Domini*' and the successive choral entries on '*Confessio et magnificentia*', followed by a hushed '*manet, manet*', move to a preliminary climax, to usher in the operatically ornamented soprano and solo quartet which follow. An echo of choral plainsong returns before a further quartet reinforces the operatic structure of the movement, which begins its concluding sequence with the resounding choral exhortation of '*Gloria patri*'.

The third Psalm (No 112, Beatus Vir) is divided equally between choir and soloists, with its rich melodies enhanced alternately by orchestral flourish and restraint. Its opening phrases move from bold statements to elaborations before soloists initiate '*Gloria et divitiae*' introduced by a string melody which is reprised towards the end for the soprano soloist's '*Gloria patri*'. Meanwhile, underwritten by rich orchestration, the music swings back and forth between chorus and solo to the most elaborate sequence yet of *Amens*, in a sustained coda over twenty four bars.

The fourth Psalm (No 113, Laudate Pueri) is an exercise in traditional, strict counterpoint, which begins as a fugue in strict time, but is

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modified after the opening phrases by the movement of a descending scale on '*Quis sicut Dominus*' with which it continues to alternate until interrupted by a hushed '*Et humilia respicit*', a pattern of three distinct ideas which is repeated with great economy in a succession of variations throughout the movement until a hushed '*Gloria*' precedes the concluding *Amens*.

In complete contrast, the fifth movement (Psalm 117, Laudate Dominum) is a gentle, gliding Andante in which the floating line of the soprano's solo aria, which is one of

Mozart's best known and loveliest melodies, is underpinned by strings and bassoon. The sense of rapture is sustained as the choir steals in quietly half-way through for the Gloria, echoing the same tune in four-part harmony before its hushed Amens, over which the soprano soars once more in a glorious descant.

The Magnificat opens with basses imitating the energetic introductory triplets of the strings, *adagio*, followed in sequence by sopranos, altos and tenors before giving way to the suitably excited *allegro* of the soprano soloist's '*Et exultavit*

*spiritus meus*'. The chorus return trenchantly for '*Quia respexit*', then give way to the soloists in quartet for '*Et misericor*'. A pattern of alternating dynamics and textures between choir and soloists, as well as within passages, continues throughout, giving weight to the separate phrases of the text without losing the structural homogeneity of the canticle as a whole.

The concluding '*Gloria Patri*' is given to the quartet of soloists before the chorus return on '*sicut erat*', dropping suddenly to pianissimo for the final '*saeculorum*' before brisk, concluding *Amens*.

## EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK

### Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): Serenade No. 13 for strings in G major (1787) K525

I *Allegro*

II *Romanze: Andante*

III *Menuetto: Allegretto*

IV *Rondo: Allegro*

Mozart was invariably engaged simultaneously on different compositions, especially under the financial constraints that characterised his later life: in June, 1791, when Constanze was expecting their sixth child, he was working intensively on *Die Zauberflöte* as well as beginning *La Clemenza di Tito*. Yet he still found time to compose the exquisite short motet, *Ave Verum Corpus*. Similarly, in August, 1787, while wrestling with the score for *Don Giovanni*, apparently frustrated by a lack of ideas, he had turned to the invention of what has become one of his most ubiquitous and popular compositions, the delightful *Serenade* known by the name Mozart gave it in his personal catalogue, as '*Eine kleine Nacht-Musik*'. He had not written a Serenade since the *Wind Octet in C minor* of 1782, presumably for lack, or perhaps refusal, of a commission.

Given the state of his finances by this time, it is not surprising that he turned to the form again, though it is not known from whom the commission came.

Rather than the depth and complexity of his later works, its simple, direct style harks back to earlier work from his time in Salzburg and suggests that it might have been for amateur performance – possibly by members of the family of Mozart's friend Gottfried von Jacquin, whose sister Franziska was one of his pupils and for whose household Mozart wrote several works between 1783 and 1788. Although recorded anthologies of popular classics often include selections from its four parts, the work is an integrated and coherently structured whole that is best heard entire – though Mozart's catalogue refers to an additional 'minuet and trio' between the first and second movements, which seems to have been lost, and sketches have subsequently been discovered for a slow movement. It may, thus, have been designed in six, rather than four movements, and though intended for

performance by a solo quintet of two violins, viola and cello, with optional double bass, it is often performed by a full string orchestra.

Its structure is framed by opening and closing movements in a lively *allegro*, the first characterised initially by an assertive theme, which is followed by a second, more graceful one before both are developed and recapitulated in interrelation. The second movement is a *Romanze* in rondo form, which opens with delicate confidence at a strolling *andante* and develops at a tripping, almost waltz-like pace before gathering into a final rhythmic coda. This sense of dance then becomes open and declaratory with the distinctive *allegretto* rhythms of the minuet in the brief third movement, which both echoes and quickens the tempo of the opening movement. The final movement returns to the *allegro* of the first, but tempers its assertiveness with the more sedate form of a sonata, recapitulating its initial exposition and concluding with a briskly engaging coda.

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# SERENADE FOR TENOR, HORN AND STRINGS

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976): Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings (1943) op 31

### 1 Prologue

**2 Pastoral** a setting of *The Evening Quatrains* by Charles Cotton (1630-1687)

**3 Nocturne** *Blow, Bugle, Blow* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)

**4 Elegy** *The Sick Rose* by William Blake (1757-1827)

**5 Dirge** the anonymous *Lyke-Wake Dirge* (15th century).

**6 Hymn** *Hymn to Diana* by Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

**7 Sonnet** *To Sleep* by John Keats (1795-1821)

### 8 Epilogue

"Not important stuff, but quite pleasant, I think" was Britten's own verdict on his Serenade, perhaps because of its romantic preoccupation with night – the focus, in its various aspects, of all the texts to which this song cycle is set; perhaps, also, because of the iconic status of the horn for romantic composers – of whom Britten claimed he would himself have been one, had he been writing music a century earlier. His understated evaluation of the work is belied, however, by his esteem for the artists for whom he composed it. The remarkable virtuosity of Dennis Brain's horn playing was one inspiration, and it was the first large-scale work that he composed specifically for Peter Pears. His selection and settings of the six poems are organised thematically in a manner so coherent, and integrated so effectively with the virtuoso instrumentation for the horn, that they constitute a recognisable song cycle – one that is quite distinctive in two particular aspects: it gives prominence to the tenor voice, which is generally under-represented in the canon of orchestral song; and it gives equal prominence to the solo horn which, though well provided for in concerto form, is involved in a complex dialogue with the voice of the songs. The poetry that provides the texts for that voice

may appear eclectic, ranging from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, but it is chosen with a sure sense of what constitutes a poetic voice, and ordered in a sequence which is underpinned by the musical score to give a clear narrative structure to the cycle. Britten keeps good company in this with Vaughan Williams, Bliss and Finzi, all of whom draw confidently on vernacular language put to poetic use, complemented by a musical setting to release interpretative possibilities of meaning that go beneath and beyond those initially apparent in the words alone. Britten's focus is on the meanings of night, beyond its temporal experience, as an ontological phenomenon. We fall, at night, into sleep; we dream, have nightmares; its darkness alters and deprives us of the light and clarity of our daytime seeing; as much as it allows us rest and recuperation, it can engender also our deepest fears.

The horn, using only its natural harmonics, opens the work with a restrained and distant solo call, drawing on traditions of aural convention for a suggestion of closing day affirmed by Cotton's opening lines of the second movement: 'The day's grown old; the fainting sun/ Has but a little way to run...'. Shadows distort the view, so that

'Molehills seem mountains/ And the ant appears a monstrous elephant' – a distortion that is elaborated in the third movement, when the horn is metamorphosed into Tennyson's bugle, whose 'blow, set the wild echoes flying...and answer... dying, dying, dying'. Strings and horn combine to generate a sense of foreboding at the beginning of the fourth movement, which is intensified by the words of Blake's song of experience as 'the invisible worm,/ that flies in the night' destroys the 'crimson joy' of the rose. The dirge of the fifth movement marks the terrifying nadir of darkness as 'Every nighte and alle,/ Fire and fleete and candle-lighte,/ And Christe receive thy saule'. The gloom and fear of darkest night is relieved in the sixth movement with Jonson's delightful mythic hymn, as the 'chaste and fair' Diana 'mak'st a day of night,/ Goddess excellently bright.' This uplifting mood is enhanced in the seventh movement when Keats hymns sleep, the 'soft embalmer of the still midnight' to shut 'gloom-pleas'd eyes...Enshaded in forgetfulness divine' to 'seal the hush'd casket of my Soul'. The sound of the horn is absent from this last song, returning for the epilogue with a solo that reprises the prologue, but now as a faint echo which, as Pears put it, "winds the work into stillness".

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# PASTORAL 'LIE STREWN THE WHITE FLOCKS'

## Arthur Edward Drummond Bliss (1891 – 1975): Pastoral 'Lie Strewn the White Flocks (1928) F33

Perhaps surprisingly for a composer who subsequently became Master of the Queen's Musick (he succeeded Arnold Bax to the post in 1953), Bliss was initially regarded as an *enfant terrible* for his early works, startlingly new pieces written immediately following the First World War, in which he had served as a field officer with the Grenadier Guards. His brother was killed and Bliss emerged with an iconoclastic aesthetic sense that was more in sympathy with the high modernism of the European musical avant garde than the teachings of Stanford, with whom he had studied at the Royal College of Music for only a term before war broke out. Under the quite different influences of Debussy and Stravinsky, he composed a concerto for strings, piano and wordless tenor voice and Rout, a similar piece for soprano and chamber orchestra in which the soloist's song is also wordless, consisting only of phonetic sounds. This period culminated in *A Colour Symphony* (1922), in which he sought to represent the musical associations of different colours, paralleling contemporary work of Varese, Schoenberg and Gershwin and anticipating that of Messiaen. Although he never became part of the Synaesthesia movement, he continued to explore the relations between music and visual art in his score for Alexander Korda's film of H G Wells' *Things to Come* (1934/5) and his Checkmate Suite (1937) for Ninette de Valois' ballet, with E. McKnight Kauffer's set and costumes.

By the late 1920s Bliss had reconciled his modernism with the contemporary mainstream of English music, and the influences of Elgar, in whose *Dream of Gerontius* he

had sung as a boy. Elgar had taken, in his own words, "an affectionate interest" in Bliss's early work, hoping that he was "going to give us something very great in quite modern music, the progress of which is very dear to me", but the two had become estranged since the first performance of *A Colour Symphony*. Bliss was sufficiently confident that he had found his mature voice with Pastoral to seek reconciliation with Elgar by dedicating the work to him. Elgar was honoured and accepted "with grateful feelings...may it flourish exceedingly" and listened to its broadcast premiere. Despite poor "transmission or reception (I know nothing of the workings of the BBC with aerial sprites)" he felt able to "judge that your work is on a large and fine scale, and I like it exceedingly...Some of it naturally puzzled me, but I am none the less sympathetic."

The suggestion for a choral work was given to Bliss initially by Harold Brooke, a director of Novello's who conducted a small City of London choir, but the idea only came to fruition when Bliss and his wife were invited to join American friends on an Italian holiday. From Naples, he wrote in a subsequent note on the work, they "motored down through the wild scenery from Calabria... and the beauties of Palermo, Agrigento and Syracuse". There, "when one morning I had set out to explore the site of the classical fountain of Arethusa, a copy of the Idylls of Theocritus in my pocket, ...I found the theme for my choral work. The southern light, the goatherds, the sound of a pipe, all evoked the image of some classical, pastoral scene. I began to collect a short anthology of poems which should depict a Sicilian day from

dawn to evening." Bliss showed a much surer sense of the poetic in his selection than did Elgar (the pleasant music of whose *Later Part Songs* on pastoral themes is compromised by the cloying whimsy of verse by Brown, Patmore and de la Mare), assembling a collection of poems, from the third century BCE to his own time, around the common themes of rural life, polytheistic myth and symbols of love from the classical golden age. Bliss would also surely have been aware of the contemporary musical explorations into the pastoral tradition of Butterworth, Bridge, Howells and Ireland as well as Holst and Vaughan Williams, all of whom shared his homage to Elgar, but from whom they had distanced themselves, as he had done from Stanford. The clear traces of his early commitment to modernism remained to differentiate his music from theirs, but he seems, at some level of awareness, to have shared with them a conviction which was being articulated in literary terms by T S Eliot and the critic F R Leavis, that an organic, integrated culture depended on sustaining the aesthetic interdependence of art and the vernacular languages of popular rhyme and folk music to represent social life in historical context – a culture that they thought was being threatened increasingly by the alienating industrial metropolitanism of what had come to be termed 'mass society'. Theirs was an incipient pastoral ideology designed to ground the historical roots for a reintegration of contemporary sensibility against such a threat. Bliss's anthology can be seen as a resource for this.

The poems are set for chorus and string orchestra with added solo

flute and timpani, with varying vocal textures in the different sections, alternating at times with orchestral passages. The work opens with a short instrumental prelude, which is echoed in the accompaniment to the following four-part choral setting of Ben Jonson's summons to 'The Shepherd's Holyday'. Their celebrations in honour of Pan are followed by a rhythm of drums which begins a setting to the words of John Fletcher's 'Hymn to Pan', a vigorous choral dance which ends quietly as the singers call his name four times to invoke his appearance. An instrumental movement follows, entitled 'Pan's Saraband', a stately dance in his honour, structured around a dialogue between strings and flute. This anticipates the choral dialogue, 'Pan and Echo', a translation of words by Poliziano which tell the story of Pan invoking her love in vain, as Echo sends back a mocking distortion of his appeals, their exchange concluding with a

reprise of the Saraband.

Over a brief orchestral introduction intended to represent the sun rising in the heavens, female voices begin the words of Robert Nichols' poem 'The Naiads' Music', in which water-nymphs invite the shepherds to seek rest and solace with them, occasionally complemented by the male voices of Fauns. Bliss suggests that Nichols' poem "might be an evocation of some picture by Poussin" – presumably a classical landscape, synaesthetically echoed in Bliss's music also. Nichols again provides the poetic text for 'The Pigeon's Song' which follows, as the mezzo-soprano soloist sings of a young girl whispering the story of her love to her tame pigeon, before sending the bird as a messenger to her lover in the fields, over an ethereal accompaniment shared between strings and flute. A rich contrast within the same pastoral tradition, is found in what is widely

regarded as the best of Vaughan Williams' *Five Tudor Portraits*, 'Jane Scroop', whose lyrical expression of grief mourns the death of her pet sparrow. It was Elgar who suggested that Vaughan Williams set the 'pure jazz' of John Skelton's scatological fifteenth-century poems, written at more or less the same time as those of Poliziano.

The focus on female voices in 'The Naiads' Music' and 'The Pigeon's Song' is countered by the setting of a translation of Theocritus's poem 'The Song of the Reapers' – presumably an initial selection for the anthology made by Bliss as he conceived the work beside the Fountain of Arethusa. This is clearly a work song, dominated by male voices in a decisive *marcato* orchestral rhythm, complemented by a whistling piccolo, who sing a lusty prayer to Demeter to bless the fruit and grain, whilst, with intermittent support from female voices, handing out robust advice on when and how best to reap and thresh the corn and to boil the lentils that will sustain their labours. The rural day draws to its close in the next section, again setting verses of Theocritus, as the singers recall the classical love stories of Venus and Adonis, Leda and Jupiter, Diana and Endymion, asking one another why they should not also follow the example of the gods. John Fletcher's words are set for a final, closing benediction from the chorus as night falls: "Sweetest slumbers,/ and soft silence, fall in numbers/ On your eyelids! So, farewell".



Photo of Sir Arthur Bliss taken on a World Tour of the London Symphony Orchestra (1964) taken by NLC member Dick Tyack.