

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976): Saint Nicolas: A Cantata (1948)

I Introduction

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IV He journeys to Palestine

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“I am beginning St Nicolas, & enjoying it hugely. It'll be difficult to write, because that mixture of subtlety & simplicity is most extending, but very interesting...Yes, writing's all most exciting & interesting, but it doesn't get any easier.” (Britten, writing to Peter Pears, 18 December, 1947)

Some doubt is cast on whether his huge enjoyment outlasted such difficulties of composition by Britten announcing at its conclusion that he foreswore accepting further commissions ‘for 20 years (or thereabouts)’. Nevertheless, he was thoroughly engaged by the piece, completing it on January 8th, 1948, except for the final orchestration, postponed by more urgent work until the end of May. The commission was one Britten could not have refused for many reasons: it came from Lancing College, where his partner, Peter Pears had been a pupil in the 1920's, and who was to sing the title role; it was to be premiered in the college's Gothic Revival chapel, dedicated to St Mary and St Nicolas, to celebrate the College's centenary; and the fee of £1000 – considerable for the time – was donated by Esther Neville-Smith, wife of one of the schoolmasters, with whom Britten and Pears often stayed. Moreover, as well as being the college's patron saint, Nicolas is also patron saint of children and seamen – both groups in which Britten's works attest to his interest and commitment.

Britten had engaged his close friend and collaborator Eric Crozier to write a text for the cantata, presenting him with a copy of Haydn's *Creation* as a possible model. They had recently completed *Albert Herring*, first performed in June, 1947 and despite the difference in mood of each work, Crozier seems to have found comparably dramatic elements in the narratives he constructs around the life of each protagonist as an outsider. Whereas shy, naïve Albert's narrative relates his transformational experience on having been crowned May King of his village for a day, the cosmopolitan, adventurous Nicolas's narrative is one of significant events and experiences covering the full span of his life.

There are many of these to choose from. During his life Nicolas suffered mockery, persecution and imprisonment for his faith, but also performed numerous brave deeds and miracles: he calmed stormy seas, rescuing sailors; Christ-like, he fed a multitude of the hungry from just one sack of corn; he restored to life three boys pickled by a cannibalistic village butcher, rescued three girls from fates worse

than death by providing each of their poor but noble fathers with a sack of gold as their dowry – often represented in pictures and statues of Nicolas by three golden balls. He saved three condemned men from execution as the axe was about to fall on them, rescued a faithful man from heathen captivity, boxed the ears of the heretic Arius at the first great Church Council of Nicaea and was responsible for converting the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity. Many of these good works resulted in his power of appearing from great distances to rescue those who called on him for help, and Crozier managed somehow to weave all of them into his text.

Indeed, so taken was Crozier with the myth of Nicolas that after completing the cantata text for Britten, he published *The Life and Legends of Saint Nicolas, Patron Saint of Children* (1949), attempting to separate the actual from the apocryphal among the saint's accomplishments. Noting that it was almost impossible to sift the scant evidence for the former from the considerable volume of the latter, he attempted nevertheless to show that Nicolas's life had been spent for the most part in ministering to the needs, both physical and spiritual, of fellow Christians – especially the poor and oppressed - in his home country, Lycia. In doing so, he sought to reconcile the tales of Nicolas's forceful evangelism with the mythical characteristics of the later embodiment by which he is best known to children, as Santa Claus, the jolly personification of Christmas cheer. As in the text prepared for Britten, Crozier used the role of saintly hero to articulate 'the anguish of the struggle for faith that all good men must experience in a world corrupt with sin, despair and lack of grace'.

The difficulty in combining subtlety with simplicity that Britten experienced in setting the text stemmed from the amateur musical resources on which he had to draw. Pears took the title role, but the work was to be sung for the most part by a student chorus – the combined choirs of Lancing, Ardingly and Hurstpierpoint colleges and a nearby primary school, St Michael's, Petworth. The orchestral resources were likewise drawn from amateur players – the strings of the Lancing college orchestra, organ and a piano duet, supplemented by a professional string quintet and percussionists. It was the first time Britten had worked with a mixture of amateur and professional resources and was to set the pattern for subsequent works of a similar kind, the most significant of which is *Noye's Fludde* (1958).

Although its premiere was intended to mark Lancing's centenary on July 24th, 1948 – and its performance there on that date is still recorded as the official premiere, the college allowed *Saint Nicolas* to be performed twice during the previous month at the inaugural Aldeburgh Festival, organised by Britten and Pears, between June 8th and 12th. An embargo was imposed, nevertheless, on the publication of critical reviews until after the Lancing premiere. Notwithstanding some critical reservations, the work was an immediate public success and has remained so. It displays Britten's consummate ability to create remarkable effects using the simplest of means, as well as his especial skill at bringing together amateur singers and musicians in the cooperative accomplishment of a compelling musical drama – even here involving the audience also, who join the chorus to sing two congregational hymns.

Saint Nicolas is organised in nine parts, the first set in contemporary historical time, the remaining eight enacting the events of Nicolas's life, from birth to death. The opening Introduction begins with a sombre orchestral pulse from which a solo violin rises to explore a succession of tonal possibilities. A mixed chorus of contemporary worshippers enters, describing a vision of Nicolas in episcopal robes. They sing in challenge to the holiness he bears in wearing them, that 'the mitre and the cross of gold obscure the simple man within the saint. Strip off your glory, Nicolas! and speak!'. Nicolas responds 'across the tremendous bridge of sixteen hundred years', by recounting his passage to sainthood through Faith 'won

by centuries of sacrifice and many martyrs'. The chorus concludes with quiet entreaties for help and strength to serve their own continuation of that faith.

The second movement then takes us back those sixteen hundred years to the birth of Nicolas. Sopranos and altos sing to a simple, lively melody of his advent in answer to a prayer, his early cries, his baptism and growth 'in innocence and pride' as 'his glory spread a rainbow round the countryside'. Their account of each episode is interjected by a pious cry of 'God be glorified' which Britten instructs is 'to be sung preferably by the youngest boy in the choir'. The female chorus concludes with the prediction that 'Nicolas will be a saint', to which Nicolas himself responds, *molto animato* and an octave lower than the boy, with his own cry of 'GOD BE GLORIFIED'.

Nicolas sings a recitative-like solo as the third movement, reflecting on the death of his parents and his subsequent struggle to discover his vocation, of sacrificing his wealth 'in hope to mask the twisted face of poverty' and deciding to devote his life to God. The male voices of the chorus then pick up the narrative in the fourth movement, taking the role of sailors accompanying Nicolas on his voyage to Palestine. They approach the end of the journey, singing in lyrical rhythm as the sun sets on a calm sea. Nicolas prays alone, then chastises the sailors gambling at cards, who respond by mocking Nicolas for his piety. He sees a violent storm approaching and warns the sailors, who dismiss and scorn him further. The female choral voices add fearful cries of distress and the sounds of the wind and waves which threaten to capsize the ship and terrify the desperate crew now crying for mercy. Nicolas calls on God to save them and the storm abates, the sailors fall into exhausted sleep, and Nicolas weeps, giving prayerful thanks to God for their safe deliverance.

The fifth part of the cantata opens with Nicolas's arrival in Myra where he is hailed by the chorus as the 'stranger sent from God, man of God' and called upon to 'stand foremost in our church and serve this diocese, as Bishop Nicolas, our shield, our strength, our peace'. This is the first of seven instructions from the chorus, observing the rites of his ceremonious enthronement; after each they chant a sonorous Amen. This is followed by a succession of injunctions to 'Serve the Faith and spurn his enemies' arranged as an elaborate, at times hectic fugue. The movement concludes more steadily as choirs and congregation join in singing three verses of the Old Hundredth hymn, 'All people that on earth do dwell...' Britten is known to have enjoyed harmonising hymn tunes with his old school friend and collaborator, W.H.Auden during evenings when they were drinking and sharing a camaraderie not so far from what he might have hoped to engender with this feature of the score – one which he also used in *Noyes Fludde*.

During the persecution of Christian martyrs by the emperor Diocletian in the early years of the fourth century CE, for 'eight barren years...stifled under Roman rule' Nicolas 'lay bound, condemned to celebrate my lonely sacrament with prison bread'. This episode is related in the sixth movement, a moving solo recitative like that of the third. To a dissonant, chromatic melody Nicolas chastises the members of his congregation for their transgressions and exhorts them to repent, to hold on to their faith and seek redemption.

The seventh part of the work recounts what is perhaps the strangest of Nicolas's apocryphal miracles: a tale of pickled boys. The chorus sings of a group of weary, hungry travellers through severe weather who reach shelter and the prospect of food. Among them are mothers singing of their lost sons, three little boys who have gone missing during the journey: 'Timothy, Mark and John are gone, are gone, are gone'. To the landlord the travellers offer gold for meat and, as they sit to eat, enjoin Nicolas, who has

mysteriously materialised among them, perhaps in answer to the grieving mothers' prayers, to share it with them, knowing that, like them, he 'has far to go'. Nikolas warns them not to eat: 'within these walls they lie whom mothers sadly seek'. He calls upon the boys to 'put your fleshly garments on! Come from dark oblivion, come!'. The travellers whisper in amazement as they are bid by Nikolas to 'see three boys spring back to life, Who slaughtered by the butcher's knife, Lay salted down! And entering, Hand in hand they stand and sing Alleluia! Alleluia! to their King!', at which the three boys appear, and do just that, joined joyfully by other children's voices, then sopranos and altos and finally all voices in a rousing sequence of further Alleluias.

In the eighth movement the chorus lists, in a song of praise, the mercy, charity and kindness of Nikolas's marvellous deeds. A semi-chorus proposes to 'Let the legends that we tell, Praise him with our prayers as well' and the full chorus returns to their contemporary presence of the Introduction, asserting: 'We keep his memory alive in legends that our children and our children's children treasure still'.

And so, to the cantata's final movement, the death of Nikolas. After an orchestral fanfare, he sings in contented resignation of his soul 'faint with love for Him who waits for me above'. The chorus quietly sing the *Nunc Dimittis* in the version prescribed for Evensong in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. They bring the work to a close, joining once again with the audience to sing the first three verses of William Cowper's 18th century hymn: 'God moves in a mysterious way...'

Paul Filmer
November 2001

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847): Verleih uns Frieden, op. posth (1831). Prayer for four-part choir, organ and orchestra.

A uniquely beautiful composition... This little piece deserves to be known the world over, and so it will be. (Robert Schumann)

Following his initial public success and recognition, Mendelssohn embarked in May 1830 on an extensive tour of Austria, Germany and Italy which lasted until October of the following year. His longest stay was in Rome, from November 1830 to April 1831. Musically, the city was a disappointment: "The orchestras are worse than anyone could possibly imagine. Nobody seems to care, so there is no hope whatsoever of improvement. If only the singing were a shade better!" Yet he was clearly happy there: "After breakfast I play, sing, and compose until about noon. Then Rome in all her splendour awaits me". Soon after arrival he composed the Three Sacred Choruses (Op. 23) and, in February 1831 this expansive setting of a Lutheran prayer. Whilst in Vienna he had become acquainted with the Bach enthusiast and singer Franz Hauser who sent on to him in Italy the *Lutherisches Liedbuchlein*, a hymnal. Mendelssohn was inspired by it to write six choral cantatas, two motets and this hymn-setting, informing Hauser in a letter of January 1831 that he intended 'to set the little song *Verleih uns Frieden* as a canon with cello and bass'. The canonic opening is for divided cellos, its theme recalling the second subject from his 1830 *Hebrides* overture and anticipating the opening clarinet motif of the 1833 overture *Die schöne Melusine*. The canonic structure continues as the text is repeated three times, as three separate verses: the first, sung by basses alone, follows the gently flowing instrumental introduction. They are led for half a bar by the altos into the second verse, so that it is not until the final verse that the full chorus unites in warm expression of the plea for peace, generating a confidently full and mellow sound that belies the

underlying anxiety of the plea, before drawing quietly to a soft, expectant close.

Paul Filmer
November 2018

I was glad

I was glad when they said unto me,

We will go into the house of the Lord.

Our feet shall stand in thy gates, O Jerusalem,
Jerusalem is builded as a city,

That is at unity in itself.

O pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

They that prosper that love thee

Peace be within thy walls,

And plenteousness within thy palaces.

Parry composed this setting of words from Psalm 122 initially for the coronation of King Edward VII at Westminster Abbey on August 9, 1902. He revised it for the coronation of George V in 1911, and the text of the central section (of salutation to the new monarch), usually omitted, as this evening, from concert performances, was appropriately re-gendered to 'Vivat Regina' in 1953, for performance at the coronation of the present Queen. Together with his choral song Jerusalem, this anthem has led to Parry's reputation for representing musically the sense of opulent confidence which seems to have characterised Victorian and Edwardian England. It is set on a lavish scale and opens with a sweeping declaration of joyful satisfaction in celebration of the 'unity in itself' of the city of Jerusalem. Yet the anthem exhibits a surprising subtlety when slowing and softening to the lyrical passage for semi chorus, sung to the beautiful tune of 'O pray for the peace of Jerusalem', before returning to the pomp of its opening in the resounding conclusion of 'plenteousness within thy palaces'

Paul Filmer