

Music Listening for The Great Vigil and Easter Day

David Hurd, Mus.D.

Organist and Music Director

Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, NYC

This is the second of two articles I have written this Holy Week to bring attention to some choral music which we may not be able to hear live this year, but which may assist our meditation on the essential liturgical events which shape this week. Previously I wrote about choral music for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. This article focusses on choral music for the Great Vigil of Easter and for Easter Day. The Book of Common Prayer designates scripture readings and psalmody for Easter celebrations at four different hours: the Great Vigil of Easter (beginning in the dark), an Early Service (dawn), a Principal Service (morning) and an Evening Service. Out of the great wealth of music composed for the church's annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection, I have chosen to discuss a small sampling of choral pieces for the Great Vigil and a few others for Easter Day.

As with my previous article, all of the pieces presented below have probably been sung at Saint Mary's in past years, and some were scheduled to be sung this year. The YouTube links which I have provided include a variety of musicians and venues. I hope you will find devotional focus and spiritual benefit in listening to these choral compositions and meditating on the words being sung. Although this music comes to us here in YouTubes by electronic means, please remember that it was, at some point, *live* when it was sung in the presence of the electronic device which captured the recording. Voices singing together have a wonderful capacity for imparting a sense of community even when transmitted indirectly. This sense of community may be particularly appreciated at this time when we are socially separated. Some of the videos have scrolling scores or images which may enhance your experience of the music.

The Great Vigil of Easter

The first mass of Easter is preceded by a vigil, traditionally kept mostly in relative darkness. Music for this portion of the service normally consists of psalms and canticles sung in response to scripture readings. At the conclusion of this vigil in which the actions of God in creation history are recounted, the resurrection of Christ is proclaimed, lights are lighted, the organ sounds and *Gloria in excelsis* may be sung. *Gloria in excelsis* is not specific to the Easter Vigil but, when it is heard as the first major choral offering at the Easter Vigil, it is especially powerful. The mass setting intended for Easter at St. Mary's this year is Kenneth Leighton's dynamic *Missa Brevis*, Opus 50, so I have included the *Gloria in excelsis* from this mass setting. It is followed by pieces by John Taverner and by me which have been sung as communion anthems in the past two years at Saint Mary's. Finally, I have included a setting of the proper communion antiphon for Easter, *Pascha nostrum* by William Byrd, which was scheduled to be sung this year at Saint Mary's.

Here is more information about the music and its composers.

The British composer and pianist Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988) was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire. He was enrolled at an early age as a chorister at Wakefield Cathedral and soon began piano study in which he excelled. He was awarded BA degrees in Classics and Music from Queens College, Oxford in 1950 and 1951 respectively. Soon afterwards he was befriended by composer Gerald Finzi who introduced him to Ralph Vaughan Williams. Through these and other related associations Leighton gained increasing recognition as a composer and enjoyed performances of his works. Following further music study in Italy in 1951-2, he held various teaching posts in Deal, Leeds, and Oxford, and eventually settled at the University of Edinburgh as Reid Professor of Music from 1970 until his death in 1988. Leighton's *Missa Brevis*, Opus 50, was composed for the Choir of Liverpool Cathedral and published in 1968 under the editorship of Bernard Rose, his music mentor at Oxford. It is an imaginative setting of the Book of Common Prayer communion ordinary, mostly for four voices and scaled well for liturgical use.

John Taverner (c.1490–1545) was born in Lincolnshire. He was a colorful but not particularly well documented figure in the development of English liturgical music in the early sixteenth century. Of note, Taverner was the first choirmaster, from 1526 to 1530, of the newly founded Cardinal College, now Christ Church, Oxford. Musicologist Sally Dunkley has written “The music of Taverner, taken as a whole, represents the final development of the florid late-medieval English style, coupled with the assimilation of new aesthetic and technical features which indicate the growing influence of continental thought and practice.” Taverner's setting of the third responsory at Matins of Easter Day (and also the opening of the Gospel for the Principal Service in Year B), *Dum transisset Sabbatum*, is one of his notable works. The text is drawn from Mark 16:1-2. The musical setting is for five voices in which much of original chant—which would customarily have been simply sung as chant—is sung in long notes in the baritone register, surrounded by rich polyphony.

O Night that is brighter than the Day is a setting for double choir of a hymn attributed to Asterius of Pontus (c.400). Asterius, a contemporary of Saint John Chrysostom, was born in Cappadocia and eventually was bishop of Amasea, now in Turkey. Although little is known about him, he is survived by some writings including sixteen homilies and, presumably, the text of this motet. This fifth-century text, *O Night that is brighter than the Day*, is a reflection intended for the Paschal Vigil. It closely parallels the *Exsultet*, that extraordinary ancient hymn and prayer which is sung before the newly lighted Paschal Candle at the outset of the Easter Vigil liturgy. I composed this musical setting in 1990. It is essentially a dialogue between two four-voice choirs which alternate singing Asterius' successive characterizations of the Paschal Night. In the final two phrases of the hymn the two choirs join in rich eight-part harmony.

William Byrd (c.1540–1623), by dint of his musical genius and political savvy, was able to compose and publish richly both for the Protestant English church of his time and for the Catholic liturgy of his conviction, when it was not legal to do the latter. *Pascha nostrum* is Byrd's setting of the Latin communion antiphon for both the Vigil mass and the mass of Easter Day. Its source is Byrd's second book of *Gradualia* whose first and second editions date from 1607 and 1610 respectively. The words are those of I Corinthians 5:7-8. The choral texture is five voices with the top two being essentially equal in range. Coincidentally, the opening entrances of voices 2, 3 and 4 (the first third and last to enter) have the same melodic shape that George Frederick Handel used many years later

for the word *Hallelujah* in his most famous chorus from *Messiah*. (Voices 1 and 5 begin with the inversion of the same motive).

The texts and links to YouTube recordings follow.

Gloria in excelsis (Missa Brevis)—Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988)

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=1RzO20FHirA>

Dum transisset sabbatum—John Taverner (c.1490–1545)

Dum transisset Sabbatum, Maria Magdalene et Maria Jacobi et Salome emerunt aromata, ut venientes ungerent Jesum. Alleluia. Et valde mane una sabbatorum veniunt ad monumentum: orto jam sole Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome brought spices to go and anoint Jesus. Alleluia. And at dawn on the first day of the week they came to the tomb just as the sun was rising. Glory be to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUBF7kNVlbY>

O Night that is brighter than the Day—David Hurd (b. 1950)

O night that is brighter than the day,
O night more dazzling than the sun,
O night more sparkling than the snow,
O night more brilliant than our lamps!
O night that is sweeter than paradise,
O night delivered from darkness,

O night that dispels sleep,
O night that makes us keep vigil with the angels,
O night terrible for the demons,
O night desired by all the year,
O night that leads the bridal Church to her Spouse
O night that is mother to those enlightened!
O night in which the devil sleeping was despoiled,
O night in which the Heir brings the co-heirs to their heritage!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tjoCpEe3w0>

Pascha nostrum—William Byrd (1543-1623)

*Pascha nostrum imolatus est Christus. Alleluia. Itaque epulemur in Azymis sinceritatis et veritatis.
Alleluia.*

Our pasch, Christ, is immolated, alleluia. Therefore, let us feast in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, alleluia.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yca_O-e3_KA

Easter Day

These musical selections for Easter Day include two pieces composed for a text specifically prescribed for the day. These are followed by a setting of a text with a broader Easter season reference, and finally, two additional pieces which easily may carry the Easter reference beyond the fifty days. The antiphon *Haec dies quam fecit Dominus*, “This is the day which the Lord hath made,” is the Gradual for Easter Day and traditionally appointed to be sung throughout Easter Week. As such, many splendid choral settings of this text have been composed over the centuries. I include two very different settings of this text, both by English composers, separated by four centuries. The first is by William Byrd and the second by Herbert Howells. These motets are followed by one of many settings of the Easter Monday Matins responsory *Surrexit pastor bonus*. This setting by Michael Haller was scheduled to have been sung at communion on Easter Day at Saint Mary’s this year. The final two anthems, John Ireland’s *Greater love hath no man* and my own *As newborn stars were stirred to song*, are not so much specifically pieces for Easter Day, but they reflect upon the Easter event in its broader context and significance. Both of these pieces suitably express the message of Easter, but are not limited to Easter Day or season.

Here is more information about these pieces and their composers.

The second volume of William Byrd’s *Cantiones Sacrae*, published in 1591, included his six-voice (SSATTB) setting of *Haec dies quam fecit Dominus*. Of the many choral settings of this antiphon, Byrd’s setting of this text is particularly jubilant. It begins in a study duple rhythm and later dances into

triple rhythm at *Exultemus* in delightful *sesquialtera* before returning to a more sedate duple rhythm at the steadily rising *Alleluia*.

Herbert Howells (1892–1983) was a remarkable twentieth century English composer. He was mentored in his youth by some of the prominent English musicians of the time including C. V. Stanford, C. H. H. Parry, and Charles Wood. Rather than pursuing the more *avant garde* impulses which propelled some young composers of his time, he cultivated a more tonally oriented yet distinctively original vocabulary of melody, harmony and lyrical rhythms for which his music is recognized. He was highly regarded, particularly in Anglican church circles, for his richly expressive anthems and settings of the morning and evening daily office canticles. Howells' sensitivity for the expression of texts communicated itself also into his instrumental compositions, many of which have scriptural or other programmatic subtexts. Howells' setting of *Haec dies quam fecit Dominus* was first performed at Compline of Easter Day 1918 at Westminster Cathedral, London, under the direction of Howells' early mentor, Dr. Richard Terry. *Haec dies* was the last of nine works that Howells composed for the Latin liturgy at Westminster Cathedral while he was a student at the Royal College of Music. Published posthumously in 1992, Howells' dramatic setting of this ancient Easter antiphon is scored for five voices.

Surrexit pastor bonus is the second Matins responsory for Easter Monday. Its text declares and rejoices that the Good Shepherd, who has lain down his life for his sheep, has indeed risen. It is sung throughout the Easter season and has been set by many composers over the years. The German composer Michael Haller (1840–1915) set this text for unaccompanied five voices. Haller's setting was to have been the communion motet for the Solemn Mass on Easter Day at Saint Mary's. Haller's musical studies began while he was a student at the Benedictine Abbey in Metten. He studied theology in Regensburg and, after his ordination, became prefect of the boychoir school there. He later became conductor at the *Alte Kapelle*, founded a church music school where he taught composition and counterpoint from 1874, and held various other musical titles at the Regensburg Cathedral. He was recognized by Pope Leo XIII for his service to the Catholic Church and the Papacy. Haller's setting of *Surrexit pastor bonus* is strongly reminiscent of the music of renaissance composers and alternates trios of higher and lower voices with phrases for all five-voices. The concluding *alleluias* are suitably in a lively triple meter.

The anthem *Greater Love Hath No Man* is by the English composer and teacher of music John Ireland (1879–1962). In addition to this anthem, Ireland is known for his songs, piano pieces and programmatic orchestral compositions. From 1904 to 1926 he was organist and choirmaster at Saint Luke's Church, Chelsea. Having been a composition student of Charles Villiers Stanford prior to 1901, he taught composition at the Royal College of Music in London from 1923 to 1939. *Greater Love Hath No Man*, published in 1912, is a substantial model of the twentieth century English anthem. Its text is a composite drawn from Song of Solomon 8:7, John 15:13, 1 Peter 2:9, 1 Corinthians 6:11 and Romans 12:1; a combination of scripture which is held together amazingly well by Ireland's conventional and expressive musical setting.

As Newborn Stars Were Stirred to Song is an anthem setting for mixed voices and organ of a four-stanza hymn text by the Rev. Carl P. Daw, Jr. (b. 1944). It was commissioned in 2009 to honor Dr. Keith

Scott Reas in recognition of his tenure as Director of Music at St. Mark's Church, Capitol Hill, Washington, DC. The anthem begins with a repeating figure played by the organ part, meant to suggest distant twinkling stars, as the choir sings in a chordal texture. The organ remains an integral partner with the choir through the anthem as the narrative of the text unfolds. In the final triumphant stanza, the original twinkling star organ motive returns as a strong energizing force supporting the choir's full voice.

The texts and links to YouTube recordings follow.

Haec Dies—William Byrd (1543-1623)

Haec dies quam fecit Dominus. Exultemus et laetemur in ea. Alleluia.

This is the day which the Lord hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it. Alleluia.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnMvq20SxCM>

Haec Dies—Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

Haec dies quam fecit Dominus. Exultemus et laetemur in ea.

This is the day which the Lord hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZ_OSvjUtqo

Surrexit pastor bonus—Michael Haller (1840–1915)

Surrexit Pastor bonus qui animam suam posuit pro ovibus suis et pro grege suo mori dignatus est. Alleluia.

Risen is the Good Shepherd who gave his life for his sheep and for his flock is worthy to die. Alleluia.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_S4zSJJd2s

Greater love hath no man—John Ireland (1879–1962)

Many waters cannot quench Love, neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death. Greater Love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Who His own Self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness. Ye are washed, ye are sanctified, ye are justified, in the Name of the Lord Jesus; Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, That ye should shew forth the praises of Him Who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

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

As newborn stars were stirred to song—David Hurd

As newborn stars were stirred to song
when all things came to be,
as Miriam and Moses sang
when Israel was set free,
so music bursts unbidden forth
when Godfilled hearts rejoice,
to waken awe and gratitude
and give mute faith a voice.

In psalms that raise the singer's sense
to universal truths,
in prophet's dark-toned oracle
or hymn of three brave youths:
the song of faith and praise endured
through those God called to be
a chosen people bearing light
for all the world to see.

When God's redeeming Word took flesh
to make salvation sure,
unheeding hearts attuned to strife
refused love's overture.
Yet to the end the song went on:
a supper's parting hymn,
a psalm intoned on dying lips
when sun and hope grew dim.

But silence won no vict'ry there;
a rest was all it scored
before glad alleluias rose
to greet the risen Lord.
The church still keeps that song alive,
alleluia, for death has lost its sting,
and with the gift of life renewed
the heart will ever sing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbxxZX4wG5w>