

Requiem by John Rutter

In Wikipedia, the popular on-line encyclopedia, John Rutter (1945–) is summarized as “an English composer, choral conductor, editor, arranger and record producer.” At first glance, this might not seem too remarkable; the surprise is in what is *missing*: where is the comfortable tenured affiliation with an Oxbridge college or the music directorship of a major church or concert-oriented choir, any of which would provide him with a reliable and secure income? The most remarkable aspect of John Rutter’s career is that he has deliberately avoided situations that would constrain his independence or limit the time he can devote to composition.



John Rutter

After finishing his music studies at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1968, he was appointed Director of Music there in 1975. But, in 1979, he resigned this position in order to have more time to compose.

His first major work, a *Gloria*, had been published in 1974 and was so successful that it resulted in a flood of commissions, including TV shows and commercials. But he soon gave up doing commissions because he was constantly being asked to repeat himself as a composer. He wanted to decide for himself what to compose.

By 1981, Rutter realized that he needed to conduct a choir, but he wasn’t willing to give up his independence by becoming the conductor of someone else’s choir. So he founded a new choir, the Cambridge Singers, which rarely gives concerts, but focusses on recordings. And, to ensure that he had complete control of what got recorded and how, where and when that music was recorded, Rutter in 1984 founded his own record label, Collegium Records.

Rutter conducts other choirs in concerts, but usually in America, rather than in Britain. He has, as he has said, “kept out of the firing line” of the sometimes vicious music critics in Britain. This may suggest paranoia, but Rutter explains:

I knew William Walton slightly and he was deeply, deeply hurt—almost crippled as a composer—by the attacks that had been made on him.

In contrast, he has always been well treated in America. He says,

There are fewer prejudices about the style of contemporary music in the U.S. They have a very pragmatic approach: they want newly written music but it doesn’t have to conform to the latest correct contemporary style. If I did write music that happened to have tunes in it, nobody thought any the worse of it, whereas here it was sniffed at.

The attitude of the British music establishment to Rutter may be gleaned from the following

remark, on a BBC web site: “Most of his works are crowd pleasers, if occasionally verging on the twee;” i.e., excessively dainty, delicate, cute, or quaint.

One might suspect that Rutter could afford to live an independent life because he had inherited a sizable nest egg. But this is unlikely: his grandfather was a marine engineer in Newcastle-on-Tyne and his father an organic chemist.

So, the question that arises is, how has John Rutter been making his living? The answer, it would appear, is . . . Christmas carols.

When Rutter was a student at Highgate School in London, Christmas was the high point of the year for him, not because he was especially religious, but because of the Christmas concert in which he participated as a chorister. The simple but moving melodies of the carols were exactly what he most appreciated. As a child, he had spent hours “experimenting” on an old upright piano that had been left behind in his house by a previous occupant. Instead of receiving formal instruction with scales and arpeggios, he developed for himself a skill at making melodies. Edward Chapman, the music director at Highgate, encouraged the choristers to compose and Rutter, like his classmate John Tavener, did so, especially carols.

While Rutter was a student at Cambridge, David Willcocks, music director at King’s College and his harmony and counterpoint teacher, heard about and asked to see Rutter’s carols. Willcocks was impressed and arranged for their publication. These have been enormously successful; one of them, the *Shepherd’s Pipe Carol*, composed by Rutter when he was just 18, has sold over a million copies. Willcocks also asked Rutter to co-edit with him four volumes of *Carols for Choirs* for Oxford University Press, and this series too has been extremely successful. And so John Rutter has been able to live off the royalties generated as a result of his love of Christmas carols.

Composer and writer Jeremy Nicholas published the following remarks in an article on Rutter in *Classic FM Magazine*:

In a country that used rightly and routinely to award knighthoods to the organists of our major cathedrals, it says something of changing priorities and the British attitude to music that Rutter’s name has not appeared on any honours list. Though it will embarrass such a modest man to read this, the lack of official recognition for John Rutter is a disgrace.

The British establishment responded in 2006 with its version of faint praise: Rutter was appointed, not a Knight like his mentor Sir David Willcocks, but rather a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). This might seem to a North American to be an impressive honour, but it does not allow him to use “Sir” before his name. No doubt *Mr.* John Rutter CBE chuckles to himself all the way to the bank to collect his carol royalties.

Rutter has said the following about his *Requiem*:

I suppose some will find the sense of comfort and consolation in it facile, but it was what I meant at the time I wrote it, in the shadow of a bereavement of my own.

The bereavement Rutter mentions is the death of his father, in 1984; he completed the *Requiem* in 1985 and inscribed the score *In memoriam LFR*.

The most significant musical influence on Rutter seems to have been Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Rutter was in the choir when Britten himself conducted the celebrated premiere recording of this work in 1963. Fauré's *Requiem* must also have been influential; Rutter's new critical edition of this work was published in 1983.

Like Britten and Fauré and other composers such as Duruflé and Brahms, Rutter did not strictly follow the Catholic liturgy. He selected movements from that (*Requiem aeternam*, *Kyrie eleison*, *Pie Jesu*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, and *Lux aeterna*), and from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*: the 2nd movement is a setting of Psalm 130 (*Out of the deep I have called unto thee*), and the sixth movement is a setting of the 23rd Psalm, composed by Rutter in 1976. In two of the movements, verses from the Anglican burial service alternate with Latin texts.

The *Requiem* was first performed in its entirety on October 13th, 1985 at a United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, with Rutter himself as the conductor. Within six months of its composition, the orchestral parts had been rented out more than 500 times in America alone.

Two Anthems by Henry Purcell

Many have considered Henry Purcell (1659–1695) to have been Britain's greatest native-born composer. He was appointed one of the court composers at the age of 18 and, two years later, became organist at Westminster Abbey, succeeding his teacher, Dr. John Blow. He composed in all forms current at the time but is best known for his vocal music, including anthems, theatre music, and the short opera *Dido and Aeneas*.

The anthem *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei* is thought to have been written around 1680 for the Queen's chapel at Somerset House. The lyrics are a paraphrase of Psalm 3.

The lyrics for *I was glad when they said unto me* are from Psalm 122 and are traditionally sung at British coronations. Francis Sandford, an eye-witness, described the procession for the coronation of James II and Mary in 1685 as follows:

The Choir of Westminster, with the Prebendaries and Dean, being entred the Church, fell off from the Proceeding, a little on the Left-hand of the Midle Isle, and stayed there till their MAJESTIES entred the Church ... The KING and QUEEN being entred the Church, were received by the Dean and Prebendaries, who, with the Choir of Westminster, proceeding a little before THEIR MAJESTIES, sung the full anthem *I was glad* composed by Mr Hen. Purcel, a Gentleman of the Chapel-Royal and Organist of Westminster. The Anthem being



Henry Purcell

ended, the Children and Choir of Westminster turned to the Left-Hand and went up into their Gallery by the Great Organ.

For centuries, it was thought that Purcell's 1683 setting of *I was glad* (Z. 19) was used at this occasion. But that setting includes instrumental interludes and requires accompaniment by strings; it would have been unsuitable for performance in a procession: according to Sandford's description, the instrumentalists present were seated at least 30 yards away from where the singers were processing!



Procession for the Coronation of James II and Mary, April 23rd, 1685

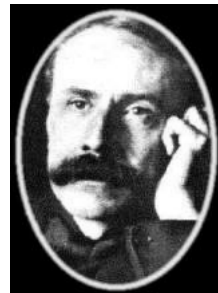
In 1977, a setting of *I was glad* for chorus and organ was noticed in a manuscript collection at Ely Cathedral. The work was there attributed to Purcell's colleague John Blow, but he may have been the source rather than the composer, and many musicologists are convinced that this is the work that was performed at the coronation. The most complex counterpoint is in the concluding *Gloria* by which time the choir would have come to a halt at the end of the nave, allowing coordination of the more complex texture. Whether by Blow or Purcell, this is the setting of *I was glad* to be performed this evening.

Purcell died, probably of pneumonia, at the age of 36. The music he had composed for the funeral of Queen Mary only a few months previously was played at his funeral; he is buried adjacent to the organ in Westminster Abbey. John Blow composed a moving *Ode on the death of Mr. Henry Purcell* and was re-instated as organist at Westminster. Blow's own tombstone notes with wry pride that he had been the famous Purcell's "Master" (i.e., teacher). A few years later, it was suggested to G. F. Handel that one of his compositions resembled works by Purcell; Handel replied that, had he lived, Purcell would have composed much better music than that.

***Ave Verum Corpus* by Sir Edward Elgar**

Edward Elgar (1857–1934) was the son of a piano tuner, church organist and music dealer in Worcestershire. Although self-taught as a musician, he quit school at 15 and began his musical career by teaching piano and violin. At 22, he became conductor of the orchestra at the local insane asylum.

He is best known for his “Enigma” *Variations on an Original Theme* (1899), the choral work *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), five *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* (1901–30), violin and cello concertos (1910 and 1920), and his 1922 orchestration of Hubert Parry’s 1916 setting of the poem *Jerusalem* by William Blake. Upon hearing the orchestral version for the first time, King George V said he would prefer it to *God Save the King* as the national anthem and, in 1935, insisted it appear on the program for his jubilee, “otherwise, I shall get up on the platform and whistle it myself!” Elgar was knighted in 1904.



Edward Elgar

The motet *Ave Verum Corpus* began as a composition in 1887 in memory of William Allen, a Worcester attorney for whom Elgar had worked as a fifteen-year old. It was first performed at St. George’s Church in Worcester, where Elgar had succeeded his father as organist. In 1902, he orchestrated three such works and had them published them as his Opus 1.

***A Proclamation and a Prayer* by David Cameron**

A Proclamation and a Prayer is for choir, string quartet, flute, oboe, and organ; this is its first performance. David Cameron has provided the following commentary:

I began composing this piece with two premises: first, that it would use an instrumental group similar to that in John Rutter’s *Requiem*, though expanded to include the members of the Melos String Quartet; and second, that it would express some of my growing interest in Celtic spirituality.

Its text is drawn from four sources. The first is a Gaelic poem, *The Mystery*, attributed to Amergin, a Milesian poet whose people settled in Ireland before the Christian era. This pre-Christian reflection finds deep resonances in St. Francis of Assisi’s *Laudes creaturum* (the source of the English hymn *All Creatures of our God and King*); both the Celtic bard and the Christian mystic have found the Divine in the physical world, and the creatures that inhabit it. The Celtic strain continues in the third text, a prayer for divine help, and for our growth in wisdom, understanding, justice and love; it is taken and expanded from a liturgy of the Celtic church. The piece ends with the opening verses from a Hebrew poem still older than Amergin’s *Mystery*, namely Psalm 148. I have treated these sources freely, re-aligning and embellishing them as the musical work took shape.

A Proclamation and a Prayer is in three sections, with the second of them, the prayer, and the third, the psalm text, linked continuously. The three movements are unified by several recurrent themes, notably the one that begins the piece.

Bob Tennent
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