

## in the gloom of whiteness

*music by*

Colin Riley

Fraser Trainer

Keith Roberts

*performed by*

Canticum

*Conductor:* Mark Forkgen

*Soprano saxophone:* Simon Haram

### Programme notes

*...round the still earth*, the title taken from a poem by Rilke, was commissioned by the National Youth Choir of Great Britain and first performed by them in London in 1994. It is a cycle of six songs – the texts ranging from the medieval to the Canadian George Johnston – which trace the year through winter to the advent of spring. The composer writes that the music “is largely based on elements of rounds and repeating lines echoing the flux and patterns of natural elements such as clouds, leaves and falling snow”.

The wildness of the elements is celebrated *con brio* in *News*. After an opening declamation, reinforced with stamping, the tenors take the narrative forward to a percussive accompaniment. That role passes to the sopranos, followed in canon by altos and tenors. In the second verse, the tune is sung in unison by sopranos and basses against the percussive chords of the two inner parts. Those end in a whisper. Sopranos again have the melody, this time above antiphonal effects in the lower voices. The music slows to a frozen rigidity (“Cold has seized the birds’ wings”) – and the opening declamation is repeated.

*Flight* is a palindrome, with a polyphonic core flanked by homophonic passages, and those in turn enclosed by canons, the first in six parts for sopranos, the second in four for tenors and basses. In the canons, Riley conveys the unsettling, fleeting nature of the clouds by setting crotchet against dotted crotchet.

*The Warm and the Cold*, a marvellous poem by Ted Hughes, offers the composer the contrast between the deathlike grip of winter and the pulsating life of the creatures which defy it. The first is conveyed by open fifths on “freeze”, against which sopranos, gradually joined by the other parts, have the melody, the second by a series of rollicking, broken phrases peculiar to each part. First announced simply, these are then split equally between divided sopranos, altos, etc., and finally split with the lower part in each case in augmented form. The star, and the voices, fall, and the tenors turn the sweating farmers on spits.

*As the manner is* is a rumbustious, late medieval lyric in which the ivy comes off distinctly second best to the holly: the second has birds singing in its boughs, the first is spattered with pigeon dung. The narrative, shared between the parts, is interspersed with a refrain ending “as the manner is”. The coda is an amusing piece of verbal nonsense sung staccato on “How, how! So, so!”

*Snow down* is a complete, and magical, contrast. Dark-toned, hushed homophony slowly grows in volume and chromaticism until it leaves the text dramatically suspended. After a pause, solo alto and soprano sing in canon of snow as the falling feathers of a white bird killed on its nest, above a major tenth held by the basses, the lower note a C below the stave. The two soloists pass each syllable of “down is fluttering” between each other, their falling phrases counterbalanced by rising *glissandi* in the altos and tenors. The bass chord ceases and sopranos take up the text in a huge figure which rises to top B flat, then falls through nearly two octaves to middle C. Against that note, the soloists describe a descending arc on the word “down”.

Riley ends his cycle with *Into Leaf*, a poem about spring by Philip Larkin which is framed by the Rilke fragment. The song is a slow ascent over more than three octaves, from the still earth announced by the basses to the sopranos’ top B. The main narrative role falls to the altos, each of their phrases rising higher and higher like the sap. The tone becomes more urgent (“Yet still the unresting castles thresh”), then wild as a peal of bells (“Begin afresh”). The piece ends with a majestic coda, the altos singing an inverted Larkin couplet against the Rilke excerpt.

Fraser Trainer’s ***Landscapes*** are settings of three sonnets by the German-born Mathilde Blind, who came to England as a child after her stepfather, Karl, had been exiled for his part in the Baden insurrection of 1848-49. Commissioned by Mark Forkgen, Canticum’s musical director, they were given their world première by the choir in November 2003.

In *Haunted Streets*, the opening nine bars, for saxophone alone, introduce motifs subsequently taken up by the voices, in particular the shift between E natural and E flat. Soprano and tenor sing in mirror image (“Like shifting pictures seen within a glass”), then with alto, in descending cluster chords (“A face projected from that shadowy mass”, etc.) as the saxophone sways in triplets above them. The music builds to a climax as the vision clarifies (“stand out clear and sweet”), and the saxophone celebrates ecstatically.

There is a reprise of the mirror image and cluster chords (“The face of faces”, etc.). The music builds again but the vision proves illusory and, above a major second held by sopranos and altos on “air”, the saxophone reverts to the melancholy figures of the opening.

In *Winter Landscape*, the voices, humming contrapuntally, then vocalizing in contrary motion, depict a static, gelid world. A rocking figure for altos (“All

night, all day”) convey the snow’s ceaseless fall. Above it, chromatic slithering for sopranos illustrates the confusing whirl of its flakes. Landmarks are blotted out by a white which assumes in Trainer’s score the intensity of a vibrant colour. The music subsides as death and darkness seem to prevail.

Then, suddenly, the cloud lifts, the snow ceases, the moon appears and earth is joined to heaven in whiteness. This transfiguration is marked by a rapid increase in tempo, and moves to a tremendous climax in which upper and lower voices descend in canon on consecutive fifths (“Earth vied in whiteness”). The effect is primeval.

In the final pages (“Herself a star”, followed by vocalizing and humming), the composer uses previous material to create a palindrome, though this time the last sound is with the sopranos.

In *Red Sunsets*, the saxophone, placed offstage, introduces a lively five-note phrase which will recur throughout the piece. In stark contrast are the heavy fifths of the lower three voices (“And o’er wet roofs”). The saxophone, now onstage, repeats its joyful dance, the voices take it up and move to a chromatic, hammered, chordal climax on St. John the Divine’s vision of the New Jerusalem (“That heavenly city”).

We return to earth with the fifths of alto, tenor and bass (“And, lo, three factory hands”). Four bars of close harmony follow (“Starved of earth’s beauty”). The fifths recur, but now much more widely spaced (“O toilers”). For the fourth and final time the saxophone, again distant, repeats its dance, and dies on a D.

**Veni** is a dark, passionate setting of the seven “O” antiphons for the Magnificat at Vespers in the week preceding Christmas Eve. In them, the faithful call on Christ, in the splendour of his various attributes (“O Sapientia”, “O Adonai”, etc.), to redeem the world. Keith Roberts’ score, which was commissioned by Mark Forkgen and given its first performance by Canticum in 2000, echoes the anguish of that cry. The key word is the “Veni” of Advent, the first syllable set mostly on a stabbing semiquaver on B flat/A sharp.

The opening antiphon alternates between slowly rising counterpoint (“O Sapientia”) and canon (“attingens”), the whole above a B flat bass pedal note. That note is assumed, two octaves higher on A sharp, by the sopranos, with a serene *fugato* passage beneath (“ad docendum nos”). The mood is broken by the little dart of “veni”, a semitone above the A sharp, becoming ever more urgent and leading straight into “O Adonai”, a brief, strident declamation in the Lydian mode, again based on B flat.

The third antiphon (“O Radix Jesse”) divides into three sections, the first contrasting overlapping falling fifths and fourths with jazz-like close harmony. A low-lying homophonic passage follows (“super quem”). The B flat “veni”

reappears, sung first by solo soprano, the word then taken up with passionate vigour by all four voices, this time rising in fifths, and that cry answered by the insistent semitones of “iam noli tardare”.

The fourth and fifth antiphons (“O Clavis David” and “O Oriens”) are linked by the same concluding phrase, “in tenebris et umbra mortis”, and a much repeated four-part minor chord - introduced in the previous movement - which for Roberts represents the idea of death. Opening with that chord, the fourth antiphon proceeds with oriental sinuosity (note the alto melismas on “aperies” and “claudis”). The B flat “veni” returns, this time with a quaver introduction, the start of a constantly accelerating antiphonal passage for double choir which climaxes on “sedentem” and falls in stupendous chromaticism on “tenebris”. Solo voices then echo the opening phrases above the terrible tramp of tenors and basses (“et umbra mortis”).

The antiphon for the winter solstice, “O Oriens”, uses the same four notes that dominated its predecessor but this time in a gentler, radiant, major tonality. The score is divided between choir and solo quartet, the first rising like burnished brass on “oriens”. Their dialogue resolves into E major, only to be punctured immediately by the sopranos’ dissonant stab on “veni”. We are back in the sombre world of supplication in the face of death.

“O Rex Gentium” is based on a D, round which other voices tightly revolve, their buzzing, or, rather, bubbling, to represent the mud from which God formed humankind, punctuated by cries of “Rex”. Altos embark on a sensuous canon (“et desideratus”) above stentorian open bass chords. The music proceeds in fragmentary fashion till the reappearance of the B flat “veni” and a dramatic, broken phrase for sopranos, “et salva nos quem de limo”. The antiphon ends in a flurry of semidemiquavers, thinning to the altos as the basses round off the text with “formasti”.

The final movement opens *vivace*, the tonality seemingly hovering between F sharp major and B minor, the rhythm alternating between common and triple time, effects which, for the composer, illustrate the desperation of the cries to Emmanuel. These end on a unison F sharp, with the altos adding the major third on “veni”. That converts into the familiar, stabbing B flat and the start of the final section. Below drumming soprano notes, lower parts quote from earlier movements. Two of the four soprano parts launch into wild *glissandi*, while tenors and basses recall the opening phrase of the work. There are repeated tenor cries on “noster” and the movement, now divided into twelve parts, ends in full spate.

*Simon Scott Plummer*