

PARRY CENTENARY

by Christopher Morley

Beginning on a cheery note, along with the third of Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms, I want "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" at my funeral.

Its wonderful repose-seeking words from the pen of the American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier (1807- 92) are set to a melody by the composer Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry. The tune was first heard in Parry's oratorio Judith (premiered at the 1888 Birmingham Triennial Musical Festival), but in 1924 George Gilbert Stocks, director of music at Repton School in Derbyshire, compiling a new chapel hymnal, combined Parry's music with Whittier's verses to create one of our most beloved hymns, known, of course, as Repton.

At the end of the 19th century Parry was the most eminent composer in the United Kingdom, and he was generous in his advancement of a younger, totally unqualified aspirant who eventually eclipsed him. That man was Edward Elgar, born in Worcestershire, next to Parry's own county, Gloucestershire. The huge difference between them was that Elgar was the son of a shopkeeper, Parry the well-educated son of a country squire. But they are linked by a penchant for huge, sweeping melodies mirroring the landscape of the Malvern Hills which straddle their homeland.

This year is the centenary of Parry's death, and the event is being marked by a mini-festival over the May Bank Holiday weekend. Gloucester Cathedral will be the chief venue, but the programme also takes in the composer's childhood home at Highnam Court, just outside the city.

The festival begins on Friday May 4 with a screening of the feature-length BBC documentary film "The Prince and the Composer" in the Ivor Gurney Hall at the King's School, Gloucester. The Prince of Wales, himself a well-known Gloucestershire resident, joins members of Parry's family in exploring the composer's life and work (7.30pm).

Saturday May 5 begins with an organ recital from Ashley Grote, Master of Music at Norwich Cathedral, and former Assistant Director of Music at Gloucester Cathedral. His programme at St Peter's RC Church in Gloucester features music by Parry as well as his pupils at the Royal College of Music, Vaughan Williams, Holst (both also Gloucestershire lads) and Ireland (12.30pm).

All attention homes in to Gloucester Cathedral at 7.15 that evening for the Gala Concert, heart of the proceedings, when Adrian Partington conducts the Gloucester Choral Society, the Oxford Bach Choir and the Philharmonia (resident orchestra at the Three Choirs Festival). The programme is mouth-watering, framed by two of Parry's most famous offerings: I was Glad, his evocative anthem composed for the Coronation of Edward VII, and Jerusalem, which should be our National Anthem (it's a good sing, and glorifies our country instead of an individual, without any jingoism).

Between these two come Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis, premiered here in 1910, Holst's absolutely intoxicating Hymn of Jesus (after whose premiere Vaughan Williams, Holst's great friend, wrote "I just want to go out and get drunk"), Ireland's "Greater Love hath no Man", and a rare opportunity to hear Parry's Ode on the Nativity.

Next day (Sunday May 6, 5.30pm) the Cathedral hosts the Saint Cecilia Singers conducted by Jonathan Hope, assistant director of music at Gloucester Cathedral. The main work is Parry's Songs of Farewell, completed shortly before the composer's death, and preceded by music from Holst (the Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda) and two part-songs by Frank Bridge.

The final day of the festival sees the move to Highnam, when students from Parry's Royal College of Music perform his Piano Quartet, as well as that by his student Herbert Howells and miniatures by Vaughan Williams. Parry authority Jeremy Dibble gives a talk on "Tradition and Innovation in Parry's Choral Music", before the afternoon ends with Choral Evensong in the village church.

Well-timed for this centenary of Parry's death comes the publication of Hubert Parry: a Life in Photographs, by Michael Trott (Brewin Books).

This is a treasurable volume, crammed with images of Parry and his milieu, threaded through with biographical detail, and seasoned with memorable snippets relating to the composer's views on a multitude of matters, including the new-fangled business of motoring.

He was one of the first motorists to be fined for speeding, and this memory by Charles L. Graves says it all:

"He drove down the steep and winding road which leads from Savernake Forest into Marlborough at such a pace that when they reached the bottom the chauffeur got out and was sick!"

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