

JOHN RUTTER'S SACRED CHORAL MUSIC

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John Rutter is a prolific British composer who has created a large body of choral works, both sacred and secular, over the course of a long career. His compositions for choirs are extremely popular with both audiences and singers, and are probably given more performances in a given year than those of any other living composer. Fans may be prone to calling him the “world’s greatest living composer,” but it is likely the modest Rutter himself would not accept the title. As he himself states, most of his sacred works have been composed on commission from churches and individuals.¹ Naturally, when composing for a ‘customer,’ the satisfaction of that person or group must be considered. In this, Rutter has a certain genius, as his works are uniformly pleasing – both to hear and to sing. Interestingly, Rutter composes in at least three distinctly differing styles. A singer who has only experienced Rutter’s easily mastered “Look at the world” would be surprised that the same composer could have written the extremely challenging and rather dissonant “Come down o love divine.” These widely varying compositional styles will be explained after a brief consideration of Rutter’s childhood and early career.

RUTTER’S CHILDHOOD AND EARLY CAREER

John Rutter was born in 1945.² He attended Highgate School, which in Rutter’s day was a boy’s school with a strong musical tradition. Rutter knew from an early age that he wanted a career as a professional musician, and the Highgate School was an ideal institution for him in that sense. The school choir at the time,

¹ “John Rutter writes” in accompanying booklet, *Be thou my vision; sacred music by John Rutter* performed by the Cambridge Singers, Collegium Records CSCD 514, 2004, compact disk.

² Biographical information taken from an interview of John Rutter by Alan Macfarlane dated January 28, 2009, http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/DO/filmshow/rutter1_fast.htm.

of which he was a member, had a fine reputation, and was occasionally asked to provide a boy's choir for performances of major choral works. As a member he was able to participate in important performances of major choral works such as Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana," and Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem." Interestingly, there were other young composers at Highgate at the time, including John Tavener (1944-2013), whose approach to the composition of choral music in a way completely different to Rutter.

In 1964, after graduating from Highgate, Rutter entered Cambridge University's Clare College, where he studied music and sang in the chapel choir. While a student at Clare College he wrote his first compositions to be published, and conducted his first recording.³ One of these early compositions, "Shepherd's pipe carol," written when he was eighteen, went on to sell over a million copies.⁴

Rutter has had a long relationship with Clare College. As a post-graduate student there he collaborated with David Willcocks, then director of music at the next-door King's College, on "Carols for Choirs." This four-volume collection of Christmas carol arrangements by Willcocks and Rutter went on to become a mainstay of church choirs everywhere in the English-speaking world. In 1975 he was appointed director of music at Clare College, a post that included teaching duties and the running of the chapel choir. He continued in this post until 1979, when he resigned in order to devote more time to his composing career.

Since leaving Clare College, Rutter has worked as a free-lance composer, arranger, and conductor. In 1981 he founded the Cambridge Singers, a professional chamber choir created primarily for the purpose of recording sacred choral music. This group has recorded a wide range of choral repertoire, including, of course, Rutter's own compositions. In order to record and distribute the group's performances, Rutter created Collegium Records in 1984. This recording company has catalogue of over 30 CD's by the Cambridge Singers, as well as a few by the present Clare College chapel choir in its catalogue.⁵ It celebrates its thirtieth year in 2014.

³ "Biography," <http://www.johnrutter.com/biography/>.

⁴ Trevor Beeson, *In Tuneful Accord, the Church Musicians* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2009), 202.

⁵ "John Rutter Works List," <https://www.collegium.co.uk/content/Works+List/4>.

Though a quintessentially British composer, a fair proportion of Rutter's first recognition and commercial success came from the United States. His early career overlapped with a period in the classical music world when the work of serialist composers held sway.⁶ Naturally, works such as his "Shepherd's pipe carol," with its cheerful theme, happy rhythmic flow and total lack of dissonance were not considered serious music at the time. As Rutter puts it himself, "they {Americans} 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 {England} it was sniffed at."⁷ Major compositions that originated from American commissions include "Gloria" (1974) and "Magnificat" (1990).

COMPOSITIONS: SHORTER SACRED CHORAL WORKS I: CAROLS

As Rutter himself has stated, most of his works were composed at the request of a specific church or individual. For clarity sake, these will be separated into two categories: Christmas carols and anthems.

Rutter's early attempts at composing and arranging Christmas carols were extremely successful, as we have seen. His own Collegium Records website gives a list of his compositions, including carols. Under the heading "Carols for Mixed Voices," twenty-nine original carols and forty-one carol arrangements are listed, for a total of seventy or more works in the genre.

Rutter's thirty or so original carols are written in various styles, naturally. If these works were listened to in a single sitting, however, one would notice that certain musical types do predominate. In fact, this writer feels that most of the carols, as well as the anthems, would fit into one of three categories.⁸

Category one comprises works written in a popular style. These pieces have melodies, harmonies and rhythmic patterns reminiscent of light classical music,

⁶ Serialism is a method of composition in which one or more musical elements is subject to ordering in a fixed series. Most commonly the elements so arranged are the 12 pitch classes of the equal-tempered scale. (*The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*, cv "Serialism.")

⁷ Stephen Moss, "Sing a song of Christmas," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2000, http://www.theguardian.com/friday_review/story/0,3605,414360,00.html.

⁸ These categories and groupings of compositions are the opinion of the author.

musicals, and, at times, popular secular music. Musically speaking, there is nothing to distinguish the carols of this group from secular music except for their texts. Some examples of this type are “Shepherd’s pipe carol,” “Jesus child,” “Star carol,” “Donkey carol” and “Angel’s carol.” Within the genre there is both variety and similarity. The carol “Jesus child” is based on a Caribbean rhythm, while the “Donkey carol” is based on a 5/4 meter, and, therefore, flow along in quite different ways from each other. On the other hand, many common traits exist among these carols. They all have cheerful, easily remembered melodies and snappy rhythms. “Shepherd’s pipe carol,” “Jesus child” and “Star carol” all begin with similar instrumental introductions that features driving rhythmic patterns. Syncopation appears in each carol at vocal phrase endings, and in each, the word “Bethlehem” is treated in a very similar way, rhythmically. Not everyone appreciates, or would wish to program popular-sounding music for their church choir, or course. It must be agreed, however, that these miniature-size compositions are very well crafted and tuneful. They are certainly extremely popular with amateur choirs.

The second category carols (and anthems) contrast greatly with the first. For lack of a better term, these will be called “sentimental” or “nostalgic” types. In general, they have slower tempos and smoother rhythmic patterns than the popular types. Their melodies are broad and smooth, and their harmonies are predominantly in a lush Romantic style. Stylistically, they could have been created by composers a generation or two before Rutter, as there is little that is modern in them. Examples include “Christmas lullaby,” “Nativity carol,” “Mary’s lullaby,” “Candlelight carol” and “Love came down at Christmas.”

The third and final category is more difficult to describe precisely. Works that comprise this group make use of neither the popular forms of the first category, nor the overtly Romantic harmonies of the second. Some are reminiscent of folk music, displaying gapped melodies and modal harmonies. Two beautiful examples are “Of a rose, a lovely rose,” and “The wildwood carol.” Others have a general structure and musical flow similar to the sentimental type, but without the extremely rich harmonies. An excellent example is “What sweeter music,” which is, in this writer’s opinion, one of Rutter’s best original carols.

COMPOSITIONS: SHORTER SACRED CHORAL WORKS II: ANTHEMS

It is easy to imagine that Rutter, when composing carols, finds himself confronted with certain limitations – the expectations of the singer/listener as to what Christmas music *should* sound like, the fact that most texts are rather short and normally strophic, etc. By comparison, he has had much more freedom in the composing of anthems, which are choral compositions intended to be used in the context of an Anglican worship service. Words used in an anthem can be anything sacred, from biblical texts to modern sacred poetry. Consequently, we find anthems as brief as the shortest carols (two or three minutes) to more lengthy compositions that require seven or more minutes to perform. The anthem genre itself provides no guidance or limitations, other than the fact that texts should be in English, and that the music should be suitable for use during a worship service.

Stylistically, Rutter's anthems can be placed in the same three categories as given above for the carols. Of a total of approximately sixty anthems for mixed voices listed on the Collegium Records website, seventeen have been selected as represented and are listed here by category. As it was in the case of the carols, anthems in the third category have the most stylistic variety. It is there that one can sense a connection to the work of other twentieth-century Western classical composers.

Anthems classified as belonging to category one (popular types) are immediately recognizable by their up-tempo instrumental introductions followed by vocal entrances in unison. Rutter seems to love repeated rhythmic patterns (which are often termed *ostinato*), and uses them frequently in his accompaniments. In fact, the following seven anthems all begin with an introduction featuring repeated rhythmic patterns: "I believe in springtime," "Look at the world," "All things bright and beautiful," "For the beauty of the earth," "I will sing with the spirit," "O be joyful in the Lord," and "O clap your hands."⁹ Rutter's choice of instruments in the orchestrated versions of these seven works is also surprisingly uniform. Plucked stringed instruments (especially the harp) provide rhythmic interest and harmony, while woodwinds (particularly oboe and flute) handle melodic lines. Brass

⁹ The anthems covered here are all available in either keyboard or orchestra accompaniment versions. For the purposes of this article, Rutter's own preferred version, that of orchestra accompaniment, has been used.

instruments are used in one of the anthems (“O clap your hands”). To summarize, the anthems in this group all begin with a Rutter trademark: a short, striking rhythmic introduction using typical ‘Rutter orchestra colors’ followed by a tuneful melody in unison which is soon transformed to harmony in the choral parts. Modulation to different keys is also a signature effect that appears in many anthems.

As was the case in the carol genre, anthems in category two (sentimental/nostalgic types) feature none of the rhythmic vibrancy of the popular types. The following five anthems are typical for pieces in this category, with their gentle flow, subdued climaxes, and concentration on the text: “As the bridegroom to his chosen,” “A Clare benediction,” “A Gaelic blessing,” “The Lord bless you and keep you,” and “O waly waly.” In this category, Rutter is careful to reflect musically the meaning of the text. Dignified melodies, slower tempos, and rich harmonic settings characterize these anthems. Category two anthems require two or three minutes to perform, a length that does not allow for a tremendous amount of musical variety. Stylistic unity is the trademark of these smaller works.

The third category of anthems comprises a wider variety of musical types than the first and second types. These works are generally longer, requiring between four and seven minutes to perform. This added length gives Rutter more room for imaginative treatment of texts. These works often progress in a series of strongly contrasting sections that directly reflect the meaning of the text. Harmonies can be more freely dissonant, so these anthems often sound more distinctly modern than do other types. Textures vary from a cappella works, to those with a single instrumental part, to anthems with organ or large ensemble accompaniments. The following anthems are recommended listening for one interested in gaining an understanding of Rutter’s work at its highest technical level: “Come down, o love divine,” “Cantate Domino,” “Cantus,” “Hymn to the creator of light” and “Loving shepherd of thy sheep.”

The fine anthems of this category all bear repeated listening and study. For reasons of space only two will be described here. “Come down o love divine” was written for a double choir and is unaccompanied. A high skill level on the part of the singers is necessary for a successful performance. Free use of dissonant harmonies, extremely high and low ranges of the voice give the music a haunting,

otherworldly effect. The meaning of the text is clearly described in the music, and is reflected by sudden and surprising changes of choral texture. Rutter makes no compromises for the listener here – there are no sweet melodies, lush Romantic harmonies or memorable accompaniment parts. It was composed for a joint performance by the choirs of Westminster Abbey, St Paul’s Cathedral and Westminster Cathedral, London, and it is clearly professional-level music. This work is highly recommended.

“Cantate Domino novum” is an anthem for eight vocal parts, and is of a similar difficulty level to “Come down, o love divine.” Rutter mixes the Latin words of part of Psalm 96 with English to form a new macaronic text. The Latin text appears in a sort of refrain-like section that returns periodically through the work. The musical writing here reminds one of early twentieth-century French choral music, perhaps Poulenc. In contrast, Rutter’s own unique use of dissonance appears during the English text (at “his wonders,” for example). The Gregorian chant “Veni creator spiritus” appears before the final repetition of the “Cantate Domino” refrain.

COMPOSITIONS: LARGER SACRED CHORAL WORKS

Though it is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that Rutter has composed a number of large-scale choral works. Numerically, Rutter’s output of shorter sacred works vastly outnumbers his larger scale compositions. The fewer large works are quite popular, and are performed regularly in concerts. These compositions include: “Gloria” (1974), “Requiem” (1985), “Te deum” (1988), “Magnificat” (1990), “Psalmfest” (1993), and “Mass of the children” (2003)

RECEPTION OF RUTTER’S WORKS IN ENGLAND AND JAPAN

As we have seen, Rutter’s choral works are very popular in the United States. What has been the reception of his music in his own country? And what of his music here in Japan – is it known and/or performed at all? Three prominent choral conductors, one in England, and two in Japan, were contacted in order to answer this question. Each was asked their opinion of his sacred music, as well as

how they thought Rutter was viewed in their respective countries.

Sarah MacDonald, Director of Music at Selwyn College, Cambridge University, and Director of Ely Cathedral's Girls' Choir writes, "It is technically very skilled music, and he knows how to write a catchy tune. His technical prowess is particularly notable in his arrangements (folk songs, traditional carols, etc.), and I much prefer them to his choral compositions. She acknowledges that he has a serious side (category three works, as described above), as well as a popular side. As for his reception in England, MacDonald notes that his music is probably not the first thing all conductors would prefer to select, personally. However, given that he is frequently requested at special services, it is impossible to avoid choosing his works, particularly at Christmas time, when there is great demand from the general public.¹⁰

Professor and Director of the Aoyama University Chapel Choir Teruhiko Nasu has the following to say about the works of Rutter. "I think Rutter is a skilled composer. Despite the fact that his melodies and harmonies can be easily understood and sung by amateur choirs, they are written neither in difficult contemporary nor hackneyed pops styles, something which is not easily accomplished." Mr. Nasu's first impression of Rutter's works was formed in the early 1980's when he heard the album *The Holly and the Ivy*. As he recalls, "the first sounds of Rutter's orchestra-accompanied Christmas carols I heard were reminiscent of musicals or Hollywood film music. Even though on first hearing the music gave the impression of something commonplace or imitative, strangely enough, something in the music made me want to hear it again. I think this demonstrates the quality of Rutter's work - there is certainly inspiration in it."

As for the use of Rutter's music in Japan, Mr. Nasu states that is well-known and often performed in the church-related schools, but that it is not so familiar to church choirs or congregations.¹¹ Mr. Nasu has translated five of Rutter's choral works, "A Clare benediction," "Star Carol," "The Lord bless you and keep you," "Thy Perfect love," and "Peace of God."¹² Of these, I have conducted his version of "A Clare benediction," and find it works as well in Japanese as in English. Perhaps

¹⁰ From an email to the author dated August 19, 2014.

¹¹ From an email to the author dated August 17, 2014.

¹² These works are licensed through Oxford University Press, but have not been published.

Rutter's works will find a wider audience in Japan through these translations.

The third person asked for his opinion is Steven Morgan. He is presently the musical director and conductor of the Tokyo Embassy Choir (formerly the British Embassy Choir), and a composer himself. He suggests, "Rutter is fine in small doses. But when you compare it to the 'real thing,' you see how commonplace it is. The 2011 wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton was a case in point, when Rutter's very predictable "This is the day" was premiered: one could imagine the rest of the anthem after hearing the first eight measures! I do like certain pieces by Rutter, of course (though I wouldn't say I "love" any of them). Some of these are "What sweeter music," "God be in my head," and "Te deum." On the positive side, I will say Rutter is a fine craftsman when it comes to arranging carols or other pre-existing melodies."¹³

John Rutter is obviously not the only person in the English-speaking world writing choral music. The same three conductors were asked to suggest other modern composers for the reader to investigate. Two men who are known to write in a lighter style, perhaps with an eye on sales of their music, are Bob Chilcott and Howard Goodall. Other composers who occasionally write choral music in a more popular style include Alan Bullard and Malcolm Archer.

Composers who do not work in the popular choral idiom include John Taverner, Phillip Cooke, Jonathan Dove, James MacMillan, among others. Conductors looking for serious choral repertoire for their choir are encouraged to examine the music of these composers. Finally, other composers recommended by one or more of the above conductors, and whose works are popular with choirs and the public, include Grayston Ives, Eric Whitacre and Paul Mealor.

In the end, how one rates the works of John Rutter comes down to personal taste. His works in every category are undeniably well crafted, and he has had a huge influence on the amateur choral world of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. By all reports, Rutter is a genuinely decent and humble man. Let us close this study of his works with a quote by the man himself. Composing, says Rutter, is "a bit like bespoke tailoring. You are trying to make a suit of clothes for somebody you have measured up to be worn at a specific event. It

¹³ From an email to the author dated August 14, 2014.

may not necessarily be a path to greatness but at least it helps in arriving at something suitable.”¹⁴

¹⁴ “John Rutter: Modest Maestro,” Classic FM, accessed August 2, 2014, <http://www.classicfm.com/composers/rutter/guides/john-rutter-modest-maestro/>.