

## **Wired To Create – Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2017**

**Taunton Choral Society with St Mary Magdalene Church Choir**

This summer TCS present a concert of works exploring the boundaries of what might be called Classical Music. Not all composers trained and skilled in their high craft choose to live and compose in that society. Their tastes, eccentricities or handicaps can make them the outliers in the repertoire – fringing the boundary between the traditional and the wider world. Yet, here we can mine the richest seams of musical ore; music that doesn't carry with it the baggage of expectation. In this concert the traditional mixes with influences of jazz and the avant-garde. The music may be separated by history or style, but the unifying theme lies in the composers – each one being in some way “different” from their society, and forced to overcome barriers to their success. In some cases they bring with them the shadier parts of life, but always producing quality music that charms the ear and refreshes the spirit.

Composer and jazz pianist George Shearing's life story is truly one for Hollywood! The youngest of nine children, he was born *blind* into a poor, working class family from South London in 1919. By the time of his death in 2011 he had made over 150 commercial records selling millions, awarded multiple doctorates, Grammys and Ivor Novello awards as well as being Knighted for services to music. His prodigious talents were spotted early, and he was offered many scholarships to study at university. Yet, in a truly Dickensian plot twist he was forced to turn down formal study in order earn money playing in pubs and bars. He would later comment during his ennoblement "My mind keeps flashing back on my beginnings as pianist playing in a pub for the equivalent of \$5.00 a week. What a journey it has been from that pub to Buckingham Palace." The seven *Songs and Sonnets from Shakespeare* (1999) are Shearing's second cycle setting the Bard. His first, smaller cycle *Music to Hear* (1985) shows his increasing interest in choral writing, but while youthful and bright, are very rooted in the American jazz and spiritual genre - in stark contrast to these works some 14 years later. Here, we see a much more sophisticated and sensitive approach to the text and the part writing, creating some truly sublime moments especially in the slow movement. As with all Sir George's 300 or-so

compositions, his blindness made it necessary to have an amanuensis write the music as it was being played with additional input from John Rutter in this cycle.

The Parisian, existentialist, avant-garde'ist, umbrella collecting, musician Erik Satie (1866-1925) has long remained in the collective memory for his most famous series of piano pieces – *Gymnopédie 1-3*. Throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century however, his life and influence have come under closer scrutiny. At the time of his death, his relative obscurity outside the fashionable salons and musical gatherings of inter-war Paris meant his music was largely forgotten. But such was the irresistible weirdness and eccentricity of his years that in the end, his life and works could not help but be explored.

At the turn of the century, Paris (and France) was revered as the very height of human sophistication. Musically, artistically, philosophically, immense strides in social and cultural thinking were being made. When we review the evidence of his behaviour, it would seem that Satie regarded his existence as a kind of living art - an embodiment perhaps of the immense cultural epicentre that was his upbringing. He bought identical sets of grey-white suits that he would wear exclusively. For a period he would only eat white food, and was said to have once consumed a 30-egg omelette. In his twenties he moved into a small apartment in the Montmartre district and for the rest of his life refused to entertain anyone there. He possessed hundreds of umbrellas, and would take to carrying one even in summer. Needless to say, a man such as this was well known in the salons and clubs of Paris. One story recounts how the then unknown Satie, in an attempt to gain favourable mystique at a club introduced himself as an “gymnopediste”. This term, largely invented by Satie is a corruption from a form of naked Greek dance! It is a typical leap of Satie logic, that we see this term used to describe the calm, peaceful lilt of the *Gymnopédies*. This afternoon we hear the first two of the famous *Gymnopédies* with additional double bass. The connection with the *Sonnets* is apt, as Shearing acknowledged Satie's influence in his jazz writing.

Our received impression of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) the symphonist and giant of late romantic expressionism would not at first glance belong in such company as Satie or Shearing. But delve deeper and we see a man fraught with tension and self-

doubt, someone who spent his life hiding from the world. For a composer he was an extremely late bloomer. Even into his late 40's he still had no international hit to speak of. Along with his unswerving Catholicism, unworthiness and obsession with detail were Bruckner's comforters. He spent year after year chasing qualifications for teaching and music that were so beneath his ability that the chief examiner of the Vienna Conservatory would comment, "He should have examined us!...If I knew just one tenth of what he knows, I'd be happy." Bruckner would spend his whole life battling his inferiority complex. He never married, and was most likely a lifelong virgin, painfully awkward around women. It was said he kept a list of young girls in his diary, and would frequently proposition them and others. He had a mania for counting the bars of his massive symphonies to ensure they were statistically correct. It was only with extreme encouragement of his friends that he would eventually make the move away from the confines of the teaching rooms to explore his exceptional gifts.

He would grow up as a choirboy in the monastery at Sankt Florian, Austria, learning the organ to virtuoso standard. He would later return to teach there for ten years, and it's this period we see him write the bulk of the sacred motets we hear this afternoon. These early works show a tremendous technical mastery of counterpoint and harmonic expression very much in the style of Palestrina – that most venerated master of sacred music. The highlight of the set is the *Os Justi* with stunningly haunting, extended fugue. The passage starts in A minor and slowly passes a little rising figure down through all the voices, ending in G major. At the end we hear the plainsong chant that informs the piece. Bookending the set are the two *Aequale* for three trombones. Written in response to the news of his godmother's death – they are short funeral marches which are intended to express hope as much as solemnity. The bass trombone part for *Aequali No.2* has been lost, but is reconstructed here by this afternoon's conductor, Ed Goater – a world premiere!

We round off with Holst, and one of his best loved works for choir. *Turn Back O Man* is an arrangement of words by Clifford Bax set to a Calvinist psalm tune. It was originally part of collection of choral works for festivals by English composers of the era. The rather quixotically named compendium *Galaxy Festival Choruses* and most of its works has been largely forgotten, but this gem survives mostly because of its

rather bumptious charm and memorable tune. The genesis of this work is a clear example of what composers of the modern era had to contend with. Gone were the days of livery and patronage. The decline (and later, annihilation) of the principedoms of Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century meant artists were forced to earn their crust in more mundane ways. Holst was for most of his life, like Bruckner a teacher, at Morley College and St Paul's Girls' School in London. He was also a professional trombone player - a "pastime" that would get him into bother. One story recounts how, whilst cycling to visit Ralph Vaughan-Williams, he paused in a country field to warm up on his instrument. He was severally reprimanded by the local farmer who found him terrifying the grazing sheep with his playing! In point of fact, Holst was a veracious cyclist, even riding his bike across the Sahara Desert for a holiday. But it would be his *poor* health that would ultimately define his character. He was always a sickly man. Suffering from neuritis (a nervous impairment) in his right arm, he was prevented from perusing a piano career, and had to strap a pen to his hand in order to be able to write. As such he was always a shy character, and would find his coming fame with *The Planets* always difficult to bear. He died aged just 59 most likely of stomach cancer. One of the great ironies for this most quintessentially English composer, was the suspicion he would suffer throughout his life because of his name. His father was a German, and used the aristocratic "von" suffix with his surname. Gustav would later drop this marker on advice from his friends.