

Edinburgh Bach Choir

Stephen Doughty, Conductor

**Programme notes for
“Virtual Concert”, 6 June 2021**

Brahms, *Schicksalslied*

Robertson, *Requiem for the Innocent*

In the normal life of a choir the singers would rehearse together, in the same room and at the same time, be honed into shape by their conductor and then perform to their wonderful audience. However, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic sadly almost all the above activities have had to be curtailed.

In the current world (which, we hope, will come to an end in the near future) all our commonly-accepted norms have been turned on their head: the singers are guided/rehearsed *individually* in online sessions, in their comfort of their own homes and probably not quite all at the same time due to the vagaries of the internet; the conductor *hopes* he has honed them into shape but – in the strangest element of all – he is unable to hear anything until it is largely too late to amend anything! The singers record themselves individually and the recordings are mixed together by a sound engineer – another novelty! – who takes on much of the responsibility for the final look and sound of the event. Only then can the choir ‘perform’ to their wonderful audience.

We are delighted to add yet another dimension to this virtual performance: a chamber ensemble who have also recorded their playing individually in their own homes. Edinburgh Bach Choir would like to thank them for their playing and technical prowess and we very much hope you enjoy our performance.

-- Stephen Doughty

Johannes Brahms: *Schicksalslied*

(*Song of Destiny*)

Brahms's *Schicksalslied* (Opus 54) is an orchestrally accompanied choral setting of a poem by Friedrich Hölderlin, one of the best-known German Romantic poets. The poem contrasts the blissful life of the gods with the fate of us ordinary mortals here below, and the musical setting dramatically captures the same contrast. Brahms began work on the piece in 1868 and it was first performed in 1871. It is often known as *The Little Requiem* as it shares many stylistic and compositional similarities with Brahms's most ambitious choral work, the *German Requiem*.

Text

Ihr wandelt droben im Licht
Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!
Glänzende Götterlüfte
Rühren euch leicht,
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
Heilige Saiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;
Keusch bewahrt
In bescheidener Knospe,
Blühet ewig
Ihnen der Geist,
Und die seligen Augen
Blicken in stiller
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben,
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.

Translation (James E. Mitchell)

Holy spirits, you walk up there
in the light, on soft earth.
Shining god-like breezes
touch upon you gently,
as a woman's fingers
play music on holy strings.

Like sleeping infants the gods
breathe without any plan;
the spirit flourishes
continually in them,
chastely kept,
as in a small bud,
and their holy eyes
look out in still
eternal clearness.

A place to rest
isn't given to us.
Suffering humans
decline and blindly fall
from one hour to the next,
like water thrown
from cliff to cliff,
year after year,
down into the Unknown.

James Robertson: *Requiem for the Innocent*

James Robertson's *Requiem for the Innocent*, for choir, chamber orchestra and soloists, is dedicated to the Edinburgh Bach Choir, and we are honoured to have this substantial new work written especially for the choir. It was completed in the summer of 2020, and the world premiere was originally planned for our 2020-21 season, but this had to be postponed because of the pandemic. Instead, we are delighted to bring you a virtual world premiere of four of the *Requiem's* eight movements and look forward to performing the piece live and complete as the composer intended soon.

The composer writes:

"The choice of incorporating different sources of text in *Requiem for the Innocent* evolved over a period of time; it had not been pre-planned. Shortly after starting work on the piece, I felt a particular focus or title was needed. For some years I have been involved with an organisation called Human Writes; this is a long-established British organisation founded for the purpose of befriending prisoners on Death Row in the United States. Over the past three years I have been in communication with a man called Daniel Gwynn. Daniel is 50 years old and has been in prison for the past 25 years. He has been seeking for a long time to overturn his conviction. He has found great solace and therapy through painting. Daniel's case – and other events taking place in our world such as the plight of refugees – connected me with the idea of innocence. This was the catalyst for writing my composition.

One of the challenges of setting the standard texts which feature in a requiem is that there are often not many words in each movement to work with. This can result in a lot of verbal repetition. An example of this is the *Kyrie* which would normally feature the words 'Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison'. I felt that adding the English translation of the Latin text affirmed the meaning that was being conveyed. In other movements the theme of innocence – and the injustice that is often felt by those who are innocent – compelled me to add some of my own words. Finally, there are other brief references to Biblical scripture that seemed appropriate to incorporate. The inclusion of a young girl soloist seems to me now to represent and embody the concept of innocence; again, this is not something I had originally set out to do. In the final movement, *Lux Aeterna*, the young girl almost presents a Christ-like innocence (and his own sense of injustice) by voicing some of his final words from the cross. The transition, however, from 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' to 'Today thou shalt be with me in paradise' acknowledges the sense of hope in the piece as a whole and the ultimate triumph of goodness and justice."

Our virtual performance features four of the eight movements: 1. *Requiem aeternam*; 2. *Kyrie eleison*; 4. *Sanctus*; 8. *Lux aeterna*. In addition to soloists taken from the choir we are delighted to welcome **Samanthi Shanjeevan**. Samanthi hails from Sri Lanka and is a pupil at St George's School for Girls in Edinburgh. She sings with the National Youth Choir of Scotland.

1. *Requiem aeternam* Soprano Soloist: Hebe James

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.
Te decet hymnus, Deus in Sion
et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem.
Exaudi: Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.

2. *Kyrie eleison*

Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy.
Kyrie eleison; Christe eleison.

4. *Sanctus* Soprano Soloist: Samanthi Shanjeevan
Tenor Soloist: Guy Johnson

Sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

And who is this child, silent and still,
who bears her pain with such grace
while knowing what she must face?
This pitiful number of years
must not be squandered through tears.
She is innocent! Innocent!

And who is this man in shackles and chains?
Falsely accused, he circles a cage.
Why should he temper his rage?
Yet hope continues to grow
on this most wretched of rows.
He is innocent! Innocent!

Sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.

And who are these men, women and children
who flee their country of birth
to find a life of more worth?
These victims of hatred and war
We must do more than pray for.
They are innocent! Innocent!

Hosanna in excelsis.

8. *Lux aeterna* Soprano Soloist: Samanthi Shanjeevan

Lux aeterna luceat eis
Cum sanctis tuis, Domine,
In aeternum:
Quia pius es.

Why hast thou forsaken me?

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.

Who is this God?
Where is Jesus in this?
Lux aeterna.

Why hast thou forsaken me?

Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.
Amen.

Singers

Soprano

Georgia Bartlett McNeill
Sheila Bryer
Celia Carson
Morag Fairhurst
Fiona Gordon
Eleanor Harris
Jenny Harris
Hebe James
Mary Jeffreys-Jones
Janette Myles
Briony Pillath
Moira Todd

Alto

Tillie Boulogne
Judith Bull
Ann Cassidy
Lorna Crichton
Selda Dow
Deborah Harris
Terri Lydiard
Jennifer Miller
Catriona Moss
Anne Newlands
Perdita Stevens
Libby Torrie
Alison White
Elizabeth Woollven

Tenor

Guy Johnson
John Knox
Bob Ladd
Douglas Peters
Steven Torrie

Bass

Ulrich Germann
Neil Paterson
Kenneth Ritchie
George Ross
Lindsay Sawyer
Ian Stark
Neil Weir
Alistair Wesley
Philip Woodhead

Orchestra

Flute, Piccolo: Allison Orr
Oboe: Rachel Curry
Clarinet: Calum Robertson
Bassoon: Hannah Astle
Horns: James Goodenough
Jeff Gumpertz
Trumpet: Mark James
Trombone: Peter Horsfall

Piano: Malcolm Garden
Timpani, Percussion: Chris Overton
Violin 1: Sheena Jardine
Violin 2: Rebecca Rollinson
Viola: Ken Taylor
Cello: Malcolm Garden
Bass: Margaret Graham

Video and Audio Production

Steve Richer