

Vierne 150

A programme of French and British Music

Concert 4

Rhapsody no. 3 in C Sharp Minor, Howells
Folk Tune, Whitlock
Postlude in D Major, Smart
Symphony no. 4 in G Minor, Vierne



Rhapsody no. 3 in C Sharp Minor

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was a prolific composer of orchestral, keyboard and choral music, whose anthems and Canticle settings form an important part of services in churches and Cathedrals across the world.

Howells had a very musical childhood, first deputising for his father, the organist at a local Baptist church, then singing as a choirboy at a local Anglican church. He began formal music lessons with Herbert Brewer, organist of Gloucester Cathedral, in 1905 and became his articled pupil at the age of sixteen, studying alongside Ivor Novello and Ivor Gurney. In 1912 he began studying at the Royal College of Music under Charles Villiers Stanford, Hubert Parry and Charles Wood and, only a few years later, was appointed Professor of Composition. He held this post from 1920-79, alongside his position as Director of Music at St Paul's Girls School from 1936-62. His compositional style was greatly shaped by the music of Vaughan Williams and the composers of the English Renaissance, resulting in a unique sound full of flowing melodies, a careful balance of counterpoint and homophony, as well as a few signature melodic, harmonic and rhythmic motifs, instantly recognisable to any listener familiar with his Canticles and anthems.

The Rhapsody no. 3 in C Sharp Minor was composed in March 1918 when Howells was staying with Sir Edward Bairstow in York. He was kept awake by a Zeppelin raid, and composed the work in one night. Indeed, it is possible to draw parallels between the

fiery intensity of the music, with the fear Howells must have experienced. The Rhapsody opens with an assertive melody above a highly chromatic accompaniment. (The distinctive falling triplet pattern of this melody will feature frequently throughout the piece.) After the tempestuous opening, a new, noble melody is introduced which settles the music into a quieter dynamic and a more consonant harmony ahead of a central *Tranquillo* section. Here Howells uses the opening triplet figuration as rhythmic interest beneath a sweeping melody. Gradually the peace is disturbed by the introduction of an urgent semiquaver phrase which is passed between pedal and left hand, and precipitates a recapitulation of the opening melody and a return to the earlier wild, chromatic harmony. The dynamic ebbs and flows, building to a stormy *fortississimo*, and falling away to almost nothing. Just as the music feels like it will close quietly, a series of heavy chords swell over a ponderous pedal line, and the music finally closes with a triumphant C sharp major chord.



Folk Tune

Percy Whitlock (1903-1946) was an English organist and composer. He studied at the Royal College of Music with Stanford and Vaughan Williams, before taking up the position of Assistant Organist at Rochester Cathedral in 1921. After nine years at the Cathedral, he moved to Bournemouth where he served as Director of Music at St Stephen's Church alongside a position as the town's borough organist. This gave him the opportunity to work with Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra and play at the local Pavilion Theatre. Indeed, he played so regularly that, in 1935, he decided to work at the theatre full-time. Sadly, Whitlock died of tuberculosis in 1946, aged just 42. His music was largely forgotten for decades after his death, but enjoyed a modest resurgence in the 1980s due to the foundation of the Percy Whitlock Trust in 1983.

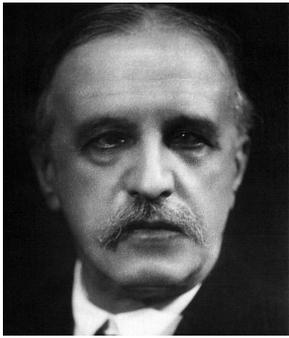
The Folk Tune is the second of Whitlock's *Five Short Pieces* (Allegretto, Folk Tune, Andante Tranquillo, Scherzo and Paean), composed in 1929 while he was still working at Rochester Cathedral. Their engaging and varied character brought Whitlock his first major success as a composer. The *Musical Times* said of the collection that the pieces were '...among the most encouraging of recent organ publications. The music has tune and freshness'. The Folk Tune is expressive and sweet, with a light, hymn-like texture and simple melody stated three times, first at the top of a homophonic accompaniment, then as a slightly altered oboe solo beneath fluid right hand quavers, finally returning as the soprano voice above a warm accompaniment on the great flutes and swell strings. The piece ends with a gentle coda on the swell, with one last lingering fragment of the folk tune on the great.



Postlude in D Major

Henry Smart (1813-79) was an English organist and composer. He was surrounded by music from an early age: his father was a music publisher, orchestral conductor, and violinist, and his uncle, Sir George Smart, was the conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Society at Covent Garden and composer to the Chapel Royal. Smart was educated at Highgate School and began studying law at university, but soon gave this up to pursue a career in music. He first became organist of Blackburn Parish Church, where he began composing, and throughout his lifetime also held organist positions at St Giles-without-Cripplegate, St Luke's, Old Street, and finally St Pancras New Church, where he remained from 1864 until his death. He was a skilled mechanic and designed several organs including the instruments at St Andrew's Hall in Glasgow, and Leeds Town Hall. As an organist, he was famous for his improvisation and, despite becoming completely blind at the age of fifty-two, continued playing almost entirely from memory, and composed by dictating to his daughter Ellen. As a composer, his output included an opera, oratorios, part-songs, instrumental music, and a number of hymn tunes including Regent Square, most commonly sung to the words 'Christ is Made the Sure Foundation' or 'Light's Abode, Celestial Salem'. Like Whitlock, much of Smart's music was forgotten after his death. A few compositions have been revived, but his music no longer celebrates the elevated position it once held during his lifetime.

The Postlude in D Major begins with a stirring homophonic theme, and joyful antiphony between great and swell, which is soon repeated on full organ above scalic pedal writing. These scalic motifs then pass to the manuals, and the texture begins to thin before the arrival of a new, *legato* melody on the choir, which gradually builds to a full organ statement of the opening melody in the dominant. This is followed by another contrasting section made up of fast moving counterpoint on the swell with moments of solo on the great and in the pedal, using passages of melodic material from earlier in the piece for brief sequences and motivic development. After a brief dynamic swell, a quiet but fast moving chorale-like section on the choir leads into a crescendo across the swell and great which flows seamlessly into a recapitulation of the first theme. This final section sparkles with scalic flourishes, bright staccato chords and a few unexpected harmonic twists, and the Postlude closes with a triumphant and emphatic unison D.



Symphony no. 4 in G Minor

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was a French organist and composer who, despite being born almost blind, displayed an exceptional talent for music from a very early age. He first heard the piano at the age of two and, after hearing a Schubert lullaby, is reputed to have been able to pick out the notes of the melody on the piano. He went on to study at the Paris Conservatoire and, from 1892, served as assistant to Charles-Marie Widor at the church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He was appointed organist of Notre Dame in 1900 and held the post until his death in 1937, where he famously died at the console.

Symphony no. 4 was started in 1914, just before the outbreak of World War One, and is dedicated to American organist William C. Carl. The work begins with a single note, which rings ten times above a haunting pedal melody like a mournful bell. This melody (Theme 1) is then repeated in the right hand above a heavily chromatic accompaniment. It is made up of a series of two bar, arch-shaped phrases, which ascend and descend, steadily rising until the entry of the second theme on the swell trompette.

Theme 1:



The Minuet beautifully contrasts the first two movements in its simplicity and elegance. The Prelude's highly chromatic first theme is transformed into a sparkling hautbois melody interspersed with graceful passages of flute and pedal, sometimes in duet, and sometimes as an accompaniment. The playful mood continues into a trompette solo beneath a series of parallel third and fourth chords, and above a pedal drone on A flat and E flat, giving this middle section a slightly folk-tune feel. Finally, the solo oboe returns with the flutes and the Minuet closes with a little chromatic twist and a gentle E major chord which fades into the building.

The fourth movement Romance which follows features one of Vierne's most sublime melodies. It is heard in the pedal after a brief solo introduction on the swell strings, and is accompanied by beautiful (if at times a little sentimental) harmony in rippling broken chord figurations. Vierne states it twice more on the great flute and the choir oboe, before the sombre middle section begins. This calls to mind the dark, menacing harmony of the Prelude, but here the chromaticism is interspersed with moments of warmth and resolution. A scalic flourish returns the music to D flat major, and to one last iteration of the exquisite opening melody, and the Romance finally closes with a gentle coda on the flutes and strings.

The stillness of the Romance is quickly shattered by the chaotic and terrifying Final. The opening theme of the Prelude returns, transformed into a *moto perpetuo* figuration on the manuals and, eventually, the pedals. The entire movement is unrelenting and dramatic. Even at its quietest, the quaver movement persists, at one point almost overwhelming the swell counter melody and giving it an undercurrent of fervour and unrest. A passage of insistent unison brings the music to a brief *largamente* coda, where Theme 1 returns one last time at the top of seven punchy chords, and the piece ends in the tonic major.