

Mass for double choir

Frank Martin (1890 – 1974)

Kyrie
Gloria
Credo
Sanctus & Benedictus
Agnus Dei

There are some composers who do not achieve significant recognition until well into their thirties or forties, or even later. It may be that, like Vaughan Williams and Tippett in this country, they are musical late developers, but in the case of the Swiss composer Frank Martin, whose work was little heard until he was over fifty, the reasons were more complex.

Unlike his French contemporary, Olivier Messiaen, whose sensual, flamboyant music sprang from the unshakeable certainties of his Catholic religion, Martin, similarly devout but brought up at the opposite end of the Christian spectrum, in the Calvinist tradition, experienced faith as a private, inner struggle which found its musical expression in an intensely personal style. He was a meticulous and extremely self-critical composer, and would lock away his manuscripts for long periods until he was certain that what he had written was capable of standing up to his own rigorous critique of its musical and intellectual basis. It took him many years to find his own distinctive musical voice, and it wasn't until 1941, when his oratorio *Le Vin Herbé* was performed for the first time, that he felt he had at last developed a style with which he could be satisfied. It was also his belief that his own compositional efforts paled into insignificance in comparison with the supreme genius of his great idol, Bach. All these factors helped to limit the opportunities for performances of his music. The 1941 concert seemed to act as a catalyst, and thereafter his music became much more widely known.

Martin was born in Geneva, the son of a Calvinist pastor, and by the age of eight he had started composing. When he was twelve he heard a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, an experience which left an indelible impression on him. Following his father's wishes, he eventually entered the University of Geneva to study mathematics and physics, but soon decided instead that he was going to devote himself entirely to his music. His unique style draws on a wide variety of influences, including Renaissance music, French Impressionism and Schoenberg's twelve-note system, but above all, Bach.

The first four movements of the **Mass for Double Choir** were completed in 1922, the Agnus Dei being added four years later, but Martin did not allow the work to be performed until 1963. After its premiere he explained why it had remained unseen and unheard for all those years: '*I considered it to be a matter between God and myself,*' he wrote. '*I felt that a personal expression of religious belief should remain secret and hidden from public opinion.*'

Martin's Mass is notable for its flowing rhythmic and melodic vitality - always at the service of the words - and the juxtaposition of austere, restrained music, often based around a pedal note, with rich harmonic writing of considerable passion and great beauty. Although there are no actual plainsong themes in the work, the influence of Gregorian plainsong is never far away, not least at the very opening, where a simple, flowing alto line gradually unfolds, soon to be taken up by the sopranos and then supported by the full choirs.

Unusually, the Gloria begins calmly, with accumulating chords announcing 'Gloria in excelsis Deo'. This leads into the movement proper, which after an energetic 'Quoniam' ends with a quiet 'Cum sancto' - another original touch. The Credo opens with appropriately strong statements from each choir. After a quietly ecstatic 'Et incarnatus', a passage which was particularly dear to Martin, comes the 'Et resurrexit', an exuberant canon based on the pentatonic scale.

In the Sanctus, gently undulating chords from the tenors and basses support an eloquent, falling phrase from the sopranos. The climax of the movement, and one of the most powerful moments in the whole work, is the section from 'Pleni sunt coeli' through to the final, ecstatic 'Osanna'.

The separation between the two choirs is most marked in the eloquent Agnus Dei, which Martin added in 1926. The second choir provides a steady rhythmic foundation, over which the first choir, mostly in unison, sings a plainsong-like melodic line that echoes the music of the opening Kyrie. The work reaches its peaceful conclusion with the two choirs combining for the final, heartfelt 'Dona nobis pacem'.

Since its first performance in 1963, the reputation of Martin's Mass has steadily grown, and it is now recognised as one of the great masterpieces of unaccompanied choral music.

programme notes by John Bawden

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