

Magnificat

John Rutter (b.1945)

Magnificat anima mea
Of a rose, a lovely rose
Quia fecit mihi magna
Et misericordia
Fecit potentiam
Esurientes
Gloria Patri

Though he is perhaps best known for his carols and other short pieces, John Rutter also has a number of large-scale works for chorus and orchestra to his name. Most of these received their first performances in the United States, where Rutter is a frequent visitor, writing regularly for American choirs and conducting performances of his own music. The *Magnificat* was first performed in 1990 in Carnegie Hall, New York, conducted by the composer, and the UK première followed a year later in Coventry Cathedral.

The Magnificat - the canticle of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Luke I: 46-55) - traditionally formed part of the ancient Roman Catholic service of Vespers. After the Reformation it was incorporated into the evening services of the Lutheran and Anglican churches, where it was linked with the Nunc Dimittis. The Magnificat has been set to music more often than any liturgical text other than the Mass itself, in settings that vary enormously in style and scale, from the purity of Palestrina's exquisite four-part unaccompanied compositions to Monteverdi's grand, dramatic settings written for St Mark's, Venice, and later the almost symphonic conception of Mozart's *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*, of which the Magnificat forms the final movement, written in 1780 for use in Salzburg Cathedral.

John Rutter's initial inspiration for his *Magnificat* was another great masterpiece – that of J.S.Bach, though he has also revealed that he found the task of following in Bach's footsteps a somewhat daunting prospect, as indeed any composer might. Despite the fact that the two works are about as different in style as they could possibly be, they nevertheless do share some basic similarities. For instance, both pieces conclude with a reiteration of the music of their opening movements, both make use of traditional Gregorian plainsong melodies, and in both works the focus is on the soloist for the more reflective verses, while the chorus is called upon to provide some appropriate vocal muscle in robust sections of the text such as 'Fecit potentiam in brachio suo' (He hath showed strength with his arm). And just as Bach included several additional Christmas movements in the original E-flat version of his *Magnificat*, so too Rutter incorporates three extra elements into the standard Latin text. Particularly memorable is his haunting setting of the beautiful 15th century poem, 'Of a Rose, a lovely Rose', which uses the image of a rose as an allegory for the Blessed Virgin Mary and her powers to intercede for mankind. The other two supplementary texts are the Sanctus from the Ordinary of the Mass, and a Marian antiphon, 'Sancta Maria' (Holy Mary).

John Rutter has stated that his intention was to write a Magnificat redolent of Mediterranean sunshine and celebration, evoking the spirit of the many exuberant festivals held throughout Europe in honour of the Virgin Mary. To this end, the work is full of energetic, syncopated rhythms and strong melodies, with more than a hint of the musical theatre from time to time. Rutter's music is always beautifully written for the voice and superbly orchestrated, and although his unashamedly popular style has won him few friends amongst the upper reaches of the musical establishment, choral societies and audiences throughout the world have responded with wholehearted enthusiasm to its uninhibited tunefulness.

programme notes by John Bawden

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