

Mass of the Children

John Rutter (b.1945)

Kyrie
Gloria
Sanctus & Benedictus
Agnus Dei
Finale

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 *Mass of the Children* received its première in Carnegie Hall, New York, in February 2003, and the first UK performance followed a month later in Guildford Cathedral, the composer conducting on both occasions. The work is scored for adult mixed choir, children's choir, soprano and baritone soloists and orchestra. The Mass is a *Missa Brevis* – a Latin Mass without a Credo – in five movements. Several additional English texts are also included, and these form a progression from waking to sleeping that runs through the work as a counterpart to the liturgy of the conventional Mass text.

The piece does not begin immediately with the Kyrie Eleison but, in keeping with the 'waking to sleeping' theme, opens with the children's choir singing lines from Bishop Thomas Ken's fine morning hymn, 'Awake, my soul, and with the sun', written in about 1674 for the scholars of Winchester College. After the Kyrie comes an exuberant Gloria featuring energetic, unequal rhythms that are typical of Rutter at his liveliest, and then a complete change of mood is introduced with the gently lilting harmonies of the Sanctus and Benedictus. The Agnus Dei text is divided between the fourth and fifth movements, with the first part being followed by William Blake's moving poem, 'The Lamb', sung by the children's choir. The final movement begins with two prayers by John Rutter, for the baritone and soprano soloists, based on verses by Lancelot Andrewes and St Patrick. The Mass now returns to the poetry of Bishop Ken. In one of Rutter's most inspired passages the beautiful evening hymn, 'Glory to thee, my God, this night' is sung by the children to the sublime melody of Tallis's Canon whilst the adults chant 'Dona nobis pacem' (Grant us thy peace). Finally the choirs are joined by the soloists, and the combined voices gradually bring the work to its peaceful conclusion.

The idea of combining a children's choir with an adult one is of course nothing new, but most of these works tend to treat the young voices as a subsidiary musical resource. In his *Mass of the Children*, however, the composer has given the children's choir a central part to play. It is they, not the adults, who are heard at the very outset, and their role throughout is integral to the overall concept of the *Mass*. As always with Rutter, the music is beautifully written for the voices and superbly orchestrated. His skilful writing for soloists, choirs and orchestra and his sensitive interweaving of the various Latin and English texts has resulted in one of his finest and most moving works.

programme notes by John Bawden

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