

Three motets

Charles Stanford (1852 - 1924)

Justorum animae
Beati quorum via
Coelos ascendit hodie

Following the death of Purcell in 1695, English music went into a long period of decline that was not reversed until the late 19th century. Of the many musicians who helped to bring about the English musical renaissance it was Charles Stanford, Hubert Parry and Charles Grove who were arguably the most influential. Largely thanks to their untiring work as composers, teachers, performers and administrators, musical standards gradually improved and a firm foundation was established for a new tradition of English music. This musical revival reached its full flowering with Elgar and continued with Vaughan Williams and a whole new generation of talented composers.

As a teacher of composition, Sir Charles Stanford was without equal. A list of his many pupils at the Royal College of Music reads like a *Who's Who* of early twentieth-century British music: Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Gustav Holst, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, to name only a few of the most well-known. Stanford was a prolific composer and highly regarded in his day but, apart from his church music, which has always been central to the Anglican cathedral repertoire, most of his works fell into neglect after the First World War. New musical horizons had been opened up by Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and others. Stanford's music was firmly rooted in the formal Austro-German tradition of the nineteenth century, and no longer seemed relevant to a traumatised post-war world looking to the future, not the past, for hope.

In the field of church music, on the other hand, Stanford's music has consistently been held in the highest regard. At a time when mediocrity prevailed, Stanford swept away many of the tired conventions, bringing in a freshness and vitality not heard since Purcell's day, and enriching the repertoire with a succession of fine anthems, motets and settings of the morning and evening canticles. Together with the music of Herbert Howells, Stanford's church music continues to provide the backbone of the cathedral choir repertoire. He received many honours during his career, and was knighted in 1902. His ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey, next to Purcell's.

The *Three motets*, Op. 38 for unaccompanied choir were published in 1905 but probably date from 1892, the year in which Stanford gave up his post as organist of Trinity College, Cambridge. They are dedicated to his successor, Alan Gray, and the college choir, and are amongst the finest of his shorter choral compositions.

Justorum animae takes its text from the Book of Wisdom:

The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God; there shall no torment or malice touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seem to die, but they are in peace.

The piece is in three short sections. The outer two reflect the contemplative nature of the first and last part of the text, whilst the central section is a vivid depiction of malice - 'Et non tanget illos tormentum malitiae'.

Beati quorum via is in six parts, with divided sopranos and basses, and is meditative in character. Effective use is made of contrasting the three upper and three lower voices, and the piece is rightly regarded as one of Stanford's most exquisite unaccompanied compositions. The text is from Psalm 119, verse 1:

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.

Coelos ascendit hodie is an Ascensiontide motet, scored for double choir, and makes much use of dramatic interplay between the two choirs. The superb final 'Amen' grows ever outwards from one single note, concluding on a vibrant eight-part chord.

*Today Jesus Christ, the King of Glory, has ascended into the heavens, Alleluia!
He sits at the father's right hand, ruling heaven and earth, Alleluia!
Now are David's songs fulfilled, now is the Lord with his Lord, Alleluia!
He sits upon the royal throne of God, in this his greatest triumph, Alleluia!
Let us bless the Lord; let the Holy Trinity be praised,
let us give thanks to the Lord, Alleluia! Amen.*

programme notes by John Bawden

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