

## **Chancel Choir Christmas Concert**

First Congregational Church, Oshkosh, WI

Third Sunday in Advent - December 13, 2015

### ***The Many Facets of Joy***

Today our Chancel Choir, under the direction of Joanne Peterson, presents their 2015 Christmas Choral Program in honor two of the world's most famous composers, directors and arrangers of Church Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: John Rutter and Sir David Willcocks. These great lights of the Church Music panoply come from two different generations of English citizens, one, Sir David Willcocks, born in December 1919 and the other, John Rutter was born in 1945 after the end of World War Two. Both have been honored for their gifts and have performed around the world. They have collaborated on four volumes of the very successful *Carols for Choirs* anthology series (one volume is being utilized by our choir in today's service).

The first carol that the choir will perform is *Once In Royal David's City*, a song that references the ancient Judean city of Bethlehem (a Hebrew word which literally meant "House of Bread"), the birthplace of the Savior. Written by Cecil Frances (nee: Humphreys) Alexander who was born in Dublin, Ireland in April 1818, this carol represents this great Church woman's contribution to children's music throughout her life. This is her best known Christmas Carol but her equally famous "All Things Bright and Beautiful" illustrate her sense of the importance of children and animals to the work of God in the world. She married a clergyman from Derry (the home of my maternal ancestors) who eventually became the Archbishop of Armagh.

Listen now as our choir sings those familiar words written by a woman who was known throughout the British Isles as a person of faith who served the poor and challenged all of her life (having founded a home for the Deaf and Dumb in Derry with the proceeds from the sales of her hymnbook for children's choirs),

*for he is our childhood's pattern,  
day by day like us he grew,  
he was little, weak and helpless,  
tears and smiles like us he knew;  
and he feeleth our sadness,  
and he shareth in our gladness.*

*Gabriel to Mary Came* is a 14<sup>th</sup> century Irish Carol. The text, originally written in Latin, tells the story of Gabriel's Announcement to Mary that she will conceive and bear the savior of the world. *Thou art the gate of heavenbright, the sinner's healer kind.* It deals with the inner struggle of Mary between her vows of chastity until marriage and her call to bear the Savior of humankind. *In God's almighty keeping shall all unsullied be,* are Gabriel's comforting words as he departs her presence.

Sir William Arthur Cambridge (a preacher's kid) is attributed with the translation of this ancient text from Ireland. Cambridge was a classicist and one of the greatest authorities on theater of Ancient Greece in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the Greek professor at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland prior to becoming the Associate Dean of Sheffield University in England.

Sir David Willcocks arranged this carol in its entirety. His musical training began at Westminster Abbey in London in 1929 when he was only ten years old. He later studied in Bristol and at King's College in Cambridge. He served in the British military for five years during WW II and was awarded the Military Cross. He later served as organist at Salisbury Cathedral and Worcester Cathedral. He gained significant distinction through numerous recordings of choirs he directed, the most famous of which was the King's College Choir at Cambridge. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1977.

In Luke's Gospel are recorded those magnificent words of Mary's in response to Gabriel's visit to her:

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior,  
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed;  
For the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
To Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Listen now as our choir sings this most ancient of texts which will be presented this morning regarding Gabriel's visit to Mary.

John Rutter has become famous for adapting very familiar hymns and tunes to new arrangements that captivate both the singer and listener. His arrangement of the carol *For the Beauty of the Earth* has always been one of my favorites. He is a prolific composer and conductor of choral music. His works are mainly choral and include Christmas carols, anthems and extended works such as his *Gloria, Requiem and Magnificat* (all of which I have sung with the Bismarck/Mandan Civic Chorus in North Dakota). One of his most recent works was the anthem he composed for the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton entitled *This Is The Day*.

Despite becoming famous for composing and conducting much religious music, Rutter told an interviewer on the CBS TV show *60 Minutes* in 2003 that he is not a particularly religious man yet still deeply spiritual and inspired by the spirituality of sacred verses and prayers. Rutter had just completed his *Mass For Children* which he wrote after the sudden death of his son Christopher while a student at Clare College, Cambridge. David Willcocks considered Rutter “the most gifted composer of his generation.”

In the next carol that our choir will sing, Rutter turned his attention to that well-loved old southern mountain American song *I Wonder as I Wander*. The question it asks fits the utter loneliness of humanity “out here in the universe.” As I grew up in the south I recall hearing this carol sung every Christmas in our church. It was a congregational favorite and still is sung around the world.

While in the town of Murphy, NC in 1932 John Jacob Niles attended a fundraising meeting held by evangelicals who had been ordered out of town by the police. While there “a young girl stepped out to the edge of the little platform attached to an automobile. She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievably dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash blond hair hung down in long skeins...But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song.”

The girl, named Annie Morgan, repeated the fragment seven times in exchange for a quarter per performance, and Niles left with “three lines of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material – and a magnificent idea.” Based on this fragment of an Appalachian Folk Song, Niles composed *I Wonder as I Wander*. Rutter’s arrangement of the song does nothing to eliminate the controversy that has swirled around its authorship in southern mountain country and everything to enhance its haunting mystery imitating the deep Christological question: Who and Why is Jesus of Nazareth so compelling in human history?

John Audelay, who died in 1426 infirmed, deaf, and blind, had been an English cleric who early in his life was involved in a brawl on an Easter Sunday at St. Dunstan-in-the-East church in which a parishioner was killed. It has been suggested by many that this man, who is the author of some of the very first Christmas carols written and recorded in the English language, spent the rest of his life in penance for his part in the melee.

Much of Audelay's poetry is concerned with the theme of repentance. He was especially concerned with the exposure of priests to accusations of heresy and he wrote one scathing satire against church hierarchy, incorporating references to that great satirical poem *Piers Plowman*.

John Rutter has taken his carol theme of *There is a Flower* and arranged it, as you will hear, in a very unusual way. The closing words of the carol are most striking in Rutter's most capable mind. The listener might agree, when hearing it, that *there is none such in paradise as this flower*.

Rutter's music is very popular, particularly in our country because he is able to compose without the classical constraints European composers face when preparing anthems and choral works. It is as a writer of carols that he has really made his mark. This carol that the choir is about to perform is included in "100 Carols For Choirs" (Volume 2) that he and Sir David edited and arranged in 1987.

These two men, along with John Scott, the organist and director who accompanied Sir David in Green Lake, WI (who, like Sir David, passed away this fall of 2015), formed a musical trinity for choral music throughout the past century. All three are shy creators whose work has not been accomplished for their own glory but, like Bach, for the glory of God.

Sir David Willcocks (who incidentally was conscripted for the recording of Mick Jagger's Rolling Stones song "You Can't Always Get What You Want") recalled for the New York Times how he directed the Bach Choir in the opening strains of that recording. He also shared a touching story of his first audition in London with choirmaster Henry Walford when he was only eight years old:

*He gave me some ear tests and then played the piano to me for quite a time. Suddenly he stopped, played a quiet chord and said, 'Tell me, can you hear God speaking to you in that chord?' I listened hard, Willcocks said, but I couldn't. However, I thought of my mother outside the room and didn't want to let her down, so I said 'Yes sir, I think I can.'*

When we listen to the compositions of these giants of church choral music, many of us would say that in the melodies, chords, and words, we do indeed hear God speaking to us.