‘Beauty Springeth Out of Naught’: Interpreting the Church Music of Herbert Howells

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> *Missa Sabrinensis* is not designed for ritualistic use. It is essentially a composer’s personal and creative reaction to a text of immense, immemorial significance.
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> Historically, its text has been used in countless diverse ways by many composers – Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Cherubini, Bruckner, Kodály, Janácek, Vaughan Williams and Rubbra are of the company. For each of these the Mass offered a disciplined but personal field of deep feeling and most intense expression, the scope and idiom of their settings have differed in each case. Non-ritualistic, the boundary-line between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ has nearly vanished. The emphasis has lain, instead, upon individual reaction to an Office of the Church that has become vivid, powerful, pervasive and irresistible part of the mental and spiritual nature of man. For the creative musician it has become – like the Passion – one of the two superlative texts for musical setting.[1]

These are Howells’s own words from 1956. They highlight not only what a strong sense of tradition he felt, but also his awareness that this was a tradition that had undergone change. Today his anthems, canticles, psalm chants, mass settings, organ works and hymns enjoy a thriving existence, as is evinced by the profusion of new recordings.

The popularity of Howells’s church music is, one might suggest, predicated largely on the sound world. Instantly recognisable, his use of modal counterpoint, novel tonal language and long plainchant-like lines, create a very different atmosphere to any of the established repertoire that preceded it. The power of this amalgam has been so effective, even overwhelming, that it has obscured our reception of other musico-textual processes that are seminal to a more intrinsic understanding of Howells’s sacred music. In essence, the listener is so absorbed by texture and harmony that they often fail to notice how unusual Howells’s text settings are.

Howells is often regarded as one of the most significant composers for the Anglican Church, but what is not always appreciated is how novel and innovative his approach was. The subject has received little scholarly attention and this paper will use two examples to highlight how unorthodox Howells’s music can be. We should view Howells’s own dictum - “the boundary-line between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ has nearly vanished” – as a call to reconsider this music and its implications.

Background

Howells received his musical education through two institutions. The first was Gloucester Cathedral, where he studied as an 'articled pupil' to the then Organist and Master of the Choristers, Herbert Brewer. The second was the Royal College of Music, where Howells studied with several professors, but most notably Charles Villiers Stanford and Charles Wood. He also came under the considerable influence of Hubert Parry (the then Director) and Richard R. Terry (the Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral).

R. R. Terry, through his editing of renaissance polyphony and its performance at Westminster Cathedral, became a standard-bearer for early music in England. Stanford sent his pupils to hear the music at the cathedral and Howells spent a short period as Terry's assistant, helping him to edit scores for publication. At the same time, his training at Gloucester and the RCM immersed him in the Anglican repertoire of the day, which had reached a peak in the liturgical music of Stanford, Parry, S.S. Wesley and John Stainer.

The interplay, and often fusion, between these two periods - the renaissance of the sixteenth century (the golden age of English polyphony) and the so called 'English musical renaissance'[2] – is at the heart of Howells' church music. He felt this very acutely and had arguably his greatest artistic awakening at the premiere of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* in 1910, a work which epitomises this fusion. In the spaces of great cathedrals and churches Howells felt his calling to an artistic tradition in which all of the mainstream composers of the day were engaged. The staff of the Royal College, in particular, showed that serious composers wrote symphonies *and* church music and, in so doing, held the church at the centre of the musical mainstream.

The likes of Stanford and Wood had demonstrated, in their instrumentally-conceived church music, that sacred and secular music were not mutually exclusive, and that both idioms could be, and were, the subjects of serious creative imagination. For Stanford and Wood, however, the composition of sacred and secular music spanned their entire creative existences, and both were pursued in equal measure. For Howells, though, secular music dominated his output until the Second World War. Only afterwards did the composition of sacred music become a preoccupying focus. There are a number of reasons for this.

In 1917, when Howells left the Royal College he was a rising star in London, whose works were beginning to be performed widely. In the chamber works of this period we can hear a number of new influences, particularly the harmonies and parallel textures of Debussy and Ravel. It is likely that Howells looked to Ravel after the first performance of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia*, since Vaughan Williams's recent period of study in Paris was widely spoken of in relation to the 'queer new piece'. Howells's contemporaries also caught the French bug, partly through the London performances of the Ballets Russes, but also directly (for example, Arthur Bliss

visited Paris and met *Les Six* in 1919). Despite some success, most notably with the A minor Piano Quartet which was published under the auspices of The Carnegie Trust, Howells's music continued to met with a lukewarm critical response. This came to a head with the 1925 premiere of his Second Piano Concerto, at the end of which Robert Lorenz (a notable critic) stood up and shouted 'thank God that's over'. The audience responded with loud applause for the concerto, but there was considerable newspaper coverage[3] of the incident, and Howells took the extreme decision to withdraw the work, even though the publishers (Curwen) where in the final stages before printing[4].

Howells continued to compose after this incident but there was a significant drop in productivity. Even so, the collection *Lambert's Clavichord* (1926/27) and the Second Organ Sonata (1933) show a further advance in the techniques that would become standard fare in this later church music. *Lambert's Clavichord* is a collection of keyboard works that Howells wrote when lent a clavichord for the summer by the photographer (and spare-time instrument maker) Herbert Lambert. The stylistic fusion of renaissance keyboard writing and elements of a much more modern harmonic idiom (partly Ravelian, but looking forward to neoclassical works like Poulenc's *Suite Française*) is combined with a rhythmic immediacy that was further refined in the Second Organ Sonata. Here Howells reached his most dissonant (with the exception of a few works of the late 1970's). Rhythmically too, the Sonata is written in an arresting and almost aggressive manner, highly reminiscent of William Walton. The Sonata also uses a single motif to unify the entire work – a technique that would become standard practice for the composer.

The sudden death of his nine year old son in 1935 changed Howells's life significantly. At the time, one of his closest friends, organist/composer Harold Darke, said that he was a broken man who would never write again. However, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Howells and Darke were both asked to take on responsibilities in Cambridge chapels, Darke at King's and Howells' at St John's. During this time, Howells was asked to write a setting of the Te Deum for King's. This piece, now part of the famous 'Collegium Regale' settings, was to mark the start of Howells's return to church music.

Howells's Musical Language

As well as understanding the context in which Howells came to church music after the Second World War it is important to appreciate just how new his music sounded. Howells's new musical language, with its use of modality (particularly using sharpened fourths and flattened sevenths), gave it a unique sound that was recognisable within a matter of seconds, while at the same time his use of counterpoint, long melismatic phrases and false relations harked back centuries. In a sense it is the ultimate in faux tradition, mixing old and new elements to give the effect of listening to something much older than it is. What is most interesting is that

there seems to have been no questioning of this new musical style. Comparison with the music of Stanford and Parry (to name but two successful church composers) shows the enormity of the move from a heavy reliance on Brahmsian chromatic harmony within obvious classical forms, to a much more subtle language (arguably French) that uses rich modal harmony and actively disguises formal procedures to give the impression of a free, rhapsodic and improvisatory structure.

For many, it is this unique sound that they associate with English cathedral music (particularly the Anglican Evensong). Paradoxically, the sound world that Howells created to capture the atmosphere of Anglican liturgy now creates and defines the experience itself. For any composer this is significant achievement: so total is the effect, so emotionally sensitive, that it has become the essence of English church music and shows signs of continuing to be so for some time. It is important to point out that other composers made significant contributions to this new repertoire of modern church music too, but none produced anything like the quantity of music, and has had the same influence, as Howells. Howells's success stems partly from the fact he not only wrote far more for the church than any other composer, but he maintained a standard that far exceeded the majority of other composers. Composers who were more successful than Howells tended to be absorbed in larger symphonic forms and opera (as were William Walton, Britten, Tippett, Leighton and Rubbra).

To return to my initial quotation about the boundary-line between 'sacred' and 'secular', it is interesting to think that when Howells wrote his Organ Rhapsodies (Op. 17), he commented that he was specifically aiming at 'getting away from the church' and that these pieces were 'quite modern'[5]. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what he meant by this description, but all three pieces are large-scale compositions that seem to aspire to the world of orchestral music. They use the kaleidoscopic range of textures and sounds that modern cathedral organs are capable of, and their extended length means they can function as concert pieces outside of the liturgy. The title of 'Rhapsody' may have been chosen consciously in order to plant the pieces firmly in the recital repertoire, after all, it was less than two years after their publication that Harvey Grace complained[6] about organists who 'dispel the atmosphere of devotion' by playing inappropriate voluntaries. Given that the tempestuous Third Rhapsody was written during a zeppelin raid on York, one can imagine that this was precisely the kind of piece he was talking about.

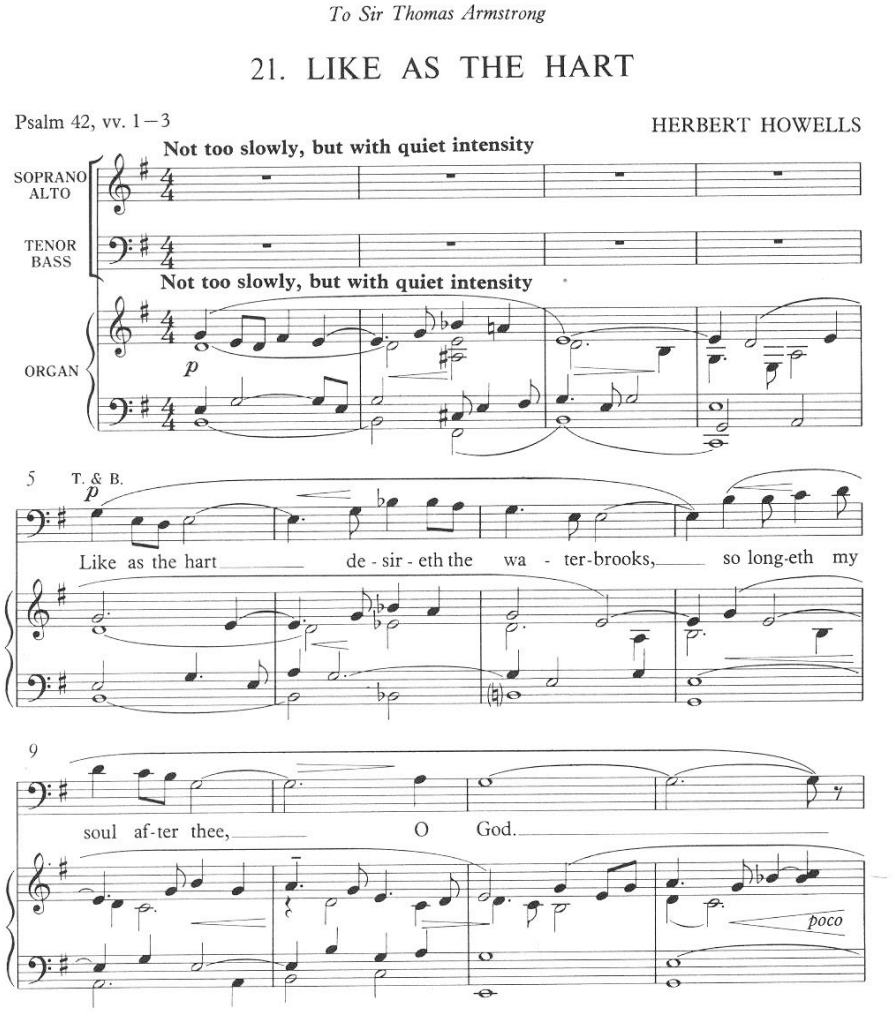
One aspect of Howells's church music that is often commented on is the degree to which it is sensuous, and to some, erotic. One reviewer commented:

> Scratch the surface of a typical Howells choral work and you find decidedly un-Anglican qualities. One is smouldering sensuality (the rhythm of Like as the Hart, the most sublime of all Howells anthems, comes close to a slow tango, its harmony is thick with 'blue' notes), another is a lacerating, masochistic pain even in ostensibly joyful music.[7]

This view is due, in part, to the revelation by his daughter (Ursula) in Paul Spicer's biography of the composer, that "Herbert was ruled by sex. He was unbelievably attractive to the female sex and was just as attracted to them" [8]. Richard Lloyd noted in an address to the Church Music Society that Christopher Palmer's 1978 book on Howells had 'more masochism and sex than one expects to encounter in a book about music'.[9] And Palmer himself wrote:

> A cynical person might ask 'Well, if "religion" – whatever that may mean – wasn't the driving force behind his "religious" music, what was? Sex? To which the answer 'Yes' would not be wholly facetious. Herbert's sex-drive was certainly strong and demanding and could not contain itself within the normal confines of his marriage.[10]

While we may acknowledge this side of Howells's personality, it is another matter to suggest that this had a significant influence on the music. Any such suggestion is not only difficult but highly subjective. At the same time, however, to ignore it, as has been the case up to now, would be to ignore an important element. It is therefore worth looking at the example mentioned above, the anthem 'Like as the Hart'.



The ‘quiet intensity’ of the opening with its modal ambiguity, yearning appoggiaturas and use of inversions creates a build up of tension that is focused on the melodic line - a smooth line, which, coming from both tenors and basses, has more than a hint of testosterone.

The dissonant emphasis on ‘desireth’, both through the rising line and flattened fifth, almost seems more common to a slow jazz number than a setting of a psalm, but the similar treatment of the words ‘soul’ (b.9) and ‘God’ (b.16) reinforce an overall sense of spiritual desire that is emotional and, crucially, not an obvious way of responding to the text. This interpretation of the psalmist is confirmed when the upper voices enter (a major climax in itself) with the plea ‘When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?’. The sheer richness of sound (mainly created by using simple major and minor seventh chords) and tranquillity of the final page leave the listener aesthetically satisfied. Key to the anthem’s form is the fact that the text is entirely petitionary: it does not provide any answers. Howells merely frames the desire, and while there are climaxes, they demonstrate the fluidity of this mood rather than the attainment of an ultimate goal.

In a sense the Howells setting answers itself. He sets the line ‘When shall I come before the presence [pause] the presence of God’. The richness and satisfaction of the final slow and quiet resolution on ‘the presence of God’ seems to present that specific sound moment as a glimpse of the tranquillity that God provides, merely in his presence at that specific moment. Howells’s setting, however, certainly takes its cue from Coverdale’s florid translation.

To the new listener, Howells’s music is often mistaken to be French, particularly because of the rich harmonic language. This may be down to Howells’ own formative experience, specifically his early study of pieces such as *Daphnis et Chloé* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (both scores that he liked to quote examples from in lectures), which lead to the cultivation of a musical language with considerable semantic crossover. It is more than tempting to consider similarities between Debussy’s faun and Howells’ hart, but whatever the source of such harmonic sensuousness, it should still be considered a highly unusual setting of the psalm.

To consider eroticism and religious music is not unusual - indeed, for composers such as Olivier Messiaen it is a standard approach - but we are considering Howells’s music specifically in the context of the Anglican tradition. This music represents a very specific and powerful departure from what might be considered conventionally Anglican, yet it now occupies a central position in its liturgy. In fact, such overtly emotional music could be considered ‘un-English’ and stemming from a much older Catholic tradition - one that goes back to poets such as John of the Cross, whose line ‘Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved’ in ‘Dark Night of the Soul’[12] demonstrated a similar form of spiritual desire.

Example 2 – I love all beauteous things

My second example is a setting of the poet Robert Bridges, but I want to briefly look at three other texts of Bridges which Howells set, two as anthems and one as a hymn.

My eyes for beauty pine
My soul for Goddes grace
No other care nor hope is mine
To heaven I turn my face
One splendour thence is shed
from all the stars above
Tis named when God's name is said
Tis love, 'tis heavenly love
And every gentle heart that burns with true desire
Is lit from eyes that mirror part of that celestial fire

All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Pride of man and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil he buildeth,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendor, light and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore from his store
newborn worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

Thee will I love, my God and King;
thee will I sing, my strength and tower;
forevermore thee will I trust,
O God most just of truth and power,
who all things hast in order placed,
yea, for thy pleasure hast created;
and on thy throne, unseen, unknown,
reignest alone in glory seated.

Set in my heart thy love I find;
my wand'ring mind to thee thou leadest;
my trembling hope, my strong desire
with heav'nly fire thou kindly feedest.
Lo, all things fair thy path prepare;
thy beauty to my spirit calleth,
thine to remain, in joy or pain,
and count it gain whate'er befalleth.

O more and more thy love extend,
my life befriend with heav'nly pleasure,
that I may win thy Paradise,
thy pearl of price, thy countless treasure.
Since but in thee I can go free
from earthly care and vain oppression,
this prayer I make for Jesus' sake,
that thou me take in thy possession.

These texts clearly have a lot of similarity in terms of themes and uses of language and in many ways are typical of Bridges' poetry and his preoccupation with philosophical immanence. Alongside this it is helpful to consider the Victorian preoccupation with beauty in the writings of William Morris.

> That the beauty of life is a thing of no moment, I suppose few people would venture to assert, and yet most civilised people act as if it were of none, and in so doing are wronging both themselves and those that are to come after them; for that beauty, which is what is meant by ART, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life, if we are to live as nature meant us to; that is, unless we are content to be less than men.[13]

In Morris' writings beauty is not only an essential trait of life but also wrapped up with high church attitudes to social reform and respect for all God's creation: God is beauty and mankind is created in that image. This transfiguration leads to us to consider such momentary divine radiance in Howells's settings. Again this is a construct, a fusion, of several things which go together to create a charging of language with mood and atmosphere to create a spiritual vision.

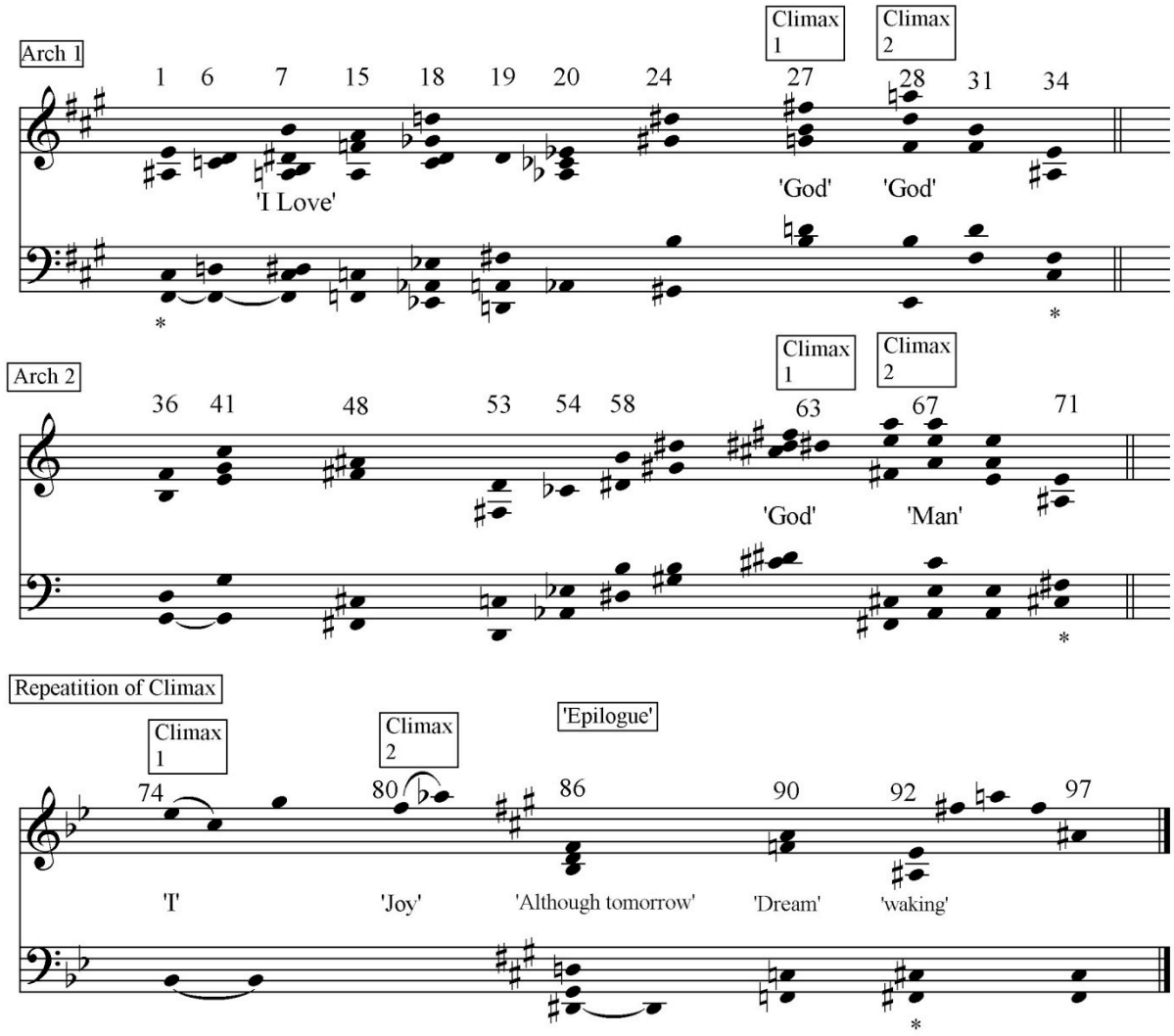
The idea of transfiguration expressed in music was not new to Anglican choral music. One need only think of the ecstatic move from B flat to G major at the begin of Parry's setting of psalm 122 - 'I was glad', an effect also heard in the Sanctus of Stanford's B flat Communion Service. This spiritual ecstasy is often associated with divine luminance and, in this context, William Harris' memorial to Bridges, 'Love of love and Light of light' is the most obvious example.

Howells's setting of 'I Love All Beauteous Things' perhaps emphasises the transfigurative metaphor strongest. In the context of William Morris, the poem seems to encapsulate the blurred distinction between the 'maker' of the man and the human craftsman, an interpretation reinforced by the note on the score –'Composed for a Special Festival Service held in conjunction with the 'Hands of the Craftsman' Exhibition in St Albans Abbey'.

I love all beauteous things,
I seek and adore them;
God hath no better praise,
And man in his hasty days
Is honoured for them.

I too will something make
And joy in the making!
Altho' tomorrow it seem
Like the empty words of a dream
Remembered, on waking.

Reduction of 'I Love All Beauteous Things'



Howells structures the piece in two arches which repeat the first stanza, using much of the same material, transposed up a semitone for the second arch. However he sets up an expectation of two climaxes on the word ‘God’ in the repeat and then reworks the second climax to the line ‘And man in his hasty days is honoured for them’ – a form of musical transfiguration that is reinforced when he then repeats the climax material for the text of the second stanza - which uses the first person singular to develop the sense of personal significance for the listener. Howells also repeats the opening line (I love all..) quietly after the ‘waking’ that gives the sense of the whole poem being a ‘dream’.

When we look at Howells’s settings of Robert Bridges we see that the themes of spiritual desire and beauty are central. Howells first set one of Bridges’ poems (‘The Evening Darkens Over’) in 1913, probably at the suggestion of Stanford, whose own setting of "Eternal Father" was published 1913. 1913 was also the year that Bridges was appointed poet laureate, a post that he held until his death in 1930. The text and

setting of 'The Evening Darkens Over' has echoes of *Sea Drift*, a setting of Walt Whitman by Frederick Delius first performed in 1906, which Howells described as 'the saddest [music] I've ever heard'[14]. Howells's other settings of Bridges include the song 'His Poisoned Shafts' (1915), the anthems 'My Eyes for Beauty Pine' (1925), 'Thee Will I Love' (1970), 'I Love All Beauteous Things' (1977), and, most famously, the hymn 'All my hope on God is founded' (1930).

There are several reasons why Howells might have been attracted to these texts. Bridges' particular brand of traditionalism with its preoccupation with form and desire to seek modern relevance in older texts, particularly through paraphrases, has a clear aesthetic parallel with Howells. Their works show a shared sensibility, even though they were at different stages of their respective careers. The culture of beauty found in Bridges, and particularly in his philosophical text *The testament of beauty* (1929) – the apotheosis of his career - would clearly have had a resonance with a composer who said at the end of his life: 'I have composed out of sheer love of trying to make nice sounds'[15].

In the two early settings, Howells may have just been seeking to follow fashion. After all, at the time Bridges was one of the most widely set of all poets of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Bridges was well known for his interest in music, producing his own *Yattendon Hymnal* (1899) to act as a benchmark at a time when he thought that:

> We are content to have our hymn-manuals stuffed with the sort of music which, merging the distinction between sacred and profane, seems designed to make the worldly man feel at home, rather than to reveal to him something of the life beyond his knowledge, compositions full of cheap emotional effects and bad experiments made to be cast aside, the works of the purveyors of marketable fashion, always pleased with themselves, and always to be derided by the succeeding generation.[16]

Bridges's texts met this sacred/secular tension head on, revelling in a high church mysticism and the rich symbolism of immanence. Bridges was friends with several major composers, most notably Holst (the *Choral Fantasia* is dedicated to him) and Parry (the pair both went to Eton and Oxford). Parry's *Invocation to Music- An Ode (In Honour of Henry Purcell)* is perhaps the finest settings of Bridges, although the relationship between the pair was not always a good one, exacerbated by Parry's alterations to the poetry - without consultation. Finzi's settings of *In Terra Pax* and the *Seven Partsongs* are also of considerable note.

Bridges also had an important role as an editor, and Howells was particularly taken by his 1915 anthology *The Spirit of Man*, which was complied by Bridges as a national response to the horrors of the First World War. The 449 poems come to a peak in the final text 'Sanctum est' (a translation by G H Palmer of the *Salisbury Antiphoner*):

> HOLY is the true light, and passing wonderful, lending radiance to them that endured in the heat of the conflict: from CHRIST they inherit a home of unfading splendour, wherein they rejoice with gladness evermore.

Howells set this text at the end of his greatest work *Hymnus Paradisi* – a large scale requiem for his dead son. Howells specifically mentioned *The Spirit of Man* when talking about *Hymnus* in a BBC talk in 1968.[17] 'Sanctum est' comes in the final section - 'The Heavenly Kingdom' – but an earlier section headed 'Spiritual Desire' should also be noted in the context of this essay.

By setting Bridges, Howells was one of very few composers (William Harris was another) in the twentieth century who engaged with the genre of sacred poetry that came on the back of the Oxford movement in the 1830's, poetry that was set as hymns prolifically by John Stainer and John Bacchus Dykes, but all but disappeared in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

While necessarily brief, these two examples do demonstrate the sophistication of Howells's 'sacred' settings within his own, self-acknowledged, 'secular' context.

We know very little about Howells's specific beliefs other than that, following the death of his son, he struggled to believe in a Christian God at all. However, his music is convincing and seems to point to an inner mysticism: a genuine acceptance of the fact that the finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite. Such agnosticism is a common theme amongst British composers at this time, Vaughan Williams being a good example, but Britten is perhaps the strongest comparison. His use of the requiem mass text and Wilfred Owen's poetry in the *War Requiem* sets up an ambiguous dialectical tension which seeks to arouse questions rather than answer them.

Howells viewed all these texts as poetry and I think it is clear that his internal impulses were metaphorical rather than literal. Nevertheless, Howells had a clear sensibility for such things (like Bridges and Coverdale).

Looking at his compositional career as a whole, it seems that Howells concentrated on writing for the church because his music received its warmest welcome there. However, this is not to say that Howells was not extremely self-critical, and from these few examples it is obvious that those who seek a more subtle interpretation of his church music will find not only a wealth of detail in his scores but also an interpretational vacuum in existing literature. Howells's fusion of sacred and secular has a magnetism that should fascinate any listener and gives a unique take on the 'vivid, powerful, pervasive and irresistible part of the mental and spiritual nature of man.

References:

[1] Howells, H. (1956) Programme note for the first London performance of *Missa Sabrinensis*

[2] For an overview of this period see: Stradling, Robert; Meirion Hughes (2001). The English musical renaissance, 1840–1940: constructing a national music. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[3] The Times (28th April 1925) p. 12.

[4] RCM Manuscript 4660 is marked up for printing and includes the Curwen copyright notice.

[5] Palmer, C. (1992) *Herbert Howells –A Centenary Celebration*. London: Thames. p.72.

[6] Grace, H. (1920) *The Complete Organist*. London: The Richards Press.

[7] White, M. *The Independent*, 11th October 1992.

[8] Spicer, P. (1998) *Herbert Howells*. Bridgend: Seren. p.94.

[9] An address to the Church Musical Society, 16 June 1982.

[10] Palmer: p.198.

[11] Extract from 'Like as the hart', Copyright 1943, Oxford University Press.

[12] Kavanaugh/Rodriguez (Eds. 1979), *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*. Washington DC: ICS Publications. p. 359.

[13] Morris, W. (1882) 'The Beauty of Life' - Chapter 3 of *Hopes and Fears for Art*– an address to Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 19, 1880. London: Ellis & White. Available from the The William Morris Internet Archive. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/index.htm).

[14] Spicer: p.29.

[15] Spicer: Preface – p. i.

[16] Bridges, R. (1905) *The Yattendon Hymnal*. Oxford: Blackwells.

[17] Palmer: p.415