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### The Liturgical Organ Works of Herbert Howells

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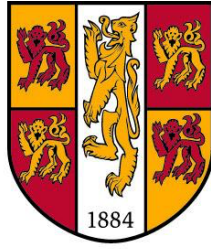
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THE LITURGICAL ORGAN WORKS  
OF HERBERT HOWELLS

A thesis submitted to  
The School of Arts, Culture and Language  
at The University of Bangor

in part fulfillment of the requirements of  
the degree of Master of Music by Research

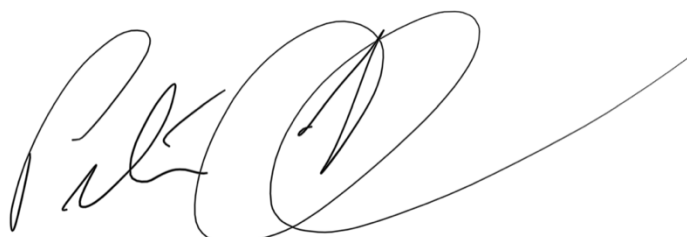
by  
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## Abstract

Although chiefly remembered as a composer of choral works and church music, Herbert Howells's compositional output is wide-ranging, including solo songs, keyboard works, chamber music, sonatas, concerti, orchestral works and more. His unique sound world makes his music instantly recognisable and creates its particular appeal. This thesis is one performer's attempt to understand that appeal.

Academic studies of Howells's compositions approach the music in one of two ways. Some consider the music in impressionistic terms, assessing the mood of a piece, while others parse the harmonic and rhythmic features, analysing the particular building blocks that come together to create the specific sound world. We will attempt to combine both approaches in assessing and analysing a series of works composed by Howells for the organ, and the written research will be complimented by a recital of a selection of those works.

The three initial chapters will lay the building blocks for the analysis. Chapter 1 begins by assessing significant events in Howells's life, particularly moments of tragedy which impacted upon his personality and compositional work. Chapter 2 assesses Howells's complete output for organ, drawing the parameters of the study to a select group of works, and considering information about the composer's intentions in performance alongside contemporary issues of performance practice. Chapter 3 analyses the structural building blocks used to create the particular sound world of Howells. The succeeding chapters then analyse each of the selected works in detail.

This is music to be enjoyed, consumed, listened to and heard as much as it is to be studied, and so the conclusion is, in part, the accompanying recital. Academically we are left pondering the consequences of deep trauma on the creative spirit, and how beauty emerges from pain as catharsis. The act of composition can be an expression of both grief and hope, lifting the wounded soul to a new reality. How does that challenge and shape performance?

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am indebted to a great number of people who have assisted me at various points in my research.

The late David Drinkell, whose love of, and enthusiasm for, the music of Howells first inspired me during my undergraduate years.

George Bevan for scanning and sharing his MMus thesis, and the Revd Canon Dr Paul D. Andrews for sharing his PhD work. John Riddle and Jeff Enns, for their helpful insights into some early writing on the Psalm Preludes.

Jenny Green at the Bangor University library for her unfailing patience in answering endless queries. Robert Foster at the library of the Royal College of Music for searching the archives and scanning documents. The librarians at the University of Iowa for making a digital copy of dissertations by Nixon McMillan available by email. Adrienne Wagner from the University of Colorado library for sharing a digital copy of Peter Hodgson's PhD thesis. Andrew McCrea, Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Studies, RCO, for scanning and sharing articles from the RCO journal.

The Most Revd John McDowell, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, and the Oulton Trust, both of whose financial support has enabled me to undertake this degree.

Dr Branwen Davies and Dr Ffion Evans, my personal tutors, and Dr Iwan Llewelyn Jones, my second supervisor, for their encouragement, diligence, and commitment.

Matthew Owens, one of the most extraordinarily gifted musical polymaths I know, for his patient teaching and refinement of my rudimentary organ technique.

My supervisor, Stephen Rees, another musical polymath who has pushed me to think, explore, refine and develop my analysis and writing, far beyond what I believed myself to be capable of.

And finally my wife Donna, and my children Joshua, Caleb and Sarah, for their unfailing support and encouragement, and their patience while I practiced for endless hours on the elderly digital organ in our music room.

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## INTRODUCTION

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St Paul famously wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “I will sing with the Spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Corinthians 14:15, Authorised Version). His instruction for Christians in worship is equally applicable to musicians in performance. Musical performances can be categorised in four ways: those who play with ‘the spirit’ (i.e. with flair) those who play with ‘the understanding’ (i.e. technique, analytical understanding), those who play with both, and those who play with neither. It is only when the spirit and the understanding both come together that a performance truly comes alive.

The aim of this thesis is to add the understanding to the player who feels the spirit for the liturgical organ works of Herbert Howells. In ‘Windows on a Complex Style’,<sup>1</sup> Diane Cooke makes the astute observation that scholarly descriptions of Howells’s style take one of two general approaches. The first, drawn from Christopher Palmer’s discussion of his impressionistic tendencies can be characterised by: “the lines indeterminate and soft-drawn, the sum-total of a texture a complex seen mistily through a haze of water or light... effortless interweaving of myriad coloured strands, fluid, self-generating, kaleidoscopic...”.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this the second approach is essentially a clinical analysis of compositional devices and techniques, harmonic language and a basic parsing of his music, note by note and phrase by phrase. To illustrate this she quotes from Peter Hardwick, who wrote that

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<sup>1</sup> Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p.37ff.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, *Impressionism in music*, p. 176 n. 4, cited in Cooke & Maw p.37.

Howells's basic style could be described as "tonal...but with modal incursions, diatonic dissonance, cross-relations, pedal points and suspensions, as well as asymmetrical phrases, rhythmic vitality and confident melodies."<sup>3</sup> Cooke rightly concludes that neither approach, alone, does justice to the creative output of Howells, and that a synthesis of both approaches is necessary to understand its appeal.

Jonathan Clinch, in his paper *Beauty springeth out of naught*, makes a similar observation. Focusing specifically on Howells's text-setting in his church music, he makes the assessment that the popularity of his music is predicated largely on the sound world he creates, but this beguiling sound world can often act as a barrier to a deeper understanding of the music. "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' sacred music."<sup>4</sup> His conclusion is that the listener becomes so absorbed in the sound world, the texture and harmony (the impressionistic approach described above) that they fail to notice the unique features of his text-setting. It is a criticism which may be levelled against many organists, who play and love the music, but if asked to explain why, would not be able to quite grasp what the power is that Howells's music holds over the performer.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Clinch, "Beauty springeth out of naught": Interpreting the Church Music of Herbert Howells' in *British Postgraduate Musicology*, vol 11, 2011, p. 1.

This thesis is one performer's personal attempt to answer that question, exploring the music at a level beyond mere performance, and recognising that this is music which does not yield up all its treasures in one performance or listening, but which slowly unfolds its treasures. In doing so we will combine the two approaches identified by Cooke. The three initial chapters will lay the foundation stones upon which the three following chapters will build. Chapter 1, 'Biography and Musical Influences', will present a brief biography of Herbert Howells, with particular reference to those moments which were pivotal in his personal life, in his musical education and development, and in his professional career. It will attempt to tease out the relationship between private events and compositional output, and how childhood influences affected his public persona, in particular with relation to unfavourable critique of his music.

Chapter 2, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells' is an assessment of his entire corpus of composition for the organ. This chapter seeks to define the parameters of this study by dividing the catalogue of works into two broad categories, those intended for (or inspired by) the liturgies and liturgical worship of the Church, and those intended primarily for concert performance. Having achieved this, a brief assessment of each work from the latter category will be undertaken to contextualise the remaining chapters.

Chapter 3, 'Form and Style in Howells's Organ Works' provides a general analysis of common features which will recur in succeeding chapters. An analysis is also

undertaken of the issue of registration, looking at both the composer's intentions and practical considerations.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 turn to successive collections of music for more detailed individual analysis. Chapter 4, 'The Catharsis of Composition', examines his first two suites of organ works, the *Psalm Preludes* (composed 1915-6 and 1938-9, and published 1921 and 1940) considering the implications of the particular choice of Psalm verses, and how those verses are depicted in the musical structure. The choice of verses is also related to particular life events, and shows how composition was a vehicle for catharsis to Howells. Chapter 5, 'A Princely Gift' contains an analysis of what is arguably his most well-known and popular collection, the *Six Pieces for Organ* (composed 1939-1945, published 1953) where the full flowering of his interpretation of Tudor style is brought to bear on the organ. The sixth chapter, 'The later years' turns to three works from the 1950s, when Howells was in his seventh decade. First the wedding gift for a friend (or possibly an old flame), the 'Siciliano for a High Ceremony' (composed 1952 and published 1957), and then a final return to the inspirational power of the Psalms in 'Rhapsody IV' and the 'Prelude: De Profundis' (composed 1958 and published 1983). Chapter 7, 'A Posthumous Puzzle' considers what is the earliest work to be composed, but the last to be published, 'Cradle Song.'

Howells has long been consigned to the organ loft and choir stalls as a composer whose only claim to greatness was limited to the world of church music. While focusing on a particular area of this work, this thesis is underpinned by the firm conviction that that in no way does justice to the man or to the musician. His

greatness as a composer, both for organ and choir, is that he is not an organist-composer, but a composer who (sometimes) writes for the organ. Howells is a composer of instrumental sonatas, concertos, and suites, of chamber music, songs and part-songs, or monumental recital works in almost every genre, and in part, of church music. His thorough grounding as an organist from Brewer in Gloucester and Parratt at the Royal College of Music (RCM) left him supremely well equipped to write for the instrument, but it is the wide-ranging nature of his compositional output which qualifies him as a great composer for the instrument. In an introduction to a broadcast of one of his organ works, 'Paean', in 1967, he speaks of his relationship with the organ:

Why have I composed so much for the organ? And the answer is all mixed up with my chorister days in a parish church in my native Gloucestershire. In those days I didn't want to sing. I wanted to play the organ, and often I did, pretty badly. I was going to and from Gloucester Cathedral soon afterwards and I found there not only the lovely East Window, but I heard the superb organ, and I had lessons on it from the later Herbert Brewer, a brilliant executant. He, and later on in London, Sir Walter Parratt, even made me dream of becoming an organist myself. Instead I began writing for the instrument and wrote for some of my organist friends, and they were a brilliant set, and why not? Some of them were among the finest organists in the world, and so I set to writing songs, preludes, rhapsodies and a sonata for Dr Thalben-Ball for the opening of the new organ in the Royal Albert Hall. In 1940, after a severe illness, I found a new way of making use of convalescence. In those days and in that time, in sheer affection and admiration of Dr Herbert Sumsion of Gloucester, I wrote this set of six pieces, ending with a *Paean*.<sup>5</sup>

The list of Howells's dedications for his organ works reads like a 'Who's who?' of the organ world in the early and mid-twentieth century: Harold Darke, Walter Alcock, Edward Bairstow, Walter Parratt, George Thalben-Ball, John Dykes Bower, William Harris, Herbert Sumsion, John Birch, a Prime Minister (Edward Heath) and the Duchess of Kent all appear at the head of his scores.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 435.

In a review of his *Six Pieces for Organ* published in the July 1953 edition of *The Musical Times*, the anonymous reviewer wrote: “among composers today there is none who understands the organ so well as Herbert Howells, or who has cared for our instrument so long and so much. His organ pieces have been few; but for close on forty years he has given organists some of his most intimate thoughts, long meditated and never relinquished until every detail has passed the test of mature reflection”.<sup>6</sup> Howells’s output for the organ is relatively small, but it is perhaps the selective nature of what he has allowed to go into print which has enhanced the overall appreciation of its quality. His goal was always quality, not quantity, and this can be seen in the less-favourable assessment of some of the posthumous collections edited by Robin Wells (and considered in chapter 2).

## Literature & Methodology

Much has been written on Howells, beginning with Edwin Evans’s article in *Musical Times* in 1920. Paul Spicer’s biography of 1998 (entitled simply *Herbert Howells*) is one of the seminal works, as are the two volumes by Palmer: *Herbert Howells, a study* (1978) and *Herbert Howells, a celebration* (1996). *The Music of Herbert Howells* (edited by Philp Cooke and David Maw, 2013) presents a series of academic studies of various aspects of Howells’s compositions. The PhD thesis of Peter Hodgson (1970) gives a wide ranging introduction to Howells’s music, while that of Paul Andrews (1999) itemises all of the extant sources and documents. There have been numerous academic studies which deal with facets of Howells’s musical life, including the theses of Cleobury, Gardner, Istad, Marshall, Mitchell and Ward.

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<sup>6</sup> N.A., ‘New Music: Organ’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 94, no. 1325, p. 318.

Several general conspectuses of organ music contain useful introductions to Howells as a composer for the instrument, especially Peter Hardwick's *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, Christopher Anderson's *Twentieth-Century Organ Music*, John Henderson's *Directory of Composers for the Organ*, Corliss Arnold's *Organ Literature: a comprehensive survey*, and Ian Quinn's *Studies in English Organ Music*, while Alexander Pyper's DMA thesis, *Performance practice at the English organ circh 1880-1940* introudces some of the practical background information to help interpret contemporary performance practice issues.

John Nixon McMillan's 1997 PhD thesis, *The organ works of Herbert Howells*, is a wide-ranging and general study of the entire corpus of Howells's writing for the instrument. Donald Grice's 2008 DMA thesis, *Rhapsody in the organ works of Herbert Howells*, expolores the use of rhapsodic form in great detail, and George Bevan's 1993 MMus thesis examines a small selection of works, analysing the original manuscripts and where possible tracing those works through from early drafts to published versions.

Relf Clarke's 1994 article in the journal of the Royal College of Organists was one of the only articles on performing Howells's organ works, until Jonathan Clinch published his 2013 article in the journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies. The Musical Times contains many articles on aspects of Howells's life and music (some fourteen are included in the bibliography, the earliest dating from 1920, and the most recent from 1992). Some are general, giving background information on the composer's life and work, while others contain useful reviews of (what were at the

time) 'new' compositions. Of particular note are Grace's 1934 article on the first Organ Sonata, Milner's 1964 article dealing with the second Organ Sonata, Spicer's 1974 assessment of the Partita, Wells's 1987 article about the posthumous publication of several previously unpublished manuscripts, and Sutton's assessment of Howells organ works in 1971.

This brief overview of the extant literature reveals that much has indeed been written about Howells's life and biography, assessment of individual works, and certain stylistic traits, but there is little literature which deals specifically with connecting academic research and performance on the organ. This thesis sets out to bridge part of that gap by contextualising a lifestory of trauma and grief, analysing the music in a search for meaning and inspiration, and considering some of the practical issues involved with bringing all of this to life in performance. Alongside the musicological research are some small windows into musical reception – assessing how the music has been used in teaching and examining, and on recordings. There is much more work which could have been undertaken in these areas amongst others, but the constraints of space have inhibited that in the present study. There is also further work to be done on autograph sources and historic recordings, but again these also are beyond the scope of this present work.



## CHAPTER 1 : BIOGRAPHY AND MUSICAL INFLUENCES

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The life and biography of Herbert Howells has been widely documented, most fully in Paul Spicer's seminal work, *Herbert Howells* (1998), and Christopher Palmer's *Herbert Howells, a celebration* (1996). This introductory chapter draws upon both of these, and many other general biographical sketches, seeking to record the main points of the composer's life, drawing particular attention to musical influences which will surface in the succeeding chapters, and to the moments of grief and tragedy which are ultimately responsible for shaping not only the man and his personality, but also the trajectory of his compositional output by recording his struggles with criticism and unfavourable reviews.

### **Lydney & Gloucester**

Herbert Howells was born on 17th October 1892 at Lydney in Gloucestershire, at the mouth of the Severn and in the shade of the Malverns, only a few miles from the Welsh border. He was the youngest of eight children born to Oliver and Elizabeth Howells. His father was a painter, decorator, plumber and builder, who also kept a small hardware shop in the village, and played the organ at the local Baptist church. Herbert received his early piano lessons from his eldest sister, Florrie, and from a young age deputised for his father at the organ.

At the age of eleven he became a choirboy and unofficial assistant organist at the local (Anglican) Parish Church, where the vicar continually found reasons for him to play while the regular organist sang tenor in the choir. Herbert's father (Oliver Howells) had a very fine mind and a great appreciation of beauty and education, but less business sense. In 1904 he filed for bankruptcy, and this led to the family

being ostracised by many in the local community. The young Herbert felt the pain of this particularly, and carried it with him though out his life.

In 1905 he was awarded a scholarship to Lydney Grammar School, where the headmaster quickly recognised his musical promise and brought him to the attention of the local landlord, Charles Bathurst (later Viscount Bledisloe). Realising the family's financial circumstances, Charles's sister, Mary, undertook to fund piano lessons with Herbert Brewer, the organist of Gloucester Cathedral. In 1909, at the age of 16, Howells became an articled pupil of Brewer, along with Ivor Novello and Ivor Gurney.

Gloucester was one of the three homes of the annual Three Choirs Festival, alternating annually with Hereford and Worcester. As the oldest, and at the time pre-eminent music festival in England, it attracted all of the major singers, orchestras, conductors and composers of the day. It was at this festival that Howells had the two revelatory experiences of his youth. The first was hearing Handel's *Messiah* in 1907, and the second (and more profound) was the premiere of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* at the 1910 festival. Many years later Howells described the experience during a BBC broadcast: "I heard this wonderful work, I was thrilled, I didn't understand it, but I was moved deeply. I think if I had to isolate from the rest any one impression of a purely musical sort that mattered most to me in the whole of my life as a musician, it would be the hearing of that work not knowing at all what I was going to hear but knowing what I had heard I should never forget."<sup>7</sup> Not only was the young Howells overwhelmed by the music, but ended up sitting next to the composer, and sharing a scores of *The Dream of*

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 22.

*Gerontius* while Elgar conducted. After the performance Howells and Gurney, unable to sleep and unwilling to return home, wandered the streets of Gloucester until the small hours of the morning.

While not immediately apparent in his compositional output, this was a moment of self-discovery for the young Howells, seeing in it something of both his future and also of his roots, musically and spiritually. He later said of himself “all through my life I’ve had this strange feeling that I belonged somehow to the Tudor period - not only musically but in every way,”<sup>8</sup> while his then close friend Vaughan Williams said that he felt him to be “the reincarnation of one of the lesser Tudor luminaries.”<sup>9</sup> Howells describes the influence of the *Fantasia* and his friendship with Vaughan Williams:

Ralph and I felt and reacted to things musically in a very similar way, and if some of our works are alike in any respect, it’s not, I think, merely a question of influence but also of intuitive affinity. We both came from the same part of a world and loved it dearly; we were both attracted by Tudor music, plainsong and the modes - my interest in folk music was perhaps more for its modal colouring than for its human associations. We felt we needed to write in these modes and in the pentatonic scale; there was no question of our using them simply because they were novel.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Royal College of Music**

In 1911 Gurney left Gloucester to study composition with Stanford at the Royal College of Music in London. He encouraged Howells to follow him, and so Howells ultimately withdrew from his position at Gloucester to focus solely on composition. In 1912 Howells submitted a portfolio of compositions, including an organ sonata, a song cycle, a violin sonata, and ‘Sumer Idyls’, a set of piano pieces. The pieces were examined by Parry, Stanford and C. Harford Lloyd, and Howells was

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, pp. 11-12.

awarded a scholarship to begin his studies. He studied music history and literature with Parry, composition with Stanford, harmony and counterpoint with Wood, organ with Parratt, and choral technique with Walford Davies.

Dibble gives an astute assessment of the relationship between Stanford and Howells from the teacher's perspective, in his biography of Stanford:

of all his later-day pupils, it was Howells who earned Stanford's highest estimation. The brilliant technique of the young man from Lydney, his flair for orchestration, his thorough understanding of organic procedures, all combined to a form of language of 'tempered modernism' which chimes with the very aesthetic values Bliss had fought against. Stanford referred to his protégé as 'my Son in Music' and considered him 'one of the most striking and brilliant brains I have ever come across.' Stanford did all he could to encourage Howells's gifts. He conducted the premiere of Howells's First Piano Concerto... and consoled his sensitive pupil when the critics damned it. He included numerous pieces of Howells's works... in RCM concerts, encouraged his pupil to publish his music... and moved heaven and earth to keep him out of the army when conscription was initiated.<sup>11</sup>

On arrival in London Stanford immediately sent Howells to Westminster Cathedral to experience its choir under R. R. Terry. Terry was responsible for the revival of renaissance polyphony, giving the first liturgical performance in modern times of works by the English 'greats', Tallis, Tye and Byrd, and many others. The experience inspired Howells, and within weeks he had written his *Missa Sine Nomine* or *Mass in the Dorian Mode*, his first professionally performed work.

His first piano concerto was written for his friend Arthur Benjamin, who premiered it under the baton of Stanford in 1914. After unfavourable reviews the work was immediately withdrawn. Spicer records Howells's belief that it received "murder by critics"<sup>12</sup> but challenges this perception by quoting both the review by Eaglefield

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Dibble, *Charles Villiers Stanford: Man and Musician*, p. 417.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 37.

Hull who described it as “a magnificent work, well worth ranking by those of Rachmaninov which we hear so frequently”<sup>13</sup> and the later letter from Ivor Gurney (1918) who said: “to think of the c minor Concerto makes me tremble; it is so above me in everything save (I believe) pure beauty.”<sup>14</sup> The manuscript is still in the RCM library, but missing its final pages. A completion by John Rutter has been published by Novelle and recorded by Chandos. This was the first of a series of occasions where Howells proved to be overly sensitive to and affected by criticism, and very quick to withdraw works that were not unanimously acclaimed. Perhaps that is why so little of his secular music is known today.

His first major orchestral work was completed in 1914, with the enigmatic title *The B's*, a suite of dance-type pieces dedicated to friends, all of whose nicknames began with the letter B. This was followed by a stream of works, chamber and orchestral, vocal and instrumental.

In 1915, while many of his fellow students were enlisting in the army, Howells was diagnosed with Graves' disease (an immune system disorder that results in the overproduction of thyroid hormones) and given six months to live. There is a certain poetic irony in the fact that the illness which should have killed him so swiftly in fact spared him from potential death in the trenches, and ultimately led to a long and fruitful life, eventually celebrating his ninetieth birthday. His specialist offered him a new treatment, totally untested on humans, radium therapy. Twice a week, for two years, he attended St Thomas' Hospital for this treatment, which was more successful than his doctor's wildest dreams. Part of each

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

week was spent recuperating at home in Lydney, and part in London for treatment. It was during this time that he wrote his *Piano Quartet in A minor*, which proved to be the start of his new found celebrity. Stanford submitted the work to the newly formed Carnegie Trust for publication, and it was the only work by an 'unknown' composer to be accepted, standing shoulder-to-shoulder among many established composers including Stanford, Vaughan Williams, Holst and others.

### Salisbury

In February 1917, as his time as a student was drawing to a close, Howells was offered the job of assistant organist to Walter Alcock at Salisbury Cathedral, at an annual salary of £100 (as well as living accommodation in the Cathedral Close). Spicer reproduces, in full, a most fascinating letter written by Howells to his friend Harold Darke, announcing his appointment. In this letter he looks forward, with a great sense of hope, to building up a happier set of associations in his mind with church music than he was left with from his time under Brewer in Gloucester. He writes forthrightly about "the sort of repugnance which even some of the best church music kindled in me - merely because it all filtered through that nasty mood which had been part of my musical mentality ever since Gloucester."<sup>15</sup> While looking back with a sense of horror, he also looks forward with a sense of optimism to "the companionship of a man like Dr Alcock, so very different from the inhumanity of Brewer... I soon ought to be at peace with church music."<sup>16</sup>

Howells's elation at his appointment was short lived. Within three months he had to resign his position because his doctor prescribed a period of complete rest as his

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

only hope of recovery. He found himself penniless, but help arrived in an unexpected form. Henry Hadow made an application to the Carnegie Trust (who had recently published Howells's *Piano Quartet*) to support Howells with a grant for a period of several years. In his letter of application Hadow describes the young Howells as "a man on whom so much of the future of British music seems to me to depend."<sup>17</sup> It was decided to employ Howells, at a salary of £150 per year for three years, to assist Terry (of Westminster Cathedral) with the editing of Tudor and Elizabethan music. The *Tudor Church Music* project was initially concerned with the manuscript collections of the British Museum, but later broadened out to include the collegiate and cathedral libraries. The intention was to produce twenty volumes, covering all of the major English composers from 1525-1625, and the list of composers included Taverner, Merbecke, Sheppard, Tye, Whyte, Parson, Farrant, Tallis and Byrd. The nature and extent of Howells's involvement is not clear. Marshall suggests that he was responsible for editing the masses of Taverner,<sup>18</sup> work which de Livet ascribed to Terry<sup>19</sup> (perhaps with Howells as his sub-editor?). Ultimately the exact nature of Howells's contribution is less important than the awareness of his exposure to this music.

Howells was incapable of 'complete rest'. His compositional output continued apace, including (amongst other works) a 'Fantasy String Quartet', two Violin Sonatas, an orchestral piece entitled 'Puck's Minuet' (commissioned by Brewer for the Gloucestershire Orchestral Society), and he combined all this with his editorial

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Richard George Marshall, *The Career and Reputation of Herbert Howells*, p. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Marc de Livet, 'An idealist touched by practicality': *The work and influence of Richard Runciman Terry (1864-1938)*, p. 185.

work for Terry, and announced his engagement to Dorothy Dawe, who he had been in a relationship for four years.

## **London**

In April 1920 Howells was appointed to the teaching staff of his alma mater, the Royal College of Music, and in August of that year he married Dorothy, a marriage which produced two children, Ursula (1922) and Michael (1926). Howells was commissioned to write a work for the 1922 Gloucester Festival. *Sine Nomine, A Phantasy*, was noteworthy at many levels. It was scored for a large orchestra, and wordless solo soprano, solo tenor and full choir. Its name has a resonance with the Tudor traditions of writing pieces entitled 'In Nomine'; the melodic contours of the work hark back to the rhythmic freedom of plainsong, and so, just as Vaughan Williams did in his *Tallis Fantasia*, Howells now begins the process of marrying Tudor England with twentieth century composition.

Howells's musical life was a flurry of activity. As well as teaching in the RCM and composing, he was an active adjudicator at music festivals, and an examiner for the Associated Board. Still recovering from Graves' disease, he spent several examining tours abroad, in South Africa and Canada, in the hope that warmer climes might speed his recovery.

In 1925 he suffered a crisis of confidence in his composing when his second *Piano Concerto* (commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society) received unfavourable public comments from the music critic Robert Lorenz at the end of its first performance. After the audience applauded Lorenz stood up and shouted "well



thank God that's over." <sup>20</sup> Howells immediately withdrew the work from the publishers, even though it was at the proof stage for publication.

In 1927 Howells made the acquaintance of Herbert Lambert of Bath, initially to have his portrait taken. Lambert was also a clavichord maker, and lent Howells one of his instruments. As a token of thanks Howells composed *Lambert's Fireside*, but his fascination with the instrument was great and soon he added another eleven pieces, creating the collection *Lambert's Clavichord*, a set of pieces clearly inspired by Tudor compositions such as the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. The work received a glowing review from Terry, and this was most likely a turning point for Howells after the failure of his *Piano Concerto*. Terry writes of the danger of a modern composer writing for 'resuscitated' instruments of the past and merely creating a poor pastiche.

This first attempt has been made by one whose creative musicianship cannot be called into question; whose sympathy with both the Tudor instruments and Tudor composers is undeniable, and above all it has been made by one who is content (out of the plenitude of his critical knowledge of Tudor music) to reproduce the spirit of the old music rather than to give us a mere reproduction of its mannerisms or a repetition of its clichés. Mr Howells has absorbed all the wealth and variety of Tudor rhythms, but keeps his own individuality intact. His music is modern inasmuch as he uses chords and progressions unknown in Tudor times, but the spirit of the old composers is there all the while.<sup>21</sup>

The rhythm of teaching, examining, adjudicating and composing continued unabated, until 1935. One other important work from this period was the *Requiem*, written in 1932 for the choir of King's College, Cambridge, scored for unaccompanied voices, but never ultimately submitted to the choir for

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<sup>20</sup> Recorded in Spicer, 1998, p. 80. This was followed by newspaper coverage in *The Times*, 25th April 1925, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Richard Terry, *The Queen*, 7 November 1928, cited in Spicer, 1998, pp. 88-89.

performance. It remained in Howells's papers, unperformed until 1980 when Novello published it.

## **Michael**

In August 1935 the family holidayed, as was their custom, in the countryside of Howells's native Gloucestershire, staying in a farmhouse in Bream, near Lydney. During this holiday the Howells's nine-year-old son Michael contracted a virulent form of polio and died. He was buried in Twigworth, in the church where his parents were married 15 years earlier. This proved to have the most profound effect on Herbert, and, after a long period of depression (where he was virtually unable to write) led to the composition of many works, most notably *Hymnus Paradisi*.

The unpublished *Requiem* of 1932 served as a basis for *Hymnus Paradisi*, but underwent a complete metamorphosis, being scored for orchestra, soprano and tenor soloists and choir. The work was begun on Michael's birthday in 1936, and completed in 1938, but remained the private tribute of a grieving father. It was only finally premiered in 1950 at the Three Choirs Festival, after encouragement from Vaughan Williams (and most probably Sumson and Finzi), and published the following year.

In June 1936 Howells was offered the post of Director of Music at St Paul's Girls' School, London, in succession to Holst who died in 1934, and Vaughan Williams. He combined this with his other teaching and examining roles, and an increasing broadcasting workload with the BBC.

In 1937 he was examined for the degree of Doctor of Music at Oxford University, having submitted for, and been awarded the BMus in 1934. His submission consisted of an essay on 'precursors of the mass', along with a song cycle *In green ways*, his *Piano Quartet*, and a *Fantasia* for cello and small orchestra, the first major work (along with *Hymnus*) to follow Michael's death. As *Hymnus* was a reworking of the earlier *Requiem*, this *Fantasia* was a reworking of the first movement of a *Cello Concerto*, begun in 1933 but never finished.

## Cambridge

The years follow 1937 saw choral and organ music take a more prominent place in Howells's composing, and the beginnings of another suite of clavichord pieces. In August 1941 Howells was invited to be acting organist of St John's College, Cambridge, deputising for Robin Orr who had enlisted in the RAF. This was a major undertaking in an already full diary, but one which proved to be another major turning point in his creative life.

Howells travelled to Cambridge on Thursday evening each week, returning to London early on Monday morning. In those days the choir of St John's was only a weekend choir, with a small repertoire, and so the work was not overly demanding. In the four years Howells was there not one of his works appeared on the music list. It has often been stated that Howells never played any of the repertoire before or after services, instead continually improvising. John Williams<sup>22</sup> disputes this, and specifically refers to him practising from Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*.

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 125.

A cup of tea and a bet of one guinea proved to be a decisive moment in the compositional life of Howells. Borris Ord had invited three people to tea in his rooms in Cambridge: the Dean of Kings (Eric Milner-White), the composer Patrick Hadley (recently appointed a lecturer in the music faculty) and Howells. The Dean laid down a bet to the two composers to write a 'Te Deum', and the prize was won by Howells who produced the setting which later became known as *Collegium Regale* (King's College). First performed by the choir of Kings in 1944, it was quickly paired with a 'Jubilate Deo', and in 1945 with the companion Evening Service.

For the price of one guinea the transformation of the musical future of Anglican worship which, it could be argued had its genesis in the *Four Anthems (in time of war)* in 1941, found a new impetus and experienced the greatest change since Stanford (and others) a generation earlier. Many features could be noted, such as the contrapuntal nature of the writing, and the use of melismas to colour key words in the text, but beyond all that the crucial point is recognised by Spicer: "He comes at the music vertically, rather than horizontally: Christ in his glory and mystery, rather than Jesus, friend and brother... his harmonic language and the brilliance of his contrapuntal skills set him up perfectly to woo the listener into being ravished one minute, and gently chastised the next. It is an extraordinary balancing act."<sup>23</sup> Like the vaulted arches of a gothic church, the intention is to draw the eye and ear, heart and mind, upwards from the mire and clay of the earth and into the throne room of the divine glory. This is not music written to inspire a feeling of comfort, but of awe, a feeling which is perhaps most encapsulated in the word numinous.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 132.

So began a steady flow of liturgical settings, with the *Gloucester Service* of 1946 and the *St Paul's Service* of 1951 (both settings of the evening canticles, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis) being regarded as the high points. The setting of the evening canticles became a (or perhaps the) defining feature of Howells's creative output, and continued until the *Dallas Canticles* of 1975. From the early setting in G Major (1918) until 1975, he set these words twenty times, and each setting is unique.

### **Further recognition**

Having relinquished the post at St John's when Orr returned from active duty, life returned to normal in London. Howells's mother died in January 1946, and his daughter Ursula was married in June 1947. Princess Elizabeth was expecting her first child in November of that year, and the BBC commissioned Howells to write *Music for a Prince*,<sup>24</sup> for which he reworked two movements from his early string suite, *The B's*. The work was broadcast on the third programme the evening after Prince Charles's birth, and included in the following January's Promenade Concerts. Spicer suggests that this recycling of earlier music is indicative of a lack of confidence in the public reception of his orchestral composition.

Sumsion approached Howells and asked if he might have a new work for the 1950 Gloucester Festival. As a result of this conversation Howells finally allowed his private tribute to Michael, *Hymnus Paradisi*, to be released to the world. In contrast to so many of his orchestral and instrumental works, the reviews of *Hymnus* were effusive in their praise<sup>25</sup>, and, as we have seen, this mattered very much to Howells. It has often been suggested that after the death of his son Howells turned more and

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<sup>24</sup> Which would, presumably have been *Music for a Princess* had the child been a girl.

<sup>25</sup> Spicer quotes extensively from Reginald Jacques, Frank Howes and Gerald Finzi, pp. 146 ff.

more to the writing of liturgical music as a form of catharsis or spiritual healing, but it is equally possible that it was the warmth of the reception which his music received in church circles and the constant stream of requests and commissions which is at least equally responsible for this change in direction.

In the year 1952 King George VI died, Sir Ernest Bullock (organist of Westminster Abbey) succeeded Sir George Dyson as director of the RCM, and the centenary of Stanford's birth was marked with a memorial Evensong at Westminster Abbey. Vaughan Williams and Howells both laid wreaths on the composer's grave, and Guy Stanford (the composer's son) placed the ring his father had bequeathed to Howells on Howells's finger, a tangible sign of musical succession between teacher and the pupil who he regarded as his 'son in music' and 'one of the most striking and brilliant brains I have ever come across'<sup>26</sup>. The ring originally belonged to a French Prince who died at the guillotine during the revolution. His daughter had fled to Ireland and the ring passed through three generations of her family before passing to one of Stanford's uncles.

Howells was one of a select group of composers chosen to write music for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, and the same year he was appointed CBE. His introit, 'Behold, O God, our defender' was broadcast across the world to the millions who viewed the coronation service on television. That same year he was one of the ten leading composers of the day commissioned by the Arts Council to contribute a choral work to the *Garland for the Queen*.

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Jeremy Dibble, *Charles Villiers Stanford: Man and Musician*, p. 417.

Howells was appointed King Edward VII Professor of Music at the University of London in the spring of 1954, a part-time position he held for ten years. Later that year his large scale choral masterpiece, *Missa Sabrinensis* or 'Mass of the Severn' was premiered at the Worcester festival. The reception was not as warm as that for *Hymnus* just a few years earlier<sup>27</sup>, but here we are dealing with a much more complex work. Howells's own comment in a letter to Arthur Hutchings (following the first performance) makes particularly interesting reading:

In my comparative old age I feel strangely freer to express myself in music - free of the thousand and one fears and fashions, comparisons and estimates being interminably made by one's contemporaries. There is, in so many of us, a crippling concern with public reaction and the critical opinions of Tom, Dick and Harry. The four walls of one's study cannot shut these out: or is it that one fails to learn how to shut them out till one has one foot in the grave?

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The *Collegium Regale* service was completed in 1956 with the composition of the 'Communion Service', twelve years after the 'Te Deum' won its one guinea bet. In August 1958 Vaughan Williams died, and the following January Howells was elected the third John Collard Life Fellow in succession to his friend and inspiration. The fellowship is awarded by The Musicians' Company to the most distinguished British composer of the time<sup>29</sup>. Just as the passing on of Stanford's signet ring marked a succession in English music, so did this honour. That election was followed by the Presidency of the Royal College of Organists.

The choice of subject matter for Howells's choral works drew ever closer to Michael with the passing years. In 1959 he began his most poignant work, one which would take some six years to bring to fruition, *Stabat Mater*. The image of the grieving

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<sup>27</sup> Spicer quotes extensively from reviews by Bernard Rose and Scott Goddard, pp. 160 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 161.

<sup>29</sup> It was held successively by Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Howells. Following Howells's death in 1983 it fell into abeyance until 2015 when it was awarded to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

mother holding Our Lord's body on her lap, as depicted by Michelangelo in the *Pietà* in St Peter's, Rome, was not merely an object of religious devotion, but a depiction of the depths of Howells's paternal despair over a life not lived. During this time he also completed *A Sequence for St Michael*, with its agonising double cry for Michael in the opening bars, and *Take him, Earth, for cherishing*, for the memorial service for John F. Kennedy in Washington in 1963.

In 1961 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the university of Cambridge, and in 1980 (a year after his retirement from the teaching staff) he was awarded another from the RCM. In 1972 he was made a Companion of Honour. In 1975 Howells's wife of fifty-five years, Dorothy died, and her ashes were interred in Twigworth with Michael. The Queen's College, Oxford offered him an honorary fellowship in 1977. On 12 July 1979 he finally retired from the RCM after fifty-nine years teaching, and died on 23 February 1982 at the age of 90. The esteem he was held in was evident by the burial of his ashes in the north quire aisle of Westminster Abbey, near to those of Vaughan Williams, and along with many of Britain's great and distinguished heroes, poets and musicians.



## CHAPTER 2 : THE ORGAN WORKS OF HERBERT HOWELLS

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter we will attempt to assess the compositions of Howells for the organ in several ways. Firstly, by tabulating a chronological list of compositions, including those known works where the scores are currently missing, and then by considering them by date of publication. The catalogue of works will then be divided into two categories, liturgical and non-liturgical, setting the parameters for the subsequent chapters. This division is not intended to be a critical distinction in assessing the full corpus of organ works, but simply a tool to narrow the parameters for the purpose of this thesis. To measure the reception of Howells's organ compositions in any way beyond anecdotal is difficult, and therefore to provide two contrasting approaches we will consider firstly their use as examination pieces, and secondly the number of recordings that currently appear on the online streaming platform, Spotify. Both of these approaches are intended as windows which might shine some light on the reception of these works in recent years for both performers and students.

### **Howells the composer**

One of the infelicities of history is that few people are remembered holistically. Howells has been remembered as a composer of church music, and within that more particularly for his settings of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. It is only in more recent years, due in part to the work of the Herbert Howells Trust and the Herbert Howells Society that his other works have become more widely disseminated, published, performed and recorded. His compositional output is

large and varied, which is all the more surprising when one realises that he did not regard himself as a full-time composer. He said of himself:

Yes, I earn my bread and butter as a teacher, not as a composer; composition isn't for me a "material necessity" in the financial sense. I can't write for a living. I've never wanted to be in the public eye; in general I've gone out of my way to avoid publicity and the writing of potential "pot-boilers" has certainly never appealed to me in the slightest. One or two works have brought me some acclaim and have gone the rounds, but in general I've always written first and foremost because I wanted and needed to write; performance, publication and the rest I tend, rightly or wrongly, to leave to others."<sup>30</sup>

Apart from choral and organ works, Howells's vast output includes two piano concertos, a 'cello concerto, a concerto for strings, 'Elegy' (for solo viola, string quartet and string orchestra), as well as many shorter pieces. His list of chamber music compositions is equally extensive including sonatas for oboe and clarinet, string and piano quartets and quintets and more. Solo songs and song cycles, part songs, madrigals, music for piano and clavichord all figure prominently in his *oeuvre*, a chronological listing of which runs to some 36 pages in Cooke and Maw.<sup>31</sup> There are also, of course, the numerous large scale choral works which are not liturgically orientated, including *Sir Patrick Spens*, *Sine Nomine*, and his choral masterpieces *Missa Sabrinensis*, *Hymnus Paradisi* and *Stabat Mater*, and of the liturgical works little needs to be said by way of introduction.

It is hardly surprising that compositions for the organ figure prominently in Howells's catalogue of works, the organ having been a constant companion in his musical journey, beginning as an articled pupil of Herbert Brewer at Gloucester, a pupil of Parratt at the Royal College of Music, assistant (for a brief period) to Alcock at Salisbury Cathedral, and acting deputy to Orr at St John's College, Cambridge

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<sup>30</sup> quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, A study*, 1978, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The music of Herbert Howells*, pp.311–346.

(during Orr's wartime service). The following chronological table of compositions, including dates of composition and publication, is extracted from the full table of Howells's works included in Cooke and Maw.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

## The organ works of Herbert Howells, a chronological table

Year	HH no.	Title	Publisher
1911	22	Prelude in Eb (missing)	Unpublished
1911	23	Postlude in C (missing)	Unpublished
1911	25	Sonata in c minor, Op. 1	Novello (1992)
1913	30	<i>Four choral preludes</i> (missing)	Unpublished
1913	36	<i>Two pieces</i> 1. Menuetto (missing) 2. 'Cradle Song'	(ii) Novello (2010)
1913	37	Psalm-Prelude (missing)	Unpublished
1914	52	<i>Phantasy Ground Bass</i> (missing)	Unpublished
1915-16	56	<i>Three Psalm Preludes</i> , Op. 32 (Set 1) 1. Psalm 34:6 2. Psalm 37:11 3. Psalm 23:4	Novello (1921)
1915/18	57	<i>Three Rhapsodies</i> , Op. 17 1. No. 1 in Db major (1915) 2. No. 2 in Eb minor (1918) 3. No. 3 in C# minor (1918)	Augener (1919)
1916	65	<i>Two short pieces</i> (missing)	Unpublished
1932	189	Sonata no. 2	Novello (1934)
1938-9	219	<i>Three Psalm Preludes</i> (Set 2) 1. Psalm 130:1 2. Psalm 139:11 3. Psalm 33:3	Novello (1940)
1939-45	226	<i>Six Pieces for Organ</i> 1. 'Preludio "sine nomine"' (1940) 2. 'Saraband (for the morning of Easter)' (1940) 3. 'Master Tallis's Testament' (1940) 4. 'Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue' (1939) 5. 'Saraband ( <i>in modo elegiaco</i> )' (1945) 6. 'Paean' (1940)	Novello (1953)
1941	233	Intrata (no. 2)	Novello (1987)
1945	248	<i>Six Short Pieces</i> (MS - incomplete) 1. Tranquillo, ma con moto 2. [MS missing] 3. Quasi lento 4. Allegro impetuoso (see HH 363iv) 5. [MS missing] 6. Untitled (see HH 342)	(i), (iv) Novello (1987)

1952	268	'Siciliano for a High Ceremony'	Novello (1957)
1958	288	<i>Prelude: 'De profundis'</i>	Novello (1983)
1958	289	Rhapsody no. 4, 'bene psallite in vociferatione'	Novello (1983)
1959	292	<i>Two pieces</i> 1. 'Dalby's Fancy' 2. 'Dalby's Toccata'	Novello (1982)
1969	326	'Flourish for a bidding'	Novello (1987)
1971-2	334	Partita	Novello (1972)
1974	342	'Epilogue' (see HH 248vi)	Banks music (1982)
1977	353	'St Louis Comes to Clifton'	Novello (1987)
1970s	358	Rhapsody no. 5 (missing)	Unpublished
1970s	359	'Scherzo for Michael Smythe' (missing)	Unpublished
Undated	360	Allegro Scherzade	Novello (1987)
Undated	361	[Untitled organ piece in B Dorian] Published as 'Aria'	Novello (1987)
Undated	362	Chorale	Novello (1987)
Undated	363	[For inclusion in the <i>Five Short Pieces for Organ</i> ] Quasi lento: teneramente. Incomplete organ piece; published in a completion by Robin Wells	Novello (1987)

From even a cursory perusal of this table it will become clear that the organ works can be divided into three groups: those which are missing, those which were published during Howells's lifetime, and those which were published posthumously. For ease of analysis we will present each of these groups in separate tables.

It is also obvious that there were huge gaps in Howells's creative output for the instrument. From the completion of the third Rhapsody in 1918 Howells did not return to the organ until the second Sonata in 1932. During this period he was

concerned with establishing himself as a member of staff at the Royal College of Music, and a busy career teaching and adjudicating. During this period the bulk of his composing focused on solo and part songs for voice(s) and piano.

The library of the Royal College of Music contains many of the original manuscripts. Among them are sketches of many unfinished organ works. A catalogue of these is included by George Bevan in his thesis.<sup>33</sup>

### Missing Manuscripts

Year	HH no.	Title
1911	22	Prelude in Eb (missing)
1911	23	Postlude in C (missing)
1913	30	<i>Four choral preludes</i> (missing)
1913	36	<i>Two pieces</i> 1. Menuetto (missing)
1913	37	Psalm-Prelude (missing)
1914	52	<i>Phantasy Ground Bass</i> (missing)
1916	65	<i>Two short pieces</i> (missing)
1945	248	<i>Six Short Pieces</i> (MS - incomplete - no. 2 & 4 missing)
1970s	358	Rhapsody no. 5 (missing)
1970s	359	'Scherzo for Michael Smythe' (missing)

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<sup>33</sup> George Bevan, *Herbert Howells and the organ: a critical study of autograph manuscripts and printed editions of selected works for the instrument, as an indication of his compositional process*, p. 18.

### Published during Howells's lifetime

Year of composition	HH no.	Title	Publisher
1915/18	57	<i>Three Rhapsodies</i> , Op. 17 1. No. 1 in Db major (1915) 2. No. 2 in Eb minor (1918) 3. No. 3 in C# minor (1918)	Augener (1919)
1915-16	56	<i>Three Psalm Preludes</i> , Op. 32 (Set 1) 1. Psalm 34:6 2. Psalm 37:11 3. Psalm 23:4	Novello (1921)
1932	189	Sonata no. 2	Novello (1934)
1938-9	219	<i>Three Psalm Preludes</i> (Set 2) 1. Psalm 130:1 2. Psalm 139:11 3. Psalm 33:3	Novello (1940)
1939-45	226	<i>Six Pieces for Organ</i> 1. 'Preludio "sine nomine"' (1940) 2. 'Saraband (for the morning of Easter)' (1940) 3. 'Master Tallis's Testament' (1940) 4. 'Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue' (1939) 5. 'Saraband ( <i>in modo elegiaco</i> )' (1945) 6. 'Paean' (1940)	Novello (1953)
1952	268	'Siciliano for a High Ceremony'	Novello (1957)
1971-2	334	Partita	Novello (1972)
1959	292	<i>Two pieces</i> 1. 'Dalby's Fancy' 2. 'Dalby's Toccata'	Novello (1982)
1974	342	'Epilogue'	Banks music (1982)

## Published Posthumously

Year	HH no.	Title	Publisher
1958	288 289	<i>Prelude: 'De profundis'</i> Rhapsody no. 4, 'bene psallite in vociferatione'	Novello (1983)
1941 1969 1977	233 326 353	Three pieces for Organ (ed. Robin Wells) 1. Intrata (no. 2) 2. Flourish for a bidding 3. St Louis comes to Clifton	Novello (1987)
1945 Undated Undated 1945 Undated Undated	248 360 361 248 362 363	<i>Six Short Pieces</i> (Reconstructed by Robin Wells) 1. Tranquillo, ma con moto 2. Allegro Scherzade 3. Aria 4. Allegro impetuoso (see HH 363iv) 5. Chorale 6. Quasi lento: teneramente	Novello (1987)
1911	25	Sonata in c minor, Op. 1	Novello (1992)
1913	36	<i>Two pieces</i> 1. 'Cradle Song'	Novello (2011)

Robin Wells was also responsible for the publication of two other collections of for the organ, 'Two slow airs' (Novello 1987), arranged for organ from two original works by Howells for violin and piano; and 'Miniatures', a collection of 30 short pieces originally written by Howells as exercises and sight-reading tests for piano.

## Defining the 'liturgical' organ works

There is often a presupposition, because of the nature and most common location of the instrument, that all works written for the organ must be, in some sense, liturgical. The concept of the organ as a recital instrument is often understood as (at best) a subsidiary role. In many minds the organ exists to accompany liturgical singing, and to provide musical wallpaper before and after (and perhaps during) services of worship.



On completing the Three Rhapsodies, Op. 17, Howells is reported to have declared how glad he was to be “getting away from the church!”<sup>34</sup> The implication is that he finally felt that he was writing music to be performed on the organ, and not music that existed simply for the purposes of worship. This statement creates a distinction in his organ compositions between those which were written for ‘the church,’ for worship, or because of some sort of theological inspiration, and those which were intended for the concert hall or non-liturgical performance.

Of the liturgical organ works, immediately obvious are the two sets of *Psalm Preludes*, each a miniature tone-poem inspired by and depicting a verse from the Psalms.

The *Six Pieces for Organ* stand as obvious liturgical works, including, as they do, the ‘Saraband (for the morning of Easter)’. Originally the ‘Saraband (*in modo elegiaco*)’ was subtitled ‘for Good Friday’. The other pieces in the set are not specifically liturgical, only by association or inference. ‘Master Tallis’s Testament’ is a tribute to one of the greatest liturgical musicians of the English Church, and the title of the ‘Preludio ‘Sine Nomine’’ might be an oblique reference to the sixteenth century practice of writing pieces entitled ‘In nomine’ for a consort (usually) of viols, taking the Plainsong “in nomine Domine” as a cantus firmus.

The ‘Siciliano for a High Ceremony’ was written for the wedding of Jane McNeill to the Earl of Dalkeith in St Gile’s Cathedral, Edinburgh, and first performed at the ceremony on 10 January 1953.

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, pp. 65-66.

The final two liturgical works both dating from 1958 are the 'Prelude: 'De profundis' and 'Rhapsody no. 4, 'bene psallite in vociferatione',', a pair of pieces inspired by two of the same three psalm verses as the second set of *Psalm Preludes*, and which Howells considered naming as the third such set.

As each of these works will be considered in greater detail in the ensuing chapters, only the justification for their classification as 'liturgical' is included at this point.

### **The 'non-liturgical' organ works**

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to comment on the non-liturgical organ works, for the sake of completeness a few brief observations will be offered to understand the extent of the catalogue of organ works.

The first extant work by Howells is the Sonata in C minor, Op. 1, composed while an articulated pupil of Brewer at Gloucester in 1911, and submitted to the Royal College of Music the following year when Howells applied for a scholarship to study composition. Dedicated to Ambrose Porter, the deputy organist at Gloucester from 1907–1912, there is a certain indebtedness to the sonatas of Basil Harwood and Edward Elgar. Porter and Howells seem to have struck up quite a friendship, Porter having previously dedicated a 'Fugue in C minor' to the young Howells.<sup>35</sup> Despite encouragement from Walter Parratt, Howells declined to consider publication, and the score was believed to be lost until after Howells's death, when a copy came to light and the work was finally published by Novello in 1992. The dedicatee,

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<sup>35</sup> Graham Matthews, 'The history and significance of Herbert Howells' Organ Sonata no. 1 in C minor' in *Organists Review*, June 1992, p. 105.

Ambrose Porter, retained the original manuscript he had been given by Howells, and was still performing from this score in the 1950s at Lichfield Cathedral (where he was Organist from 1925 to 1959). This copy was believed to have been destroyed after his death, but is now in the library of Lichfield Cathedral. Another pupil of Brewer, Tustin Baker (1900–1966) made a copy (by hand) of the Porter manuscript, with the additional note that it was the composer's "Op. 2", and it is from the Baker manuscript that the published edition is derived. Hardwick describes the first movement as "a huge, 258-bar edifice in disciplined, regular sonata form... (where) there are already numerous touches that later become part of the mature Howells's style."<sup>36</sup> He goes on to elucidate these as blurring of metric accents with syncopation and triplets, Tudor style florid linear lines, contrapuntal textures and expressing excitement by means of rising arabesques. Each of these features will be encountered regularly in the later organ works.

The first of the 'Three Rhapsodies' dates from August 1915, while the second and third were not completed until February and March 1918 respectively. These romantic essays, overflowing with sadness and yearning, were Howells's first published organ works and the beginning of the foundation of his reputation as a serious composer. These three pieces have no antecedent in British organ music<sup>37</sup>, except for Harold Darke's Rhapsody (1908) which, like Howells's works, is essentially an improvisation on a single melodic idea, with moments of tranquil peacefulness interspersed with impassioned outbursts. Howells dedicated the 'Three Rhapsodies' to Harold Darke, Walter Alcock and Edward Bairstow respectively.

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, pp.122-123.

<sup>37</sup> There are, however, antecedents in the piano repertoire

The second organ Sonata was completed in 1932 and dedicated to Howells's friend from his student days at the RCM, George Thalben-Ball. As a student Thalben-Ball won renown for his 1915 performance of Rachmaninov's third Piano Concerto, the first British pianist to perform this work. Howells's Sonata received its premiere at a joint meeting of the Organ Music Society and the London Contemporary Music Centre at the Royal Albert Hall on 20th March 1934. All of Howells's common stylistic traits are to be found in the Sonata, but what marks it out from the rest of his output (with the possible exception of the 'Third Rhapsody') is the aggressive dissonance in the outer movements. Also worthy of note is the angular opening theme, with its rhythmic vitality and short jagged leaping motif. "The overall effect of the Sonata," writes Arthur Milner, "is one of remarkable unity, this being partly brought about through thematic interconnection between movements. The opening bars of the first movement furnish basic material which is found in some guise or other in all the movements."<sup>38</sup> One of the most technically demanding of all Howells's works, this Sonata has prompted mixed views. Hardwick writes off its neglect by saying "perhaps the nub of the problem is that it is music that appeals only to stalwart Howells connoisseurs."<sup>39</sup> On the other hand Milner is ebullient in his praise, describing it as "not merely fine organ music, it is fine music in its own right, irrespective of medium... This is musician's music, in the best sense of the term, to which one goes back again and again with increasing satisfaction."<sup>40</sup> Palmer sits somewhere between the two extremes, describing it as "a challenging, somewhat angular and thorny extended work... the sonata serves up its treasures

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<sup>38</sup> Arthur Milner, 'Organ Music of our century: 12. The Organ Sonata of Herbert Howells' in *The Musical Times*, vol 105 no. 1462, p. 924.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, p. 132.

<sup>40</sup> Arthur Milner, 'Organ Music of our century: 12. The Organ Sonata of Herbert Howells' in *The Musical Times*, vol 105 no. 1462, p. 926.

with repeated exposure.”<sup>41</sup> All three commentators make valid points. There is a more immediate appeal (or accessibility) to the earlier (more romantic) works of Howells, while many of the later works can, at first sight, seem uncomfortably dissonant. Though not chronologically one of the later works, this sonata, particularly its opening and closing movements, seems to pre-empt this later style.

The last major organ work written by Howells was the *Partita* (1971). Howells had been a long-time friend of the politician and MP Edward Heath, and promised him a gift of an organ composition should he ever rise to the position of Prime Minister. Heath was a keen amateur musician, and as an undergraduate had been organ scholar at Balliol College, Oxford (1935–8). After twenty years as an MP, Heath became Prime Minister in 1970. The *Partita* was written the following year, and premiered by John Birch at the Royal Festival Hall on 23rd February 1972. It is a suite of dances, consisting of five movements but conceived of as a single composition. ‘Intrada’ is an agile, rhythmic movement, based on a downward then upward writhing fragment. ‘Interlude’ is a more melancholy movement, more dissonant than anything found in Howells’s earlier writing. In ‘Scherzo and Epilogue’ the bustling, energetic mood returns, and is linked to the second movement by a reappearance of its motif in the ‘Epilogue’. ‘Sarabande for the 12th Day of Any October’ hearkens back to the archaic modality of the ‘Saraband (in modo Elegiaco)’ from the *Six Pieces for Organ*. It is a tribute to Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was born on 12th October 1872, and whose centenary would be celebrated the year the *Partita* was premiered. Howells had vowed that anything he composed for that centenary year should have a connection to the friend who had

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<sup>41</sup> Larry Palmer, “Herbert Howells (1892-1983)” in Christopher S. Anderson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Organ Music*, p. 295.

inspired him. 'Finale and Retrospect' brings a certain cohesion to the work, drawing together melodic fragments and motifs from the preceding four movements. Spicer's assessment of the Partita is worth noting: "Harmonically Howells's style remains unique. Almost any bar of this music will identify its sources and yet the music is more ruthless and more aggressive than before. The use of dissonance also is bolder and more continuous... a beautifully conceived and superbly executed work."<sup>42</sup>

The *Two Pieces* written in 1959 were not published until 1982, and stand out amongst Howells's organ works as unusual, because they are the only pieces written for manuals only. Named 'Dalby's Fancy' and 'Dalby's Toccata', they were both written for John Dalby (a former organist of St Machar's Cathedral, and Superintendent of Music, Aberdeen). During the Second World War a bomb destroyed the chancel and organ of St Mary's Episcopal Church, Aberdeen. A generous benefactor presented the church with a chamber organ of one manual and five ranks (8', 4' and 2' flues, and a 'Swelling Hautboy' of limited compass), built by Samuel Green and dating from 1778. The *Two Pieces* were written specifically for this instrument which explains the lack of a pedal part and the distinctive textures. The occasion was one of a number of broadcasts made by Dalby on this instrument. Tudor in style, these two miniatures are still unmistakably Howellesian in spirit. The 'Fancy' is essentially a wide ranging melody over a two part harmony, while the 'Toccata' is principally a two-voice texture. Both explore the charming voicing of the historic chamber instrument.

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Spicer, 'The Organists Repertory - 18: Herbert Howells' Partita' in *The Musical Times*, vol 115 no. 1580, 1974, p. 883.

The final organ work to be published before Howells's death on 23rd February 1982 was the aptly titled 'Epilogue'. It was composed in the 1940s as the final of the *Six Short Pieces*, a set never completed by Howells (see HH 248 above). In 1974 Howells was invited to contribute a piece to a collection entitled *The Hovingham Sketches*, a series of pieces by distinguished British organists compiled for the Duchess of Kent. Howells turned to the final of the *Six Short Pieces*, revising his original manuscript, and giving it a title. A loud and powerful piece which requires a large organ and solo tuba to do it justice, it seems a fitting 'Epilogue' in more ways than one.

After Howells's death many of his papers and manuscripts were deposited in the Royal College of Music, where he spent so much of his life both as student and teacher. From these papers Robin Wells published four collections, *Six Short Pieces*, *Three Pieces*, *Two Slow Airs* and *Miniatures*.

*Six Short Pieces* was a set begun by Howells in 1945 but never completed or published. Two of the six pieces (nos. 2 and 5) were missing from the manuscript sketches, and the final piece had been revised by Howells and published as 'Epilogue' in *The Hovingham Sketches* (see above). Only two complete scores remained: nos. 1 ('Tranquillo, ma con moto') and 4 ('Allegro impetuoso'). Wells reconstructed no. 3 ('Quasi lento') from HH 363, 'Quasi lento: teneramente'. No. 2 comes from HH 360, 'Allegro Scherzade', no. 3 from another untitled manuscript, HH 361, now entitled 'Aria', and no. 5 from another manuscript, HH 362, 'Chorale'. Hardwick describes this particular collection as "mainly reconstructions based on incomplete, rough working copies of unsorted various oddments left unpublished after the composer's death. Their value as performing scores is questionable."<sup>43</sup> This

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, p. 142.

may appear as an unduly harsh criticism, but it raises the question, why did the composer abandon this set? Was he unhappy with it? Might he have intended to revise or complete it? The re-purposing of one movement decades later could be taken as implying that Hardwick was indeed correct.

The collection entitled *Three Pieces* brings together three unconnected pieces. They are 'Intrada (no. 2)' from 1941, 'Flourish for a bidding' (1969), and 'St Louis comes to Clifton' (1977). The first of these was written to celebrate the 80th birthday of Walter Alcock, and performed by the composer at that celebration on 29 December 1941. The second is not connected, as one might at first imagine, with the liturgical 'bidding prayer.' In fact the 'bidding' referred to is much more mundane: it referred to a charity auction, to raise funds for the Royal College of Organists Centenary Fund. This 'Flourish' was Howells's contribution, for which the others could 'bid'. The third piece of this suite dates from January 1977, and was written as Howells's contribution to a privately published tribute to Douglas Fox, director of music at Clifton College, Bristol. The enigmatic title comes from a 15th century French folk tune which Howells used as his inspiration. This folk song tells the story of the childhood of Louis, who later became King Louis IX of France and eventually was canonised by the church as a saint. Palmer describes this set as "adding little to the Howellsian repertoire, but they might be of interest to the specialist who has played most or all of the work printed during the composer's lifetime."<sup>44</sup> While appearing under one cover, they are three disparate pieces, their only connection being convenience for the publisher.

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<sup>44</sup> Larry Palmer, 'Herbert Howells (1892–1983)' in Anderson, p. 299.



The other two collections by Wells are *Two Slow Airs*, arrangements of two pieces originally written for violin and piano, and *Miniatures*, a collection of thirty exercises and sight-reading tests for piano.

These posthumous collections are not generally well regarded. Hardwick says of them: “they make available some interesting but not completely satisfactory music. The inspiration level is quite low when put beside the compositions published in the composer’s lifetime.”<sup>45</sup>

It is perhaps curious that the two most recent publications from Howells’s organ works are the two earliest extant works, the 1911 Organ Sonata no. 1 being published on the composer’s centenary in 1992, and the 1913 ‘Cradle Song’ appearing in print as recently as 2010 in the Organists Charitable Trust *Little Organ Book*, a collection of some eleven pieces, edited by Martin Neary. Apart from Howells, there are unpublished works by John Rutter and a number of ‘rising stars’ of the compositional world, as well as some tried and tested works by Stainer and Frederick Bridge. The ‘Cradle Song’ was written on 4th December 1913 at Howells’s home at Lydney, Gloucestershire. This gentle lullaby has the feel of a folk-song, with a scotch-snap in the melody, a device he later returned to in the ‘Siciliano for a High Ceremony’.

### **Howells’s organ works as examination pieces**

It is instructive to see how the organ works of Howells are viewed amongst the teaching profession. One indicator of this is to look at exam syllabi and to see how often his works appear. In the following section both the major and minor UK

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, p. 139.

boards are included (RCO, ABRSM, TCL, LCM, VCM, NCM), as well as the three major North American boards (AGO, RCCO, RCT).

At the time this list was compiled,<sup>46</sup> none of Howells's organ works appear on the diploma syllabus of the Royal College of Organists. He has one solitary entry on the Associated Board syllabus for organ. For the Licentiate Diploma two of the *Six Pieces for Organ* are included, 'Saraband (for the morning of Easter)' and 'Master Tallis's Testament' (nos. 2 and 3 respectively).

Howells fares better in the syllabus from Trinity College of Music, London, which include seven of his compositions. Grade 1 includes 'Eighteen' from 'Miniatures', while Grade 7 offers the 'Saraband (in modo elegiaco)' from *Six Pieces for Organ*, and Grade 8 has no. 3 from the First set of *Psalm Preludes*. The Associate diploma has no. 3 from the Second set of *Psalm Preludes*, the Licentiate diploma offers either the 'Prelude 'De Profundis'' or the first of the Rhapsodies, while the Fellowship diploma includes 'Rhapsody IV'.

In the London College of Music Syllabus, 'Master Tallis's Testament' appears on the Grade 8 list, no. 1 from the First set of *Psalm Preludes* is on the DipLCM, no. 1 from the Second set of *Psalm Preludes* is on ALCM, and 'Flourish for a bidding' appears on the LLCM list.

Turning to the smaller independent boards, at the Victoria College of Music Howells appears three times, for Grade 8 *Psalm Prelude Set 1 no. 3* is on the list. For

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<sup>46</sup> April 2021.

*AVCM Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 1* is included, and at *LVCM* ‘any two’ of the *Six Pieces for Organ* May be offered.

The National College of Music includes just one of Howells’s pieces on its syllabus, *Psalm Prelude no. 3*, for the *LNCM* exam, but the particular set is not specified.

Across the Atlantic Howells does not feature at all in the Royal Canadian College of Organists diploma syllabus. He appears twice in the American Guild of Organists syllabus, with ‘Saraband (for the morning of Easter)’ on the Associate diploma lists, and ‘Psalm Prelude set 2 no. 3’ on the Fellowship lists.

The Royal Conservatoire, Toronto, has much more extensive repertoire lists, along with a different grade structure. ‘Saraband (for the morning of Easter)’ appears on Grade 8, the ‘Preludio ‘Sine Nomine’’ on Grade 9, and both ‘Master Tallis’s Testament’ and ‘Siciliano for a High Ceremony’ at Grade 10. At Associate Diploma level ‘Paeon’ is an option.

*Howells's organ works set for performance examinations*

<b>Work</b>	<b>Collection</b>	<b>Examination(s)</b>
Psalm Prelude no. 1	Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1	DipLCM
Psalm Prelude no. 3	Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1	Grade 8 (TCL), (VCM)
Psalm Prelude no. 1	Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2	ALCM, AVCM
Psalm Prelude no. 3	Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2	ATCL, FAGO
Psalm Prelude no. 3	<i>Not specified</i>	LNCM
Preludio 'Sine Nomine'	Six Pieces for Organ	Grade 9 (RCT)
Saraband (for the morning of Easter)	Six Pieces for Organ	LRSM, AAGO, Grade 8 (RCT)
Master Tallis's Testament	Six Pieces for Organ	LRSM, Grade 8 (LCM), Grade 10 (RCT)
Saraband (in modo Elegiaco)	Six Pieces for Organ	Grade 7 (TCL)
Paean	Six Pieces for Organ	ARCT
<i>Any two pieces from</i>	Six Pieces for Organ	LVCM
Siciliano for a High Ceremony		Grade 10 (RCT)
Rhapsody no. 1	Three Rhapsodies	LTCL
Rhapsody no. 4		FTCL
Prelude 'De Profundis'		LTCL
Eighteen	Miniatures	Grade 1 (TCL)
Flourish for a bidding	Three Pieces	LLCM

From this tabulation it is obvious that there is a strong leaning towards the two sets of *Psalm Preludes* as well as the *Six Pieces for Organ*. It is also particularly informative that the 'liturgical works' (as defined in this thesis) are virtually the only works represented in this table. The only 'non-liturgical' works included are 'Rhapsody

no. 1', 'Flourish for a bidding', and 'Eighteen' (from 'Miniatures'). Writing about the First Organ Sonata in 1992, Graham Matthews said: "I predict the use of separate movements as very useful teaching and examination material."<sup>47</sup> Certainly as far as examination syllabi are concerned his prediction has not borne fruit.

A further factor in this discussion might be the challenge of registration on unfamiliar instruments, usually with little rehearsal time allocated to candidates. While that is certainly true, the contra argument is that they are not set pieces, they are simply one of a range of options, and while particular challenges might rule out certain pieces in individual cases, this is not universally the case.

### **A Spotify Discography**

With the rise of the ready availability of recording equipment, along with a profusion of local studios, short-run licences and internet streaming platforms, compiling a Discography that could be described as (in any sense) complete is an impossible task. For the purposes of this study we will limit the parameters to the online streaming service, Spotify.

The information compiled below was correct at the time of compilation (5-10 April 2021), but such is the nature of online streaming that it is constantly being added to, and less frequently deleted from.

A search for recordings containing one or more organ works by Howells returned a total of 115 discs, one as early as 1970 (thought principally from the 1990s onwards), and the most recent from the current year (2021). Of these discs, nine were devoted solely to the organ

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<sup>47</sup> Graham Matthews, 'The history and significance of Herbert Howells' Organ Sonata no. 1 in C minor' in *Organists Review*, June 1992, p. 105.

works of Howells, and a further 106 included one or more items. Of the 106, 90 contained just a single organ work, 11 contained two each, and the remaining five discs had several works. These 106 discs included 75 discs of organ music, and 31 of mixed choral works (of these, eight were of liturgical services, and six dedicated to the music of Howells). A complete listing of discs and tracks is recorded in Appendix 1.

### *Statistical analysis of recordings*

Work	Howells discs	Compilation discs	Total
Sonata no. 1	-	2	2
Cradle Song	-	-	-
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1. no. 1	2	14	16
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1. no. 2	3	5	8
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1. no. 3	2	8	10
Rhapsody no. 1	2	7	9
Rhapsody no. 2	3	2	5
Rhapsody no. 3	3	23	26
Sonata no. 2	4	-	4
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2. no. 1	3	9	12
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2. no. 2	2	2	4
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2. no. 3	2	8	10
Preludio 'Sine Nomine'	2	2	4
Saraband (for the morning of Easter)	3	4	7
Master Tallis's Testament	3	27	30
Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue	3	1	4
Saraband ( <i>in modo elegiaco</i> )	3	-	3
Paeon	2	7	9
Intrada no. 2	3	-	3
Six Short Pieces (ed. Wells)	1	1	2
Siciliano for a High Ceremony	2	2	4
Prelude: 'de Profundis'	2	-	2
Rhapsody no. 4	1	-	1

Two pieces (for John Dalby)	1	-	1
Flourish for a bidding	2	1	3
Partita	4	-	4
Epilogue	1	-	1
St Louis comes to Clifton	2	1	3
Two slow airs (ed. Wells)	2	-	2

The arrangement of works is chronological (by date of composition, rather than publication), with collections listed as individual movements where these appear on recordings as such. The division between discs which are dedicated to Howells's works and those which contain some individual works highlights the contrasting reception of his earlier and later works. While those discs focusing solely on his organ works have a more even spread of works (due, in part, to the smaller sample, and in part to the more complete nature of recording projects), there is still a leaning towards the earlier period (the 'Partita' being the notable exception), and also the longer and less accessible works, such as the Second Sonata.

The list of 106 discs containing one or more tracks throws into stark contrast the popularity of certain works, principally 'Master Tallis's Testament' (27 of 126 listings, or 21%), the third of the Rhapsodies (23 tracks or 18%), and the first of the Psalm Preludes (14 recordings or 11%). Taken together, these three works constitute 51% of the tracks listed (64 of 126). The remaining Psalm Preludes, Rhapsodies and 'Six Pieces' provide a further 43.5%, in total 94.5% of the pieces represented (119 recordings), while the other works total only 5.5% (7 recordings).

Also of interest is the fact that the first Sonata appears twice in the later category, but not in the former, while the second reverses that statistic. The later works fare particularly badly in this second category.

‘Cradle Song,’ the most recently discovered work, has been in print for a decade, and it is surprising that this charming early work has not appeared on any recording to date.



### CHAPTER 3 : FORM AND STYLE IN HOWELLS'S ORGAN WORKS

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Describing the organ music of Howells most biographers and writers suggest that it takes hearing as little as just a couple of bars to know whose music it is you are listening to. Howells has created not merely a style or a voice, but a particular sound that is so noticeably unique that his music is instantly recognisable. The subsequent chapters will consider in detail each of the 'liturgical' organ works in turn, but first this chapter will endeavour to discern some of the general features or his trademark techniques which, together, form that sound.

Howells's works have been categorised in various ways. In his centenary assessment of Howells as a composer of organ music Paul Spicer says: "Peter Hodgson writing on Howells in the mid-60s noted that 'three paramount moods appear to have permeated Howells's musical consciousness: the elegiac, the mystic (or remote), and the soberly gay.' There is a visionary quality about the music which is both 'luminous and numinous'."<sup>48</sup> Spicer goes on to say "I have often felt that Howells trying to be light-hearted or even 'soberly gay' is never quite convincing. There are exceptions... the *Paean* from the *Six Pieces* and the third of the second set of *Psalm Preludes*... the fourth *Rhapsody* seems to contain too much posturing, as do some of the later pieces..."<sup>49</sup>. Writing much earlier (1930), Hubert Foss divided Howells's compositions into five main categories: "the contemplative, as exhibited in the Church music; the rhapsodic, which is a larger and bolder manifestation of this same spirit...; the fanciful — a particular and separate genus which appears in

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Spicer, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)' in *Organist's Review* (1992), p. 124.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

a marked degree in Howells; the abstract, which, present in most of his music, has developed from time to time in a special degree; and the grander style of the larger works.”<sup>50</sup> It is curious that where many composers works are categorised by genre and form, when turning to Howells it is more often mood which seems apposite.

## **Form**

During his formative years of study at the Royal College of Music Howells came under the influence and tutelage of Stanford, Alcock, Parry and Wood. They were all heavily influenced by the Germanic school of composition, producing chorale-preludes, fantasias, toccatas, passacaglias, preludes and fugues. Particularly in their organ writing and choice of form, the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach was never far below the surface.

Howells did not blindly follow this model, but chose a more unique path. The effect of the Great War on Howells is documented in his diaries and letters, and in the various memorial compositions to fallen friends, and so it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that this may have produced a level of anti-German sentiment, which in turn may have been one contributing factor to this new direction. Another major factor and include was his work with Terry in editing early music, a role which immersed him in a different sound world, one with which he felt an instinctive affinity. Throughout his compositional career Howells wrote only two organ sonatas (and the first of them predates his studies at the RCM), no passacaglias, no prelude and fugues, and no chorale preludes.<sup>51</sup> He wrote but one fugue, the ‘Fugue, Choral and Epilogue’ from *Six Pieces for Organ*, and a significant

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<sup>50</sup> Hubert J. Foss, ‘Herbert Howells: a brief summary of his music’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 71, no. 1044 (Feb 1930), p. 113.

<sup>51</sup> His notebook recorded a set of ‘Four Choral Preludes’ in 1913, but the manuscripts of these are missing.

number of pieces inspired by the Psalms. In each of these it was a text alone which shaped his composition, and not a pre-existing melody as in a chorale prelude.

Howells seemed to find little inspiration in the baroque era, but turned more often to the Tudor period. He turned to dance forms such as the Siciliano and the Saraband, to the Fancy and Paeon, and of course his most famous work is (in part at least) a tribute to Thomas Tallis, 'Master Tallis's Testament.'

A large proportion of his organ works could be described as rhapsodies. Writing in the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, John Rink traces the roots of the genre from the Homeric epic poetry of Ancient Greece though the later literary genre in which it became "an extravagant effusion of sentiment or feeling,"<sup>52</sup> to its adoption as a musical form at the end of the eighteenth century, and subsequent appearance as a keyboard form early in the following century. Rink analyses these early Rhapsodies as: "Ternary in form... (they convey) the impassioned, agitated character usually associated with the genre, as well as more elegiac or aspirational moods, an improvisatory spirit often shaping the music,"<sup>53</sup> concluding that they are the instrumental counterpoint to the literary genre, attempting to capture poetic sentiment in sound. Speaking of his *Rhapsody for Piano* (1919), Howells says:

It is perhaps the whole secret of "inspiration" that an idea should seize a composer's imagination and that simultaneously the imagination should seize upon the idea, the objective and subjective activities reacting upon each other until both have had full play; and in a rhapsodic composition there should be nothing extraneous to the one idea upon which the consciousness has brooded in rapture... the preparation of the background, the emergence of the tune which is the reason of the rhapsody, the elaboration of the brooding background, the fuller version of the tune, the gradual dying down and fading, and the ending of the spell.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> J. Rink, 'Rhapsody' in *Grove Music Online*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Howells, quoted in Donald J. Grice, *Rhapsody in the Organ Works of Herbert Howells*, p. 16.

Although referring specifically to a work for the piano, the same description could equally apply to the rhapsodic works for organ. It is that sense of a musical idea being born, growing, developing and dying which seems to encapsulate an entire life-cycle in a few minutes of music.

Grice draws on the analysis of John Nixon McMillan<sup>55</sup> to describe thirteen of Howells's organ works as Rhapsodies or rhapsodic in structure: the six Psalm Preludes, the four Rhapsodies, 'Prelude: 'De Profundis',' 'Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue', and the middle movement of the second Organ Sonata. This analysis is important to this study as it describes nine of the works we have identified as 'liturgical'.

Analysing Howells's choice of form in his liturgical organ works, we find five works which are related, in different ways to music of the Tudor and Elizabethan age: two sarabands, a siciliano, 'Sine Nomine' and 'Master Tallis's Testament'. Nine rhapsodies or rhapsodic works (as defined above) and one Toccata: 'Paean', the final of the *Six Pieces for Organ*.

### **Arch Form**

Howells made particular use of what is aptly referred to as an Arch Form. There is a sense of organic growth within the music, which usually begins at a low dynamic and with a relatively thin texture. As the work develops, the texture thickens, the dynamic increases, a loud climax is reached (usually about two thirds of the way through the piece), and then gradually the intensity subsides, the dynamic drops, and the ending is as gentle as the beginning. Within this structure, the curve of the

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<sup>55</sup> An unpublished PhD thesis from 1997.

arch is not symmetrical. The apex of the arch may occur at various points, even just a few bars before the end (e.g. 'Master Tallis's Testament'), but the general principle holds true. A prime example is the first of the Psalm Preludes. Less obvious is the second prelude from the first set, because the dynamic rise in the arch is gentler, but still very much present in a subtler form.

This device consists of three basic elements, dynamics, texture and tempo. Usually the opening is gentle and lyrical, and little by little each of the three increase in intensity. As the dynamic rises and the texture thickens, so the tempo accelerates towards the apex of the arc, the climactic moment. The Arch Form is exemplified in most of the Rhapsodic works, but not restricted to them. Howells applies the same principles in other works such as 'Siciliano for a High Ceremony' and 'Master Tallis' Testament.'

Less often the arch is inverted, where a piece starts and ends triumphantly, with a gentler middle section, e.g. the third of the second set of Psalm Preludes or 'Saraband (for the morning of Easter).' This may be a simple inversion of the arc, or it could be a more basic ternary form, ABA1.

### **Harmonic Language**

More than any other feature, it is Howells's harmonic language which makes him most readily identifiable, even to a listener with only a casual acquaintance with his work. But what is so unique about this facet of his composition? When Howells was composing, particularly in the early period of his life, British music was primarily diatonic, it was either in a major key, or a minor key, and modulations between these were fairly strictly controlled. There were, of course, centuries of earlier music

which had been rediscovered in the later Victorian era, the modal music of Plainsong or Gregorian Chant, and of early polyphony. At the RCM Howells studied counterpoint with Charles Wood, a much underrated figure, overshadowed by Stanford and Parry. Wood is remembered today primarily as a composer of church music, but his *oeuvre* is much wider, including chamber music, solo and part-songs, madrigals, chamber operas and a piano concerto. Wood was more than just a second-rate composer and a good teacher, he was an expert in modal harmony and counterpoint<sup>56</sup>, and it is likely that he was responsible for, if not introducing Howells to modal harmony, then at least refining his skill in this area.

Howells's music is neither purely diatonic nor purely modal, but a unique fusion of the two. He makes particular use of the sharpened fourth and flattened seventh notes of the scale to create a modal flavour (almost Lydian or mixolydian), and his music can best be described as most often having a tonal centre rather than being in a specific key or mode. He often uses extended pedal points to clarify or anchor this tonal centre.

Harmonically he makes much use of harmonically rich chords - the seventh, ninth and eleventh chords. Of particular note is the augmented eleventh chord (a dominant ninth chord with an augmented eleventh added).

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, his *Mass in the Phrygian Mode* which still appears regularly on Cathedral music lists today.



*Example 1, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 67-69*

A device borrowed from Tudor polyphony and used with great effect by Howells is the cross relation, where a note appears diatonically and chromatically altered in close proximity. He uses simultaneous cross relations (i.e. the two forms of the one note being played together) to create dissonance. This could equally be interpreted as Howells's take on bitonality, superimposing two different triads as in the following example:



*Example 2, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 4-7*

Enharmonic change is another tool in Howells's harmonic vocabulary. While not always audibly apparent until the music develops in the new key signature, it can take the music in an entirely new, fresh and unexpected direction. In the following extract from Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 2, the chord of D-sharp Major is suddenly respelled as a chord of E-flat major, and this new key is maintained for an extended

cadence before moving to B minor. This particular prelude has, as its theme, “darkness and light to you are both alike”, and this enharmonic shift is just one of the devices which illustrate similarity and difference.



Example 3, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 2, bars 30-32

Howells uses third relations to create unexpected chord sequences and modulations. In the following example the fifth of the C major chord becomes the third of the E-flat major chord.



Example 4, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 80-4

Perhaps more important than each of these devices is that Howells always thinks contrapuntally first, and harmonically second. Contrasting himself with Delius, Howells said “he [Delius] thinks in terms of blocks of sound, I think polyphonically, in lines.”<sup>57</sup> Edwin Evans noted this feature as early as 1920 when he wrote: “steeped

<sup>57</sup> Howells, quoted in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 16.



as he is in the 16th century music of the Latin church, he owes much to the polyphony of Palestrina, whose practice was to make his parts move correctly in relation to the bass, but with considerable license in regard to each other, whereas modern teaching [of counterpoint], insofar as it enforces strictness, demands that all parts be reconciled.”<sup>58</sup> With the exception of ‘Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue’ (from the *Six Pieces for Organ*) Howells did not write any fugues for the instrument, but there are many fugue-like passages of free imitative counterpoint in his writing, for example the middle section of Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 3, where the two-part counterpoint is written over an extended pedal point.



Example 5, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 39-47

## Melodies

Howells's melodies often feel as if they are an organic development of more elaborate plainsong, lines which are not always bound by conventional rhythmic structures, but which rise and fall as naturally as a sleeping person's breath. As with his harmonies they are marked by the sharpened fourth and flattened seventh.

<sup>58</sup> Edwin Evans, 'Modern British Composers. VIII. Herbert Howells' in *The Musical Times*, vol 61 no. 924 (Feb 1920), p. 90.

Howells has a tendency to use short motifs with similar rhythmic or intervallic constructions. One of these signature motifs is a semiquaver upbeat followed by a rising figure.



Example 6, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 1-3



Example 7, Paean, bars 110-114

Another rhythmic motif favoured by Howells consists of a quaver rest, a pair of semi quavers, a dotted quaver, a semi quaver, and a pair of quavers.



Example 8, Fugue, Chorale & Epilogue, bars 1-2



Example 9, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 92-5

These, and other similar motivic patterns appear frequently in the organ works of Howells. These short motifs are constantly reshaped and transformed, often imperceptibly and organically. For example the following theme from Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 1 appears initially as:



Example 10, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 20-22

When this theme later reappears the A-natural has become an A-sharp, the rhythm slightly altered, and the basic theme extended.



Example 11, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 76-80

This organic development happens throughout Howells's writing. Rarely does a theme return exactly as first presented, there is almost always a subtle

development, perhaps of rhythm, harmony or melody, or a combination of all of three.

### **Metre**

One of the most immediately obvious traits in Howells's music is the frequent change of metre, a trait which is perhaps indebted to his fascination with Plainsong and medieval music. Howells is never constrained by a metre, but changes time signature frequently in his more rhapsodic works. Those works based on dance rhythms (the two Sarabands, the Siciliano) are more constrained by the nature of the dance rhythm.

His earlier works tend to have fewer changes of time signature, compare for example the first and second set of Psalm Preludes. The third prelude from the First set is one of the few works to have absolutely no change of time signature, but this may be a more a reflection of the words which are being interpreted (a theory which we will examine in the following chapter), while the first prelude from the Second set has some forty-eight changes in time signature in a work of just eighty-six bars, an average of just under two bars per change.

### **Cadences**

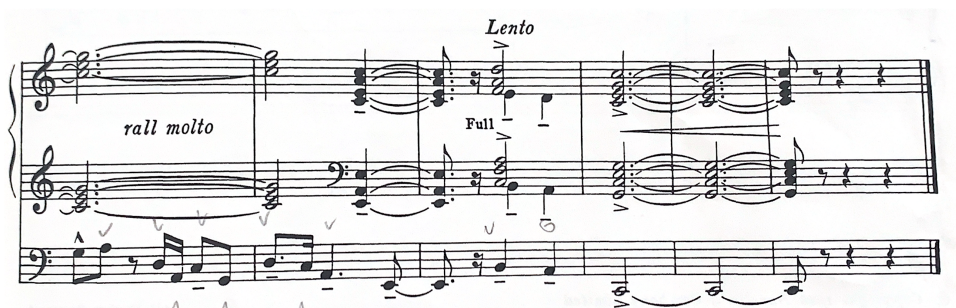
There is an unpredictability to Howells's music which is often seen in his use of unconventional cadences. Even when concluding a piece with a perfect or plagal cadence, the progression is often enhanced by added chromatic notes, suspensions or extended pedal points.

To take the example of a perfect cadence, which occurs in five of the sixteen works under consideration: even in the more conventional approaches, such as in 'Cradle Song', he uses a dominant 9th chord with a double suspension, while in 'Master Tallis's Testament' the perfect cadence is approached by way of a decorated melody and passing note leading to a dominant 7th chord. The second prelude in the first collection of psalm preludes features six bars of a dominant pedal point, followed by an eight-bar (ornamented) tonic pedal, over which a final perfect cadence emerges.

The musical score is for a piece in 4/4 time, marked *più e più tranquillo*. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows a right hand with a dominant 9th chord with a double suspension, and a left hand with a tonic pedal point. The second system shows the continuation of these pedals, with dynamics *pp*, *dim.*, and *ppp* indicated. The score is signed (H. H. 1916).

Example 12, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 2, bars 65-74

The plagal cadence is less frequently employed, and again is never a simple IV-I progression. The first prelude from the second set of Psalm Preludes concludes with a series of suspensions over a progression which is essentially IV7-ii-I, while in Rhapsody IV the second inversion of ii becomes a substitute subdominant chord for a cadence that is essentially plagal.

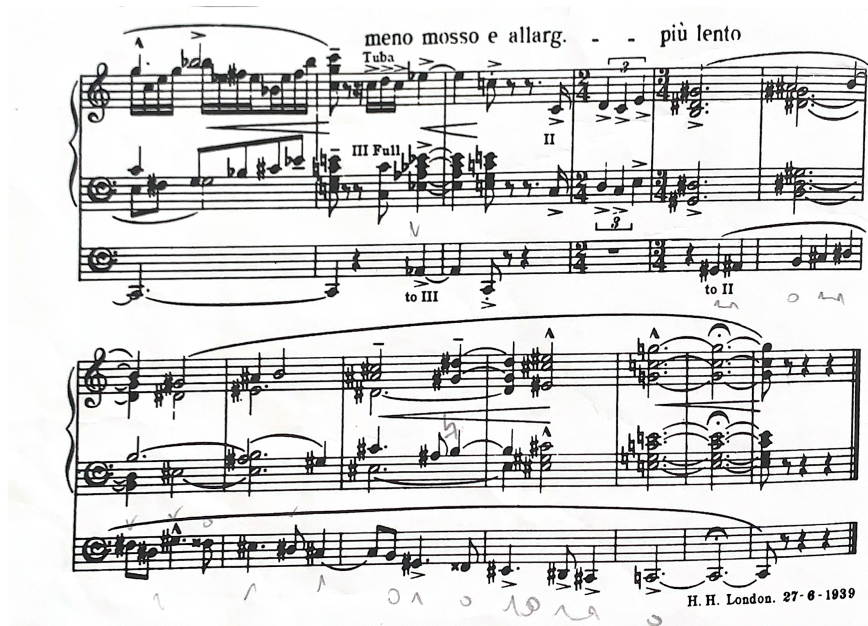


Example 13, Rhapsody IV, bars 191-196

Howells is capable of creating a cadence from any chord in the scale. In the second of the second set of Psalm Preludes he uses the flattened supertonic (G7 - F sharp). In 'Preludio 'Sine Nomine'' the final cadence moves from the mediant (with added notes) to the tonic (with a tierce de picardie). 'Saraband (for the Morning of Easter)' also uses the mediant, this time with a sharpened third, in an invigorating sequence Dmaj9 - Emaj - C. The submediant appears in 'Siciliano for a high ceremony' where the final cadence moves from the flattened submediant minor 9th to the tonic (A-flat min9 - C). The first of the first set of Psalm Preludes also uses the submediant 7th resolving on the tonic with a tierce de picardie. 'Paean' ends with a cadence from a 7th on the leading note (which is effectively a substitute Dominant 9th in first inversion).



Of all the works considered, the most aurally thrilling cadence is that of the final of the second set of Psalm Preludes where, after a long tonic pedal, firmly anchoring the harmony in C, there is a brief episode (6 bars in length) where the pitch is raised a semitone (to C sharp) with a clear perfect cadence in C sharp (over a chromatic bass) resolving suddenly to C major.



Example 14, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 216-228

## Pedals

When considering questions of form and style, Howells's conception of the pedals is of prime importance. In British organ music pre-Howells, the pedals served primarily as a harmonic anchor, providing a solid bass line and a foundation upon which the harmony was built. They do show occasional flourishes or bravura (e.g. in the Sonatas of Stanford), and can occasionally be used to play a solo melody (as in some of Parry's *Chorale Preludes*), but on the whole the potential of the pedals is limited and predictable.

There are many occasions when Howells follows these conventions, using the pedals as a harmonic anchor, particularly in the use of long pedal points when the manual harmony seems rather fluid. But equally frequently Howells uses the pedals as another manual, rather than a separate division with a different function.



Example 15, *Master Tallis' Testament*, bars 19-21

In the example above Howells calls for an 8' registration in the pedals, treated as a solo with manual accompaniment. This device appears in numerous works, and even those which are primarily registered at 16' have regular melodic flourishes in the pedals. The most developed example is in 'Master Tallis's Testament,' where the first variation has the theme weave seamlessly from pedal solo 8', 4' (bars 19-22), to tenor and alto lines (bars 23-26), to the soprano register in bar 27, soloed from bar 29. In bar 31 the theme returns again to the pedals for just two bars, and this time at 8' only, before passing to the left hand for the remainder of the variation. This sort of writing requires an instrument with a large number of pistons which can be set by the player to achieve seamless transitions from pedal solo to harmonic bass pedal and backwards and forwards.

Howells's conception of the melodic powers of the pedal department is much more highly developed than his predecessors. This flows from the already noted trait of his thinking in terms of polyphonic lines rather than harmonic blocks.



## Registration

As a composer Howells always sought absolute precision with every detail of his writing, phrasing, articulation, texture, balance of parts, dynamics, tempi etc. He was constantly revising works right up to the moment of performance, and again for publication. George Bevan, in his dissertation, examines Howells's compositional process by comparing manuscripts from the Howells collection at the RCM, showing the constant process of development and refinement that each work went through. Being aware of that attention to detail, the lack of registrational detail in Howells's organ works appears (at first sight) both surprising and challenging.

Howells is quite specific in detailing manual changes, including coupling and uncoupling both of manuals and of pedals, and he gives many dynamic instructions to guide the performer, along with detailed crescendo and decrescendo markings. The only specific instances of registrational direction are in Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 3 and in Rhapsody IV, both of which call twice for a brief interjection by the Tuba; 'Preludio 'Sine Nomine'' which begins with the Swell Diapason, and at the mid point demands "Swell strings (*mf*)"; the solo in 'Saraband (in modo elegiaco)' is assigned to the "solo oboe", and at the end of 'Paean' there is a short motif which calls for the "solo reeds". Apart from these five pieces, there are no specific sonorities suggested. With regard to the pedals he often notes the pitch, but not the timbre, and there are numerous examples of adding and removing the 32' stop, of pedals at 16' (with and without 8') coupled to various manuals, to a pedal solo at 8', and less often a solo at 8' + 4'.

Where, then, is one to begin in choosing appropriate registration? It is often proposed that Howells had the organ in Gloucester Cathedral in mind as his ideal instrument for performing his works. The first set of *Psalm Preludes* dates from his student days at the RCM, when the Gloucester organ was certainly fresh in his mind, and the *Six Pieces for Organ*, though much later, were dedicated to Herbert Sumsion, the successor to Brewer at Gloucester, so it is not inconceivable that he had that instrument in mind. Relf Clarke reports a conversation with Howells's nephew, Neil Howells, who said that his uncle "told him that whenever he composed for the organ, he was thinking of 'the old organ at Gloucester'."<sup>59</sup> As with every Cathedral organ there have been progressive stages of development. There are too many builders involved in the history of the Gloucester instrument to list, but to all intents and purposes it is a Willis organ. Henry Willis<sup>60</sup> first enlarged the instrument in 1847, overhauled it in 1879, enlarged it in 1889 and overhauled again in 1899. By this stage it was a small four manual instrument of just 39 speaking stops (see specification overleaf).

Before considering the specification of the organ in detail, and the implications for the performance of Howells's organ works, the question must be asked to what exactly was Howells referring to when he spoke with fondness of 'the old organ at Gloucester'? It will become clear that certain directions in the printed score could not possibly be performed on this instrument as it was, and thus it seems that it was the particular tonal character of the instrument rather than the specific mechanical detail of the specification which is paramount.

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<sup>59</sup> Relf Clarke, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells: some general considerations' in *The Royal College of Organists Journal*, vol 2 (1994), p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Willis (1821-1901), also known as "Father" William was one of the foremost organ builders of the Victorian era. The 1847 contract in Gloucester was Willis's first major job and he regarded this as his stepping stone to fame. The firm, Henry Willis and Sons, is still in business today. Until 1997 it was managed by five successive generations of the Willis family.

Gloucester Cathedral Organ Specification, 1899<sup>61</sup>

<b>Great</b>	Double Diapason	16'	<b>Swell</b>	Double Diapason	16'
	Open Diapason	8'		Open Diapason	8'
	Open Diapason	8'		Lieblich Gedact	8'
	Claribel Flute	8'		Salicional	8'
	Principal	4'		Vox Angelica	8'
	Flute Harmonique	4'		Gemshorn	4'
	Twelfth	2 2/3'		Fifteenth	2'
	Fifteenth	2'		Mixture	III (17.19.22)
	Sesquialtera	III (17.19.22)		Contra Posaune	16'
	Trombone	16'		Copnopean	8'
	Trumpet	8'		Hautboy	8'
	Clarion	4'		Clarion	4'
	<i>Swell to Great</i>				
	<i>Choir to Great</i>				
	<i>Solo to Great</i>		<b>Pedal</b>	Open Diapason	16'
				Bourdon	16'
<b>Choir</b>	Stopped Diapason	8'		Octave	8'
	Dulciana	8'		Ophicleide	16'
	Flute	4'		<i>Great to Pedal</i>	
	Clarinet	8'		<i>Swell to Pedal</i>	
	Cor Anglais	8'		<i>Choir to Pedal</i>	
				<i>Solo to Pedal</i>	
<b>Solo</b>	Flute	8'			
	Clarinet	8'			
	Orchestral Oboe	8'			
	Tuba Mirabilis	8'			

<sup>61</sup> Michael Gillingham et al., *Gloucester Cathedral Organs*, pp. 16-17.

From this specification there are a number of features worthy of note. Firstly there are only two mixtures, one each on the Great and Swell, and both are Tierce mixtures (17.19.22). The Great and Swell both have full choruses and reeds at 16', 8' and 4'. The choir is unenclosed, and with no chorus structure. The solo also is unenclosed, with just four orchestral stops. The pedal department is particularly small, only four ranks, and heavily dependent on manual couplers. It is also particularly noteworthy that the only inter-manual couplers add each manual to the Great, but not to each other. There is no 'Swell to Choir' coupler which one would expect, neither are there any octave or sub-octave couplers. Gillingham makes an interesting observation on the Willis rebuild of 1888/9, that financial economy resulted in the Great and Swell being on higher wind pressure to make it sound like a more substantial instrument, while "the Chaire organ was 'left to its fate' as a relatively unimportant architectural curiosity... The action to Great, Swell and Pedal was pneumatic, but that to the Choir organ (still in the Chaire case) was tracker."<sup>62</sup> This would explain the lack of a Swell-Choir coupler, and in view of general expectations of organ building must have resulted in a rather strange instrument. There are no pistons, just some composition pedals - four to the Great, three to the Swell, and one (reversible) which controlled the Great to Pedal coupler.

This specification immediately raises challenges in interpreting even Howells's early works — the First Set of *Psalm Preludes* call specifically for a 32' Pedal stop, and a Swell-Choir coupler, neither of which were present on the Gloucester organ when Howells played there.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

Paul Spicer makes the following observation regarding the registration direction in the first of the Psalm Preludes, which notes the addition of the pedal 32' as the climax approaches: "Do those who have 32 foot flues and reeds stop to think when Howells marks the climax 'fff (with 32ft)' that he actually means the flue, *not* the reed? It should not be forgotten that Gloucester Cathedral does not have a 32' reed."<sup>63</sup> This is an important observation, but it must also be balanced by the fact that Howells wrote this work prior to the addition of this stop.

The 32' flue was added to the Gloucester organ in 1920 by Harrisons who were responsible for a rebuild and expansion of the instrument. There were only minimal changes to the Great (the addition of a third Open Diapason) and Swell (the addition of a Vox Humana). The Choir was quite altered by the addition of a Contra Dulciana 16', Viola da Gamba 8' and Harmonic Piccolo 2', resulting in a fuller chorus, and the removal of the two reeds. The solo was doubled in size with the addition of a Quintaton 16', Concert Flute 4', Viole d'Orchestre 8' and Viole Celeste 8', and the transposition of the Clarinet to 16' as an Orchestral Bassoon. The pedal increased to ten stops, mostly by extension and manual duplication. The choir was fully integrated into the scheme of the organ, and provided with Swell-Choir and Solo-Choir couplers, the swell was provided with Octave and Sub Octave couplers and a Tremulant. The solo was enclosed (with the exception of the Tuba) and provided with Octave, Sub Octave and Unison Off couplers as well as a Tremulant. Manual pistons were added and a much larger range of foot pistons and composition pedals.

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Spicer, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)' in *Organist's Review* (1992), p. 124.

Leaving aside questions over the pre-1920 and post-1920 instrument, the general observation by Relf Clark is important for performers of Howells's early organ works to reflect upon:

Present-day performers might like to consider whether the interests of authenticity are served by the use of brilliant quint mixtures such as one finds at Gloucester today; string-toned stops of very narrow scale; close-toned chorus reeds of the Tromba type; powerful, quasi-diaphonic Pedal reeds voiced on heavy wind; and other features not characteristic of Willis (especially when preparing performances of the *Rhapsodies*, Op. 17, and the *Psalm Preludes*, Op. 32). They should certainly consider the evidence that exists with regard to the habits of registration of organists of around the time when Howells was studying with Herbert Brewer and assisting Walter Alcock at Salisbury..."<sup>64</sup>

Clark continues to list a number of useful sources with regard to registration practices, following this with some general principles of dynamic build up from the softest stops to full organ. He also makes the important observation that the lack of registrational aids on the Gloucester organ (and other similar organs of the day) would have meant that the "kaleidoscopic changes of colour and rapid *crescendi* and *diminuendi* possible on most present-day Cathedral organs would not have been possible... without an assistant... and organists of that period registered mainly by hand, another fact one should perhaps keep in mind when devising schemes of registration."<sup>65</sup>

Bearing in mind the particular stops (and registration aids) 'missing' from the Gloucester instrument but called for by Howells, Clark concludes that his approach was at times idealistic, an organ with the dynamic range and flexibility able to produce seamless crescendo without much effort on the part of the player.

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<sup>64</sup> Relf Clarke, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells: some general considerations' in *The Royal College of Organists Journal*, vol 2 (1994), p.44.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

We have a number of snippets of information from the composer himself. In an early interview (1922) Katharine Eggar records a few thoughts on the Rhapsodies and first set of Psalm Preludes: "In these... he has taken a modern view of the instrument. The modern organ is a marvelous colour-medium, and demands a suitable idiom for making full use of its resources. 'It can give bursts of colour that are not possible on the orchestra,' says Mr Howells; 'Why, then, not take advantage of its capacities? It's absurd to think that only contrapuntal writing is suitable for the organ. And even if it were — we can't compete with Bach'." <sup>66</sup>

Reviewing the second set of Psalm Preludes almost two decades later, Harvey Grace draws attention to a performance issue in the second prelude of the set, where a section of the work is scored for both hands on the same manual, but the hands cross in such a way as to make this extremely difficult to navigate for the performer. Grace wrote to Howells seeking clarification on this point, and in his review quoted from the letter: "The mark is correct; the right hand joins the left on the Swell. My wish there is to have unity of texture and colour above all. The ideal of the passage would be the balanced tone of a string quartet." <sup>67</sup> From this we can conclude that Howells writes principally with a particular sound world in mind, and only secondly with the practicalities of a performer being considered. Moving to more general principles of registration Grace continues to quote from Howells: "The thing I hope that players will *most* resist is fussy and oft-changing registration. It would injure continuity, especially in Nos. 2 and 3. I feel that flexibility of movement matters far more than variety of colour." <sup>68</sup> This alone should cause many performers to review their interpretation of these (and other) works by Howells.

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<sup>66</sup> K. Eggar, 'An English Composer: Herbert Howells' in *The Music Teacher* 15 (December 1922), cited in Hodgson, Peter, *The Music of Herbert Howells*, pp. 122-3.

<sup>67</sup> Harvey Grace, 'New Music' in *The Musical Times*, vol 81 no. 1167 (1940), p. 210.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1966 in *English Church Music* Howells laments the “tonal elephantiasis encouraged by the misuse of outsize organs,”<sup>69</sup> which again points the performer in the direction of clarity of sound and timbre, and simplicity of registration which allows each voice to be heard.

The default aesthetic view of Howells’s organ works is that they are best performed in a large cathedral with a generous acoustic. Writing about ‘Intrada’ in the *Musical Times*, Robin Wells says: “Howells must have had the lofty spaces of Gloucester or Salisbury in mind... one needs to be able to savour the thrill of the full organ reverberating around such a building, contrasting with the soft strings and celestes melting into the dark shadows of the stonework.”<sup>70</sup> Clinch challenges that view, drawing on a series of quotes from Howells writing on the subject of Radio Broadcasts in 1950, where he bemoans the lack of clarity in many broadcasts, caused by the “echo defects” of Church and Cathedral acoustics which obscure much of the logic of contrapuntal choral-writing, and lead to organ accompaniments sounding remote, fitful and divorced from the voice.<sup>71</sup> Turning to the specific issue of organ registration in the same interview, Howells describes the success of a particular recital as “avoiding ‘overloading’ and his willingness to exploit individual stops, giving (as it were) two or three simultaneous distinct but simple lines of tone-colour.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Howells, in *English Church Music* (1966), cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* (1998), p. 134.

<sup>70</sup> Robin Wells, ‘Howells’s unpublished organ works’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 128 no. 1734 (1987), p. 459.

<sup>71</sup> BBC Report, Howells Archive, The RCM library, cited in Jonathan Clinch, ‘Herbert Howells’s Organ Works? Critical reception, performance practice and the case for reappraisal’ in *BIOS; the Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies*, vol 37 (2013), p. 132.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133.



From all these comments by the composer we see two distinct threads emerge. One is a simplicity in terms of registration, both in the choice of tone colours and in the frequency of registrational changes. The second flows from the first, and it is the importance of pulse, flexibility of movement and the judicious use of rubato to build climaxes, rather than reliance on registration alone. With both of these in mind it is perhaps understandable why Howells eschews specific registration directions which might result in more of a straight jacket on performers, hindering, rather than allowing them to explore the tonal capacity of the instrument (and building).

## CHAPTER 4 : THE CATHARSIS OF COMPOSITION

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Howells composed two sets of Psalm Preludes, miniature tone poems each inspired by and depicting a verse from the Psalms. It is significant that each collection came into being after a notable and traumatic event in Howells's life, and so alongside a musical analysis of the works we will explore the theological resonances of his choice of texts, and consider how he may have found a sense of catharsis in composition. It is widely recorded that *Hymnus Paradisi* was written as Howell's private response to the crippling numbness brought about by the death of his only son, Michael. I suggest that the second set of Psalm Preludes form a public counterpart to that private work.

### **The place of Psalmody in Howells's compositional output**

The first of Howells's compositions to be inspired by the Psalms are the *Three Psalm Preludes* (Set One) which were written while still a student at the Royal College of Music in 1915-1916.<sup>73</sup> In 1917 he composed a setting of Psalm 137, 'By the waters of Babylon,' which was written as a response to the death of a close friend in the First World War, and during the time of Howells's extreme ill health. This was essentially a private response to grief, not written for performance or publication.

It was over 15 years before Howells turned again to the Psalms, incorporating settings of two psalms, 23 and 121 in his unpublished *Requiem* in 1932. He wrote the work for the choir of King's College Cambridge, but it remained unknown until its

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<sup>73</sup> His notebook makes reference to a Psalm Prelude composed in 1913, HH37 (referenced in chapter 2), but the score is missing.

eventual publication in 1980, just three years before the composer's death. Following Michael's death in 1935 he came to increasingly associate the Requiem with his late son, and re-scored large parts of it to form the basis of *Hymnus Paradisi*, his musical outpouring of grief and love for Michael. This work was written between 1936-1938, but again remained a private work which was only revealed to the world at the Three Choirs Festival in 1950, and published the following year. The same two psalm texts are used in this work.

As his work on *Hymnus Paradisi* was drawing to a close, Howells again turned to the Psalm Prelude genre, completing a second set of three pieces for solo organ in 1938 and 1939. From this time onwards Howells's compositional focus was turning more and more towards choral and organ music. His *Four Anthems*, originally subtitled 'In time of war' (1941) are all settings of Psalm texts, 'O pray for the peace of Jerusalem' (Psalm 122), 'We have heard with our ears' (Psalm 144), 'Like as the Hart' (Psalm 42), and 'Let God arise' (Psalm 68). These were followed in 1944 by 'God is gone up' (Psalm 47), and also that year his setting of the Jubilate Deo (Psalm 100) for King's College Cambridge. Howells's most public commission, 'Behold, O God, our defender' (Psalm 84:9-10), was written for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

In 1958 Howells wrote two further organ works inspired by psalms, 'Rhapsody IV,' and the 'Prelude: 'De Profundis',' taking as his inspiration the same verses as the first and third of the second set of Psalm Preludes. Barber believes that 'De Profundis' was written "during a time of mental anguish,"<sup>74</sup> and from notes in

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<sup>74</sup> Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p.259.

Howells's diary connects its composition to the days surrounding Michael's 32nd birthday.

Howells's final psalm-based pieces were two anthems: 'One thing have I desired' (Psalm 84:10) in 1968, and 'Exsultate Deo' (Psalm 81) in 1977.

### **Three Psalm Preludes, Set One, Op. 32 (1921)**

The first three Psalm Preludes were written between 1915 and 1916,<sup>75</sup> when Howells was a student at the Royal College of Music, and published in 1921. He was an organ pupil of Parratt, studied composition with Stanford and counterpoint with Wood. This was Howells's first serious attempt at composition for the organ following his first Sonata (1911) for the instrument, and these outstanding miniature tone poems have become part of the staple diet for organists across the world. Each is inspired by a verse from the psalms, and displays the composer's improvisatory genius. Reviewing these shortly after publication, Harvey Grace says of them that they are: "among the most striking of recent contributions to English organ music... the idiom is modern, and the blend of modal, diatonic and chromatic harmony is a refreshing change from so much modern music in which the chromaticism is so constant as to lead to monotony. Mr Howells evidently finds the organ a sympathetic medium, and players with a taste for organ music of a fresh and individual character will look to him for further additions to their repertory."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> McMillan advances a view that the first of the set was not written until 1920, see below for further discussion.

<sup>76</sup> Harvey Grace, 'New Music' in *The Musical Times* vol 62 no. 944 1921, p. 702.

No. 1

The first prelude, dedicated to Howells's teacher at the RCM, Sir Walter Parratt, bears the ascription "Ps. 34. v. 6", which (in the Coverdale translation in the *Book of Common Prayer*) reads: "lo, the poor crieth, and the Lord heareth him: yea, and saveth him out of all his troubles." Decades later Howells described the dedication as "a student's shy tribute to a great Organist and Teacher. Structurally it is an essay in slow, prolonged, cumulative development of climax, followed by an equally unhurried descent dismissing and eliminating complexity, movement, sonority."<sup>77</sup> Palmer describes this piece as having: "a polyphony which lightens and aerates the harmonic texture, a palpable feeling for shape and growth, an interesting interplay of diatonic and chromatic elements, and, above all, a majesty, a regal splendour at the climax which anticipates the transcendental spirit of many a later work."<sup>78</sup>

The published score bears the ascription "H. H. 1915." This does not appear in the manuscript (RCM 4713) but the date has been widely accepted. Nixon McMillan has advanced a theory that this piece was not written until 1920. His evidence is a letter written by Parratt to Howells (on RCM headed notepaper) dated "10.3.192(?)" and also including "1920" in a circle, and a penciled comment by Howells stating "This note is in reference to my first *Psalms Prelude* (written for Sir Walter's 79th birthday last month) which he sent back to me - in manuscript - with this note."<sup>79</sup> The birthday in question was in February 1920. McMillan further observes that the manuscript bears the dedication "Sir Walter Parratt, C.V.O." to which the letter "K" was later added. Parratt was made a CVO in 1917 and KCVO in 1921.

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<sup>77</sup> Herbert Howells, jacket notes, *Herbert Howells Church Music*, ARGO record ZRG 507 (1967), cited in Anderson, Christopher S. (ed), *Twentieth-Century Organ Music*, p. 294.

<sup>78</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 61.

<sup>79</sup> John Nixon McMillan, *The Organ Works of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)*, pp.141-2.

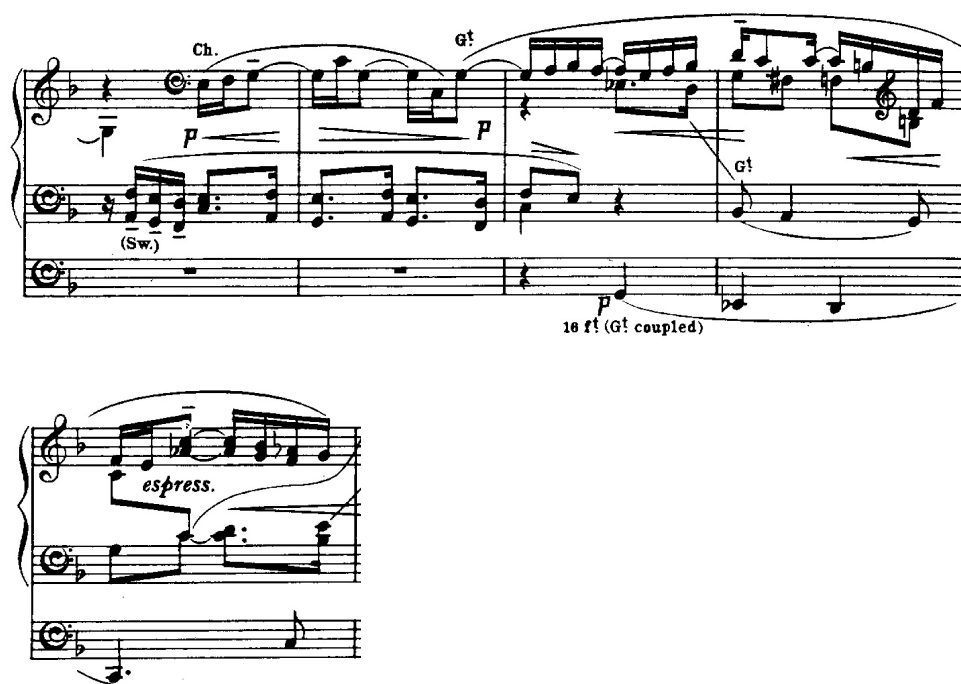
The sombre mood of the text is immediately captured in the tempo marking, *Lento, poco appenato* (slow, and suffering, pained or grieved). Growing from a hushed, pained opening, through an impassioned climax, the conclusion is reached in a gentle whisper as the poor soul finds deliverance from the Lord.

The opening theme is a mixture of tonality and modality, moving almost entirely by step, and marked by a falling second and syncopation, portraying the sighing and crying of the “poor man.” There is a palpable sense of pleading or even sobbing created by the weeping appoggiaturas in the opening theme. The tonal centre of the piece is not firmly established until bar 5, with the conclusion of the first statement of the theme arriving clearly in d minor. This theme is then restated a third higher, with a growing insistency, a device used throughout the prelude.



Example 16, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 1, bars 1-5

The tonality passes through E major and moves to C major for the introduction of the second main theme in bar 16. This theme is a gentle, though at times leaping response to the impassioned plea of the opening theme, and it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that this reflects the words “and the Lord heard him.” Again the tonality is fluid, touching on G minor and A minor, before coming to centre around E flat major.



Example 17, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 1, bars 16-20

These two themes continue to dialogue, and this could be interpreted as a reflection on the psalm verse: the poor man wrestles with God through a series of chromatically inflected tones and scales, suspensions and appoggiaturas, along with the frequent changes in both tempo and dynamics. The beseeching of the poor man increases with agonizing intensity until the climax is reached in bars 47-58, where the dynamic marking is *fff*, and the opening theme is heard in augmentation. Slowly the desperation begins to subside, as the soul recognizes the response of

God, marked by the instruction *poco a poco dim. e rit.* The final statement of pleading comes in b. 85, this time differentiated by a much calmer accompaniment and some particularly rich harmonies. The prelude ends, as it opened, with a mixing of the Dorian mode and the minor key, and the Tierce de Picardie on the final cadence, along with the dynamic marking *ppp*, gives a sense of peaceful assurance and tranquility.

Howells later quoted from this Prelude in his 1917 composition, 'Elegy for viola, string quartet and string orchestra' (Op. 15).

#### No. 2

The second Prelude is dedicated to Harry Stevens-Davis, a pupil of Howells, a city of London banker, and the acting organist of Beaconsfield Parish Church during the war service of the incumbent organist, Sidney Shimmin (who was the dedicatee of the third of these Preludes). Stevens-Davis was also the dedicatee of 'Sing Lullaby', the third of Howells's 'Three Carol-Anthems' in 1920. The ascription of this prelude is "Ps. 37. v. 11", which (again quoting the Coverdale / BCP text) reads: "But the meek-spirited shall possess the earth and shall be refreshed in the multitude of peace".

In the sleeve notes for an LP in 1977<sup>80</sup>, Felix Aprahamian recounts the genesis of this piece: "One Saturday morning at Beaconsfield, the pupil asked his teacher for an easy piece which he could play as a voluntary the following day. The piece was written in lieu of a lesson, practiced on the Saturday afternoon, and duly performed

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<sup>80</sup> 'The Complete Organ Music of Herbert Howells, vol. 2'.



on the Sunday.”<sup>81</sup> In an interview in 1993 Aprahamian stated that this information could only have come from the composer.<sup>82</sup>

This is, both technically and harmonically, the simplest of the set. There is no turbulent torrent of emotion, the music is marked by a flowing and melodic character. It is more diatonic than is usual in Howells’s writing, but with some beautifully expressive chromaticisms. Palmer describes it rather whimsically as an “unpretentious essay in a conservatively diatonic idiom that might have come from many another organist-composer hand of the period; it contains little that Ebenezer Prout, that infallible touchstone in matters musical, would have deemed worthy of censure.”<sup>83</sup>

The prelude begins pianissimo, with *Non troppo lento, ma sempre espressivo* as the direction for tempo. The diatonic harmony and the use of a higher, somewhat ethereal register on the swell gives a serene opening to the prelude.



Example 18, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 2, bars 1-4

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in John Nixon McMillan, *The Organ Works of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)*, p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 61.

It is from this placid and gentle opening theme, with its predominant use of stepwise motion and occasional downward fourths and thirds that the bulk of the prelude is developed. The dynamics rarely rise above *mp*. In bar 16 the opening theme returns, this time in the dominant, on a solo register on the Great (with the swell coupled) and marked *mf*. This soaring solo sound returns again in bar 42, which leads into the muted climax in bar 54, where the dynamic rises, for just two bars, to *f*, but even here this is qualified by the addition of the words *ma dolce*.

At the second solo passage on the Great, the tempo increases with the indication *un poco più mosso*, and the left hand accompanies the theme with a passage of quavers in undulating thirds, which is the beginning of the slow build up to the climax in bar 54.

Example 19, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 2, bars 40-45

Howells makes use of extended pedal points, in bars 16 to 24, 38 to 42, and 61 to 66, which reinforces the sense of tranquility. While strongly anchored in E flat major,

the theme is recapitulated in the dominant at bar 16, returning to the tonic before an interesting series of modulations through F minor (bars 31-35), D flat Major (bars 36-37), followed by B major over an extended pedal point, resolving into E major in bar 43. A subtle enharmonic shift from C sharp major in bars 51-52 to D flat major in bar 53 brings us home to the tonic key for the final 16 bars, with the gentlest of endings, descending to *pp*, and marked *più e più tranquillo*, and further diminuendo through a single bar of 5/4 (the only change of time signature apart from two single bars of 2/4 in the opening section) to end in a whispered *ppp*.

### No. 3

The third prelude is dedicated to Sidney Shimmin (1891-1968), a student at the RCM with Howells and Ivor Gurney, and also the dedicatee of the fourth of Gurney's 'Five Preludes' for piano. He was organist of the Chapel Royal Windsor Great Park (1910-1914), and from 1915 of Beaconsfield Parish Church. He went on to become a teacher at Malvern College, Cheltenham Ladies College and Rendcomb College, and in 1946 he founded the Cheltenham Bach Choir. The ascription of this prelude is from verse 4 of Psalm 23, "yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

For this prelude Howells chose the key traditionally associated with tragedy, C minor, and the incessant crochet ostinato with which the prelude begins does not abate throughout the piece. It is interesting to note that this is the only Psalm Prelude written in an unchanging metre (6/4), and this regularity adds to the sense of doleful journey. This relentless ostinato creates the sense of a cortège proceeding through the valley of the shadow of death, and the listener cannot help but hear, as

the thin-textured bleak opening thickens out, and the dynamic level slowly rises, the glorious climb to the summit where the psalmist proclaims that he will fear no evil because the Lord, who is his shepherd and guide, is with him.

Over the initial ostinato the theme begins with a syncopated figure incorporating a falling second, perhaps representing a sigh of anguish. The pedal entry in bar 8 echoes this figure and introduces a chromaticism which enhances the sense of gloom.

*Lento serioso.* Ch. Sw. coupled

MANUAL. *p* *mp assai espressivo*

PEDAL. *Sw.* *simile*

*dim.*

*ppp*

*ppp*

1st *poco pesante*

Example 20, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 3, bars 1-11

The opening tempo marking is *Lento serio*, and the opening theme a single melodic line against the left hand ostinato. In bar 8 this texture starts to thicken as the right hand plays in thirds, and the chromatic pedal line is introduced. By bar 12 the left hand texture has become quite dense, and there is a footnote to bar 15 directing that “throughout this page the rhythm must not be rigid.” The intensity continues to build, and in bar 27 the tempo direction is *Più mosso, e poco agitato*, and this development continues in bar 33 with the further direction *ancora più mosso e più agitato*. The addition of the full swell in bar 39 is followed by a *molto* crescendo.

The climax is approaching in bar 41 with a fortissimo restatement of the theme and huge clusters of notes in both hands, with the ostinato played in both hands as well as the pedals. In bar 44 the dynamic increases to *fff*, and the right hand soars to the upper part of the manuals. The chromatic pedal ostinato is reintroduced, but this time against a strong C major chord in the manuals, creating a sonorous blanket of sound, and representing the soul’s assurance that “thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”



Example 21, Psalm Preludes Set 1, No. 3, bars 44-49

After an eight-bar climax the pitch begins to descend, the texture slowly thins, the dynamic begins to decrescendo, and there is a slow *rit*, leading to a return to *Tempo I*. The ostinato remains, but now a gentler rumble, and the final twelve bars are directed as *sempre poco a poco tranquillo al fine*. The ostinato continues, a reminder that the valley of the shadow of death has not been avoided, but has been navigated with the guidance of the shepherd, and the final seal of tranquility is the diminuendo on the final chord, as the dynamic level fades away to a *ppp*, the ostinato slows then finally halts, and the right hand drops out, leaving a low C minor chord played by the left hand and pedals.

### **Three Psalm Preludes, Set Two (1940)**

The second set of Psalm Preludes dates from 1938 and 1939, and was completed around the same time as Howells's choral masterpiece, *Hymnus Paradisi*. There are particular links with the first two preludes which will be explored below. In more general terms they are the response of a composer to a loss so profound that words cannot find a release, but music, of its very essence, brings comfort beyond words. Discussing the set, Palmer writes: "No. 2 of the set calls for no special comment, a fluently-written, quiet-tempered voluntary... Nos. 1 and 3, on the other hand, are two of Howells's finest organ works."<sup>84</sup> Referring to the first of this set he goes on to say: "for intensity of expression Howells can rarely have exceeded the approach to the climax and the return of the opening motif at the climactic point: it is perhaps necessary for him thus to stand and face this incoming tide of despair in order that he might shine through to the clear white light of *Hymnus*."<sup>85</sup> Turning to no. 3 he

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<sup>84</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, pp. 63-4.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

describes it as anticipating and perhaps even surpassing 'Paean' (the final of the *Six Pieces*) in its uninhibited elation and sheer physical excitement.

Reviewing this suite of works in the *Musical Times* in 1940, the editor of the journal, Harvey Grace, begins by comparing (and contrasting) them with the set written two decades earlier, saying "the dissonances are bolder, the tonality frequently has a touch of indefiniteness that is both suggestive and attractive, the polyphony is sometimes of chords rather than of single parts, and the melodic line is perhaps less immediately ingratiating than in the earlier set. But there is no falling-off in invention, in the building of climaxes, in the sense of colour (musical colour, not that of the organ-builder); and as a whole the new Preludes leave an even stronger individual impression their predecessors."<sup>86</sup> Grace goes on to discuss the issue of registration and makes several observations which are worthy of note. He begins by suggesting that the opening of the first prelude should be performed on a single 8' stop of particular clarity, and observes that there are climaxes created by Howells's use of harmonic and rhythmic changes and an increase in emotional intensity but not necessarily power, and that performances can be marred because "failure to realize this distinction may lead players to discount the climax by adding stops too soon."<sup>87</sup> Most important of all is his account of correspondence with the composer. Grace wrote to query a direction at the end of the first page of the second prelude where both hands are marked to be played on Swell, but there is a difficult crossing of parts. The response received from Howells indicated that the direction was indeed correct, and he said "my wish there was to have unity of texture and colour above all. The ideal of the passage would be the balanced tone of a string

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<sup>86</sup> Harvey Grace, 'New Music' in *The Musical Times*, vol 81 no. 1167, 1940, p. 209.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

quartet... The thing I hope that players will most resist is fussy and oft-changing registration. It would injure continuity, especially in Nos. 2 and 3. I feel that flexibility of movement matters far more than variety of colour.”<sup>88</sup> These words from the composer should give the performer pause to reconsider interpretation of these works. Grace’s final assessment of this suite is one of unadulterated praise: “the Preludes are not mere organ music, but works of character and significance that happen to be written for the organ. An occasional reminder of that distinction is useful.”<sup>89</sup>

### No. 1

This prelude is dedicated to John Dykes Bower, with the ascription *De profundis clamavi ad Te, Domine*. The dedicatee, like Howells, had been a pupil of Brewer at Gloucester. From 1926-1936 he was organist successively of Truro Cathedral, New College Oxford and Durham Cathedral. These short appointments were followed by over three decades as organist of St Paul’s Cathedral London, and a Professorship of Organ at the RCM. The ascription is the first verse of Psalm 130, “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord”.<sup>90</sup> An often overlooked detail is the date of completion, noted in a small typeface at the end of the piece, “(H.H. London. 29-9-1938)”. The significance is, of course, that this was Michael’s name day, the feast of St Michael and All Angels’.

Everything about this prelude cries of the anguish of a parent’s broken heart. The tempo is given as *Lento, dolente*, slow, sad, mournful. The use of the 5/8 metre gives an asymmetrical shape to the phrases, which are marked by suspensions, false

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>90</sup> Howells wrote a second organ piece on this text, *Prelude De Profundis* (1958).



relations and accented passing tones. The prelude opens with the hands at either extremity of the keyboard, crawling towards each other in a serpentine fashion, with chromaticism and syncopation used to create a feeling of being in the depths of despair.



Example 22, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 1-2

The time signature is predominantly 5/8, but it is constantly shifting, and there are no fewer than 51 time signature indications across the 86 bars of the piece, shifting regularly into 6/8 and 3/8, and less often bars of 2/8. This constant uncertainty as to bar length heightens the agony and the intensity, the troubles of the heart and mind. The unusual beaming of notes across bar lines (as in the example above) contributes to the feeling of an even more irregular metre, or even to a sense of no fixed metre at all: the anguish and despair has neither beginning nor end.

Alongside constantly shifting time signatures, the tempo increases steadily alongside the dynamics. In bar 15 the direction is *un pochettino più moto* and this is followed, twice, by *poco crescendo* leading to the first forte in bar 22. In bar 27 the dynamic has dropped to pianissimo, and the tempo again begins to increase with *un poco più mosso*, and in bar 35 *un poch. agitato e poco a poco accel.* The long slow crescendo continues, and in bar 51 the direction is *ancora più mosso*. He specifies the

addition of 'full Swell' in bar 55, and from bar 63 there are two bars marked *allarg. molto* preparing for the climactic moment in bar 65, with its dynamic marking of *fff*. Throughout this one can feel the hand wringing of the bereaved father, with the increasingly painful waves of suffering consuming the very core of his soul. After each cry is a fleeting repose before the agony returns with greater intensity.



Example 23, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 64-66

From that pinnacle of anguished intensity both dynamics and tempo subside, with the direction *più e più tranquillo* in bar 76 being followed in bar 85 by *più lento, assai tranquillo*, leading to the final three bars of *molto lento*, suggesting that a calming assurance is beginning to take hold. The prevailing minor mode gives way, ultimately, to a final statement in D major, suggesting a sense of optimism that God has not only heard, but also answered the cries from “out of the depths”. It is particularly interesting to compare the final phrase to that of ‘I heard a voice from heaven’ in *Hymnus Paradisi*, where we can see not only the same key, but also a very similar progression and mood.



Example 24, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 1, bars 92-96

Example 25, Hymnus Paradisi V, 'I heard a voice from heaven', b.60-64

## No. 2

This prelude is dedicated to William H. Harris, with the ascription "Yea the darkness is no darkness with Thee, but the night is as clear as the day: the darkness and light to Thee are both alike. Ps 139: v.11." In 1921 Harris was appointed to the faculty of the Royal College of Music, teaching organ and harmony. In 1933 he was appointed Organist and Choirmaster at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, where he was involved in the musical education of the teenage princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. He was the conductor at the coronations of both King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II.

As with the first of this set, the date of completion is again significant, April 12th 1939, the day when he should have celebrated Michael's transition from childhood to teenage years (his thirteenth birthday). Given the years of grief, the choice of text is perhaps surprising, and suggests that some comfort has been found in the darkness.

The text introduces two different concepts, darkness and light, which are both opposite and paradoxically alike. It is possible to speculate wildly about the application of this in the texture and form of the music. The texture is much more transparent than its predecessor, and there is a sense of restrained optimism as the F sharp minor opening turns to a major ending.

It is possible to suggest that the angular theme in the opening bars of the left hand is a representation of darkness. The opening is analogous to a fugal subject and countersubject, though not rigorously developed.

**Lento placido, teneramente** (♩. 54)

ANDREW L. ARNOLD

**MANUAL**

**PEDAL**

Example 26, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 2, bars 1-7

A second theme appears in bar 22, a rising figure in parallel sixths in the right hand, with the same theme in augmentation in the left.



Example 27, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 2, bars 21-24

In bar 58 the two themes are combined, in a sense a reconciliation of darkness and light being both alike.



Example 28, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 2, bars 58-59

Another interesting musical twist, not immediately obvious to the listener, is the enharmonic respelling of the D-sharp major chord in bar 30 as an E-flat major chord in bar 32. Aurally it is the same chord, but theoretically and harmonically it marks a significant and noteworthy shift.



Example 29, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 2, bars 30-32

The shift from the opening minor key (F-sharp minor) to the same key but in the major for the final thirteen bars has already been noted. It is worthy of note of itself, but also because of the parallel with *Hymnus Paradisi*, where that key is used for the final section of the 'Sanctus' movement, setting words from Psalm 121, "the Lord shall preserve thee from all evil, yea it is even he that shall keep thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in, from this time forth and for evermore." Not only are there the direct parallels, but equally important is the fact the 'light' is so central to *Hymnus*, and that in both pieces light ultimately prevails, with the establishment of a calm tranquility, but only after any difficulties have been overcome.

### No. 3

This prelude is dedicated to Percy C. Hull, with the ascription "Sing unto Him a new song; play skilfully with a loud noise. Ps 33: v.3". Hull was organist of Hereford Cathedral from 1918-1949, and was responsible for reviving the Three Choirs Festival in 1946.

We have now reached what is surely the triumph of grief over despair. The first of this set was on a text which is melancholic, words which epitomize the depths of

despair for the composer. The second reveals a hope that light will triumph over darkness, and now Howells has chosen words which seem almost at odds with all of his other psalm preludes - and yet how fitting as the moment of catharsis is reached. Palmer describes this as “suddenly vigorous and buoyant, (it) suggests a throwing-open of doors and windows, a dispelling of nightmares and gloom, summer *in excelsis*.”<sup>91</sup>

Howells has generally followed a pattern of a gentle opening, building in intensity both in dynamics and often also in tempo to a large climax, then gradually subsiding. In this prelude the shape is inverted, the opening is marked *Allegro (non troppo) ma giocoso, fortissimo*. This opening is followed by a gentler middle section, quieter and slower, before the bold opening theme returns with an acceleration towards the end.

The opening, in C Major, is bold and exuberant, conveying the sense of a new song, coming after the first and second preludes. The dense yet thrilling dissonant harmonies have echoes of his second sonata, and seem to anticipate the later ‘Paean’ (the final of his *Six Pieces*, written in 1940). The opening is marked with crunching cluster chords, jubilant flourishes and highly animated, pointed rhythms, creating a festive feel, and well illustrating the words “play skilfully with a loud noise.” It is certainly the most technically demanding of the preludes, with copious use of semi- and demi-semi-quaver runs. The Tuba entry at bar 51 adds to the sense of flamboyance and exuberance.

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<sup>91</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 119.



Example 30, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 1-3

The middle section is entered rather abruptly with a semitonal shift in the pedals from D to D sharp. Over a prolonged pedal point begins an almost sinister fugal exposition centered around the sharpened subdominant (F sharp major). The tonality is ambiguous. Is the pedal point functioning as the third of B major, or the dominant of G sharp minor?



Example 31, Psalm Preludes Set 2, No. 3, bars 39-47

After a considerable period of development and growing intensity, another pedal semitone shift (from A flat to A natural) in bars 134-135 leads to a shortened and



transformed recapitulation of the opening theme, but now in the brighter supertonic (D major). The tonic is reestablished in the lengthy coda, which concludes with a brief reappearance of the tuba, and a remote (and dramatic) harmonic progression through G sharp minor and C sharp major before resolving on a thunderous tonic chord.

## **Conclusion**

It is no mere coincidence that both sets of Psalm Preludes were composed in the immediate aftermath of what were the life-changing moments in Howells's life-story, the diagnosis of Graves' disease in 1915, with its anticipated limited life expectancy and consequent journey 'through the valley of the shadow of death', and the death of Michael in 1935. Like so many before and since, Howells found a sense of comfort and solace in the honesty of the Hebrew poetry, and the ability to cry 'out of the depths'. During his time at Gloucester and Salisbury cathedrals, and later at St John's College, the singing of the psalms would have been part of the daily offices, and the words seared onto the memory through cyclical repetition.

It is also worth observing that in turning to the Psalms, Howells had a choice not only of 150 psalms, but of 2,461 individual verses, and from these he initially chose three, and subsequently three more. There are certain psalms which are more widely known than others, which are quoted in literature or from which phrases have entered common parlance. It is interesting to note the breadth of Howells's exposure to the Psalms through his particular choice of verses. In the first set he begins (Psalm 34:6) with an imprecatory verse, but one which includes what is

essentially an 'oracle of salvation,'<sup>92</sup> and there is a sense of pouring out his heart before God. This is followed (Ps 37:11) by a verse of confident assurance, perhaps laden with thoughts of his friend who laid down his life in the service of king and country, or more widely of the thousands upon thousands who were doing so in the battlefields of the First World War. The final choice for the first set (Ps 23.4) must surely be an autobiographical reflection in music, written by one who entered the valley, but who has survived through the grace of God.

The second set has more of a sense of progression, being more fully bound up in a single and particular loss. It begins with a cry of utter dereliction and abandonment (Ps 130:1), followed by a reflection on the redemptive power of God (Ps 139:11), before finally turning from grief to look towards the future with renewed hope and confidence (Ps 33:2).

Spicer records his daughter Urusla's assessment of his faith — or perceived lack of it. She said that after Michael's death "We used to live in church. But that was an emotional thing as Michael was buried there. As far as religion goes I think he adored the music and the buildings - he adored cathedrals. Emotionally he had a sort of spiritual sense."<sup>93</sup> She followed this with an account of a conversation about a year before his death where he expressed his doubts about an afterlife.

This is perhaps a simplistic analysis of a complex character who has suffered an extreme trauma in the death of an only son. The particular choice of Psalm verses, as analyzed above, might suggest a much deeper faith that he found hard to

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<sup>92</sup> A term used by Biblical scholars to refer to a sense of assurance that Yahweh has both heard and answered the Psalmist's cry.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 98.

articulate, but no less real because it is intensely private. In an interview with Susan Regan for *The Gramophone* in 1971, Howells spoke of the effect of this bereavement and the subsequent catharsis found in the composition of *Hymnus Paradisi*:

In 1935 my young son died of polio; I was completely frozen and all the sympathy and kindness in the world couldn't help. Friends tried, but I knew I had to get something out of me that had taken possession; I needed to write a special type of work. In the first year after he died I jotted down a few notes and put them in order during the following two years, when I was a little more sociable and sensible. It was completed in 1938 but it was a private document and I didn't want to share it with the public. It had done the service I had wanted it to do; released me from the crippling numbness of loss.<sup>94</sup>

Is it a step too far to suggest that the second set of Psalm Preludes might, in some way, be the “public” document which served as a counterpart to the more private document? In both instances the words of scripture and the liturgy of the church were found to bring comfort and hope in the darkest of times.

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<sup>94</sup> Cited in Martin John Ward, *Analysis of five works by Herbert Howells*, p. 8.

### Six Pieces for Organ

"In 1940, after a severe illness, I found a new way of making use of convalescence" said Herbert Howells, in an introduction to a radio broadcast of *Paean* on 2nd May 1967. "In those days and in that time, in sheer affection and admiration of Dr Herbert Sumsion of Gloucester, I wrote this set of six pieces, ending with a *Paean*."<sup>95</sup> What a tremendous present to give to the venerable organist, to quote again from Palmer, "A princely gift."<sup>96</sup>

Five of the six pieces were completed between 1939 - 1940, and the sixth, 'Saraband (in modo elegiaco),' completing the set in 1945. While Howells recalled composing the set during recuperation (as quoted above), Spicer notes that two of the pieces ('Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue' and 'Master Tallis's Testament') were shown to Sumsion during Howells's new year holiday in Gloucestershire in January 1940, before the illness.<sup>97</sup> The set was published in 1953.

One of the interesting questions is whether the six pieces were conceived of as a suite, or just a collection. Four of the six pieces show the influence of Tudor and Elizabethan music on Howells, but two have no Tudor influence at all. There seems to be little or no linkage between the six pieces, with the possible exception of the two Sarabands. The second ('In modo elegiaco') was originally entitled 'for Good Friday,' and so a tenuous link could be proposed with the first (Easter) Saraband.

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<sup>95</sup> Cited in Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 435.

<sup>96</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 64.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 116.

The six pieces display a remarkable variety of mood, from the exuberance of 'Paean' to the coolness of the Tudor theme and variations in 'Master Tallis,' from the intense agony to ecstatic hope in the two Sarabands.

In his review of the *Six Pieces*, Luther Noss describes them as: "a sort of Anglicised impressionism: all of the familiar impressionistic devices are used, but in moderation, and with a fine understanding of their application to the organ. They offer both a unity and a variety which permits their use singly or as a group... these pieces represent contemporary English organ music at its conservative best."<sup>98</sup> That curious phrase, coined by Noss, of 'Anglicised impressionism' is perhaps a useful one. Like many words the term 'Impressionism' is not easily defined, but often easily understood. In his article in the *Grove Dictionary*, Jann Pasler traces the term through a school of painting where suffused and reflected light is used to give an impression of a landscape or urban setting rather than an outline or detail, and traces that style through the music to early twentieth century France.<sup>99</sup> While Howells does not conform to that classical definition, there are elements of an overlap, which Diane Cooke describes as "'Impressionism' in the simpler sense of 'leaving an impression' on the listener - that impression being one of atmosphere or intangible feeling or spirit."<sup>100</sup>

### **Preludio 'Sine Nomine'**

The title of this piece might, at first sight, make the reader think of the great hymn tune composed by Vaughan Williams for the text 'For all the saints' when editing the *English Hymnal*. Knowing Howells's admiration for Vaughan Williams, it might

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<sup>98</sup> Luther Noss, 'Review: *Six Pieces for Organ* by Herbert Howells' in *Notes* 12, pp. 152-3.

<sup>99</sup> Cf p. 604 for a fuller discussion.

<sup>100</sup> Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 39.

be logical to look for a connection, but none is to be found. A second line of enquiry might be to translate the Latin, so the piece becomes 'Prelude without a name,' which is no more enlightening, unless one were to conclude that Howells didn't quite know what he was writing.

Understanding the title takes us back to the Tudor era. In the 16th century there arose a tradition of writing pieces entitled *In Nomine*, using the plainsong of part of the Benedictus (of the Mass), "In Nomine Domine" (in the name of the Lord) as a cantus firmus around which were woven three or more contrapuntal lines, usually for instruments such as viols. Also from the Renaissance period was the tradition of the *Missa Sine Nomine* (mass without a name). At that time most masses were paraphrase masses or parody masses, using existing plainsong or polyphonic material as the basis for the composition. Settings which were written of completely new music were said to be *Sine Nomine*.

With both of these in mind, it is immediately obvious that Howells is fusing Tudor England with the twentieth century. While he has used the title twice before — the *Missa Sine Nomine* (Mass in the Dorian Mode) of 1912, and *Sine Nomine: A Phantasy* in 1922, there is no link between these three pieces.

Palmer recounts a letter from the Canadian organist, Charles Peaker to Howells on 29 September 1954, in which he says: "the *Sine Nomine* gives me the feeling I get from Thomas Hardy when he is taking us across a bleak moor in the twilight."<sup>101</sup> Palmer describes it almost offhandedly: "this quiet improvisation is particularly

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<sup>101</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 435.

useful as a service prelude”<sup>102</sup> while to Spicer it is “a piece of simply outstanding impressionistic colouring.”<sup>103</sup> In his assessment of Howells’ organ music in the *Organist’s Review* Spicer insightfully names the issue (alluded to by Palmer) with this short piece: “here is another classic example of an apparently easy piece, ideal as an incoming voluntary, which rewards a hundred-fold the performer who has an ounce of spirituality in his blood and who takes the time and trouble to create the atmosphere Howells intended.”<sup>104</sup> Playing this is not merely a question of getting the right notes in the right order but about understanding the spirit of Howells, and communicating that as much as the understanding the technical devices he uses.

Palmer’s description carries us some way to understanding this complex interplay.

It is:

a microcosm of the complementary, not conflicting, elements in Howells’ musical make-up. The opening, severely polyphonic, suggests austerity and sobriety, whilst the second part (*placido ma espressivo*) with its succession of rich subtly-voiced added-note chords — at the euphonious dissonance of which Howells is a pastmaster — reveals an unassailably romantic streak which nevertheless eschews excessive self-indulgence and superfluous expressiveness.<sup>105</sup>

The Preludio begins with a single note played at several octaves on the Swell Diapason, rapidly shrinking away in a diminuendo. The first half of the piece is marked by a gradual expansion and contraction of what is a thin texture, perhaps more mysterious because it is essentially in the Phrygian mode, and a falling melodic motif. Long sustained notes, pedals points and rests contribute to a feeling

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<sup>102</sup> Christopher S. Anderson (ed), *Twentieth-Century Organ Music*, p. 296.

<sup>103</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 116.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Spicer, ‘The Organ Music of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)’ in *Organist’s Review*, 1992, p. 124.

<sup>105</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 64.

of space and spaciousness, as do the melodies which seem to wind without beginning or ending:

Example 32, Preludio 'Sine Nomine', bars 13-21

The contrast with the second section is marked. The thin texture is replaced by lush, dense harmony, long breathed chords and relatively static harmony:

Example 33, Preludio 'Sine Nomine', bars 25-31



The gently oscillating chords of this section do not lead the ear in a particular harmonic direction, but there is a sense of almost reassuring calm, and a slow drift towards the dominant, albeit with the most surprising cadence choosing the unrelated flattened submediant as the penultimate chord:



Example 34, *Preludio 'Sine Nomine'*, bars 45-48

### **Saraband (for the morning of Easter)**

As a dance form, the Sarabande originated in Latin America from where it migrated to Spain in the sixteenth century. In 1583 Philip II of Spain attempted to suppress the dance because of its lascivious reputation, but it managed to flourish.<sup>106</sup> From Spain it spread to Italy and then France, where it became slower and more stately. It was in triple time, with a marked emphasis on the second beat, which was often dotted. It became one of the principal movements of the Baroque suite and became popular in England in the seventeenth century. It was revived in the twentieth century by composers including Debussy, Satie and Vaughan Williams.

The 'Saraband (for the morning of Easter)' is unusual in that "it is the only sarabande in Howells's output not in elegiac mode."<sup>107</sup> Structured in regular four bar phrases with a profusion of written out ornaments, Howells employs all of the

<sup>106</sup> Cf *Oxford Companion to Music*, p. 1101.

<sup>107</sup> Barber, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 257.

characteristics of the dance listed above, but instead of the usual binary form, he chooses ternary form. In three sections he communicates stately majesty, poignant blissfulness and raucous ecstasy.<sup>108</sup> Palmer develops this analysis, observing “the miracle does not happen all at once; the music needs the utmost breadth of ground for what it has to say. One of the most thrilling moments in the organist’s repertoire is the actual moment of Resurrection when the gates of Paradise are flung wide and the main theme returns, having broken all bonds asunder.”<sup>109</sup>



Example 35, *Saraband (for the morning of Easter)*, bars 79-82

The opening section is firmly rooted in C major, but even in such strongly diatonic writing there are bold touches, such as the subdominant ninth chord on the first accented beat (bar 1), and the constant sense of tension and release created by chromatically enhanced chords on the accented beats resolving onto simple triads. There is a brief foray into G major at bar 16, followed by a longer section hovering around F major before a series of more chromatically rich chords brings a return to the tonic.

<sup>108</sup> Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 41.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 65.

The contrasting middle section is in the flattened submediant (A-flat major) and reached by the simplest of common tone modulations, an extended tonic pedal which becomes the third of the new key. This section is marked by a gentle lyricism, and the new tempo has increased slightly from the opening, *Un poch. più mosso ma tranquillo*. From pianissimo the dynamic rises slowly as the intensity increases. The throbbing figure in the pedals (a sort of stylised pedal point) adds drive and momentum as the texture thickens and the demisemiquaver ornaments add to the sense of *più sonore*. The enharmonic respelling of the pedal point A-flat as G-sharp in bar 66 preempts the shift to B major and the *con anima* direction in the following bar as the excitement and intensity build through a series of chromatic shifts and a suddenly more active pedal part. Howells does not provide any theological insight beyond the title, and it is left to the performer and the listener to interpret the Easter story in sound. With this middle section it seems that slowly realisation dawns on Mary Magdalene and the first disciples as they realise the enormity of the meaning of the empty tomb and the truth of the resurrection is revealed.



Example 36, *Saraband (for the morning of Easter)*, bars 63-66

When the opening theme returns it is heavily accented, the chords are fuller, the pedal heavier, as all the hosts of heaven can be heard to join in the great proclamation "Christ is risen!" What was shrouded in mystery and confusion has

been made clear. What could the dynamic marking be but *fff*? All of the themes heard in the opening section are repeated, but now more triumphantly. While the piece is notable for the many traditional cadences included, the final magnificent cadence, E major to the tonic C major is thrilling and arresting.

Wadham Sutton describes this as: “a work of compelling intensity and power, an ecstatic vision of the first Easter morning. The characteristic harmonies which set Howells’s works apart and make him so immediately and unmistakably identifiable permeate these pages, the virile discords resolving in chains onto orthodox and judiciously placed triads. The texture is dense, with massive chords to imbue the music with overwhelming solidity and strength.”<sup>110</sup>

The majesty of this piece is undoubted, but it lacks something of the exuberance which is associated with the liturgy of Easter Day. Howells here touches on something profound theologically, that the Easter narrative (particularly in the Johannine account) is not an immediate Alleluia, but a slow confusion and revelation. There is a first awareness that something profound has happened, but that realisation takes place over a period of time as the disciples process the meaning of the events. In that sense, Howells is much closer to the Johannine narrative than the tradition of the Church.

### **Master Tallis’s Testament**

‘Master Tallis’s Testament’ was the second of these pieces to be composed, following hot on the heels of the ‘Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue’ in late 1939.

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<sup>110</sup> Wadham Sutton, ‘The organ music of Herbert Howells’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 112 no. 1536, pp. 177-8.

Howells showed both manuscripts to Sumsion during his New Year visit to Gloucester. Spicer recognises the importance of this piece in Howells's writing, saying:

This piece is actually more important in Howells's list of works than its meagre five minutes playing time would indicate. He regarded it as one of his favourite compositions, and as a 'footnote' to Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*. In fact Howells was entering another period when Tudor / Elizabethan dances and dance forms were providing the inspiration for many of these works. A new set of clavichord pieces was imminent, and several of these *Six Pieces for Organ* were related in one way or another to music of the earlier period.<sup>111</sup>

Like Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia*, 'Master Tallis' is no mere archaic reproduction. Howells's stylistic fingerprints are clearly seen in every bar. As in *Lambert's Clavichord* he takes Tudor form, phraseology, false relations, texture and figuration but using his own harmonic language and dark harmonic colouring. He moves fluidly between modal and tonal harmony (the Dorian mode and G minor), and the music is marked by "an unerring sense of climax and repose,<sup>112</sup> constantly building in texture, in intensity and in dynamics to a thrilling climax and a mesmerizing coda.

The form is very simple, a theme and two variations, followed by a short coda. In each variation the melody and the basic harmonic structure are retained, and intensity is added by increasing the density of both counterpoint and chordal passages.

The basic theme consists of three phrases, of eight, four and six bars respectively. The first phrase remains within a range of third either side of the tonic, and is almost

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<sup>111</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 116.

<sup>112</sup> Wadham Sutton, 'The organ music of Herbert Howells' in *The Musical Times*, vol 112 no. 1536, p. 178.

entirely stepwise. The second phrase begins a minor sixth above the tonic and is a repeated descending scalic motif. The third theme begins like the first, and mirrors much of the earlier rhythm, but with a more developed melodic contour, and increases the ranges to its summit, at a seventh above the tonic. As the phrase ends it moves from the mode to the minor. One of the entrancing and captivating features is the sense in which the melody grows organically throughout the three phrases, and yet returns to the point where it began. The first and second halves of the first phrase both begin on, and return to the tonic; the middle phrase passes through while taking us from the dominant above to the dominant below, and the third phrase begins and ends on the tonic. While not symmetrical in length, there is a sense of structural symmetry between the three phrases which is immensely satisfying. As each phrase unfolds the written out ornaments (mordants, slides, grupetti etc) become more elaborate and make the piece look more complex than if it were written in Tudor style with the execution of the ornaments left to the player's discretion, but Howells leaves nothing to chance, every demisemiquaver is precisely placed. The opening theme is scored for a variety of solo stops in the right hand with a chordal and contrapuntal left-hand accompaniment.



Example 37, Master Tallis's Testament, bars 1-3

In the first variation the theme weaves seamlessly from pedal solo 8', 4' (bars 19–22), to the tenor and alto lines (bars 23-26), to the soprano register in bar 27, soloed

from bar 29. In bar 31 it returns again to the pedals for just two bars, and this time at 8' pitch only, before passing to the left hand for the remainder of the variation. When the pedal is supporting the harmony Howells directs a 16' pitch. This sort of writing requires an instrument with a large number of pistons which can be set by the player to achieve seamless transitions from pedal solo to harmonic bass pedal and backwards and forwards — or the assistance of an accomplished registrant. In bar 19 when the theme begins in the pedals there is a counterpoint in the right hand. The use of a hemiola in bar 24 and the single bar change of time signature to 3/8 in bar 26 both add to the sense of growing momentum, as does the increasing dynamic range and the denser harmony.



Example 38, Master Tallis's Testament, bars 19-21

The third variation increases the tempo by directing *a tempo, con anima*. The melody remains in the upper voice throughout, the lower parts at time providing thick chordal accompaniment, and at times a contrapuntal foil. There is much octave doubling between the hands adding to the sense of a denser texture. With each

phrase the dynamic increases, leading to a massive climax in the final two bars, which are marked *fortissimo* and *allarg.*



Example 39, Master Tallis's Testament, bars 52-54

After the ecstatic moment the arch form is completed hurriedly, almost as an afterthought. The final four bars are marked for Swell only, *pianissimo*, beginning *Adagio* and then on the penultimate bar *perdendosi*. The simple perfect cadence brings, for the first time, the diatonic major in a whisper, fading away to *ppp*. It is a magical ending to a piece of extraordinary melancholy beauty and intensity, perhaps paradoxically made all the more intense by its “pervasive coolness that distinguishes this piece from the visceral immediacy of the two ‘Sarabands’ and the ‘Preludio’.”<sup>113</sup> Here we see the light of the sixteenth century refracted through the sound-world of the mid-twentieth century, and it is this unique fusion which is so enthralling.

### Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue

The ‘Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue’ was the first of the *Six Pieces* to be composed in late 1939, having been completed on 16 December 1939,<sup>114</sup> but a contemporary

<sup>113</sup> Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 42.

<sup>114</sup> Barber, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 255.



report claims that “it was first played by Sumsion at the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester in 1950, and again by Dr William H. Harris in the Organ Music Society’s series, *Seven Centuries of English Organ Music*, compiled for the Festival of Britain in 1951.”<sup>115</sup> It seems surprising that Sumsion waited a decade to perform this work. The same article describes this piece as “the longest, the most exacting, and the biggest of the collection in more ways than one,” and suggests “there can be no doubt that those who study this lovely movement — it does not yield everything at once — will realise the rightness of every note, and, what is much more, the satisfying and inevitable curve of the whole.”<sup>116</sup> Howells’s friend and colleague, the composer Gerald Finzi, is much less effusive in his praise, writing (in the same publication just nine months later): “The ‘Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue’ from which one at first expects much, leads to the question why Howells’s fugal expositions are sometimes so dead. It is the same in the slow movement of the organ sonata and in ‘H. H. His Fancy’ in the clavichord set. Yet Howells’s contrapuntal mastery is second to none.”<sup>117</sup> Finzi also refers to Howells’s “diamond-cut brilliance” when describing his contrapuntal technique. Diane Cooke draws on Finzi’s assessment of Howells when she says: “being nearly twice as long (when performed) as the other pieces, the work perhaps offers fodder for the not infrequent criticism that Howells engages in ‘note-spinning when inspiration has slackened’.”<sup>118</sup> While she sees promise in the pathos of the first fugue subject, and the chant-like quality of the second, her final assessment is less positive: “the listener is certain to notice a tediousness in the material both leading up to and following the chorale, which is the piece’s high point; further, the moment of clarity offered by the chorale seems

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<sup>115</sup> N.A., ‘New Music for Organ’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 94 no. 1325, p. 318.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Gerald Finzi, ‘Herbert Howells’ in *The Musical Times*, vol 95 no. 1334, p. 183.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.181, quoted by Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 42.

too fleeting, in spite of its internal effectiveness and robust presentation,”<sup>119</sup> and ultimately that this piece “seems to lack the emotional depth present in the other pieces in this set.”<sup>120</sup>

The first point of note is the novel approach to form. There is a long-standing tradition of a Fugue being preceded by another movement, a Prelude or Toccata for example, and there is not necessarily any thematic link between the two, usually just the commonality of a key signature. It is much more unusual to begin with a Fugue. It is important to note that this is not a three-movement work, it is a single movement which grows organically from Fugue to Chorale to Epilogue, and the three sections are linked by musical motifs which appear and develop throughout. It has the feel of a written down improvisation, and it is also noteworthy that this is Howells’s only published Fugue, a form so beloved of (and expected by) organists, not least his teachers at the Royal College of Music, Parry and Stanford. Lionel Pike posits a suggestion as to the small role of Fugue and fugato in Howells’s writing: “it may be that the composer himself considered the form a special mark of ‘academic’ musicians — and he was not a member of any formal university community.”<sup>121</sup>

The mood of the fugue is pastoral, beginning at a gentle *mp* on the Swell manual, a sense of gentle ebb and flow and dynamic shading being provided by the use of the Swell box. Beginning in the tenor, the fugue subject moves to the alto at the 5th,

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<sup>119</sup> Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 42.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>121</sup> Pike, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 22.

then the soprano at the octave, the fourth entry in the pedals, notably at 8' pitch, the pedals acting as another contrapuntal voice rather than a harmonic anchor.

Example 40, Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue, bars 1-8

After that statement of the fugue theme the pedals change function with the change in registration to “8’ 16’ to Sw” (bar 19), while the fugue subject appears in the tenor at the 4th, passing for its sixth iteration to the soprano at the 7th (bar 24), which leads into a change of tempo from the opening *Quasi lento, serio ed espressivo*, to *tranquillo, teneramente (ma un poco più mosso)*, and the introduction of a second, briefer fugue subject (beginning in bar 27). This subject is more discreet, first appearing as one of three contrapuntal voices and not in the normal isolation of a fugue subject. It passes from soprano to alto to baritone and back to soprano; but is not treated as a strict fugue subject, each interaction of the subject shows a modicum of development as the subject grows and morphs organically.



Example 41, Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue, bars 27-30

In bar 39 the first fugue subject reappears, but in a modified form, and this modified form is used to auger in a modulation from the opening key of G major to the unrelated key of B flat minor. In this new key the first fugue subject is stated in parallel sixths. The new key is barely established (it only lasts for five bars) before another modulation into G sharp minor (three bars), F sharp minor (five bars), and as the tempo increases (*poco a poco un poch. accel.*) along with the contrapuntal complexity, the key shifts again to A minor.

This final section becomes a bridge to the Chorale which is heralded in bar 62 with an *allarg.* and heavily accented quavers. The Chorale begins in bar 63, *Largamente*, *ff* and *appassionato*. After the extended period of harmonic fluidity the tonic key of G Major is re-established. Dense eight-part harmony supports the chorale melody, which, it transpires, is actually the second fugal subject first introduced in bar 26. Frequent false relations add to the harmonic intensity of the Chorale. As the Chorale continues to declaim itself, suddenly the first fugue subject thunders forth, *fff* *assai sonore* from the pedals (bar 86) and the Chorale reaches its climax in bars 89-91.



Example 42, Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue, bars 86-88

A wavering pedal point, fluctuating between the tonic and leading note, *p*, *subito e dim. molto* becomes a bridge to the Epilogue where the original pastoral mood is reestablished, *tranquillo, mesto ma dolce*. Primarily in 5/8, this section contains hints of the fugue subject and the chorale subject but neither reappears immediately. The wavering pedal point continues until bar 117, and bars 118-132 form essentially a long slow cadence, *più lento*, under which the pedals recapitulate fragments of the two themes, first using an 8' solo, then adding a 16'. The epilogue dies off in a hushed whisper, *pppp*.

Assessing this piece in his dissertation, George Bevan ultimately concludes that: "The work as a whole has tremendous impact. The arch-form is an extended version of that used in some of the *Psalm Preludes*, such as in *Set 1/1*, but although it ends quietly the *Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue* ultimately lacks the feeling of resolution achieved in the *Psalm Preludes*, perhaps reflecting the restless atmosphere and foreboding of the Second World War years."<sup>122</sup> It is an interesting suggestion, and one which certainly resonates with Howells's diaries, in which he records his own feelings at times of international strife.

<sup>122</sup> George Bevan, *Herbert Howells and the organ: a critical study of autograph manuscripts and printed editions of selected works for the instrument, as an indication of his compositional process*, p. 69.

### **Saraband (in modo elegiaco)**

In a collection as diverse as *Six Pieces* it is noteworthy that there are two Sarabands. This second Saraband is chronologically distant from the other pieces in the collection, the act of composition being separated by over five years. It was composed during an examining tour in Scotland on Saturday 15th and Sunday 16th September 1945, just after the Second World War had ended and as Howells's tenure in St John's College was coming to an end. Almost six years after beginning the set this brought it to completion.

Discussing Howells's last great choral work, *Stabat Mater*, and particularly analysing the use of the Saraband dance form in this work, Palmer observes that: "what is beyond dispute is that, for whatever reason, the idea of the Crucifixion and the form of the sarabande were linked in HH's mind. The 'Saraband in Modo Elegiaco' — no 5 of the *Six Pieces for Organ* — was originally subtitled 'for Good Friday'."<sup>123</sup> He also observes the significance of the date of composition as the days after the tenth anniversary of Michael's death, one of several points in the year when Howells regularly entered a (brief) period of depression or of mourning.

Diane Cooke comments: "Admittedly, on first hearing the listener would not likely be aware that this piece was originally subtitled 'for Good Friday'... The reason Howells changed the title is not known, but one supposes that, for an actual Good Friday liturgy, the appropriateness and utility of a piece with a loud C major conclusion may have been called into question."<sup>124</sup> She also queries the ordering of the six pieces, suggesting that it should precede the Easter Saraband. Her point

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<sup>123</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 150.

<sup>124</sup> Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 41.

about liturgical use is a valid consideration — in most liturgically orientated denominations voluntaries are eschewed entirely on Good Friday.

Apart from the connection of the titles, and the use of the archaic dance rhythm, there is no other connection with the 'Easter' saraband. This second saraband is the shortest of the *Six Pieces* and unique in its form. As we have already noted Howells's predilection for the arch form (occasionally in inversion), this piece alone amongst the 15 covered in this study follows a continuous trajectory of tension and resolution from pianissimo to fortissimo. Spicer describes this as:

a piece of searing intensity. Here Howells uses the ancient dance form with its constant second-beat emphasis to create a work which, for me, has an electric current running through it. Every bar treads its stately pace — nothing hurries it and no quickening of either tempo or shorter-value notes gets in the way of its incessant tread. It's chilly, eerie, but in its constantly increasing volume *and* tone (and how many think in terms of tone rather than just volume?) it only reaches its climax in the last bar of the piece. Now here is no pretty arch-structure with a Rachmananovian build up and die away. This has a highly-charge emotional feeling which has nothing to do with prissy Anglicanism. It is also a piece which gains strength from its Tudor roots.<sup>125</sup>

Palmer calls this saraband "a dark-toned threnody,"<sup>126</sup> and Spicer later (1998) describes it as having a "remarkably menacing air about it... a disturbing cri-de-coeur."<sup>127</sup> Some of this emotional impact comes from a striking motif in the opening bar, which is used through, a triadic appoggiatura (D-flat minor to C minor).

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<sup>125</sup> Paul Spicer, 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)' in *Organist's Review*, 1992, p. 124.

<sup>126</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 65.

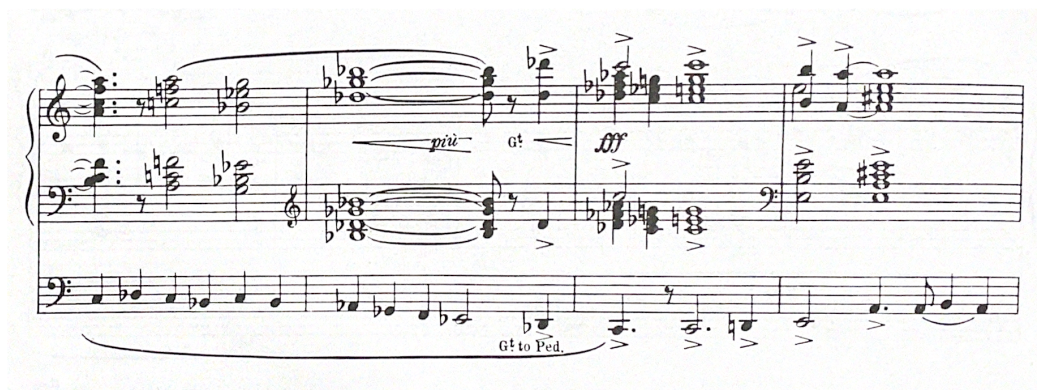
<sup>127</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 140.





Example 43, Saraband (In Modo Elegiaco), bars 1-4

The other striking feature is triadic chordal progressions based on common tones but otherwise harmonically unrelated, e.g C major to E-flat minor to C major and then A major.



Example 44, Saraband (In Modo Elegiaco), bars 37-40

This saraband is structured in four and eight bar phrases, and within each there is a rise and fall. Bars 1-8 begin and end on the Swell, **pp**. Bars 9-16 begin **mp** with a 'Solo Oboe', and end **p**. Bars 17-24 move to the Gt, and the dynamic lifts again, both beginning and ending **mf**. In bar 27 a pedal ostinato begins which adds to the growing sense of driving momentum and direction. Bar 29 moves to Ch + Sw, still **mf**. Bar 33 the dynamic has increased to **f**, and the texture has thickened from four



to six parts, reaching nine parts and *fff* by bar 40. Barber interprets this climax, and the following return of the opening theme, as the moment when Christ stumbles and falls as he carries his cross to Golgotha.<sup>128</sup> There is no relenting of dynamic, but the pedal ostinato slows. The sense of tension and release becomes more intense as each release becomes a fresh tension, and after an agonising build up, an unrelenting crescendo and a series of false relations, a chord of G minor becomes G major, leading to a perfect cadence in C major.

### **Paean**

Like the 'Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue,' the final piece of the set, 'Paean,' is one which provokes differing assessments. The (unidentified) author of 'New Music' describes it as "a lively and effective Toccata, with semiquaver figuration in the right hand over sustained parts for the left hand and pedal, and an incisive chord-theme for contrast. Dr Howells has not often worked this vein, and the result is a success."<sup>129</sup> Hardwick calls "the thoroughly modern *Paean* one of the great twentieth-century British essays in the genre" and continues by describing it as "built on a relentless development of alternating toccata and choral fanfare sections... joy is expressed partly by traditional means of quick manual arabesques."<sup>130</sup> Wadham Sutton concurs with the enthusiastic comments, describing it as "a bright ceremonial piece, replete with toccata-like figuration and rhythmic vitality, a superb recital finale."<sup>131</sup> In contrast to these, Diane Cooke's assessment is that it is "the lightest in emotional substance of the set, even while maintaining a superficial and improvisatory exuberance, and one senses from the

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<sup>128</sup> Barber, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p. 259.

<sup>129</sup> N.A., 'New Music for Organ' in *The Musical Times*, vol 94 no.1325, 1953, p. 318.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Hardwick, *British Organ Music of the Twentieth Century*, p. 136.

<sup>131</sup> Wadham Sutton, 'The organ music of Herbert Howells' in *The Musical Times*, vol 112 no. 1536, p. 178.

composer less commitment at the deepest levels.”<sup>132</sup> She goes on to dig a little deeper into this assessment, saying “from the outset the listener is expecting a toccata, and receives what might better be characterised as an *interrupted* toccata, in which the chordal fanfares seize the focus away from the toccata figuration. It is a vibrant and buoyant work, likely recognisable to the organist as one that would be entertaining to perform... but it does not leave the same kind of soul-searing impression... than the other pieces in the collection do.”<sup>133</sup>

‘Paean’ begins unambiguously in the Dorian mode on D. A fourteen bar long tonic pedal point acts as a harmonic point of reference leaving the hearer in no doubt. Cross relations in bars 11-12 give a hint of diatonic harmony emerging, but these are quickly suppressed. Accents on top of the toccata figuration create syncopations and appoggiaturas which prevent the music slipping into a predictable three in a bar rhythm. In bar 15 the harmony begins to move, leading to a new tonal home of E major in bar 23, where a sudden diminuendo leads the first toccata-section to an end. A brief pedal motif in bar 24 is followed by the first chordal interjection in bar 25, which introduces the flattened supertonic, a chord which characterises these outbursts.



<sup>132</sup> Diane Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, p.42.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 42-3.

After a section where the pedal motif passes from feet to hands and backwards and forwards, the toccata re-emerges in bar 40, this time in C major with a dominant pedal-point for 10 bars which anchors the harmony, but which feels more transient than the opening tonic pedal-point. In bar 56 the chordal interjection reappears but now developed by the interplay of the leading note 7th chord vying with the flattened supertonic, creating a sharp dissonant tension. The chordal passage this time is much more developed than its earlier appearance, harmonically still anchored on C major.

The image shows a musical score for Example 45, *Paeon*, bars 25-27. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It features a piano (p) and a forte (ff) section. The piano section is marked 'meno mosso' and 'molto'. The forte section is marked 'ff' and 'marcato'. The score includes a 'G# to Ped.' instruction and a 'marc. e sost.' instruction. The tempo is marked 'meno mosso' and 'poco largamente'.

In bar 65 the intensity subsides, and the theme passes to the pedals but in a longer and more drawn out fashion. When the manuals re-enter it is for a new episode, in E major, modulating to A major in bar 76. This feels like an improvisatory exploration of fragments of the toccata theme, but is a less tense and more relaxed environment. In bar 90 the occasional semiquavers turn into running passages, as

we feel the momentum slowly begin to increase, aided by the hemiola in bars 90 and 91. The harmony is fluid, and it is really only in bar 106 that it seems to be hovering over D-flat, before a surprising shift into D major in bar 111 and another long chordal section. The harmony shifts to G major at the *più animato* in bar 125, but this in turn functions as the dominant of C, which is reached in bar 133. In bar 140 the toccata returns for its final foray, again over a long dominant pedal, this time A, and after an ambiguous start which could be either modal, major or minor, the major tonality is clearly announced. At bar 151 the tempo increases to *vivo assai*, and the excitement builds as the climax hastens. A final chordal interjection at bar 168 is not as expected, there is a long delay on the penultimate note, and the final chord is the tonic in the first inversion, creating a lack of closure which come ultimately through a prolonged cadence where a walking bass in the pedals provides the melodic interest to drive the dramatic climax.

Palmer has described *Paean* as bearing “all the marks of a typically Howellsian exuberance — glittering pentatonic figuration, triads clashing in exultant bitonal dissonance, a propulsive energy, a sonorous splendour which strikes no note of bombast or hollow rhetoric.”<sup>134</sup> Diane Cooke (quoted above) returns to this piece saying “Howells’s intention seems to be creating and revelling in contrasts. Closer examination suggests Howells took a decisive and successful approach to the piece’s composition: identifying the distinctions that intrigue him, choosing and assembling suitable means for their expression, and then executing his intentions with enviable ease. It may be neither a subtle nor a passionate work, but it still celebrates the sheer force of Howells’s compositional personality.”<sup>135</sup> As so often

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<sup>134</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 65.

<sup>135</sup> Cooke, in Philip A. Cooke & David Nicholas Maw (eds), *The Music of Herbert Howells*, pp. 57-8.

Howells does not simply copy conventional forms, in this case the toccata, but instead develops it into something unique, a form which feels both comfortable and familiar, and yet unique and distinctive.

### **Postscript**

‘The sheer force of Howells’s compositional personality’ seems like an apt phrase to sum up an assessment of the *Six Pieces*, for one cannot fail to be struck by the breath and depth of this collection, and the sheer compositional brilliance of the mind that could conceive it. At a first cursory glance it might appear as a Tudor pastiche or tribute, but nothing could be further from the truth. From a fusion of Tudor voice and twentieth century harmony, through theme and variations, joyful and doleful sarabands, a bleak walk on the moors, an extraordinary approach to fugal development which seems to invert tradition to a fiery and exuberant toccata, this truly is (to quote Palmer), “A princely gift”.

## CHAPTER 6 : THE LATER YEARS

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Throughout Howells's compositional life the organ figured prominently, but never continually. After the *Six Pieces for Organ* in 1939-40 (completed in 1945 by the addition of 'Saraband (in modo elegiaco)'), Howells did not return to the instrument until 1952 when he penned a wedding gift for a friend ('Siciliano for a High Ceremony'). It was a further six years before he wrote again for the instrument in 1958, two significant pieces which ultimately became his final liturgical organ music. These were followed by two concert pieces for chamber organ in 1959, and then another decade elapsed before his final concert pieces between 1969 and 1974.

The two pieces composed in 1958 (and published posthumously in 1983) were both written for the publisher H. W. Gray of New York, for inclusion in a proposed *Second Modern Anthology*. Palmer<sup>136</sup> notes that these were begun on what would have been Michael's 32nd birthday (12 April 1958) and completed seven days later. In the published version they both bear superscriptions from the psalms: 'Rhapsody IV (bene psallite in vociferatione)' and 'Prelude (de profundis)'. While four decades earlier Howells made a clear distinction between his Rhapsodies and his Psalm Preludes,<sup>137</sup> it seems that the passage of time has served to blur these distinctions. In his 1997 dissertation on the organ works of Howells, McMillan records a note added by Christopher Palmer to Paul Andrew's list of Howells's works:

These pieces are published under the same cover, but without any indication that Howells actually thought of them as a set-of-two. A manuscript note reveals unequivocally that he did, for on it the following alternatives are considered:  
Two Pieces

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<sup>136</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, p. 120.

<sup>137</sup> See chapter 2.

or  
Psalm Preludes (3rd set)  
I De Profundis  
II Exultamus [?Exultemus]  
Two Fantasies  
Organ Music 1958 I and II<sup>138</sup>

It is unfortunate that Palmer's note does not give any further reference details for the manuscript referred to. It does certainly suggest that Howells had come to think of the terms 'Psalm Prelude', 'Rhapsody' and 'Fantasy' somewhat interchangeably. Apart from this possible designation as a third set of *Psalms Preludes*, there is a particular link between these two pieces and the *Second Set*. The 1958 pieces use the same verses for their inspiration as numbers 1 and 3 from Set 2.

In assessing Howells's organ works in *Organists' Review*, Paul Spicer refers to the first prelude of the second set "an intensely moving cry from the heart... The more recent 'De Profundis' piece on the same psalm verse is not in the same league." He continues to write off 'Rhapsody IV' because it contains "too much posturing... In some senses Howells, later in life, was trying to rewrite his own rules," and ultimately concludes "there is so much good music from early in his career, however, that this tailing off at the end of a long and productive life is of less significance than might otherwise have been the case."<sup>139</sup> Relf Clark concurs with Spicer's assessment, saying:

If the Elgar-inspired D flat *Rhapsody* is the high water-mark of Howells' achievement in a Romantic direction, *Master Tallis's Testament* is the high water-mark of his achievement in a modern, post-Romantic style informed by at least passing acquaintance with early keyboard music. Set against such highly wrought creations... *Rhapsody IV*, the *Prelude 'De Profundis'*... seem like Howells at less than his best, and certainly not at his most characteristic. Standing out from the post-Second World War period is the *Siciliano for a High Ceremony*, in which Howells, unusually, takes a compound metre and treats it as Delius might have done (thinking of *Brigg Fair*): the lilting

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<sup>138</sup> John Nixon McMillan, *The Organ Works of Herbert Howells (1892-1983)*, p. 319.

<sup>139</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1992, p. 126.

rhythms and pentatonic arabesques (which one may attribute to the face of a Scottish dedicatee) set it apart from the rest of the later organ music.<sup>140</sup>

Balancing these harsh criticisms, Palmer describes the 'Prelude' as "a massivethrenody, less immediately compelling perhaps than its immediate predecessor... but no less imbued with feeling. The fourth 'Rhapsody' is by contrast a bright festal piece... it marks the beginning of a new simplicity of style. For the polyphony is less labyrinthine, the lines cleaner drawn, the harmonic texture more sinewy."<sup>141</sup>

Palmer's final sentence captures the essence of Spicer's and Clark's dismissal of these later works. This sparser and more sinewy texture which Howells adopted in his 60s has less immediate appeal than the earlier more romantic works of his early 20s, or indeed of the works produced when he was in his 40s. The language may be the same, but the vocabulary has developed in the intervening years. In chapter two we quoted Larry Palmer's assessment of the second sonata serving up its treasures with repeated exposure. That sentiment is equally applicable to these later works, and explains their relative neglect in performance, in favour of the earlier (and more immediately accessible) works. We could equally posit the view that had these later works been a mere pastiche of the earlier works, the critics may well have been equally dismissive of a composer who had nothing new to offer.

### **Siciliano for a High Ceremony**

The 'high ceremony' referred to in the title of this piece was a wedding, but not just any wedding, for the guest list included Queen Elizabeth II and other senior

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<sup>140</sup> Relf Clarke, 'The organ music of Herbert Howells: some general considerations' in *The Royal College of Organists Journal*, vol. 2, 1994, p. 53.

<sup>141</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a study*, 1978, p. 66.



members of the Royal Family.<sup>142</sup> The dedication reads: “For the Countess of Dalkeith. Written especially for Miss Jane McNeill, and first performed at her Marriage to The Earl of Dalkeith at St Giles’ Cathedral, Edinburgh, on 10 January 1953.” Howells was prevented from attending the wedding because he was nursing a sceptic foot.<sup>143</sup>

In the sleeve notes to Christopher Herrick’s *Organ Dreams 2* compact disc Stephen Westrop speculates that the bride was an “old flame” of Howells. He continues to say “clearly the composer felt the need to concentrate on the serious nature of the occasion, rather than provide a piece of musical confetti. In any case, this piece is one of the composer’s most gravely beautiful and expressive works.” There is a serene beauty in the work which could mask the sorrow of lost or unrequited love (if Westrop’s speculation is correct). It certainly has an immediacy of appeal and an accessibility which is unique amongst the organ works from this later period.

Writing in the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, Meredith Ellis Little describes the Siciliana (or siciliano) as a dance form, originally from Sicily. Popularised in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is generally in ternary form, with a fairly slow tempo in 6/8 or 12/8 metre, and many examples are in a minor key. It is characterised by a lyrical melody with a flowing accompaniment, and often with a dotted rhythm. ‘From the 18th century to the 20th the siciliana was associated with pastoral scenes and melancholy emotions.’<sup>144</sup> While the former might be eminently suitable for a wedding, the latter descriptor raises certain questions.

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<sup>142</sup> There had previously been speculation that the groom might marry the Princess Margaret, sister of the Queen.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells*, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>144</sup> Meredith Ellis Little, ‘Siciliana’ in *Oxford Music Online*.

Rather than the traditional 6/8 or 12/8 metres, Howells chooses to cast his work in 9/8. From the opening anacrusis and the tempo direction *Un poco con moto, sereno*, a serene and meditative atmosphere is established by the gentle dotted rhythms, some of them 'Scotch snaps'. The lilting, dance-like tune is introduced, *con tenerezza*, in bar 3, appearing in four-bar phrases. One of the most enchanting features is the harmonic ambiguity. Howells rarely commits to a diatonic key or mode. Beginning in (or hovering around) A minor (or perhaps A dorian, with the flattened leading note), the first cadence in bar 6 seems to establish A major as the tonality, but with a false relation the C-sharp suddenly becomes a C-natural. This harmonic ambiguity, particularly at cadences and caused by false relations becomes a notable feature throughout.



Example 47, *Siciliano for a High Ceremony*, bars 6-8

In bars 13-14 the extended cadence again shifts from (A) major to minor, but by bar 18 the major key seems to be firmly established. A brief modulation leads to a further extended cadence in bars 25-6, this time in G major, but again with false relations calling the third of the chord briefly into question. In bar 31 the solo (which was present from bars 3-14) reappears, this time over a pedal-point G, which appears to be functioning as a second inversion of C major, but again he is loathe to make a clear harmonic commitment, and it is only in bar 38 that the cadence to C major is completed.

In bar 39 A minor is re-established (in the first inversion) over a pedal-point C. The solo is relinquished, and both hands are on the Choir with Swell coupled, *dolce, ma con calore*. In bar 45 the pedal-point moves to A, and from this moment the intensity starts to increase quickly and dramatically, beginning *poco a poco incalzando*. In bar 49 the direction is *più con fervore*, followed by *sempre cresc.* in the following bar, the whole passage marked by a series of cross relations.

An *allarg.* in bar 52 heralds the climax in bar 53, where the hands move to the Great (with Swell coupled), *ff, a tempo, con dignita ma affetuoso*, for a triumphant theme in C major. A single bar of 6/8 time in bar 54 and a hemiola in bar 56 both add to the sense of excitement and drive, which is accentuated by the *poco marc.* pedal theme in bar 59 and the semiquaver flurry in bar 60. A momentary dynamic reduction in bar 61 merely paves the way for another fortissimo climax in bar 64, this time cadencing in A major.



Example 48, *Siciliano for a High Ceremony*, bars 54-56

From this point the arch turns and the diminuendo is rapid. Bar 65 is *f*, bar 69 *mf*, bar 71 *mp*, and in bar 72 the haunting solo returns, now a much more lithe and chromatic melody, *un poco meno mosso*, *mf*, *molto espress.* The rapid diminuendo continues, marked *più e più calmato* in bar 74. In bar 78 a chromatic melody emerges, unaccompanied, on the choir, finding an open octave accompaniment on the swell

and 8' pedal in bar 81, leading to the coda in bar 83 and a final iteration of the solo in bar 86, emanating this time from the tenor, soaring quickly upwards before descending again. The hushed ending (finally resolved into C major) is a flattened sub-mediant 9th chord leading to a tonic, under which is a wavering pedal part.

#### **Rhapsody IV: Bene Psallite in Vociferatione**

The fourth rhapsody is dedicated to John Birch. Birch was born in 1929, and from 1953 was Organist and Master of the Choristers at the prominent Anglo-Catholic church, All Saints', Margaret Street, in London. In 1958 (the year the Rhapsody was composed) he was appointed to the same position at Chichester Cathedral.

The subtitle, *bene psallite in vociferatione*, is the Vulgate translation of the second part of the third verse of Psalm 33 (32), which the Authorised Version translates as "play skilfully with a loud noise." This is the same verse used for *Psalm Prelude Set 2 no. 3*, but then Howells chose the Authorised Version text as a subtitle. There are many other immediate similarities between the two works. Both are in 3/4 metre, both in C major, both make use of the Tuba, and both are marked *Allegro*, though in the earlier work further defines as *Allegro (non troppo) ma giocoso*, and in this later case, *Allegro vivo: turbolento*. Further basic similarities include the inversion of the Arch Form, beginning and ending triumphantly, while middle section is gentler, and the use of the flattened seventh and sharpened fourth.

The opening flurry of activity on the Tuba, supported by a simple chordal accompaniment on the left hand and pedals, is marked by running scalar patterns and dotted rhythms, giving a sense of excitement and energy as well as a tension

enhanced by the chromatic intervals. While there are many similarities with the earlier Psalm Prelude, the harmony is now more dissonant and less joyful.



Example 49, Rhapsody IV, bars 10-13

Syncopated rhythms, in both manuals and pedals create a sense of drive, and also an unsettled feeling. The pedals often take the role of driving the momentum, e.g. bars 17-22. A gradual diminuendo in bar 23 leads to a harmonic shift to a tonal centre around E major and a new episode in bar 31, *un poco meno movimento*, where a solo voice is introduced in counterpoint with the Choir. After only two bars the solo voice drops out and the counterpoint continues with both hands on the Choir.



Example 50, Rhapsody IV, bars 30-33

By bar 36 A has been established as the new tonal centre, modulating to G minor in bar 42. In bar 47 the solo returns in counterpoint, this time for eight bars, passing from the right hand to the left. A pedal point of six bars on D beginning in bar 52 functions as a dominant, preparing for the modulation to G Major in bar 58, from

there to E flat major in bar 62, and then a series of floating harmonies, accompanied by a *accel.* and a crescendo lead to a climax in D flat major in bar 70. A homophonic section is underpinned by an energetic pedal part. An enharmonic respelling of A flat as G sharp in bars 75-6 prepares the way for a new tonal centre of A minor in bar 81, and D minor in bar 89.

A new episode begins in bar 93, with the solo voice once again in counterpoint with the choir manual. False relations call the tonality into question. The counterpoint continues over a dominant pedal from bar 106, which steps up a semitone to E flat minor in bar 111, D flat major in bar 114, returning to the dominant of C major in bar 122 for a prolonged chromatic progression leading to a recapitulation of the opening tuba theme in bar 144.

When the tuba re-enters the accompanying harmony is richer than at the opening (though surprisingly diatonic), and the melody is developed with rhythmic alteration and augmentation. The original four-bar theme is now developed into sixteen bars. This is followed by seven fortissimo bars, before the dynamic drops in preparation for the final climax which starts with semi quaver runs in bar 169. The tuba comes back in bar 173, now in the left hand with huge cluster chords. The final climax is reached with an extended vi-ii-I cadence, under which the pedal recapitulates fragments of the opening theme.





Example 51, Rhapsody IV, bars 187-196

### Prelude: De Profundis

The prelude is without dedication. The subtitle is the opening words of Psalm 130 (129) in the Vulgate translation, the same verse used for the earlier first Prelude from the Second Set. In this case there are fewer direct similarities with the earlier work. The tempo is *Quasi lento, tristamente*, similar to the earlier *Lento, dolente*, the key signature is G sharp minor (earlier D minor) and the time signature fluctuates between 4/4 and 3/4, settling primarily on the later (5/8 in the earlier piece).

The 'Prelude' begins with a plaintive falling motif in a solo register, and the general downward direction of the musical phrases, depicting the descent "into the depths" is marked. The harmony floats uncertainly until the tonic is established in a cadence in bars 8-9, by which point the metre has (mostly) settled on 3/4, and there is a feeling of a melancholy Sarabande.

Quasi lento, tristamente  $\text{♩} = 48$

Solo

*mp*

Sw

16', 8' to Sw

*Example 52, Prelude: De Profundis, bars 1-4*

In bar 14 the tempo picks up, *un poch più moto*, the dynamic lifts, both hands move to the Swell for a darker texture, underlined by parallel 5ths in both left hand and pedals, and there is a brief excursion to the dominant. Open 5ths in bar 18 call the tonality into question, and the tonic is reestablished in bars 22-3, shifting back to the dominant in bar 28, and in a surprising harmonic twist, the flattened dominant (D minor) in bar 38.

In bar 39 there is a transformation as, *poco stretto*, the music suddenly begins to ascend ever upwards as the cry rises “out of the depths”. A chord sequence based on enharmonic respelling and third relations of F minor - G sharp minor - B minor - D minor is repeated twice as the music soars ever upwards.

poch stretto

ten.

mp

poco cresc.

f

p subito

poco rit

*Example 53, Prelude: De Profundis, bars 39-44*



From the darkest depths the soul has poured out its all in prayer and supplication, the cry has been made and everything subsides, but a turbulent pedal indicates that an answer has not yet been forthcoming. A fleeting return to the tonic in bar 51 leads into the most dissonant moment of the piece in bars 57-64, with time signatures lurching from 7/8 to 3/4 to 4/4, followed by 3/4, 2/4 and 5/8, and ultimately alternating between 2/4 and 3/4. In bar 65 a moment of clarity appears, like the sun piercing the clouds, in a single note of C sharp, played in double octaves in both hands on the full swell (always a thrilling sound) and pedal. The full radiant splendour appears in bar 67 (Great, *ff*) with a demisemiquaver septuplet rising up to huge cluster chords, *deliberato, pesante*. In bar 71 the Tuba emerges in the left hand for a single bar. The newfound clarity is quickly obscured by turbulent harmony (hovering around A minor), and a further climax is brewing. In bar 82 the direction is *accel sempre cresc*, and in bar 91 the double instruction *allarg* and *cresc molto* is a familiar Howellsian announcement that we are about to hear something significant, reinforced by the rising scale above the grinding harmonies.

Bar 93 begins with a massive tonic chord in the new key signature of D major, though quickly obscured by a chromatic falling theme, reminiscent of the opening. The registration is simply *fff Full* and the tempo *Tempo I Fieramente*. The angular phrases speak of the soul's heartache and wrestling with God, illustrating the psalm text, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord: Lord hear my voice." A final *ff* in bar 107 leads to a gradual release of tension, a diminuendo, and a thinning of texture. The single F sharp in octaves in bars 115-6 is redolent of the moment of clarity in bar 65, but this time there is no joy, no release.



Example 54, Prelude: De Profundis, bars 93-96

The coda, beginning in bar 117, *Più lento*, holds the soul in torment. The repeated crochet F sharp in the pedals seems to portray the relentless ticking of time to the soul who cannot find release. The opening solo returns, and the soul once again returns “to the depths”, the final long chord of F sharp minor seems to give little hope. This time there is no ‘oracle of salvation’, no answer from the Deity to the prayer of the broken heart. The cross relation in the final chord, the presence of both A natural and A sharp not only creates a dissonance but an ambiguity which seems to speak of the soul desperate for release being ultimately unsatisfied.

Example 55, Prelude: De Profundis, bars 137-146

## CHAPTER 7 : A POSTHUMOUS PUZZLE

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In chapter 2 we proposed a simple binary categorization of Howells's organ works: those which were liturgical, and those written for concert performance. The inspiration for this system was the composer's reported statement that he was 'glad to be getting away from the church,' in reference to the composition of the first three Rhapsodies.

The shortest of his extant compositions for organ, 'Cradle Song,' has proved to be the biggest challenge to this system of categorisation. This piece first appeared in print in 2010 in the Organists Charitable Trust *Little Organ Book*, a collection of some eleven pieces edited by Martin Neary. It was written almost a century earlier, during 1913. The score bears the date 4th December 1913, along with the location of Howells's parental home at Lydney, Gloucestershire.

'Cradle Song' is listed in Howells's student notebook along with 'Menuetto' (the current whereabouts of which is unknown) as 'Two Pieces for Organ' with a date of 1914. In a letter to Howells in 1971 the son of J. F. Picthorne, a Lydney organist, makes reference to this pair of pieces being performed by Howells at the opening recital of the organ in Lydney Wesleyan Church in 1913.<sup>145</sup> It is possible that Howells performed an early draft of the pieces at the recital, and that the pair were not completed until later, perhaps the manuscript date of 4 December 1913 refers to the fair copy of 'Cradle Song' and the second piece was not completed until 1914;

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<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Paul D. Andrews, *Herbert Howells: A documentary and bibliographical study*.

or possibly the entry in the notebook was made at a much later point in time when the exact dating had been forgotten.

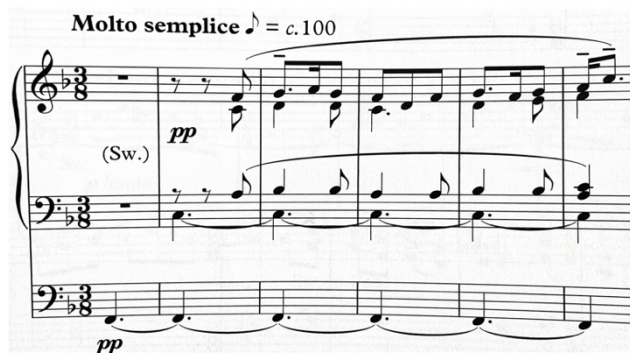
There is no clue, either in the piece or in the title, which would suggest that this piece should be classified with the liturgical works, nor indeed that it should not. It would, however, be possible to read Howells's comment about "getting away from the church" (made in reference to the Rhapsodies of 1915 and 1918) as implying that most or many of the earlier works were written with "the church" in mind. Certainly looking at Howells's output in the years 1911-1914 we find a Prelude, Postlude, Four Choral Preludes and a Psalm-Prelude, all of which are justifiably categorized as liturgical. Against these there is the first Sonata (used in his scholarship application to the RCM), a 'Phantasy Ground Bass,' and these two pieces<sup>146</sup>. Thus the balance of probability would point towards this being intended as a gentle pre-service voluntary.

This gentle lullaby has the feel of a folk-song, with a scotch-snap in the melody, a device Howells later returned to in the 'Siciliano for a High Ceremony.' The form is simple ternary, with each section comprising of four four-bar phrases.

The piece begins with an open fifth pedal point, over which the harmony gently undulates. In the second phrase the pedal point releases and a perfect cadence leads in to the third phrase which restores the tonic pedal, while the final phrase of this section introduces the sharpened supertonic, the first 'Howellsian' touch.

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<sup>146</sup> With the exception of the Sonata and this piece, the whereabouts of the manuscripts for all of these pieces is unknown.



Example 56, 'Cradle Song', bars 1-6

The middle section moves from the clear tonic of F major in the opening, to an ambiguous harmonic centre around a chord of E7, which hints at being the dominant of A minor, particularly in the 'pizzicato' pedal part, but tantalizingly never clearly resolves.



Example 57, 'Cradle Song', bars 18-22

The third phrase of this section modulates back to F major followed by a bridge phrase redolent of the nineteenth-century romanticism of Elgar and Brewer, a reminder of Howells's musical roots. The recapitulation presents the melodic material exactly as in the opening section, but with an entirely reworked accompaniment. Gone are the extended pedal points and thick harmonies of the

opening, and in their place a new sense of movement as both pedals and left hand allow more light to permeate. A gentle rocking figure in the pedals (beginning in bar 43) calls for an 8' stop only, and one can hear the cradle rocking gently, just as in the Berceuse of Louis Vierne (from *Vingt-quatre pièces en style libre*, 1914).



Example 58, 'Cradle Song', bars 43-47

Perhaps most fascinating of all is that this miniature seems to show us Howells the chrysalis emerging from the cocoon of English romanticism. He has spent but a single year at the RCM, and his writing is still heavily influenced by the prevailing style of the day, yet there are the touches that will later become his stylistic fingerprints: the use of cross relations, chromatically altered notes, added note chords, a sense of harmonic ambiguity, and a growing independence of the pedal.

## CONCLUSION

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Our journey through Howells's liturgical organ works has shown us the building blocks of his unique sound, the modality created by the sharpened fourth and flattened seventh, the long, metrically free phrases which hearken back to plainsong, the counterpoint, the false relations, the enharmonic respelling of notes, the triadic moves. But as we considered in the introduction, the music is more than the sum of the parts. Howells stands out because his sound is both new, and yet old, fresh and yet familiar. When we compare Howells to his teachers and the generation who preceded him musically, Parry and Stanford (not to mention Brewer and Wood), everything seems fresh. Gone is the reliance on Brahmsian chromaticism and classical form, replaced instead by what seems like improvisation, often with the mildest flash of genius. Behind the apparent ease of improvisation lies the mind and heart of a man schooled in harmony and counterpoint, sonata and fugue, but seized by the imaginative power to reach back to renaissance polyphony and use it as a springboard to say something new.

The bedrock for all Howells wrote is the choral tradition of the Church of England. In a broadcast on the BBC home service from Christ Church, Oxford, in 1943, he said:

Does it strike you as an odd thing, in a world of jazz, swing, vast orchestras, mechanized reproduction and radio-transmission, that a man should sit down and write a set of anthems for the church service? It seems normal enough to me - especially in this country. English music, remember, has been generally a fluctuating thing of uncertain purpose, direction and achievement. The choral foundation of our cathedrals has alone provided an abiding line of development. There hasn't been any other tradition of equal continuity. It's astonishing that so many British musicians (and a couple of illustrious Irishmen, too) have 'gone to school', as it were, in cathedral or church, in the organ-loft or the choir. Put down their names. You'll start with

Tye and Tallis, away back in Tudor days. You'll cover the centuries with names that reach up to the lamented Leslie Howard and Ivor Gurney... You'll write the name of the very present William Walton... if, in this country, we turn away from church music, and compose exclusively for a secular market, something of traditional truth goes out from us - we shall be ignoring our strongest roots. I for one would like our native composers to preserve something of the immemorial note of the Tudors and Elizabethans... Yesterday, Londoners we're listening to William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*... Its opulence, virility, impulse and militancy are all of this present age. The work annihilates all thought of Farrant, Byrd, Purcell, Battishill, Boyce, SS Wesley, Stanford and Charles Wood... But I am willing to swear that only a man steeped in the church choral tradition these men so enriched could have composed the setting of 'By the waters of Babylon'. A fortnight ago Benjamin Britten's cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb* was broadcast in this present series of music for the church: I like to think that if Purcell had been one of Britten's listeners he might well have caught an echo of his own lilting tunes and rhythms. For certainly the *echo* was there!<sup>147</sup>

And perhaps in that quotation we can see the genus of the answer to the question of the popularity of Howells's organ (and choral) works, in that their 'newness' is not 'new', but completely steeped in the best of all that has gone before. More than two decades later Howells reflected on the future of English church music when he said:

It may be that the future of English Church-and-Cathedral music is hedged with difficulties and doubts. I fear the gross threat of a 'pepping-up', the cheap surrender to popularity, the insidious and melodramatic 'putting down the mighty from their seat', tonal elephantiasis encouraged by the misuse of outsize organs, the careless denial of idiomatic fitness. These are inherent dangers. They must be countered by men of genius who from time to time shall offer the Church works of supreme fitness.<sup>148</sup>

In Howells the church found such a man of genius, and perhaps even recognised that genius where the secular world failed to do so. Peter Hodgson summed up Howells's organ works by describing them as representative of: "much of his complex aesthetic outlook: the rhapsodic, the lyrical, the elegiac, the brilliant, the ceremonial. His relatively small, but significantly distinctive, organ literature has

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<sup>147</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells, a celebration*, 1996, pp. 395-6.

<sup>148</sup> Howells, in *English Church Music* (1966), cited in Paul Spicer, *Herbert Howells* 1998, p. 134.



been described as ‘contemporary English organ music at its conservative best’, a succinct summation of this composer’s contribution.”<sup>149</sup>

There is one avenue of exploration which has not yet been addressed: the relationship between Howells’s orchestral, chamber and instrumental compositions and his organ works. When questioned about unachievable effects written into a score (as noted in chapter four), his response was that he was thinking in terms of a sound world, rather than specifically performing the works on an organ. This begs the question, could these works be interpreted as sketches for orchestral works, and if so, how would their performance and interpretation change if they were orchestrated? It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to explore this issue, but it is a fascinating question which can provide much fodder for the thoughtful performer.

Writing a tribute following the composer’s death in 1982, Sir David Willcocks said that he can:

rejoice in the knowledge that his music is echoing round the arches and vaults of the great buildings he loves and [can be] happy in the knowledge that many of the pupils that he taught in a period of more than fifty years at the Royal College of Music are making a significant contribution to English music today. He can be serene that, through his music for the church, he has enabled men and women in many parts of the world and in all walks of life to ensure that the spiritual joy expressed by Milton in the immortal words:

With antique pillars massy proof,  
And storied windows richly dight,  
Casting a dim religious light:  
There let the pealing organ blow,  
To the full-voiced quire below,  
In service high and anthems clear,  
As may with sweetness, through mine ear  
Dissolve me into ecstasies,  
And bring all heaven before mine eyes.

[*Il Penseroso*]<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Cited in Donald James Grice, *Rhapsody in the organ works of Herbert Howells*, p. 40.

<sup>150</sup> Cited in Mark Lanyon Mitchell, *A stylistic study of the anthems of Herbert Howells*, p. 67.

The one question which remains unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) is why does the music have such power to attract and enthrall? It is a question which no amount of structural analysis can ever hope to answer because it is deeper than stylistic devices or harmonic language. It is a question which draws us beyond the music to the man, and from the man back through the music and into the art of performance. From the brief overview of Howells's life recounted in chapter one we have seen the series of tragedies and challenges which beset his life: from the social stigmatisation brought about through his father's bankruptcy in his childhood, through the diagnosis of Graves' disease during his student days and the loss of many friends in the battlefields of the First World War, to the deepest grief a parent can face, the loss of a child, Michael, to polio. Each of these experiences weighed heavily upon Howells, and their burdens were carried throughout his life, affecting his character, his personality, the importance he placed on his appearance, his failing confidence in his work as an orchestral composer, and perhaps most difficult of all to assess, his faith.

In chapter four we noted the comments of his daughter Ursula about his love of the church but his lack of faith (or more precisely doubts about the afterlife). As one who deals with loss and grief on a daily basis I would interpret it differently. It appears that his doubts are around the age-old question of suffering: why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? While Howells struggled, intellectually, to grapple with that question, there is no doubt that he turned to composition to express the thoughts that were difficult to vocalise, and to seek a sense of comfort. In his student days it was the first set of Psalm Preludes, in the aftermath of Michael's death it was both *Hymnus Paradisi* and the second set of

Psalm Preludes, and in later years *Stabat Mater* and other works already commented on. The choice of texts to inspire each work says more about his faith than his own words. In the first set of Psalm Preludes there is the almost autobiographical sketch in the third Prelude: *yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil*, with its sense of calm assurance being imbued at the end of a dark journey. In *Hymnus Paradisi* it is worth observing that while he reworked much from the earlier *Requiem*, he added a final text, “Holy is the true light”, a prayer from the Sarum Diurnal expressing the sense of hope and glory to be found with Christ in heaven after life on this earth is over. In the second set of Psalm Preludes there is the sense of momentum from lament to hope to reassurance and new life. Just as many of the laments in the Psalter end with what biblical scholars describe as an oracle of salvation, so Howells in his choice of texts to set to music finds his own oracle of salvation. It is a surprise, and yet not surprising, that his two organ pieces from the late 1950s return again to the same texts, lament and hope. With so many thousands of verses to choose from, to set the same verses a second time shows that they held a particular power and importance in Howells’s psyche, a recurring theme which seems to, perhaps subconsciously, define him. Coupled with that is the recurring theme of light — in the psalm preludes: “darkness and light to you are both alike”; in the ending of *Hymnus Paradisi*: “holy is the true light”, and perhaps even a subtler suggestion, as discussed in chapter five, of the Johannine interpretation of “Saraband for the morning of Easter”, with Johannine writings being so imbued with the theme of light and darkness.

To pigeon-hole Howells as a doubter — or as a believer — is altogether too simplistic. He may have struggled with the easy answers of pre-packed doctrine and Sunday-school theology, but he wrestled with the deep questions, born of the

experience of suffering and the pathos of grief, and it is that lens which illuminates his compositions in a way which no amount of analysis ever can hope to. The soul of his work is wrapped up in suffering and the quest for redemption. To perform these works on the organ is not to play a sequence of notes, phrases, cadences, in the right order and at the right tempo, with the appropriate registrations chosen. To perform these works is to enter into both the story of the text that inspired the work, but even more profoundly the struggle of faith and doubt, the question of suffering and the quest for redemption. When one begins to understand these bigger questions, one is approaching the soul of the music, and it is that understanding which ultimately shapes performance from note-spinning to communication. Performing this music is entering into the suffering and journeying towards redemption, the eternal deep yearning of the soul for a light that can overcome darkness.

## APPENDIX 1 : DISCOGRAPHY

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The following catalogue is the discography from Spotify referred to in chapter 2, pp. 45-47. It lists each recording, divided into those (9) solely dedicated to Howells's organ music, and those (106) which contain one or more works. The title of each recording is given, the (principal) performer(s), the record label, date and relevant track listings. Within each category the discs are listed chronologically by year, and within each year alphabetically by title.

### **Discs dedicated solely to Howells's Organ Works**

#### 1. Herbert Howells Organ Music

Philip Kenyon

Herald 1988

Three Pieces for Organ

Two Slow Airs

Six Short Pieces for Organ

#### 2. Herbert Howells: Organ Music, Vol. 1

Tjeed van der Ploeg

VLS Records 1992

Rhapsodies nos. 1, 2 + 3

Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue

Sonata no. 2

Prelude De Profundis

#### 3. Herbert Howells: Organ Music, Vol. 2

Tjeed van der Ploeg

VLS Records 1993

Three Psalm Preludes Set 1, nos. 2 + 3

Three Psalm Preludes Set 2

Siciliano for a High Ceremony

Partita

#### 4. The Organ Music of Herbert Howells Vol 1

Stephen Cleobury

Priory 1993

Three Psalm Preludes, Sets 1 & 2

4 Rhapsodies

5. The Organ Music of Herbert Howells Vol 2

Graham Barber

Priory 1995

Sonata for Organ (1933)

Six Pieces for Organ

6. The Organ Music of Herbert Howells Vol 3

Adrian Partington

Priory 1998

Partita

Prelude: De Profundis

Two Pieces

Three Pieces for Organ

Siciliano for a High Ceremony

Two Slow Airs

Epilogue

7. Howells: Organ Music

Robert Costin

Atoll 2006

Rhapsody no. 2

Sonata no. 2

Intrada no. 2

Partita

8. Sounds Atmospheric: Organ Music of Herbert Howells

Christopher Stokes

Lammas 2007

3 Psalm Preludes, Set 1, nos. 1 + 2

Rhapsody no. 3

3 Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

Saraband for the morning of Easter

Master Tallis's Testament

Saraband In modo elegiaco

Partita

9. Howells: Organ Music

Robert Benjamin Dobey

Pro Organo Gold 2019

Organ Sonata no. 2

6 Pieces for Organ

**Discs which include individual organ works by Howells**

10. Organ Music from the Two Cathedrals in Liverpool

Noel Rawsthorne

Priory 1970

Master Tallis's Testament

11. LP Archive Series: 4 Organ Music from Kidderminster Town Hall / Guildford Cathedral  
Christopher Bowers-Broadbent  
Priory 1984  
Rhapsody nos. 1, 2 + 3
12. Music for an Occasion: The Organ of St Paul's Cathedral, London  
Christopher Dearnley  
Priory 1984  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3
13. Toccatas and Roses: The Hill Organ of the Royal Hospital School, East Anglia  
Peter Crompton  
Priory 1991  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1
14. Choral Evensong live from King's College, Cambridge  
Choir of King's College, Cambridge; Stephen Cleobury (director); Christopher Hughes (organ)  
EMI Records 1992  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1
15. English Organ Music, Vol. 1  
Gareth Green  
Naxos 1992  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1
16. Howells: Choral Music  
Choir of King's College, Cambridge; Stephen Cleobury  
Decca 1992  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 2  
Rhapsody no. 3
17. Organ Imperial: The Organ of Exeter Cathedral  
Paul Morgan  
Priory 1992  
Saraband for the Morning of Easter
18. The Holy Eucharist  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral Choir; Paul Trepte  
Priory 1992  
Paeon
19. English Organ Music, Vol. 2  
Donald Hunt  
Naxos 1993  
Siciliano for a High Ceremony
20. Crucifixus  
Guildford Cathedral Choir; Andrew Millington (director); Geoffrey Morgan (organ)

Herald AV Productions 1994  
Master Tallis's Testament

21. English Organ Music - The Organ of Lincoln Cathedral  
Colin Walsh  
Priory 1995  
Master Tallis's Testament

22. Peace I leave with you - a Sequence of Music for the Holy Eucharist  
Belfast Cathedral Choir; David Drinkell  
Guild GmbH 1996  
Master Tallis's Testament  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

23. Word Incarnate  
The Chancel Choir of the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation  
Pro Organo 1996  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

24. Choral Evensong from Eton College  
Eton College Chapel Choir; Ralph Allwood; Tom Williamson  
Herald AV Publications 1997  
Rhapsody no. 3

25. Riverside '97  
Timothy Smith  
Pro Organo 1997  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

26. Parry and Howells Organ Music  
Graham Matthews  
Herald AV Publications 1998  
Sonata no. 1

27. And I saw a New Heaven: Choral Music from Clifton Cathedral  
Choir of Clifton Cathedral; Mark Holt (organ)  
Hoxa 1999  
Paean

28. Howells: Requiem / Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing  
Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, directed by Christopher Robinson, Iain Farrington  
(organ)  
Naxos 1999  
Paean  
Rhapsody no. 3

29. Kindle Our Hearts  
The Chancel Choir of the Church of the Incarnation, Dallas; Kevin Clarke (conductor)  
Pro Organo 1999  
Master Tallis's Testament



30. Popular Organ Music Volume 6: The Organ of Truro Cathedral  
Andrew Nethsinga  
Priory 1999  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1
31. Trumpet Tunes  
Kevin Clarke  
prospect Studio-Label-Verlag GmbH 1999  
Master Tallis's Testament
32. Howells: Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, Benedictus; Britten: Te Deum; Gibbons: O clap  
your hands  
Worcester Cathedral Choir, Donald Hunt (director), Adrian Partington (organ)  
ImpDigital 2000  
Rhapsody no. 3
33. Purcell, Vaughan Williams, Howells, Elgar: The British and Canadian Music for  
Organ  
Ian Saddler  
CBC 2000  
Rhapsody no. 1  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2 no. 3
34. Riverside 2001  
Timothy Smith  
Pro Organo 2001  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3
35. Festivals, Times and Seasons  
Andrew Millington  
Herald AV Publications 2002  
Saraband for the Morning of Easter
36. A Thousand Voices  
J. Marty Cope with the King's Brass  
J. Marty Cope 2003  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1
37. Great is the Lord: The Anglican Repertoire Vol. 1  
The Herning Boys Choir, Mads Bills  
Paula Records 2003  
Master Tallis's Testament
38. Tuba Tune: Spätromantische Orgelmusick aus England  
Catherine Ennis  
IFO Classics 2003  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1
39. English Choral Music

Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, directed by Christopher Robinson, Iain Farrington  
(organ)  
Naxos 2004  
    Paean

40. Howells: Choral Music  
The Choir of New College, Oxford; Edward Higginbottom  
CRD Records 2004  
    Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1  
    Preludio 'Sine Nomine'  
    Paean

41. Organ Recital: Soria, Samuel  
Samuel Soria  
Delos 2004  
    Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

42. The Grand Organ of the Albert Hall, London  
Dame Gillian Weir  
Priory 2004  
    Rhapsody no. 3

43. Howells: Organ and Choral Works  
The Choir of New College Oxford, directed by Edward Higginbottom  
CRD 2005  
    Flourish for a Bidding  
    St Louis comes to Clifton

44. Derr Herr ist mein Hirt: Psalmvertonungen  
Wilm Geismann  
Carus 2006  
    Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 2  
    Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

45. English Choral Favourites  
City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus; Thomas Trotter  
EMI Records 2006  
    Master Tallis's Testament

46. Organ Spectacular from St Paul's Cathedral  
Huw Williams  
Guild GmbH 2006  
    Master Tallis's Testament

47. Celebration! (Live)  
Catherine Rodland; St Olaf Cantorei; John Ferguson  
St Olaf Records 2007  
    Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

48. Edwardian Splendour (Including Organ Music by Parry, Elgar, Howells & Bairstow)

William Whitehead  
Herald AV Publications 2007  
Rhapsody no. 3

49. Élan Vital (Live)  
Andrew Senn  
Pro Organo 2008  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

50. Evensong for St Peter's Day  
The Girl Choristers and Gentlemen of Exeter Cathedral, Stephen Tanner (conductor), Paul Morgan (organ)  
Herald AV Publications 2008  
Preludio 'Sine Nomine'

51. The Buzard Organ of All Saints Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia, USA  
John Scott  
Priory 2008  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

52. The Grand Organ of King's College, Cambridge  
Stephen Cleobury  
Priory 2008  
Master Tallis's Testament

53. The Grand Organ of Lincoln Cathedral  
Colin Walsh  
Priory 2009  
Rhapsody no. 1

54. At the Organ of Leeds Cathedral  
Benjamin Saunders  
Herald AV Publications 2010  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3

55. Celebration! The Organ of Exeter Cathedral  
Paul Morgan  
Priory 2010  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

56. Choral Evensong from Tewkesbury Abbey  
Carleton Etherington; Benjamin Nicholas  
Delphian Records 2010  
Master Tallis's Testament

57. English Organ Music from the Temple Church  
James Vivian  
Signum Records 2010  
Rhapsody no. 1

58. Great European Organs, Vol. 81: Cirencester Parish Church

Anthony Hammond  
Priory 2010  
Sonata no. 1

59. Greater Love: The English Choral and Organ Tradition  
Daniel Bara  
Gothic 2010  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

60. In Darkness or Light  
Stephen Buzard  
Delos 2010  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 2

61. Majestus: The Great Organ of Washington National Cathedral  
Scott Dettea  
Loft 2010  
Rhapsody no. 3

62. My Spirit Rejoices  
Frederick Burgomaster  
Gothic 2010  
Master Tallis's Testament

63. Organ Greats from the Great Organ  
Erik Suter  
Washington National Cathedral 2010  
Master Tallis's Testament

64. Organ Music from Carlisle Cathedral  
John Robinson  
Priory 2010  
Rhapsody no. 3

65. Organs of Edinburgh  
John Kitchen  
Delphian Records 2010  
Master Tallis's Testament

66. The Great Organs of First Church, Vol. 2  
David Goode  
Gothic 2010  
Master Tallis's Testament

67. The Grand Organ of Exeter Cathedral  
Andrew Millington  
Priory 2011  
Rhapsody no. 3

68. The Grand Organ of Salisbury Cathedral  
David Halls

- Priory 2011  
Rhapsody no. 2
69. The Organ of Chichester Cathedral  
Sarah Baldock  
Herald AV Publications 2011  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3
70. English Organ Music: Organ of the University of Lancaster & Organ of Cartmel Priory  
Ian Hare  
Priory 2012  
Paeon
71. Haec Dies: Byrd & The Tudor Revival  
Choir of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge; Geoffrey Webber  
Delphian Records 2012  
Master Tallis's Testament
72. La musique d'orgue anglaise, vol. 1  
Massimo Nosetti  
Scam 2012  
Rhapsody no. 3
73. Organ Spectacular (Classic FM: The Full Works)  
Simon Preston and Peter Hurford  
Decca 2012  
Rhapsody no. 3
74. English Romantics and Transcriptions  
Tobias Frank  
Rondeau 2013  
Rhapsody no. 3
75. Célébrations (Les musiciens et la Grande Guerre, Vol. 8)  
Philippe Brandeis; Les Cuivres de la Garde Républicaine  
Hortus 2014  
Rhapsody no. 3
76. English Organ Music  
Nicholas Danby  
SWR Classic Archive 2014  
Fugue, Chorale and Epilogue
77. Metaphora  
Hayo Boerema  
Hayo 2014  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1
78. The Steimeyer Organ in Nidaros Cathedral  
Magne H. Draagen  
Lawn Classics 2014

Master Tallis's Testament

79. A Festival of English Organ Music, Vol. 2

Ben van Oosten

Musikverlag Danringhaus und Grimm, 2015

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

80. For Thou Art With Me

David H. Brock

A. W. Toneygold Records 2015

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3

Master Tallis's Testament

81. Herbert Howells: Collegium Regale

The Choir of King's College, Cambridge; Sir David Willcocks

Decca Music Group 2015<sup>151</sup>

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

82. In Omnibus Requiem Quaesivi

David de Jong

JQZ Muziekproducties 2015

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3

83. L'orgue de St Paul's Bloor Street

David Baskeyfield

ATMA Classique 2015

Rhapsody no. 3

84. Mendelssohn, Duruflé, Howells & Widor: Organ Works

Jean Lippincott

Gothic 2015

Rhapsody no. 3

85. 50 Organ Songs: Classical Collection

Tristan Russcher

One Media iP Ltd 2015

Six Short Pieces for Organ

86. Arundel Experience

Alexander Eadon

Willowhayne Records 2016

Rhapsody no. 1

87. Great European Organs, Vol. 100

David Poulter

Priory 2016

Master Tallis's Testament

88. Take the Psalm

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<sup>151</sup> The date of 2015 is the date of re-issue, not the original recording

The Choir of Southwell Minster; Paul Hale; Simon Hogan  
Priory 2016

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

89. The Aeolian Organ at Duke University Chapel  
Christopher Jacobson

PentaTone 2016

Rhapsody no. 1

90. An East Riding Treasure

Robert Poyser

Priory 2017

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

91. Choral Evensong from Salisbury Cathedral

Salisbury Cathedral Choir; David Halls; John Challenger

Priory 2017

Rhapsody no. 1

Rhapsody no. 3

92. Sunday at Norwich Cathedral

Norwich Cathedral Choir; Ashley Grote; David Dunnett

Priory 2017

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 3

93. The Ryemuse Collection: Organ Music from 23 British Instruments

George Guest

Priory 2017

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 2

94. An Organ Celebration

Peter Guy

Big Jo-ke Music 2018

Master Tallis's Testament

95. Hereford Experience

Douglas Tang

Willowhayne Records 2018

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

96. Impressionist & 20th Century

J. P. Morgan

J. P. Morgan 2018

Paeon

97. Lest We Forget

The Choir of Chichester Cathedral; Charles Harrison

Signum Records 2018

Rhapsody no. 3

98. A Requiem for Stephen: Into a Greater Light

Stephen Cleobury: Choir of King's College, Cambridge  
King's College, Cambridge 2019  
Master Tallis's Testament

99. Dominant Accord  
Susan De Kam  
Pro Organo 2019  
Master Tallis's Testament

100. Evocations  
Katelyn Emerson  
Pro Organo 2019  
Rhapsody no. 3 (incorrectly listed as no. 2)

101. Howells: Cello Concerto, An English Mass  
Guy Johnston; Britten Sinfonia; Stephen Cleobury; The Choir of King's College,  
Cambridge  
King's College, Cambridge, 2019  
Paean  
Master Tallis's Testament  
Rhapsody no. 3

102. Mosaics in Sound  
Mark Laubach  
Pro Organo 2019  
Master Tallis's Testament  
Rhapsody no. 3

103. Spiritual Pairs  
Marilyn Keiser  
Pro Organo 2019  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

104. The Grand Organ of Westminster Abbey  
Daniel Cook  
Priory 2019  
Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3

105. The Opening of Heaven  
Bruce Neswick  
Pro Organo 2019  
Siciliano for a High Ceremony

106. 111 Organ Masterpieces  
Hans-Christoph Becker-Foss  
Menuetto Classics 2019  
Rhapsody no. 3

107. A Grand Chorus: The Organ of Westminster Abbey  
Andrew Lumsden



Guild 2020

Master Tallis's Testament

108. Festive Organ Music from Christ Church Cathedral

Philip Matthias

Big Jo-ke Music 2020

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

Saraband (for the morning of Easter)

109. Here and Elsewhere (Live)

Roger W. Sherman

ReZound 2020

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 1

110. Hybrid

Anders Gaden

CDKlassick 2020

Saraband (for the morning of Easter)

Master Tallis's Testament

111. The English Organ, Vol. 2

Daniel Moulton

Will Fraser 2020

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 2, no. 1

112. The English Organ, Vol. 3

Daniel Moulton

Will Fraser 2020

Rhapsody no. 3

113. The Very Best of Church Organ Music (Volume 1)

James Lancelot

Marathon Media International, 2020

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, no. 3

114. To be a light

The Choristers and Lay Clerks of Christ Church, Raleigh

David Jernigan 2020

Three Psalm Preludes, Set 1, nos. 1 + 2

115. Treasure Coast Pipes

David Hill

Pro Organo 2021

Master Tallis's Testament

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