



The London Festival of Contemporary Church Music

Saturday 18 May 2024, 7.30pm
St George's Church, Bloomsbury

“The Hunt of the Unicorn”

The LFCCM Festival Singers
Alastair Carey *direction*

Programme

A selection of the medieval “unicorn” tapestries, portraying key moments in the life of Christ, are accompanied by contemporary sacred music from the Festival’s “Call for Scores” incubation project in this depiction of the journey from Advent to Easter.

I. The Unicorn Purifies Water

*David Griffiths
David McGregor
Alastair Putt
Mary Offer*

Beata Virgo
O Oriens
O magnum mysterium
Shards of Heaven

II. The Unicorn is Beset by Hunters

*Charles West
Edward-Rhys Harry
Rodney Lister
Edmund Jolliffe*

Come Down, O Love Divine
Set me as a Seal
I Got Me Flowers
And I Saw a New Heaven

III. The Killing of the Unicorn

*Alastair Putt
Vivek Haria
Dominic McGonigal
Derri Joseph Lewis*

This Worldes Joie
Lord, I cry unto Thee
Ave verum corpus
Gobaith

Interval

IV. The Unicorn is carried to the Tomb

*Karl Jenkins
Łukasz Urbaniak
Alison Willis
Anthony Mosakowski
Ronald Corp
Christopher Mortlock*

Ave verum corpus
Pascha nostrum
Be Still, My Soul
If Ye Love Me
God be in my head
Ubi Caritas

V. The Unicorn Rests in Paradise

*Mary Offer
Jonathan Wikeley
Will Sims
Michael Wolniakowski
Phillip Cooke*

A New Earth
The Call
Psallite Domino
Thanks be to God
Christus resurgens

“Christ is the power of God, therefore he is called The Unicorn because the one horn symbolises one common power with the Father” – St Basil the Great (c. 329 – 375)

“Who is this Unicorn but the only begotten Son of God?” – St Ambrose (c. 339 – 397)

Tonight’s performance takes its title from a set of seven medieval tapestries that together form a connected series of themed images on the journey of a mythical unicorn. Likely woven at the very end of the 15th century – probably in Brussels or northern France, given the heavy French influence on both the visual design of the tapestries and the weaving techniques used in their production – they would have graced the halls in one or more of the owner’s residences. They were likely woven using vertically-hung looms, with the weavers working fabric by hand on the reverse side of the loom to form an mosaic-like image on the front of the tapestry. Tapestries had several practical advantages over simple wall paintings during this period. First, they were portable, so they could be moved from room to room and residence to residence, based on the season and the movements of the owner; secondly, being made of heavy fabric they naturally had an insulating effect against the cold. (Tapestries were often hung in bedrooms, although that was unlikely the case with the unicorn tapestries; they are far too large.) But perhaps most importantly, the tapestries, shining with brilliant silks, wools, and thin strips of precious metals, would have made it abundantly clear to anyone who saw them that their owner was a person of wealth, status, and singular importance.

The original owner of the unicorn tapestries is unknown, but by 1680 they were in the possession of the French noble François VI de la Rochefoucauld; at the time of his death in March that year they were hanging in his elegant Parisian town house. They survived the French Revolution by being moved out of Paris into safe keeping in the nearby town of Ruffec, suffering only minor damage to one of the seven hangings. Kept out of sight until the mid-19th century, they were acquired by the American banker John D. Rockefeller in 1922 for the price of one million dollars (roughly 20 million dollars today). Rockefeller gifted them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; today, they hang in the Cloisters of the Museum in upper Manhattan.

There are several theories as to the significance of the unicorn-based imagery in the tapestries. The first, based on our modern understanding that the symbology of the unicorn was a medieval representation of the Son of God, is that the images are depictions of key moments from the life of Christ. In this interpretation, the image of the unicorn purifying the water of a stream with its horn alludes to the Book of Malachi: “... He will purify the sons of Levi [great-grandfather of Aaron and Moses, i.e. of the tribes of Israel] ... and they shall offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness”. The images of the unicorn beset and wounded by hunters are obvious allusions to Christ’s betrayal and passion; the image of the unicorn being carried on horseback back to the hunter’s fortress depicts the body of Christ being carried to his tomb. The final image in the sequence, showing the unicorn resting in a garden – the spear wounds in its side still clearly visible – represents Christ’s resurrection and, ultimately, his ascension into paradise. The seventh tapestry in the set, which survives only in fragments today, seems to represent a maiden comforting the unicorn; this may be a representation of the Virgin Mary, which would lend additional credence to a biblical interpretation.

There are certain aspects of the tapestries, however, that raise questions about an overly dogmatic interpretation. If the depictions are meant to be interpreted as strictly sacred, then why are the

dozens of plants and flowers painstakingly woven into the background scenery – particularly in the image of the unicorn in the garden – readily identifiable as actual French garden flowers? This suggests an earthly final destination for the unicorn, not a heavenly one. Why is the unicorn in the garden chained to a pomegranate tree – a medieval symbol of fertility and love – rather than roaming freely? Why are the hunters styled so closely on actual noble hunts of the period? And what is the significance of the mysterious “AE” monograph that was evidently embroidered at a later date on several of the tapestries? These clues tend to suggest a possible secular meaning for the tapestries – perhaps a celebration of a noble wedding? – rather than a sacred meaning. It is also quite possible that the dual interpretations are not contradictory; the concept of overlapping “God of Heaven” and “God of Love” was widely accepted in the medieval period, and so these apparently paradoxical design elements may have actually been intended to complement, not conflict, with each other.

For the purposes of tonight’s performance, we take the images as allegories of Christ’s birth, passion, and resurrection. Most of the music comes from The London Festival of Contemporary Church Music’s “Call for Scores” incubation project, an open submission process for composers of new sacred music to hear their work performed by professional choirs. The programme includes a wide selection of music from “Call for Scores” from both established professional composers and emerging amateurs alike. While most of the composers are from the UK, we also have pieces tonight from composers in Europe, the United States, and New Zealand. In the first bracket of pieces, representing Christ’s emergence as the purifier, we hear music celebrating the role of the Virgin Mary (**Beata Virgo**), the birth of Jesus as the morning star who gives light to the world (**O oriens**), the ineffable mystery of the virgin birth (**O magnum mysterium**), and the calming light of the Star of Bethlehem (**Shards of Heaven**). In the second and third brackets, Christ’s passion becomes imminent on Palm Sunday then a brutal reality on Good Friday, as he is first celebrated as the Son of David (**Come Down, O Love Divine; Set me as a Seal; I Got Me Flowers; And I Saw a New Heaven**) before becoming a crucifixion sacrifice (**This Worldes Joie; Lord I cry unto Thee; Ave Verum Corpus**). The first half ends with the single word “Hope” – here in its Welsh translation, “**Gobaith**” – repeated over and over again, initially in desperation, but ultimately in increasing confidence as we look towards Easter and the Resurrection. After the interval the unicorn is carried to the tomb as a sacrifice (**Ave Verum Corpus; Pascha Nostrum**), but we know the story is not over and that love will triumph (**Be Still, My Soul; If Ye Love Me; God be in my head; Ubi Caritas**). Finally, Christ’s resurrection (**The Call; Christus resurgens**) and ascension (**A New Earth; Psallite Domino; Thanks be to God**) are celebrated.

All these varied works show boundless creativity, artistry, and stylistic inventiveness, and so are a powerful demonstration that the creation of new sacred music is in a healthy and vibrant state not only in this country but beyond. It is invidious to single out a single composer from such a fine selection, but the Festival is particularly grateful to be able to include two works by the late Alastair Putt, who was a personal friend and colleague of many of tonight’s performers.

Biographies of the composers are available online at lfccm.com.

Reproductions of five sections of the unicorn tapestries are on display tonight. You are encouraged to move around quietly during the performance to examine the reproductions while the choir sings.

Performers

Alastair Carey

Alastair Carey has been involved in choral performance since the age of six. He has performed, recorded, and broadcast throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, appearing as a vocal performer with ensembles including The Gabrieli Consort, The Oxford Camerata, The Brabant Ensemble, and The Nederlandse Bachvereniging in performances ranging from the BBC Proms to the Leipzig Bach Festival. As a conductor, Alastair has directed concerts in Asia, Australasia, Europe, and throughout the United Kingdom, including award-winning performances at competitions in the European Grand Prix in Spain and the World Choir Games in South Korea.

The LFCCM Festival Singers

Soprano Eleanor Bray Felicity Hayward Tess Pearson Emily Wenman

Alto Helena Cooke Eleanor Dann Leonora Dawson-Bowling

Tenor Matthew Howard Louis Watkins Joseph Wicks

Bass Francis Brett Geoff Clapham Jon Stainsby

The Festival's own professional vocal ensemble, The LFCCM Festival Singers, expands and augments the Choir of St Pancras Parish Church with additional singers from London's world-class choral institutions. Most members of the ensemble have come from a collegiate background and gone on to study as postgraduate students at one of the London conservatoires. This combination of superb sight-reading and world-class vocal training gives the group tremendous flexibility, enabling the performance of a repertory that spans five centuries: ranging from motets from the Eton Choirbook to new commissions by composers such as Roxanna Panufnik, Michael Berkeley, Cecilia McDowall, Howard Skempton, Michael Finnissy, Gabriel Jackson, Francis Pott, Sebastian Forbes, Francis Grier, Kerry Andrew, Antony Pitts, and many more.

The London Festival of Contemporary Church Music

The London Festival of Contemporary Church Music was founded by Christopher Batchelor in 2002 with the aim of showcasing contemporary liturgical music in both service and concert. Now more than 20 years old, the LFCCM has grown to include nearly 60 events, dozens of composers, hundreds of performers, and thousands of audience members, both live and online.

Make the LFCCM part of your Legacy

Artistic groups across the United Kingdom have seen funding cuts and financial pressures since the global coronavirus pandemic. In the face of challenges like these, the secure future of classical music in this country can no longer be taken for granted.

The LFCCM's endowment fund ensures the Festival's ongoing financial security and independence for generations to come. Your lasting legacy will be reflected in new commissions, live performances, educational programmes, and supporting the development of church music in perpetuity.

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