

# SS Wesley Bicentenary Concert

## Spoken Introductions at the concert by Fergus Black

### Introit : Blessed is the man

“Samuel”. “Sebastian”. “Wesley”.

The influences that shaped his music are all there in his name:

- the Samuel he got from his father, the English pianist, organist and composer;
- the Sebastian was in honour of J S Bach - links him to the continent. This man was a friend and correspondent of Spohr, Mendelssohn and Gounod among others;
- and the Wesley? Well, that is the Wesleys, the founders of methodism, and that links him inextricably to the world of religious music.

S. S. Wesley is a bit unfashionable now: not famous, and not obscure enough (yet!) to have a cult following.

That introit, Blessed is the man, is a very late work, and perhaps a little dull. Perhaps, like Mendelssohn, Wesley's best work was early, when he was at Hereford and Exeter. This next anthem, The Wilderness, is early. It is an extended verse anthem in the classic English model of Gibbons and Purcell. I had always assumed that this was a staple of the Anglican church music repertoire, but when I asked the choir here how many had sung it before, only one had. I suppose it falls between two stools: being too long for services and too short for concerts.

### Anthem : The Wilderness

I am disappointed not to be able to get hold of any of Wesley's piano music, there is some, but it is no longer published. The songs were hard enough to find - they are in a volume of Musica Britannica which can be bought for £76. Thank Goodness for Inter-Library Loan.

### Solo song : By the Rivers of Babylon

Most of Wesley's organ music was improvised – it was what he was famous for in his lifetime – most of the published work is from the Exeter period. One listener, in Winchester in 1854 wrote these “Thoughts

during the organ-performance at Winchester Cathedral : on Tuesday Nov : 28 : 1854.”:

*Methinks all earth is banished from this place,  
And we enspher'd in Heaven, while with closed eye  
And soul entranced I listen to the sounds  
Heaven-born – th'embodiment of harmony,  
Such as the orbs of light sing in their course –  
Which, with magician's touch, thou call'st to life,  
and waken'st from yon marvellous instrument,  
O Son of Genius! whose majestic art  
Commands the soul; now soothing with thy soft  
And winning melodies, in voice all calm,  
And gentle as the singing of a child;  
And now, as with a mighty thunder-peal,  
Or the low booming of the Autumn wind,  
High-swelling till it stirs the tempest's wrath,  
And fills all hearts with awe – awakening  
The far-off echoes of the archèd vault  
Which canopies this Temple, higher then  
Ascending on the wings of praise sublime  
To Heaven, in Glory to the Infinite.*

William Whiting

### Organ music : Andante in F

from A First Set of Three Pieces for a Chamber Organ

Wesley was, by all accounts, a difficult man to get on with - mean, often complaining. He often sent deputies to play for him, and even left services half-way through to go fishing. His pupils, and the chapters of the various Cathedrals that employed him, pretty much forgave him everything, because they thought him a genius.

### Solo Song : Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent

Serious English music was in a pretty parlous state in the mid-nineteenth century. The only choice for a talented performer and composer was music for the drawing room, or music for the church. (The symphony and the opera were not as common in England as they were on the continent). S.S.Wesley comes over to me, reading his life, as being frustrated by the lack of opportunity. Frustrated also by the provincial attitudes of the clergy - and he did his best to reform them and their views through outspoken publications. It is possible that this work bore fruit after his death.

Wash Me Thoroughly, an anthem from Leeds, juxtaposes long sustained notes, and chromatic twisting and turning, and at the end, Wesley's fingerprint, a melody based on the notes of a common chord.

### **Anthem : Wash me Thoroughly**

#### **INTERVAL**

Later in life, Wesley turned his attention to hymns, with the publication in 1872 of *The European Psalmist*, a collection of Hymns, Psalms and short anthems - Wesley wrote 142 of the hymn tunes in his new book. Some sound like they might be by Dykes, or some other Victorian hymn tune writer. Others are like German Chorales. There is a third type, that is different - Wincott, the tune we sing next, is one such, where the tune takes an unexpected turn in the final phrase.

Since hymns are written for congregations to sing, I invite you to join in.

### **Hymn : Lord speak to me (t. Wincott)**

### **Psalm : 92 (chants by Wesley)**

Central to an understanding of Wesley's music, is an understanding of how much the words must have meant to him: here, in the Magnificat and Nunc

Dimittis from his service in E, the musical invention is entirely at the service of the meaning of the text, and imbues each phrase of the text with character. It is as if we are hearing the words for the first time.

### **Evening Canticles in E major**

Wesley's Six Pieces for Chamber Organ were written when he was in Exeter for his pupil, Lady Acland, of Killerton House. She found the first set, from which Paul played earlier, too difficult, so he wrote her a second set.

### **Organ music : Larghetto in f sharp minor**

from A Second Set of Three Pieces for a Chamber Organ

### **Hymn : Alleluia sing to Jesus (t. Alleluia)**

Finally, we come to one of Wesley's most famous anthems, sung at the Queen's wedding in 1952. In this well-known piece, we can perhaps see more clearly the Wesley style - it is sectional; and the outer sections are firmly grounded in the home key, and struggle to get away from it - what Erik Routley in his book calls "Eflattery". There are chromatic sections, that perhaps sound melodramatic to us, but are effective in giving character to the text, and in the final section there is that rising arpeggio.

### **Anthem : Blessed be the God & Father**

#### **References**

- Samuel Sebastian Wesley 1810-1876 - A Centenary Memoir by Betty Matthews*  
(published by Kenneth Mummery, Bournemouth, 1976)
- The Musical Wesleys by Erik Routley. (published by Herbert Jenkins, London, 1968)*