

# THE ENGLISH MUSIC FESTIVAL IN TRURO, JULY 2021

RICHARD REYNOLDS reflects on the Truro EMF, which took place on 10th July 2021

The announcement that a one-day English Music Festival was to be held in Truro in July 2021 was greeted with delight by this supporter of the EMF, in the same way that the first sunrise after a bleak winter can restore dampened spirits. But actually, there had already been a much-enjoyed May EMF in Sussex, at a time when it seemed the dark days of Covid might finally be in retreat. One can only reflect, now, that almost all the major retreats in history have proceeded in fits and starts. Meanwhile, news that the Cornish festival was to be held in Truro's fine cathedral was an added draw to the writer. He had become familiar with this splendid yet refined example of gothic revival after a family member moved to the city some years ago.

It later transpired that there was a special reason for choosing Truro: it was the obvious venue in which to celebrate the eightieth birthday of one of Cornwall's best-known musicians, Judith Bailey. Born to musical parents in Cambourne in 1941, she trained in the Royal Academy of Music and also in the Royal College of Music. After teaching in her early postgraduate years she was appointed conductor of both the Southampton Concert Orchestra in 1969, and the Petersfield Orchestra in 1972. She began to compose for both these orchestras and has continued to compose well into her retirement years, for which she returned to her native Cornwall in 2001. And so we were gathering eager to hear examples of her music – some of us for the very first time – but this would have to wait until the afternoon.

In the morning session we were treated to the familiar duo of Rupert Marshall-Luck, violin, and Duncan Honeybourne, piano, who, one has to say, did real justice to the ever popular Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending* that began the day's music. It sounded heavenly, if a little remote, in the nave of the cathedral.

But then the real skylark always sounds remote, and one strains to hear its sweet tones while searching the sky for the little fluttering dot so far above. After this, there followed four works for Violin and Piano in duet: Holst's *Five Pieces*, Parry's *Sonata in D*, Finzi's *Introit* – originally the slow movement for a violin concerto. Finzi later withdrew the outer movements, but some 30 years after his death in 1956, his friend, the composer Howard Ferguson, made an arrangement for violin and piano of the *Introit*. It was charming, and Rupert's programme notes informed us that the violin part was entirely faithful to Finzi's original composition. To close, we heard Elgar's op.82, *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, also a great treat for this audience member.

At some point in the morning, a very rare event occurred: the music came to an abrupt halt. It seemed that Duncan was missing a page or two. He hurried off to somewhere in the south transept, presumably to rummage in his music case. Rupert, meanwhile, stepped forward to address the nave audience with one of his excellent impromptu lectures. In the event, Duncan soon returned with the missing pages and the recital resumed as if nothing had happened.

It was Judith Bailey's op.51 that opened the afternoon's recital and Duncan Honeybourne played this solo piano piece, *The Towers of San Gimignano*. The writer had left himself only a moment to glance at the programme before Duncan began, and no time to study the composer's introductory words. Its title had been briefly noted, however, but the whereabouts of San Gimignano could not be recalled, although the name seemed familiar; but as the piece progressed, the music gave rise to visions of clear-cut architecture with sharp shadows, soaring upwards here and there. The "bells", sounding from the piano, were unmistakably European, tolling across a city square, no doubt, and suddenly



Local seagull admires the EMF banner outside Truro Cathedral

the memory of just such a square was triggered. Days later, the writer was able to consult his travel records and identified the square with its spectacular surrounding towers, all situated in a hill-top town the family had visited on a rare trip to Tuscany in 1998.

The next work by Bailey, *Aquamarine Waltz*, op.65, was written for cello and piano and inspired by the beautiful sea view from her house at Gwithian Towans on the north coast of Cornwall. What joy it was to be so close to both piano and cello for this delightful work, all echoes being lost in the proximity to both instruments.

We then heard *Summer Music* by Paul Carr, who was born in Penzance in 1961, and already well known to EMF supporters. He had originally scored the work for clarinet, cello and piano when first written in the summer of 2017. He had since rewritten it as a piano quartet, specifically for this celebration of Judith Bailey's birthday, and dedicated it to Em Marshall-Luck, to whom we owe the existence of the EMF. It was thoroughly enjoyed, both as an expression of summer and as a fitting tribute by a fellow Cornishman to the composer. To play the work, Rupert and Duncan were joined by Jonathan Barritt, viola, and Joseph Spooner, cello. There were exciting moments at close quarters when the four sounded more like a full orchestra.

We returned to Judith Bailey again for the next piece, composed in 1997 for the Mainly Baroque Trio, a group established by Tony Cox in the village of Egloshayle which lies on the east bank of the River Camel, immediately upstream from Wadebridge. The composition is based on a Cornish folksong, *The Sweet Nightingale*, and is set mainly in baroque form. In a version arranged for violin, viola and cello the music was as sweet as its name suggests.

The final piece by Judith Bailey we were to hear in this "Judith Bailey Eightieth Birthday Celebration Concert" was her op.76: *Light* – a trio for violin, viola and piano. In her programme notes for this work, she says that the piece was composed at the request of Juliet Davey, and Lucy White – two of her oldest friends. It was to be written in memory of Isabel Young, the cellist who had led the Southampton Concert Orchestra for many years.

Isabel became Judith's partner and they lived in the stable flat at Uppark, the beautiful National Trust house high on the Sussex Downs. Sadly, Isabel died in 2003, and *Light* was written in the following year. Its four movements are each given a quotation: 1. "O Darkness more precious than the light" (St John of the Cross); 2. "Silent silver lights, and darks undreamed of, where I hush and bless myself with

silence" (Browning); 3. "Thou sayest farewell, and lo! I have thee by the hand and will not let thee go" (Robert Bridges); and 4. "Replace the darkness within me with a gentle light" (Anon).

As soon as the writer read the quotation for number 3, he knew what was to come, for he had suffered the bereavement of one very dear to him only three months earlier; it was the first time in his life he had experienced real grief. Unsurprisingly, therefore, he found Judith Bailey's music at this point exquisitely haunting and failed to stem the silent tears that flowed. It was clear from then on, that this was a concert he would never forget.

The final offering for the afternoon was Herbert Howells's *Piano Quartet in A minor*. Having spent a few hours atop Gloucestershire's Churchdown Hill some years earlier with other members of the EMF, the music soon conjured up images of the views, the insistent breeze and the rarefied atmosphere of this eyrie that had so attracted Howells and his fellow composer Ivor Gurney



Director Em welcomes the audience



Rupert Marshall-Luck and Duncan Honeybourne



The Quartet perform Bailey and Howells

nearly a century ago (they preferred to call it “Chosen” Hill). Howells has ever been a favourite composer, and one’s spirits rose and fell in waves as the quartet played on with undoubted professional acumen. The end came with a flourish, and to genuinely appreciative applause. But “the hand that would not let go” was still there...

The audience dispersed, a number entering the south aisle, all that remains now of the original St Mary’s Church which was demolished in 1880 to make way for the cathedral. It is known as St Mary’s Aisle, and with its own chancel, organ and choir stalls is a useful and attractive adjunct to the main cathedral. It was to be used this afternoon as a venue for audience members to listen to a discussion between Judith Bailey and Patrick Waller, the well-known musicologist and reviewer who had been a prime mover in making the Cornish composer’s instrumental music available on disc for the first time in 2007.

The conversation and subsequent question and answer session that followed were fascinating, the composer revealing herself to be both wise and gentle, and remarkably self-effacing in view of the considerable success of her birthday concert; its final echoes were perhaps even then still resonating in the high vaults of the cathedral nave and tower. Had he known he was to be invited to review the day’s events, the writer might have applied to interview Judith Bailey himself – although on second thoughts, his composure would probably have proved too delicate after the encounter with *Light*.

As things were, he slipped away to visit the EM Records CD stall near the west doors of the cathedral in order to purchase the EM Records disc *Havas – A Period of Summer*, op.44, and *Concerto for Orchestra*, op.55, both by Judith Bailey, recorded in St Jude’s, Hampstead in 2014, and produced by EM Records. The disc also features four works by fellow Cornish composer George Lloyd. This disc is full of wonderful sounds and is highly recommended on all counts, either to sit back and listen to, or as yet another vehicle to educate oneself on the wealth of English music that continues to be brought to light for our benefit by the EMF team under the guidance of Em Marshall-Luck.



Patrick and Jean Waller present a bouquet to Judith Bailey

The writer’s equanimity was restored somewhat over the evening meal with his daughter and son-in-law up the hill, and he was delighted when his daughter agreed to attend the final session of the day in his company. They set out on foot all unsuspecting and quite unprepared for the cloudburst that suddenly poured down upon them as they approached Lemon Quay. Although hastening forward, by the time they reached the cathedral both were soaked to the skin.

The evening concert had been under way for some time and at first sight the nave looked full to capacity. Fortunately two seats were discovered in the South aisle close to the crossing and it proved an excellent spot to hear the choir and to view its conductor at work. Straightaway it was clear that having been originally formed independently to stand in for the cathedral choir during its holidays, the St Mary’s Singers, attractively attired in black, were absolutely first rate. Directed now by the cathedral’s assistant organist Andrew Wyatt, the



Patrick Waller and Judith Bailey in conversation



St Mary’s Singers in concert

own, immediately following the *Songs of Farewell*, no.3: *Never Weather-Beaten Sail*, the third of the six songs by Sir Hubert Parry written not long before his death in 1918 aged 70, apparently, sad to say, a victim of the ‘flu epidemic raging at that time.

The solo organ work that followed at this point was the third movement of Percy Whitlock’s C minor *Organ Sonata*. Headed *Scherzetto*, the chosen movement lived up to its name in lively and mischievous fashion, and we heard in addition to Willis’s flutes and diapasons, some of his reed stops imitating brass, strings and woodwind in the wider orchestral sectors of the organ. This organ’s huge range of colour from the deepest 32ft pedal pipes to the shrillest pipes, measured in inches, soon became evident and was every bit as satisfying to hear as one had hoped.

We returned then to Choral works by Elgar, Finzi and Stanford and it was very pleasing to see that Judith Bailey was represented in a performance of her lovely setting of the hymn *Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven*, composed in the 1960s for the choir of the Cambourne Wesley Church of which she has been a lifelong member.

The final organ work, *Master Tallis’s Testament*, was by Herbert Howells, one of an album of six pieces he composed during the Second World War years, published by Novello in 1953. This particular piece is thought to have been prompted by hearing, at the age of eighteen, an early performance of Vaughan Williams’s *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* that was performed in Gloucester Cathedral, when Howells and Gurney were attending the Three Choirs Festival there. They had been so moved by the piece that they spent the whole night wandering around Gloucester talking about it.

The performance of *Master Tallis’s Testament* by the cathedral organist this evening, on Father Willis’s great organ, was enthralling; but by the time the last echoes faded, the writer and his daughter, still wet through, were starting to shiver and they felt it would be prudent to leave for home. So no more can be said about the two remaining choral works of the evening, and he was sad to miss the ever-joyful farewell scene with Em and Tristan presenting tributes, usually in the form of wine, to the performers. Undoubtedly the day had been very successful; and the EMF and its audiences remain immensely grateful to Dr Patrick Waller, who instigated and financially supported the day – Em made it clear that without Patrick’s suggestion and input, the day would not have happened. Those who live near Cornwall may be pleased to hear, however, that due to good audience numbers and a good deal of local enthusiasm, the EMF is already planning to repeat the visit to Truro Cathedral in 2022.



The Marshall-Luck family at work selling EM Records discs

singing sounded enthusiastic and clear, each choir member riveted on their conductor. Every now and then other voices joined in sending shivers down the spine of the writer. These “voices” stemmed from the pipework of the mighty cathedral organ whose component parts had been created in the London workshop of Henry Willis and Sons in 1887, shipped by sea to Truro, and then voiced and assembled by “Father” Henry Willis himself. He had to work far above the chancel floor while the columns and arches supporting the northwest corner of the central tower were being built around him. A simultaneous collaboration of this nature between architect, mason and organ-builder is said to have been extremely rare.

A little later in the programme we were allowed to hear this world-famous Father Willis organ on its