

***Mass of the Children* – John Rutter (1945--)**

Though he is perhaps best known for his carols and other short pieces, John Rutter also has a number of large-scale works for chorus and orchestra to his name. Most of these received their first performances in the United States, where Rutter is a frequent visitor, writing regularly for American choirs and conducting performances of his own music.



In March of 2001 he sustained the most painful loss of his young son, a computer whiz and a singer. This accident occurred right outside the Clare Chapel, the focal point of Rutter's entire life. After this tragedy he could not find inspiration to write for over two years, but he finally emerged with the composition of *Mass of the Children*. Perhaps this was Rutter's way of paying tribute to his son, clearing his soul of torment, and moving back into the light of creation - a personal catharsis.

Many of the familiar and well-loved staples of Rutter's music are here: the flowing melodies, catchy rhythms, and pop-tinged harmonies. The *Mass of the Children* received its première in Carnegie Hall, New York, in February 2003, and the first UK performance followed a month later in Guildford Cathedral with the composer conducting on both occasions.

The text of *Mass of the Children* is that of a standard Latin Missa Brevis (a Mass not including a Credo section) to which several relevant English poetic texts have been added. These additional English texts are woven in to form a progression from waking to sleeping that runs through the work as a counterpart to the liturgy of the conventional Mass text. The piece does not begin immediately with the Kyrie Eleison but, in keeping with the 'waking to sleeping' theme, opens with the children's choir singing lines from Bishop Thomas Ken's fine morning hymn, 'Awake, my soul, and with the sun', written in about 1674 for the scholars of Winchester College. After the Kyrie comes an exuberant Gloria featuring energetic, unequal

rhythms that are typical of Rutter at his liveliest, and then a complete change of mood is introduced with the gently lilting harmonies of the Sanctus and Benedictus. The Agnus Dei text is divided between the fourth and fifth movements, with the first part being followed by William Blake's moving poem, 'The Lamb', sung by the children's choir. The final movement begins with two prayers written by John Rutter for the baritone and soprano soloists, based on verses by Lancelot Andrewes and St. Patrick. The Mass now returns to the poetry of Bishop Ken. In one of Rutter's most inspired passages the beautiful evening hymn, 'Glory to thee, my God, this night' is sung by the children to the sublime melody of the Tallis Canon, whilst the adults chant 'Dona nobis pacem' (Grant us thy peace). Finally the choirs are joined by the soloists, and the combined voices gradually bring the work to its peaceful conclusion.

The idea of combining a children's choir with an adult one is of course nothing new, but most of these works tend to treat the young voices as a subsidiary musical resource. In his *Mass of the Children*, however, the composer has given the children's choir a central part to play. It is they, not the adults, who are heard at the very outset, and their role throughout is integral to the overall concept of the *Mass*.

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