

Phillip Cooke

Verbum caro factum est

Words: Christmas Responory – St John 1:14

Phillip Cooke introduces *Verbum caro factum est*, a motet for a cappella SATB choir, and discusses his approach to composition with **Shirley Ratcliffe**

Phillip Cooke gives a full explanation of his choice of text and the structure of the music on our website.

It was never Phillip Cooke's intention to have a career in music. He studied for his BA at Durham University 'to placate my parents who wanted me to have a university education. I intended to return to the Lake District to do something more prosaic.'

When he was young Cooke learned the piano but gave it up to play football – he's an Everton supporter. Then, at the age of 16 he realised how interested he was in music and started formal lessons with Ian Hare in Keswick: 'He opened my eyes and ears to music I didn't know and encouraged my fledgling compositions – I owe him a lot.'

Cooke's time at Durham kindled his interest in composition and he decided to study for an MMus at Manchester with John Casken: 'It was a really intense year that made me rethink my technique and aesthetic.' There followed a PhD with Anthony Powers at Cardiff. 'Anthony is a fantastic teacher and composer who taught me much; and the teaching experience Cardiff gave me has been extremely useful in my academic career. It only seemed right to go on with music, after studying for eight years.'

His fascination with choral music started with visits to the massed Cumbrian Rural Choirs concerts where he heard, *Belshazzar's Feast*, *Symphony of Psalms* and *Carmina Burana*. 'My first choral piece was an awful Christmas carol for Keswick Choral Society. I became more and more interested in choral music – especially British – though came to

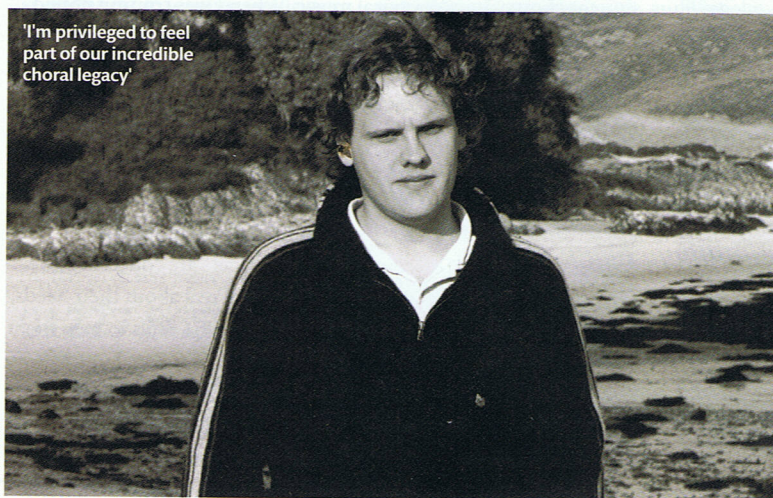
the strange dichotomy of being a composer who researched choral music without really writing a note! Why does British choral music appeal? 'I guess tradition and a shared musical heritage. We are very lucky in this country to have such an incredible legacy – the Eton Choirbook, Tallis, Byrd, Purcell, Elgar, Howells, Britten, Leighton – and to feel part of this continuing tradition is a privilege.'

Cooke's first choral loves were by Górecki and Tavener. 'The music of the "holy minimalists" is incredibly appealing with its beautiful harmonies and beguiling sonorities; but I quickly wanted to hear music that had some of those qualities but required more interaction from me. I think that's why I moved to composers like Schnittke, Gubaidulina, and then MacMillan. In the main their music is more rewarding for me.'

What are his current influences? 'I find the question of influences a difficult one to pin down. I really like the choral music of Jonathan Harvey and the directness of James MacMillan. Some of the music of the post-holy minimalists like Gabriel Jackson, Tarik O'Regan and Paweł Łukaszewski interests me, but I find the same problem inherent as in Tavener – too much light and not enough dark.'

Cooke was appointed Junior Research Fellow at The Queen's College, Oxford, working closely with director of music Owen Rees and the college choir. 'Owen has been immensely helpful and has encouraged my choral writing. I was commissioned to write an anthem and I've done a setting of the college Grace. It has been very special, particularly having the Grace sung at college occasions and festivities. I'm really looking forward to writing my new work for the choir, *Four Choral Songs*. I've worked with [the choir] for three years and know how to harness their qualities to make my music sound good!'

While living in Gloucestershire, Cooke contacted Adrian Partington at the cathedral: 'He very kindly agreed to perform my *Regina Coeli*, and I'm writing a set of Responses for next year. I'm aware of the sonorities of a cathedral choir; I'm more aware of the huge weight of church music history weighing down on my shoulders. I recently found writing an Evening Service almost as difficult as writing a string quartet!'



'I'm privileged to feel part of our incredible choral legacy'

CAROLYN ROBB

To further his other work Cooke set up the London Contemporary Music Group (LCMG) with two colleagues in 2004: 'It's a way of having our compositions played by professional players in and around London. It's been a hugely important part of my professional development and has led to my working with some of the country's finest players and composers.' The LCMG is releasing its debut CD in February with chamber music by Cooke and co-director Adrian Hull.

What draws Cooke to a specific text? 'It's a notoriously difficult business which I don't undertake lightly. I often think many musical settings don't do justice to the text and that is one of the reasons I'm attracted to ancient church texts which have been set by many composers – I'm tapping into a tradition rather than making a bold statement. There are inherent problems in this approach, but it works for me!'

How does he start to set a text? 'By reading it through hundreds of times until the rhythm and the flow is completely embedded in my brain, and then I begin to think of a suitable musical response. The mood should be obvious from the text, which then informs the music. [In terms of interpretation] I'm always interested in hearing the ideas of conductors and performers; they generally bring out colours and feelings that I didn't realise were present in the piece. In the case of *Verbum caro factum est*, I'd be really interested to discuss the two solo altos and their engagement with the piece.'

Cooke was recently chosen to take part in the Lake District Summer 4x4 Scheme for talented young composers. 'I spent a week writing for, and working with the Orlando Consort and John Casken. It was a great experience, and I am hoping to work with the festival and the ensemble again.'

With the approach of Christmas he is writing a short work for Keswick Choral Society, *Laetetur Animo*, to words by a local poet. He continues to teach at The Queen's College and, as a research fellow, has given papers on the liturgical music of MacMillan and has been researching Howells over the last four years. 'I feel Howells is the pre-eminent British choral composer of the 20th century. I've recently given a paper on "Sensuality and Mysticism in the Evening Canticle Settings". There are few composers who created such an individual body of work, which still gets performed regularly. His sacred music is the cornerstone of the Anglican tradition and he deserves more credit for it. Part of what I am trying to do with my academic career is to reclaim Howells's position in the vanguard of British composers.' ■

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Liberamente (senza misura) (♩ = c.80) rit. - - - - -

Soprano

Alto* *pp sempre, lontano* *poco*
The word. The word. The word. The word. The word be - came flesh.

Tenor

Bass

* see preface for performance details

A

Lento: tranquillo e sostenuto (♩ = c.90)

2 *pp espress.* *poco* *sub p*
Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est. Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro

pp espress. *Tutti** *poco* *sub p*
Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro

pp espress. *poco* *sub p*
Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro

pp espress. *poco* *sub p*
Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro

pp *poco* *sub p*
Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum est Ver - bum ca - ro

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