

# WHERE LIGHT AND SHADE REPOSE: JUDITH BINGHAM AT 70

Dr Phillip Cooke

“Composing was always the main thing, right from when I was a small child. In my teens I thought I might be an actress as well, but I grew out of that as the singing took over.” These are the honest and beguiling words of one of the country’s leading composers who celebrates her 70th birthday this year, a composer who has continually written powerful, colourful and dramatic works across the genres since her first pieces in the early 1970s. A composer whose oeuvre straddles monumental orchestral canvases, characterful concerti, a plethora of idiomatic organ pieces and a lifetime’s work writing for the voice in all its many guises. A composer who has written for the country’s leading orchestras, a stellar list of singers and instrumentalists, and all the best choirs in this country and much further afield. The composer, of course, is Judith Bingham, one of the most distinguished and performed British composers working today, and one of the most prominent voices in contemporary choral music.

Other than being known for her finely wrought music, Judith Bingham is often remembered for being a member of the BBC Singers (the only full-time professional choir in the country) from 1983-1995, a seminal experience which cemented her links with the group as a composer, and for which she has written many works over the years. Despite her strong association with the choir, Bingham is quick to stress that the composing came *before* her time in the group, not as a result of such – in fact she was already a well-respected young composer with a series of striking pieces under her belt before she joined the singers – for example, *A Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni*, a work for the choir, was premiered by them in 1982. Despite the obvious and prosaic benefits of stability and security that singing in the group gave her (and the negative impacts on her composition time), it must have been a hugely beneficial experience being surrounded by contemporary music-making and having exposure to such fine singers. Her choral output increased exponentially during and after her time in the choir. As her composition career continued to bloom, she left the group as a singer but returned in 2004 as Composer-in-Association (a role she

held until 2009) and is still working with the group in her 70th year.

Bingham was born in Nottinghamshire to a broadly musical family, her father had a business renting out pianos and was a good amateur pianist. Perhaps more significantly, he was a subscriber to the World Record Club, which issued long-playing records and reel-to-reel tapes, mainly of classical music and jazz, through a membership mail-order system during the 1950s and 1960s – through which Bingham learned much of the standard repertoire and ‘the sort of pieces children are supposed to like’ – supplementing this with more contemporary fare on BBC Radio 3 (or its predecessor the Third Programme). A heady mix of 1960s’ pop (Bingham was actually a member of the Beatles’ fan club in her youth), television music and Berlioz led to singing lessons before entering the Royal Academy of Music in 1970. Here she had various voice and composition tutors (including notable characters such as Eric Fenby and Alan Bush) but she also experienced some of the stylistic dogma of the time, as she recalls: “There was a clash between the post-war brutalism and complexity, and baby boomers like me.” A more supportive voice was the leading critic, writer and teacher Hans Keller, with whom Bingham had informal lessons in the mid-1970s when Keller was at the apex of his power as the BBC’s ‘Chief Assistant, New Music’ and an important voice on the BBC’s powerful New Music Panel. Keller provided support, encouragement and necessary critique at a pivotal time for the composer, and many of his lessons lingered long into Bingham’s later career (Bingham dedicated her 1981 piano work *Pictured Within* to him).

One of the most significant events of Bingham’s early to mid-career was the premiere of her 1988 orchestral composition *Chartres* by the BBC Philharmonic in 1993. This 40-minute work for large orchestra has the intriguing subtitle of ‘A piece for orchestra about some features and ambiguities of Chartres Cathedral’ and was the composer’s first piece for orchestra, written following a visit to the medieval cathedral in 1986. The premiere brought added prominence to



Judith Bingham  
Photo: Patrick Douglas-Hamilton

Bingham's composing career and several large commissions followed, including the 'dreamscape for orchestra', *Beyond Redemption*, and the BBC Proms commission for choir and brass ensemble, *Salt in the Blood*, both in 1995. The impact of *Chartres* changed everything and hastened Bingham's departure from the BBC Singers, sending her back to the world of full-time composition. It was revived to great acclaim for further performance in 2004.

The success and importance of *Chartres* highlights the achievements Bingham has had across the different genres – it would be wrong to pigeonhole her as a composer for choir and organ despite the fact that these forces make up the majority of her output. As well as the aforementioned orchestral works there are two bassoon concerti, a trumpet concerto and a recently premiered clarinet concerto written for the virtuoso Michael Collins in his own celebration year. There are many chamber works – including the often-performed *Chapman's Pool* for piano trio – instrumental works, and a body of dramatic songs (perhaps hinting at the composer's early desire to become an actress) for various different combinations and timbres. There is even an operatic work from the late 1970s, *Flynn*, based on the life, times and reported speeches of the legendary actor Errol Flynn, which typifies the breadth and diversity of Bingham's work.

However, arguably, Bingham's reputation hangs on her compositions for choir – an amazing and original body of work that continues both to grow and to explore different moods, colours and textures with every passing year. There are many works for the church and cathedral including – amongst many other pieces – services for York Minster, Oriel College Oxford, King's College Cambridge and the Edington Festival of Music within the Liturgy; responses, motets, anthems and a beautiful carol, *God Would Be Born in Thee*, for the 2004 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's. There are also seven settings of the *Missa Brevis*, including two written for cathedrals in Sweden – Västerås and Kalmar – a country where Bingham has forged strong links in the past decade. There are just as many secular works for choir which set a whole panoply of diverse poets, texts and sources (some of which are incorporated into sacred works to great effect) including Shakespeare, Manley Hopkins, Auden, Wordsworth and often the composer's own poetry. Like many of the best choral composers, the act of choosing the text for a piece is amongst the most enjoyable parts of the composition, as Bingham states: "Searching for a text is the most carefree part of creating a piece for me... I read a great deal and like to set unusual things." One of the most striking recent pieces that interpolates sacred and secular texts (and highlights Bingham's prowess at choosing texts) is the 2003 work *The Christmas Truce* written for the BBC

Singers and Britten Sinfonia. This 25-minute piece which meditates on the brief cessation in fighting over Christmas 1914 during World War I features hymns and chorales in addition to well-known Christmas carols, interspersed with ‘eyewitness and newspaper accounts selected, adapted and poeticised by the composer’. The effect of this interpolation is unsettling and disturbing, but the overall impact is hugely emotive and memorable – it remains one of Bingham’s most emotional and powerful works.

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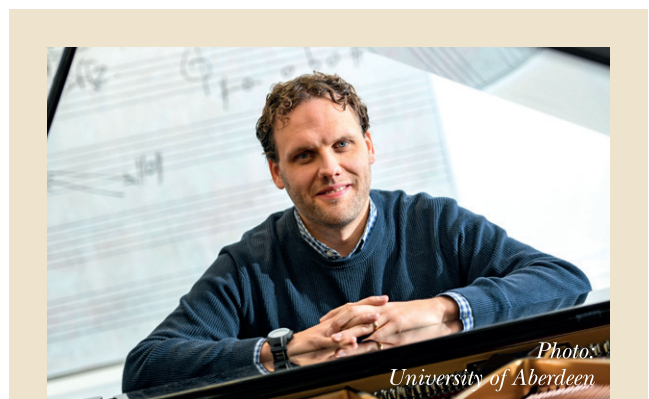
Perhaps the most high-profile of Bingham’s more recent works is also one of the most unusual, and it is something that the composer refers to as “probably one of the best experiences of my life” – the 2014 piece for choir and organ, *Ghostly Grace*. The work was written for the reinterment of King Richard III that took place at Leicester Cathedral in March 2015, the King’s body having been found in a nearby car park during an archaeological search in 2012. The finding of the long-deceased King and the subsequent reinterment service made international news and provided Bingham with one of the strangest yet most difficult commissions of her career. She recently reflected on the commission: “It was always a subject I was interested in, from childhood, and to write an anthem for his funeral was beyond surreal and very moving... I got to see his books in the British Library and spent an inordinate amount of time choosing the text.” The austere, restrained but strangely optimistic service required a specific piece of music to channel the difficult scenario of this reinterment (the post-Shakespeare reputation of Richard III and his alleged deeds creating a fairly damaged reputation in the public conscious), leading Bingham to fashion a piece that caught the mood and the moment to perfection.

*Ghostly Grace*, like a great deal of Bingham’s music, is extremely well-crafted, with much thought given to how to express the text appropriately as well as ensuring that all performers (especially the singers) have idiomatic and satisfying material. Bingham’s work is questioning; it goes to dark places and takes awkward turns – it is music that requires engagement in order to fully appreciate the craft and the technique. Unlike much contemporary choral music, it isn’t instantly gratifying, and even the simplest and most immediate piece will have something unanswered at its core, something that is necessary for the composer and listener to unravel before the work is finished. In a genre where modern, post-modern and traditional are so blurred, Bingham’s voice is unique - her music is so *contemporary* in the word’s broadest sense (something that represents the modern world and the way

we interact within it). Her compositional voice is clear and authentic, and it is unwavering, from the smallest motet to her grand oratorios and cantatas.

It is no surprise that during her career she has picked up various honours and accolades that befit her place as a leading artist of national significance. She was appointed an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 1997 (becoming a Fellow this year) and a Fellow of the Royal Northern College of Music in 2005. She was given an honorary doctorate in Music from the University of Aberdeen in 2017 and was appointed an OBE in the 2020 New Year’s Honours for service to music. Amongst other accolades she has won several British Composer Awards, including ‘Best Choral Work’ for *The Christmas Truce*. In her 70th year there have been various events of celebration, including a concert of her works from her long-term collaborators, the BBC Singers, which were broadcast during her birthday week on BBC Radio 3.

As Judith Bingham begins the next stage of her career (which includes a new work for brass band (her sixth), a second string quartet and a new Advent anthem for the BBC Singers), it is interesting to hear how the compositional arena has changed since she started in the early 1970s: “It’s a very different world now. 1970 was still a non-technological age, scores and parts were written by hand... I still have a mark on my third finger where my pen rested, because of hours of work.” Although the world may be more interconnected and the ease with which composers can get their music to the public may have changed, it is perhaps most different in the way that female composers are treated by the musical establishment: “There is no doubt that the 1970s were a pinnacle of misogyny. The 1960s altered behaviour but not attitudes... although sexism hasn’t gone away, it is so much easier now.” Like Bingham’s music, there is an openness and honesty to her words which is to be admired as much as the creeping textures of *Ghostly Grace* or the luminous colours of *Chartres* – long may this continue and long may we be presented with challenging, dramatic and vivid works from this important composer.



**Phillip Cooke is active as a composer and academic with regular performances of his work across the UK and further afield by the likes of The Sixteen, the BBC Singers and many cathedral choirs. He was the co-editor of *The Music of Herbert Howells* in 2013 and has written the first study of James MacMillan’s work, published by Boydell & Brewer in 2019. He is currently Professor of Composition at the University of Aberdeen. [www.phillipcooke.com](http://www.phillipcooke.com)**

*Interior of Chartres Cathedral  
Photo: Robert Skcigem*

