## NOAH'S FIRE


an Oratorio in 15 Parts for Baritone solo, Mixed Choir (SATB), Children's Choir, Piano, Organ, Percussion and String Orchestra

## Phillip A. Cooke

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## (2014-15)

## PERFORMANCE NOTES

- All organ stops and registrations are left to the discretion of the organist
- Breath marks are suggestions only
- Accidentals apply throughout the bar
- The solo baritone should be in an elevated, or prominent position for the Narrator role
- In Tableaux II and VII the 'action’ takes place as a play-within-a-play, here the solo violin, percussionist and organist (now playing chamber organ) should move to a secondary position slightly away from the main orchestra
- If no chamber organ is available, the organist should remain playing the church organ
- In these Tableaux the solo baritone should move from the elevated position to be in the secondary position
- To delineate the dual roles of the solo baritone, the Narrator should have a declamatory, rhetorical style whilst the Alderman should be slightly warmer and more arioso
- In Tableau III the Children's Choir should be placed off-stage, though clearly audible, they process on-stage during the third interlude and perform Tableau VI on-stage
- The semi-chorus should be made of a small group of sopranos, not numbering more than six

For the Chester Music Society Choir in Celebration of their 70th Anniversary
Noah's Fire was commissioned by the Chester Music Society for their 70th Anniversary

First performed on the 21 November 2015 by the Chester Music Society Choir, Chester Music Society Junior Choir, Robert Rice (baritone), and the Liverpool Sinfonia conducted by Graham Jordan Ellis at Chester Cathedral, Chester, UK.

With thanks to Sarah Rimkus for proof-reading the score.

## Duration: <br> Cover photograph: 'Dove-Fire'

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## PROGRAMME NOTE

Noah's Fire is my largest work to date, as well as the most ambitious and with the longest gestation. I had worked with the Chester Music Society Youth Choir over a two year period (2010 - 12) where I had written two works for them (Jabberwocky, 2010 and Far-Away Music, 2012) and following from this I suggested that the main, adult choir might be interested in a new work. Over the next two years a commission was slowly developed in close discussion with the choir, their committee and conductor. Various ideas were mooted, but the one that seemed to stand out more than others was a musical reaction to the famous 'Mystery Plays' associated with the city. This was finally decided upon and I began work shortly afterwards. It soon became apparent that a suitable text for the work would not be easy to find and after a short, unsuccessful search I approached poet and librettist Ben Kaye to see whether he would be interested in collaborating on this project. He duly did, and the finished libretto arrived in March 2014, composition beginning in earnest in August of that year.

Noah's Fire is envisaged as an oratorio in the 'British Oratorio Tradition' a tradition of largescale, choral-orchestral works, often on a sacred theme starting with Bach (not British, of course, but co-opted) and travelling through Mendelssohn, Elgar, Walton and Britten. It is a dramatic, colourful work in which the music is entirely driven by the narrative - which in this case is an important, moralistic tale which has resonances in contemporary life as well as the Medieval period in which it is set. Rather than this work be a collection of motets, or choral set-pieces I wanted the work to really tell a story - to be informed by the narrative, and for the narrative to be the reason for this piece's very being.

The work is in 15 parts and is scored for solo baritone, large choir, children's choir and orchestra (the same vocal and instrumental forces, in the main, as Britten's Saint Nicholas). It tells the story of a local guild attempting to perform a mystery play, when their play materials burn down in an unexpected fire they are left crestfallen and defeated. In their darkest hour, hope is provided by the most unlikely source - the local prostitutes who offer their help in finding new materials in return for more recognition and acknowledgment from the men-folk of the guild. This bargain is met, the materials are found, the play is staged and an important lesson is learned.

My work blends three distinct types of music - the narrator, the choir and the 'play-within-the-play'. The narrator's music (the solo baritone) is declamatory and rhetorical and it is always the same. He sings the same phrase many times (with different rhythms to reflect the different words) and acts as both a refrain and a counterpoint to the other material. His material is much more austere than the surrounding music and has more than a hint of medieval music to it. The choir has much more vivid and immediate music, describing the emotional content of the events in a variety of styles and deliveries. The 'play-within-theplay' is the performance of Noah's Flood that the guild are trying to stage - wherever this is depicted a different instrumental group (solo violin, tenor drum and chamber organ) accompanies a solo bass (from the choir) and the solo baritone in a secondary role. This material is more sustained, recitative-like and folky.

Noah's Fire embodies much of what I am striving to do as a composer today: it works with idea of tradition (both cultural, musical and historical), with associated historical models (Mystery Play, Oratorio), with pre-existing music, with musical associations and ideas relating to local communities. It aims to fuse ideas from both the secular and the sacred into something both historical and contemporary. It is a work I've been wanting to write for years, in a medium I think has significance and relevance and is a piece I hope will be as enjoyable to performers and audiences as is was for me to write.

## Instrumentation / Voices

## Solo Baritone (Narrator/Alderman)

Large Mixed Chorus [SATB], of which to be taken:
Female Semi-Chorus (Agnes Filene)
Solo Bass (Noah/Tom)
Children's Choir [SS or SA]
Timpani (1 Player)
Percussion (1 Player):
Bass drum, large suspended cymbal, tambourine, glockenspiel, xylophone, tenor drum, bell-tree, tubular bells, thunder-sheet (to be used by a chorus member)

Piano
Organ (ad lib chamber organ)
Strings (minimum: 8,8,4,4,2)

## NOAH'S FIRE

## I. Prologue - ‘As my duty, before God and Man...

Narrator $\quad$| As my duty, before God and Man, |
| :--- |
| Let all be silent now, to hear these banns! |
| Before the banishment of Popery, |
| All here was gilded pride and... mystery... |
|  |
| On Corpus Christi Day each Craft, |
| At our Westchester stations made, |
| Their Plays, to glorify our Lord, |
| Mime and music in sublime parade... |

## II. Tableau I [Introduction of the Guilds]

Choir
Eels, here, Oysters! fresh from the river!
Boots and Purses! Finest leather!
Never our fortune made, but,
Side by side, we ply our Trade...
Penny to the other side!
Swipe that lad, I'll tan your hide!
Ribbons fit for-your sweetheart's hair.
Don't let the wife know, don't let the wife know...
Gold that's fit for your finest fayre!
Lamb and Tripe that's
Soft and ripe!
Penny to the other side!
Silver Gooses for your staff!
Pewter more like... what a laugh!
Work is hard,
Rest is rare,
Easter's here,
Fair is Fair...

Life is hard,
A grown-child rare,
Work 'til dusk,
The rest is prayer...
Too many children, buried here...
So many children... ... buried here...
Pleas un-answered,
Dreams still-born,

Why should we, not then, Drink 'till morn?

Finest fayre in the Shire!
Fair is time,
And time is fair,
The time is now,
So hear our fair!

## III. Narration - 'But in these Godly acts...'

Narrator
But in these Godly acts, such jealousy was hid, As each Guild pledged, to rival Guild outdo, "These Holy days" would some declare, "Occasion vice and idleness anew."

The Waterleaders and The Drawers, That year foreswore their Play would reign supreme, But God knows pride as piety disguised, And sent to them his own divine... mystery

## IV. Interlude [Pageant Music]

## V. Tableau II [Preparation of the 'Mystery']

Noah / Tom Great Lord God in majesty,
That such grace hast granted me, Where all was borne,
... all was borne...
... all was... borne...

Alderman No, no... and no!
I said and still I say, Our pageant is tomorrow, Have you not learned the Play?

Noah / Tom There are too many words to speak, I do not have the gift...
I practiced long into the night, Yet still I am... adrift.

Alderman I too am sorry Tom, your industry, Does credit unto you.
Oh Lord, why in these days just past,

Did steadfast Noah draw his last?
All our work, the costumes, the masks, The freshly painted cart, Will be no glory, gentle Tom, If ye know not your art.

Enough tired friends, the day, it ends, Choir Already twice the Watchman's cried.

We too must be about our beds,
And pray The Lord will save our pride.

Narrator | But as the Waterleaders dreamt of splendour, |
| :--- |
| A candle, left in haste at their departing, |
| Flickered, fell, was fanned into inferno, |
| The wind swept from the West and... all was... fire! |

## VI. Interlude [Fire Music]

## VII. Tableau III [Consummation of the Flames]

Children Oh! Waterleaders... Oh! be awake!
(off-stage) Your glorious Pageant is afire!
Draw! Lament! And draw again,
Oh draw... until The very Dee be dry!
Choir Out and waile-a-way! It must soon take, The rows along the Watergate, A maelstrom such as this we've never seen, Such flames are not to be believed!

The Gods are angry...
Oh still your heresy!
For all is misery.
Where is your faith?
Consuming all, as all is tinder to them, They glow and grow, such is the conflagration! This fire, sure sign... of a higher power, Cannot not be sung-soothed, by a single soul's... perfection.

All we can be, Is not yet as we are... In striving false, Our journey must be far...

|  | We cannot be... |
| :---: | :---: |
|  | Be-come as is your heart... |
|  | Until we, we learn of your art... |
| Children | Oh! Waterleaders! What is your trade? |
| (off-stage) | What draw you there? Be it pitch, or glue? |
|  | Cry louder then! Your saint is sleeping! |
|  | A beggar's spit would better what you do! |
| Narrator | Such was the wrath of The Almighty, |
|  | No water drawn that night would quench the flame, |
|  | So seared as Sodom were their pipedreams, |
|  | And Guild destroyed, in all but name. |
|  | VIII. Tableau IV [Supplication of the Guilds] |
| Choir | O Lord, O blessed Lord, such is our pride, |
|  | Did we forget that faith should be our guide? |
|  | We dwell in burning hell of our conceit, |
|  | In Jesus's name, forgiveness we beseech. |
|  | Only your word can save us from the flood, |
|  | Of shameful tears we know must surely come. |
|  | In feeble hearts the sin of envy burned, |
|  | So born from ash, to ash we are returned. |
|  | Your Mystery became our vanity, |
|  | We beg O Lord for your miracle of... mercy... |
|  | Have mercy. |

## IX. Narration - 'Where is our end...and our beginning?’

| Narrator | Where is our end and... and our beginning? |
| :---: | :---: |
|  | Where is our Guild indeed, when all is guilt? |
|  | In love of glory, we are gelded, |
|  | Fast run aground on river... silt. |

## X. Tableau V [Recognition of the Harlots]

| Agnes Filene |  |
| :--- | :--- |
| (semi-chorus) | They call me Agnes, and you all know me here, <br> But in the light, no-one won't meet my eye, <br> Shuffle past, as if you don't see me, <br> Not as last night though, when you played a diff'rent <br> lyre... |
| Some of your Wives have just cause to... hate... me, |  |
| Choir |  |
|  | Unfaithful husbands, oft relent... forsake me, <br> Disown me, like my girls, like we never had, <br> The pleasure of your company... and made you glad. |
|  | Our 'usbands, of your very guild worked hard all <br> their lives, <br> Yet on their deaths, we was cast aside as cheap. <br> This profession is not what we chose, <br> But no Angels came to feed us in the street. |
| In turn for a bequest to save your Play, a question |  |
| we would pose, |  |
| A small request, for other fateful widows. |  |
| With the passing of the husband of a faithful wife, |  |
| She is granted privilege, he once enjoyed in life. |  |
| We'd be the shame of ev'ry sneering Trade! |  |
| Guildsman each would laugh in turn, |  |
| Can you not hear the mocking Goldsmiths now? |  |
| Forever in their scorn we'd burn! |  |

All take Communion, for the Sabbath's sake...
But one swallow, not a summer makes...

## Agnes Filene Silence!!!

If my truth too sordid be... for noble skin, If my faith be too base, for your younger kin, Cast me out again, forgo your pageant night, Or grant us now a lasting Widow's right!

Alderman Lady, this eve no other Guild will take your coin. To their pageants they are wed and none will stir. They have no cause to love us, nor we them, How can then this miracle of faith occur?

Agnes Filene Gather now ladies, come, there is work to do, Though those who spite us call us most unclean, Still we remember that our Lord did bless, Our own beloved Patron, Mary Magdalene...

## XI. Narration - 'At Sadler's Tower, the Common Women gathered...'

Narrator At Sadler’s Tower, the Common Women gathered, From there to spread the news of such distress, To plead with the Guilds to take their silver, To preach that lucre without love... is emptiness.

## XII. Interlude [Dawn Music]

## XIII. Tableau VI [Affirmation of Faith]

Children Arise good Masters, for glory, awake!
(on-stage) This dawn is blessed as Creation Day! Come quickly now, and gather at... The Cross, To see a miracle... in all its finery!

The Goldsmiths' old cart, they have gift-ed, The wheels new-Coopered to a gleam. Bejeweled above, The Weavers' canopy, A regal panoply... of... dreams...

Ev'ry Guild has left their offerings, And not a penny would they take.

|  | Their hearts were turned in time of tragedy, <br> And in their Charity, for... Widows' sakes. |
| :--- | :--- |
| Choir $\quad$For all these years were we so blinded? <br> Mistaking merchantry for hate? <br> In rivalry is room for love, <br> To save all from... The Beggar's Gate. |  |

## XIV. Tableau VII [Consolidation of the 'Mystery’]



Choir | Therefore now we are borne, |
| :--- |
| Our wives, our children, and our many, |
| With sacrifice to honour thee, |
| Of beasts and fowls, as thou may see, |
| And full devotion! |

# XV. Epilogue - 'From tragedy was born a miracle...' 

| $\underline{\text { Narrator, Choir, }}$ | From tragedy was born a miracle, <br> Children |
| :--- | :--- |
|  | Of sacrifice and of Agnes Filene, |
| Of Faith, of Hope, of blessed Charity, |  |
|  | And of the Sainted Mary Magdalene. |

Narrator, Choir Here ends the telling of our legend, A tale of which the children never tire, The story of the Waterleaders, Drawers of Dee... and... Noah's Fire.

Narrator A miracle of God... or Man? Only a Play remains... By who's will, the Raven, And the Dove... were spared the flames?
I. Prologue - 'As my duty, before God and Man...'








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VII. Tableau III [Consummation of the flames]


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VIII. Tableau IV [Supplication of the Guilds]

















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XV. Epilogue - 'From tragedy and sin, was born a miracle...'






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