

## A new carol for Queens'

Writing music has always been a part of my life, but I have always needed an occasion, a reason to write, and like to know the musicians that I am writing for. At the time of my appointment as Director of Music at Queens' back in April 2011, I was particularly excited by the prospect of composing music for the choir, feeling that here was an opportunity to experiment and to work directly with a group of singers whose voices I would get to know. However, it was not until January 2012 that I first put pen to paper.

It was New Year's Day in fact, a time for fresh thoughts. Outside the snow had frozen, and as I sat at the piano I started to improvise 'frozen' music. I was pursuing two ideas: combining chords that shared a common note, for example notes from the chords of C major and E major (both of which contain the note 'E'), and exploring the crystalline sound (to my mind) of chains of major thirds, known technically as the augmented triad. In retrospect, the first idea may have come from that sense of New Year being a turning point, facing both the past and the future, Janus-like, with the common note acting as a kind of node; if this was the case, it was certainly unconscious at the time.

I was surprised at the beauty that emerged from my experimentation, but, more importantly, by the bitter-sweet quality of the harmonies that it produced: the chains of major thirds produced a sense of hope and wonder, but the dissonances produced by the combinations of different triads gave a sense of anguish. On reflection, I realized that I was in fact exploring the possibilities of an unusual scale (or mode) formed by the notes of three triads (see ex.1). Sensing this musical material had some potential, I hurriedly scribbled down some of the chords I had been playing, and then returned to everyday life.

The potential of what I had stumbled upon was confirmed when I returned to it a couple of days later. So I set about finding a text that could be expressed by these bitter-sweet harmonies. I turned first to my favourite book of medieval poetry, and thumbed through the carols. Many were very familiar – 'There is no rose of such virtue, Adam lay ybounden' – and many were far too long, I felt, but one stood out. It dated from the fifteenth century and came from a manuscript which has connections with Exeter Cathedral (Ritson's manuscript, British Library Additional MS 5665). It has two verses and a refrain, and in the medieval musical setting (found in the manuscript) the refrain is to be sung before and after each verse. The spelling in the text I give here is substantially modernised by myself: this approach, used by Boris Ord in his famous setting of 'Adam lay y bounden', aids comprehensibility (for the listener) while retaining something of the feel of the older language.

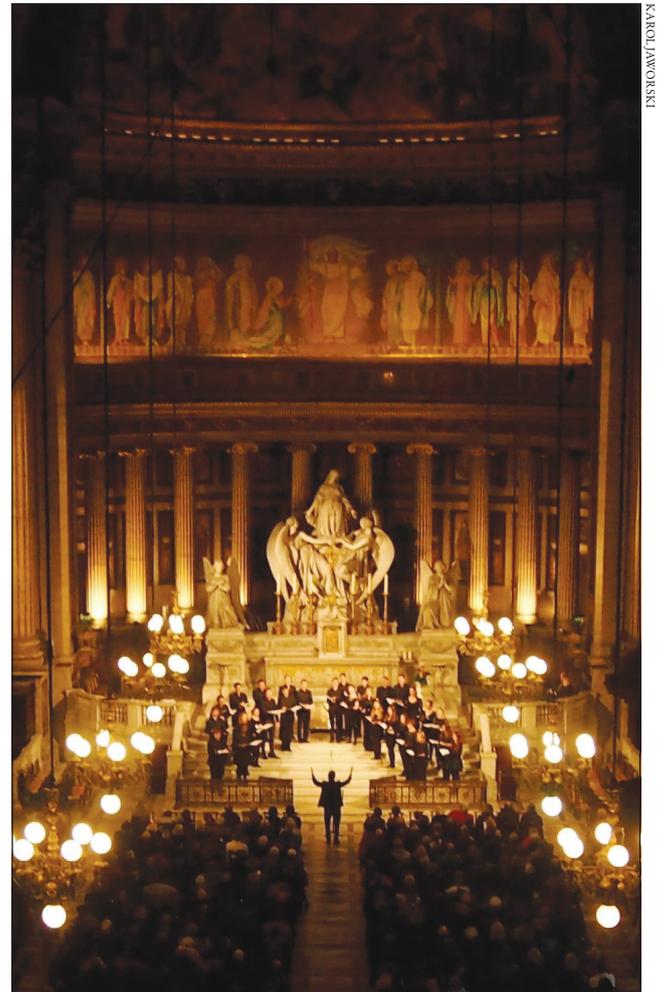
I saw a sweet and seemly sight,  
A blissful bird, a blossom bright,  
That mourning made  
And mirth ofmange:  
A maiden mother, meek and mild,  
In cradle keep a knave child  
That softly sleep:  
She sat and sang:  
Lullay, lullow, lully, lullay.

Bewy, bewy, lully.  
Bewy, lully, lullow, lully,  
Baw, baw, my barne,  
Sleep softly now.

I liked the idea of writing a 'lullaby' carol – there are many beautiful examples of the genre, and it brings with it musical conventions of rocking rhythms, known as compound time. I also liked the two voices that the poem contains: that of a narrator ('I saw a sight') and that of the mother singing to her child, especially the vernacular 'baw, baw, my barne'. However, it was the central concept of the poem that really caught my imagination, since the mixture of 'mourning' and 'mirth' seemed to correlate directly with my 'bifocal' harmonies.

So over the next week, I returned to the piano in odd moments and attempted to mould my harmonies into a lullaby for the mother to sing. At the same time, I improvised melodies for the narrator's words, trying to find the most effective rhythm for delivering the text clearly. I also pondered on the best way to use the various voice parts in the choir: it seemed to make sense that the highest voices (sopranos and altos) took the role of the mother singing her lullaby (ex.2); and the lower voices (tenor and basses) took the part of the narrator.

This led to the idea that the mother's lullaby could be



*The Choir singing in the Madeleine Church in Paris.*

**Ex.1: triads with common notes; scale or mode**



**Ex.2: The mother's lullaby refrain**

Lull - ai, lull - oh, lull - ei, lull - ai, Bew - ei, bew - ei, lull - ei, —

*p* Lull - ai - oh, — lull - ei - ai, bew - ei, lull - ei, —

**Ex.3: The narrator's melody**

*mf* I saw a sweet and seem - ly sight, A bliss - ful bird,

*f* — a bloss - om bright, That - mourn - ning made and

continuous throughout the carol, acting as an accompaniment to the narrator's words, and that the first occurrence of the words 'baw, baw, my barne' could be made to coincide with the end of the narrator's first verse on the word 'ofmange' ('at the same time'). So I set about combining my melody and lullaby: I spent a lot of time on this, seeking supple rhythms that 'floated' over the main beats of the bar (ex.3), also incorporating a rhythmic feature characteristic of medieval settings of carols, in which the 'lilting' division of six beats into two groups of three is varied by patterns of three groups of two beats (a device known as a 'hemiola'). I also had the idea of using the tenors to represent the sleeping child by holding a long note over many bars on the 'nodal' note between the mother's lullaby and the narrator's melody (the note 'B').

With the carol half completed, term began and other priorities took over. I continued to work on the carol in odd moments between supervisions, but it was only in March, in the two weeks before the actual recording, that I really set about completing it.

At the first rehearsal with the Choir, the opening phrase sounded too gluey, so I asked the sopranos to breathe after the second word, and subsequently added a rest to the notation to indicate this breath. I also spent time in the rehearsal adjusting the balance between parts, asking just half of the sopranos to sing at one point, and the altos likewise at another point, and this was also incorporated into the score. The main problem in performance was the audibility of the basses (the narrator's words); first of all, I simply asked the basses to sing up and the others parts to sing softer, but the result sounded unnatural for everyone. So then I took the rather unorthodox approach of asking the basses to stand at the front of the choir, with the sopranos and altos behind and singing into the backs of the men: this solved the balance problem instantly.

One of the main problems the Choir had in performing the carol was singing the correct vowel sounds in the mother's refrain: in the musical score I had used a phonetic spelling to reflect the original pronunciation (or my understanding of it) so that 'Lullay, lullow, lully, lullay' was transcribed as 'Lullai, lulloh, lullei, lullai' – but with the sound of many other similar but subtly different refrains in our heads, it took a long time to get beyond the 'tongue-twister' stage and start making music.

The carol also requires very accurate tuning (especially on the minor ninths which if not spot-on just sound like an out-of-tune octave) and I spent quite a long time asking the Choir to hold individual chords until they were in tune.

On the evening of the recording, I was quite tense and anxious. All was ready and we were getting the microphones in the optimum place. Then, while waiting for absolute silence before the first take, something happened that was so unexpected that the only possible reaction was to laugh: into the silence burst the unmistakable sound of bagpipes. I ran out of the chapel and located the source of the sound (easily done) – a bagpiper near the entrance to Old Hall. He had been booked for a function and was contracted to play for an hour! After some negotiating, he agreed he would stop after forty minutes, and I returned to the chapel. There followed some very productive rehearsal of the carol (in spite of the competing sounds) in which (amazingly) some of the tuning issues were finally resolved, and by which the resulting recording was certainly improved.

The recording was released in early November 2012, but the first public performance of the carol took place at the Advent Carol service at Queens' on Sunday 25th November (actual a few days before the start of Advent). Most of the senior members of the Choir who had sung on the recording had graduated in the summer, and many new members had joined the following October, so the carol was new to many and had to be relearnt to some extent. But for subsequent performances in the Dutch Church in London and in the Madeleine Church in Paris, some of those who had graduated were able to return and sing with the Choir again. It is these two performances that stick most in my memory: the Choir achieved just the lilting quality that I had imagined and with greater familiarity, we were able to take risks with the performance – greater dynamic contrast, longer dramatic pauses (especially in the long acoustic in Paris) and somehow more magic in the final cadence.

So that is the journey of my carol from improvisation at the piano to reverberations in the Madeleine Church. The Choir seemed to enjoy singing it and I received some very favourable comments from members of the audiences. If you would like to hear it, then you can get hold of the Choir's recording, under the title *And comes the day*, via the college shop or online.

Silas Wollston



The Chapel Choir in rehearsal.