

The *Ely Service*

New settings of the Evensong Canticles commissioned by The Friends of Ely Cathedral

The *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* will be familiar to all who love Evensong, one of the great glories of Anglican liturgy. There are many beautiful settings of these canticles, and the Friends of Ely Cathedral have commissioned composer Janet Wheeler to add to them. Her *Ely Service* will be sung for the first time this summer to celebrate the 1350th anniversary of the founding of St Etheldreda's monastery here in Ely in AD 673.

Earlier this year I spoke to Janet about her *Ely Service*, and asked about the challenges involved in writing new music to such well-known texts. Later I talked to Edmund Aldhouse, Director of Music at the Cathedral, about his role in the commissioning process. Both conversations revealed some fascinating insights into the world of creating and interpreting new music for the Church. I began by asking Janet about the importance of the building and its acoustical qualities in determining the kind of music she has written.

After one has chosen the material and taken a direction, somehow the material takes over. (JW)

Janet feels that music has to be allowed to breathe when written for choir and organ in a building with a big acoustic. To that end she has introduced 'some surprising rests' that play a significant role. She hopes that the cathedral's acoustic will use them to good effect. Edmund says that the way a choir interacts with a building can be a complex matter. Ideally a composer writes music that can be used anywhere, but at the same time wanting it to have the sense of a particular building with a particular acoustic. However, both of them acknowledge that the creative impulse can never be limited to one particular place. Janet concludes, 'After one has chosen the material and taken a direction, somehow the material takes over.'

I hope it will attract interest beyond Ely, because it has a lot of really lovely ideas in it. (EA)

Janet visited Ely Cathedral to hear the Boys' and Girls' Choirs in rehearsal. Both will be involved in the 'big event' as she describes it. What was she listening for, what did she need to know before committing her ideas to paper? Edmund tells me that she would need to know how fast the youngest members of the Choir learn, and how well they would cope in tackling a new and challenging piece. The way the Choir as a whole navigates lots of sustained or energetic singing is also an important consideration, as is its overall sound and timbre. While acknowledging that there are challenges in the music, he says that Janet has written something that is 'well within the capabilities of any good cathedral choir.' He hopes that the *Ely Service* will attract interest beyond Ely, 'because it has a lot of really lovely ideas in it.'

Janet is known for her 'dynamic and uplifting' music, and there is certainly plenty of that in her *Ely Service*. As to whether this anniversary commission is overtly celebratory, however, Edmund makes an insightful comment. He feels Janet has adopted a somewhat sideways approach, 'quite reflective in fact'. In Janet's large-scale concert piece called *Magnificat cum Angelis*, Mary dances for joy at the prospect of what is to happen to her. Her setting of the same text for Ely has more elements of 'grandeur' (her own word), entirely appropriate to the sense of awe that is felt by Mary at becoming the mother of the Christ Child. The experience of Etheldreda was somewhat different, yet Janet can see certain parallels between the two women facing awe-inspiring responsibilities.

One of the key things in approaching it was that I wanted this to be firmly linked to Ely. (JW)

Reviewers often remark on Janet's keen sensitivity to her texts; she wanted them this time to be 'firmly linked to Ely.' The composer has to have an idea of the relative importance of words and where the direction of the phrase is going. She says that 'every sentence, every verse has its arrival points'. Considering where to place the emphasis, either on a particular word or syllable, plays a large part in her compositional process. The text is very important to her, 'it's not just a series of sounds, it's the structure, and it's the rhythm of the words.'

Finding new rhythmic interpretations of familiar texts is a key part of Janet's approach. Edmund says she has found some new and interesting ways of doing this in her *Ely Service*. Collaboration between composer and conductor is vital where new music is concerned, principally to discuss what is, and is not, possible and most effective. Discussions led to 'some very small tweaks', as Edmund puts it, 'to make those rhythmical ideas tell even more'. Musical notation is not an exact science, and the way music is presented in a score can aid or hinder a performer's approach to it. As such, Edmund was able to offer one or two suggestions that make things easier for the singers to interpret.

A similar discussion about the organ part took place. At one point Janet had written something, which while playable on Ely's organ, would not be possible on other cathedral organs with a more limited range. All such suggested changes were geared to practicality and performance. Such advice is both helpful and encouraging to a composer who, in Edmund's words, would like the settings to 'attract interest beyond Ely'.

Janet wrote two, quite different, organ introductions for the *Magnificat*. She says it's something that often happens to her, setting off on one path before deciding on another. Although she was not unhappy with her first thoughts, she eventually rewrote the opening to tie it in with later parts of the setting. The awe-inspiring opening we hear now has some slightly surprising harmonic effects. This includes combining both major and minor tonalities, something she explores to an extent in both canticles. This eventually gives rise to a lovely 'blues' chord, heard prominently at the close of the *Nunc dimittis*.

When writing music for these often-set texts, why would you not try to do something different? (JW)

I was interested to find out if the two Evensong Canticles present particular challenges for a composer, and if there are words or phrases that require special consideration. Each of the canticles is written from the very different, very personal perspective of two quite distinct Biblical characters – Mary and Simeon. While recognising this, Janet says there is the element of wanting to tie them together. One very common way of doing this is by providing the same setting of the *Gloria* at the end of each piece. She keeps to this tradition, while also including a return to the opening music in each canticle at the words 'as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be'. The structure of her settings is also informed by the way that certain parts of the text parallel each other. For example the music she uses for 'all generations shall call me blessed' comes back later in the *Magnificat* at 'Abraham and his seed for ever', a parallel that any composer may wish to grasp, and one she has not resisted.

One of the main challenges is that both canticles have been set so many times before. In talking of the *Magnificat* Edmund says, 'It's quite difficult to get away from a structure that we all have in our heads.' More often than not it begins and ends loudly, with a fairly regular pattern of contrasting loud and quiet sections in between. The *Nunc dimittis* usually goes the other way, beginning quietly with a gradual crescendo leading to either the same *Gloria*, which is loud, or another which is quieter. These are the usual formats. Edmund says 'Janet has done well in getting away from that. Her canticles have some of the same characteristics, but not all of them.'

Edmund thinks that the *Magnificat* presents a particular challenge in being a biblical text of some 9 or 10 verses which, in themselves, do not easily suggest a cohesive musical structure. The composer here has to be more creative to avoid any suggestion of rambling. If this presents the composer with a 'problem', there is definitely no evidence of this in Janet's *Ely Service*.

The strong warnings in the *Magnificat*, referred to by Edmund as the 'blood and thunder stuff', need special attention – the proud are 'scattered', the mighty 'put down from their seat', and the rich 'set empty away'. This canticle has often been off-limits at various times in parts of the Roman Catholic world. In El Salvador, for example, it was banned altogether in the 1980s for its revolutionary content. It is often set with great force and volume; Janet's approach is more measured, while still giving the music the appropriate strength and determination she finds in the character of Mary and, by association, Etheldreda.

Edmund suggests that another passage requiring particular attention is the verse at the very end that begins, 'He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel'. The composer has to decide what kind of atmosphere to create here – something gentle, reflective and set apart, or something more triumphal that gradually builds towards the *Gloria*. Again, a decision has to be made on how to set the verse 'And his mercy is on them that fear him', which acts as a crucial bridge between the preceding verses that culminate with 'and holy is his name', and the 'blood and thunder' verses that follow.

The *Nunc dimittis* appears to present less of a challenge. Both Janet and Edmund talk of the arc-like nature of its text, where a diversion to different music is less necessary. Janet was keen to introduce a 'breathing pause', suggesting the idea of Simeon as an old man ready to rest at the end of a long life. The music has a stillness here, before beginning to build at the words 'To be a light' that reaches to a more outward and forward looking conclusion. Both the *Gloria* of this canticle and that of the *Magnificat* have some 'big singing', but both ultimately subside into a mood of quiet resignation.

In her composer's note at the head of the score Janet Wheeler writes: 'I have derived some of the melodic material from the pitches given by the numbers 1350 and 673 – either as degrees of the scale or as intervals above a pivotal pitch, treating zero as a rest.' This is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of her *Ely Service*, and the one that binds it inextricably to Ely itself. Both the date of the founding of Etheldreda's monastery and the anniversary we are celebrating are ingrained in the music. However, we do not have to be aware of this to appreciate what wonderful new settings these are, and what 'really lovely ideas' they contain. Janet Wheeler's *Ely Service* is a worthy addition to our Cathedral Choir's repertoire and, hopefully, those of other churches and cathedrals further afield.

Peter Back, June 2023
(Council Member of The Friends of Ely Cathedral)

[Janet Wheeler's *Ely Service* can be heard as part of a Festal Evensong, sung by the full Cathedral Choir, broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 on Wednesday 21 June 2023, and available later on BBC iPlayer]