

Harold Edwin Darke

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.

As a chorister I can remember that instead of concentrating, when I should have been listening to a sermon or praying fervently, I would read down the endless list of anthems and their composers which were printed on the covers of Novello's Octavo editions: J. Baptiste Calkin; Arthur D. Prendergast; Haydn Keeton; Hamilton Clarke; Dr F.E Gladstone; Eaton Fanning; Athelstan G. Iggulden the list is endless. And I wonder now, as I may have done all those years ago, what has happened to the works of these composers. The writer of Ecclesiasticus might well have had a prophetic insight into the Novello catalogue, because the composers mentioned fall into the category - *There be of them, that have left a name behind them* and merely a name and no more, so, despite the memorable quality of names such as Athelstan G. Iggulden and J. Baptiste Calkin, the leaving of the name is their total contribution to the liturgical music of the next century and beyond, and their compositions have all been directed to the celestial recycling skips. So there is a lesson for today's composers of services and anthems: no matter how vast their compositional output or how much intellectual, spiritual and musical effort may have gone into each musical work, composers despite being *honoured in their generations, and being the musical glory of their times* can become *as though they had never been born*. A salutary thought.

To return , however, to the text of the writer of Ecclesiasticus, *Let us now praise famous mensuch as found out musical tunes*. Harold Edwin Darke was born in 1888 and in 1916 was appointed to this church in which he served until his retirement in 1966, so today, with the unveiling of the plaque we celebrate the centenary of his appointment and commemorate the half-century since his retirement. To have served for fifty years in any post is a considerable achievement and he is justly remembered for his extraordinary contribution to the musical life of this place. In 1919 he founded the St Michael's Singers and as an organist he was renowned not only for his playing of Bach and other great masters but also for his amazing industry in giving recitals. For several years his Monday organ recitals were broadcast on the BBC, and records show that during his time here he gave a total of 1,833 recitals. And of course, in addition to this he was much sought after as a recitalist in many other churches and cathedrals. But how many of us ever heard him play? So like the music of Athelstan G. Iggulden and Arthur D. Prendergast, that element of Harold

Darke's life might easily have placed him in the category mentioned by the writer of *some there be that have no memorial*.

But of course, there are other elements to the life of Harold Darke, and perhaps one of the most interesting came during the war when in 1941 Boris Ord, the organist of King's College Cambridge, joined the RAF. His organ scholar, David Willcocks had already joined the army, so music at King's was under threat. On the recommendation of Henry G Ley, Precentor of Eton, Darke was appointed to serve at Kings from 1941 onwards. He was 53 when he took over, and choristers who had served under Boris Ord, who was roughly ten years younger, found Darke to be a congenial, hospitable and almost grandfatherly figure. Harold and his wife, Dora, became celebrated for their hospitality, and their Sunday afternoon teas, following evensong, became a very distinctive element during his tenure of office.

He had to cope with a huge variety of challenges: the windows of the chapel had been removed and replaced by some plain glass and a lot of grey tar-paper. This led to noise when the winds blew across the fens, and also problems with the many fighter aeroplanes which were continually passing over from the RAF school at Marshall's Aerodrome. Choral scholars came and went as they were called up, but the choristers remained and a boys-only service was introduced which led to Harold Darke writing the first ever set of treble-only responses for evensong. Despite the pressures brought about by trying to maintain Ord's standards at a precarious time, Darke also managed to maintain his London connections. He was President of the Royal College of Organists in 1941 and in the same year was official organist for the Promenade Concerts. He continued to give his weekly recitals here at St Michael's, and taught both privately and also at the Royal College of Music. Having inaugurated the recital series here, he did the same at King's College, and the Saturday recital series there is still in existence.

He must have been an indomitable character. The lack of glazing in King's Chapel meant that not only was there a problem of noise but the temperature in the winter was hardly bearable. Members of the choir came swathed in overcoats, scarves and gloves, and unsurprisingly Darke became seriously ill in 1944, so much so, that to his undoubted frustration and disappointment, he was unable to preside over that year's Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. But he was able, during his time at Kings, to include in the list of carols his own setting of *In the bleak mid-winter*, which Stainer and Bell had published in 1911 and for which (allegedly) he received royalties of three farthings per copy.

So back to Ecclesiasticus: the author was, rightly keen to praise, *Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing*. I am not sure that Harold Darke

ever recited verses in writing, but he certainly found out musical tunes, and I am sorry that his great hymn tune, *Naphill* is sung so infrequently: but the growing number of people who attend sung evensong at our great cathedrals and churches will enjoy *Darke in A minor* and *Darke in F*, both of which say something both original but also approachable, and of course, the *Darke in F* Eucharistic setting is probably sung in every cathedral in the land – and if not, it ought to be! But it is interesting to look back to the year in which *In the bleak mid-winter*, that most famous of carols first saw the light of day. What were its contemporary masterpieces? Well clearly, 1911 was a brilliant year for first performance: Bartok's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*; Stravinsky *Petruschka*; Elgar *Symphony number two*; Mahler *Das Lied von der Erde* and, eclipsing by far all of the above, *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss – oh and perhaps I should have mentioned *Alexander's Ragtime Band* which was published in that year.

But looking at the serious pieces of music from 1911, of which *In the bleak mid-winter*, Elgar's second symphony and Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* are three examples, it is interesting to ask the question, which of these pieces has won its way into the hearts of more people. Now to some extent this is a somewhat meaningless musing on methods of disseminating music: I imagine that at the time all were written, before *Spotify* and other means of playing any piece at any time, more people attended church at Christmas than were able to access opera houses or concert halls; nonetheless Harold Darke's little masterpiece will, over the last 105 years have reached more people than the other two, admittedly great works of genius. Composers are frequently asked what it is that inspires them, and clearly there is a scale of pretentiousness in assessing most of the answers, because inspiration is something that is unquantifiable and unable to be isolated. Was Darke's carol the result of the need to fill a gap in a carol service here? Was he particularly fond of Christina Rossetti's words? Did he dislike the original tune *Cranham* written five years earlier by Gustav Holst? Did he happen to have a spare hour or so between organ recitals, teaching and other activities? We shall never know, but the great simplicity and quality of his setting marks it out as a work of genius, and in the context in which we find ourselves today, one can only assume that an element of the inspiration came from the Divine.

To return once again to Ecclesiasticus, the writer speaks of the majority of the population by saying, *some there be, which have no memorial*. Harold Edwin Darke certainly does have a memorial through his work here and in Cambridge, and through his teaching, general charm and good humour, but it is certainly arguable that along with the plaque unveiled today, his compositions, although relatively few in number, will ensure that the name of Harold Darke lives on, century by century.

There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.

May he rest in peace and rise in glory.