



Malcolm
WILLIAMSON

Organ Music

Peace Pieces

Little Carols of the Saints

Elegy – JFK

Mass of a Medieval Saint

Tom Winpenny, Organ



Malcolm Williamson (1931-2003)

Organ Music

Malcolm Williamson (1931-2003), one of Australia's most distinguished musicians, settled in London in 1953 and enjoyed a meteoric rise as a gifted composer. Born in Sydney, he was the son of an Anglican clergyman and began composing as a child, later playing the organ at his father's church. From 1943 he studied piano, violin and horn at the New South Wales State Conservatorium in Sydney and in 1949 began composition lessons under its director, Sir Eugene Goossens. Here he received training of a high order, and was inspired to continue his studies abroad. In 1950 he travelled to London with his family before settling permanently in Britain. He studied with Elisabeth Lutyens, a noted exponent of serialism, and later with Erwin Stein (a pupil of Schoenberg and friend of Britten).

Williamson was fortunate to receive the support of a number of prominent musical figures during the 1950s and '60s. Sir Adrian Boult became one powerful advocate, championing much of his orchestral music, including the *Organ Concerto* (1961). Williamson's output covers almost every genre and demonstrates a striking breadth of interests, encompassing operas such as *Our Man in Havana* (1963) and a series of 'Cassations' – adaptable miniature operas intended for children's participation. His orchestral *œuvre* embraces eight symphonies, concertos for piano and violin and music for ballet, all demonstrating a remarkable versatility and a flair for orchestral colour. His choral works range from the large-scale *Mass of Christ the King* (1975-78), to liturgical anthems and charmingly simple Christmas carols.

Williamson became so well known in the 1960s that he was frequently referred to as 'the most commissioned composer in Britain'. In 1975 he was appointed to the then life-tenure post of Master of the Queen's Music in succession to Sir Arthur Bliss. Though in his later years ill health prevented him from composing, he was deeply proud to be the first non-Briton appointed to this post.

A skilled keyboard player, Williamson harnessed the broad spectrum of music which he absorbed as a performer into a rich and fluent compositional output of

high inspiration and wide variety. The ability to perform his own compositions undoubtedly contributed to his success as a composer and his prolific keyboard output attests to his formidable technique as a pianist and organist. He was equally versatile as a Soho nightclub pianist and as a church organist. His composed six piano concertos, and – unlike many mainstream contemporary composers – he wrote for the organ throughout his life.

Converting to Catholicism in 1952, Williamson immersed himself in religious music. He became fascinated both by the motets of the fourteenth-century composer John Dunstable, and by the explicitly religious music of Olivier Messiaen, perfecting his organ technique in order to study Messiaen's works. He revelled in the possibilities the organ afforded: his organ works are technically demanding, and perhaps offer a glimpse into the thrilling liturgical improvisations for which he became known in the 1950s. His earliest organ works were on religious themes: his first published work – *Fons Amoris* – was composed shortly after his appointment as Assistant Organist of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, in Mayfair, soon after his conversion to Catholicism. Messiaen's music was a vital expression of his own faith; with the technical, theoretical and spiritual possibilities that it explored, it became a strong influence on Williamson. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Williamson held the post of Organist of St John the Evangelist, Islington, presiding over the renowned Walker organ on which this programme has been recorded.

Résurgence du Feu (Pâques 1959) (Resurgence of Fire – Easter 1959) [CD 2 1] is dedicated to the congregation of St Peter's Limehouse, where Williamson was then organist. It is a vivid work which demonstrates the influence of Messiaen in its colourful registrations, birdsong-like figurations and dramatic bravura. One can easily see how its starting point could have been a liturgical improvisation. Indeed, the staggering conclusion depicts the Paschal Fire streaking 'through the Church, outside and beyond'.¹

The shock of the assassination of President John F Kennedy was the impetus for musical tributes from composers including Stravinsky, Milhaud and Bernstein. *Elegy – JFK* [CD 2 9], was composed for Alec Wyton, Organist of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York in 1964. It exploits the cathedral organ's famous state trumpets in passages symbolising (in the composer's words) 'the weeping of the noble eagle of the United States of America over one of its greatest sons'.² A fittingly sombre work, the unsettling interval of an augmented fourth – C to F sharp – haunts the piece. The contrasting sections show a range of dramatic and graceful elements whose effect would be intensified by the cathedral's cavernous acoustic.

An altogether different tribute formed the basis of Williamson's *Epitaphs for Edith Sitwell* [CD 2 2-3]. He had become acquainted with the renowned Sitwell family shortly after his arrival in England, and composed the chamber opera *English Eccentrics*, based on Edith Sitwell's 1933 book, shortly before her death in 1964. The opera had been first performed as part of the Aldeburgh Festival that year, and the *Epitaphs* were commissioned for a memorial programme for Sitwell as part of the 1966 festival. The two *Adagio* movements are based on a short 'motto theme' in the composer's *Violin Concerto*, begun in homage to her before her death, and dedicated to her memory. Williamson later adapted the works for string orchestra.

During 1970-71, Williamson held the post of honorary fellow and composer-in-residence at Westminster Choir College, in Princeton, USA, where he composed the six *Peace Pieces* [CD 1 1-6] for his colleague James Litton, the Assistant Professor of Organ and Head of Church Music. The six programmatic works depict a wide range of themes, including the natural world (*Peace in Solitude*) [CD 1 3], humanitarian and political themes (*Peace in America*) [CD 1 4] – which appears to incorporate a startling allusion to the bombing raids of the Vietnam war) and religious themes such as the Incarnation (*Wise Men Visit the Prince of Peace*) [CD 1 5] and *The Peace of God that Passeth All Understanding* [CD 1 6]. All are depicted in typically imaginative and frequently striking ways. Together the pieces form his longest organ work. As in his

earlier large-scale organ works such as the *Symphony for Organ*, Williamson's writing is technically demanding, and represents a vivid infusion of a vast range of styles and textures. Williamson gave the première at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC in October 1971, and also the British première a few weeks later in King's College Chapel, Cambridge.

The productive period of the early 1970s continued with the composition of the five short, poetic *Little Carols of the Saints* [CD 2 4-8], composed for American organist John Rose to perform in Westminster Abbey in January 1973. These fascinating miniatures portray the human qualities of different saints: *Mary Magdalene* in the garden, not recognising the risen Christ; *Francis of Assisi* befriending the animals; *St Stephen* – 'at peace' – after his death by stoning; *St Ignatius*, a soldier, who whilst convalescing reads of the life of Christ and the saints and vows to devote himself to God's service; Saul, the Jewish zealot blinded by a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus and who, as Paul, receives a new mission to turn the Gentiles to Christ. This final movement – a dazzling toccata – incorporates in the pedal the expressive melody heard in *Stephen at Peace*, transforming it into a defiant statement of faith.

Mass of a Medieval Saint [CD 2 9-10], Williamson's next organ work, can perhaps be seen as a development from *Little Carols of the Saints*. Commissioned in 1973 by the American hymnologist, musician and patron Lee H. Bristol, Jnr., it was conceived as an organ mass for liturgical use – organ music specifically intended for different parts of the communion service – after the models of Couperin and de Grigny. It takes its inspiration from 'the outward and the inner spiritual life of some such medieval saint as Bernard of Clairvaux or a man like Peter Abelard'.³ Whilst the *Gradual* and *Communion* movements are introspective and contemplative, the *Introit* and *Offertory* are in turn stately and majestic. A flamboyant *Sortie* signifies the dismissal of the congregation, charged with spreading the word of God amongst the world.

The liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s had an impact not only in the Catholic

Church: in many parts of the Anglican Church, too, a rejuvenation of congregational music was felt necessary. Williamson's composed many hymn tunes, and his lyrical sensitivity eschewed the tawdry or simplistic. The *Fantasy on 'This is my Father's World'* [CD 2 囧], is a contemplative prelude or postlude, reworking of themes of the composer's hymn and anthem of the same name.

Tom Winpenny

¹ Quoted in Ramsey, 'Contemporary Organ Music', *The Musical Times*, January 1961.

² Sleeve notes for Williamson's LP recording of the work, EMI Australia SLS 3001.

³ Bristol's preface to the published score (Edward B. Marks Music Corporation, later transferred to Campion Press, 1973).

Composer's preface to the *Peace Pieces*:

i Peace in Childhood: Pièce en trio – innocence overshadowed ever more strongly by experience – a countryside before the city was built.

ii Peace in Youth: Scherzo – exuberant unfettered thinking and living – the contest of athletic skills.

iii Peace in Solitude: Intermezzo – contentment in thoughts and recollections – distant trumpets warn of eternity – the moment preserved in ice and capped with snow.

iv Peace in America: Sinfonia – the noble struggle towards peace through anguish – flutes sobbing in the air above Arlington Military Cemetery.

v Wise Men Visit the Prince of Peace: Sinfonia – true wisdom of applying to the Source of Universal Peace – bells – song of horsemen on the cold desert sands – obeisance to the Prince of peace – shepherds' pipes.

vi The Peace of God that Passeth All Understanding: Variations on two themes – the peace out of conflict – the soul open and receptive – the white earth lying bare in eternal sunlight.

Tom Winpenny's recording of Williamson's other published organ works, including *Vision of Christ-Phoenix* and *Symphony for Organ*, and played on the organ of St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, is available on Toccata Classics TOCC 0246.

St John the Evangelist, Duncan Terrace, Islington
Specification of the 1963 J W Walker organ

Swell		Great		Pedal	
Open Diapason	8'	Quintaton	16'	Open Wood	16'
Chimney Flute	8'	Principal	8'	Subbass	16'
Viola da Gamba	8'	Nachthorn	8'	Quintaton (Gt)	16'
Celeste	8'	Spitzflute	8'	Octave	8'
Principal	4'	Octave	4'	Bass Flute	8'
Wald Flute	4'	Nason Flute	4'	Fifteenth	4'
Nazard	2½'	Twelfth	2½'	Nachthorn (Gt)	4'
Octave	2'	Fifteenth	2'	Mixture 22-26-29	III
Mixture 22-26-29-33	IV	Tertian 19-24	II	Oliphant	32'
Bassoon	16'	Furniture 19-22-26-29	IV	Bombarde	16'
Trumpet	8'	Trumpet	8'	Bassoon (Sw)	16'
Vox Humana	8'	Great Sub Octave		Posaune	8'
Oboe (via thumb piston)	8'	Swell to Great		Schalmei	4'
Zink	4'	Positive to Great		Swell to Pedal	
Tremulant		Gt. & Ped. combinations coupled		Great to Pedal	
				Positive to Pedal	
		Rückpositiv			
		Stopped Diapason	8'		
		Principal	4'		
		Koppel Flute	4'		
		Quint	2½'		
		Block Flute	2'		
		Tierce	1½'		
		Scharf 29-33-36	III		
		Crumhorn	8'		
		Tremulant			
		Swell to Positive			
		Zimbelstern			

Built 1962-63, the organ of St John's Church was conceived along the lines of the 'organ reform movement', incorporating sounds and voicing typical in North German and Dutch organs, alongside French-style reeds. It was a radical English instrument when it was built, and its Rückpositiv case (which hangs over the gallery) was unique in the country at the time. The organ's highly versatile tonal resources led it to be used for frequent BBC broadcasts and recordings in the 1960s and 1970s. The inaugural recital was given on 13th February 1963 by Douglas Mews, then organist of St George's RC Cathedral, Southwark. The organ was thoroughly renovated in 2005-06 by Keith Bance Organ Builders.

Tom Winpenny

Photo: Simon Tottman



Tom Winpenny is Assistant Master of the Music at St Albans Cathedral, where he accompanies the daily choral services and directs the Abbey Girls Choir. Previously, he served as sub-organist at St Paul's Cathedral, London. He is also Musical Director of the London Pro Arte Choir. He has broadcast frequently on BBC Radio and featured on American Public Media's *Pipedreams*. He was organ scholar at King's College, Cambridge, graduating with a music degree, and twice accompanying the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, broadcast worldwide. As a soloist, he has performed in the United States, Europe and throughout Britain. Recent engagements include recitals in Norwich Cathedral (UK) and Kristiansand Cathedral (Norway). His wide-ranging discography includes music by Mozart, Liszt, John McCabe and Malcolm Williamson. For Naxos, his solo recordings include music for organ by Judith Bingham (8.572687) and Messiaen's *La Nativité* (8.573332) and *L'Ascension* (8.573471). He directs St Albans Abbey Girls Choir in recordings of music by Mendelssohn (8.572836) and Mathias (8.573523).

www.tomwinpenny.org



The **British Music Society** (Registered Charity No. 1043838), founded in 1979, brings together professional and amateur musicians, students and scholars, and music enthusiasts young and old from around the globe to promote, preserve and celebrate British music, pre-dominantly from the Twentieth century, both at home and abroad. Its extensive discography is now being re-issued by Naxos, bringing to a wider audience many highly-acclaimed performances, often world premières, of neglected British works. The Society's Historic label includes a number of famous vintage recordings by artists such as Noel Mewton-Wood and Walter Goehr.

In addition the Society produces a Journal, *British Music*, packed full of scholarly articles and reviews, as well as a regular e-newsletter for members. Our website lists forthcoming BMS events as well as performances of British music, and also provides a forum for discussion and debate.

www.britishmusicsociety.com

One of Australia's greatest composers, Malcolm Williamson settled in Britain and rose to the position of Master of the Queen's Music in 1975. He was championed by a number of prominent musical figures and wrote in almost every genre. A skilled keyboard player and a Catholic convert, he wrote for the organ throughout his life and these works reveal his deep immersion in religious music, initially inspired by Messiaen. His instinct for dramatic *bravura* and colourful registrations can be heard in *Résurgence du Feu* (*Pâques* 1959) whilst the beautiful poetic miniatures *Little Carols of the Saints* reveal deeply human qualities, elements developed more substantially in *Mass of a Medieval Saint*. *Elegy – JFK* is fittingly sombre.



Malcolm WILLIAMSON (1931-2003)

CD 1		45:57	Little Carols of the Saints	
Peace Pieces (1970-71)		45:57	(1971-72)	18:20
1	Peace in Childhood	5:40	4 The Magdalene in the Garden	4:41
2	Peace in Youth	6:22	5 Francis of Assisi	3:19
3	Peace in Solitude	3:09	6 Stephen at Peace	4:11
4	Peace in America	8:01	7 Ignatius the Soldier	2:53
5	The Wise Men Visit the Prince of Peace	7:02	8 Paul upon Mars Hill	3:16
6	The Peace of God that Passeth		9 Elegy – JFK (1964)	5:25
	All Understanding	15:43	10 Fantasy on ‘This is my	
			Father’s World’ (1975)*	4:48
CD 2		53:25	Mass of a Medieval Saint	
1	Résurgence du Feu		(1973)	14:15
	(Pâques 1959) (1959)*	5:36	11 Introit	3:06
	Epitaphs for Edith Sitwell		12 Gradual	1:54
	(1966)	5:00	13 Offertory	2:19
2	i	3:07	14 Communion	4:32
3	ii	1:53	15 Sortie	2:24

* WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

Tom Winpenny, Organ

This recording was made possible thanks to generous assistance from The British Music Society Charitable Trust (Registered Charity No. 1122597) (Michael Hurd Bequest).

With thanks to Adrian Gunning and the staff and clergy of St John's Church, and to Simon Campion, Michael Blighton, Keith Bance and Adrian Lucas.

Recorded at the Church of St John the Evangelist, London, England, on 17th and 18th February, 2016

Producers: Andrew Post and Michael Papadopoulos • Engineer and editor: Andrew Post

Publishers: Josef Weinberger (CD 1 [1]-[6]; CD 2 [2]-[9]); Chappell Music (CD 2 [1]); Campion Press (CD 2 [10]-[15])

Booklet notes: Tom Winpenny • Cover: The organ of St John's, Duncan Terrace, London (Oscar Rook)