

# The Cherwell Singers

present

## *‘My JOY, my LIFE, my CROWN’*

Choral settings of the poetry of  
George Herbert

<b>James Brown</b>	conductor
<b>Steven Grahl</b>	organ and tenor
<b>Mark Saberton</b>	baritone

Saturday, 22th March 2014  
The Chapel of Exeter College, Oxford

# Programme

My joy, my life, my crown  
Bruce Montgomery  
(1921-1978)

Listen sweet dove  
Grayston Ives  
(1948- )

*from* Five Mystical Songs  
Ralph Vaughan Williams  
(1872-1958)

Easter  
I got me flowers  
Love bade me welcome  
The Call

Let all the world in every corner sing  
Kenneth Leighton  
(1929-1988)

## Interval

Antiphon  
Benjamin Britten  
(1913-1976)

King of glory, King of peace  
William Harris  
(1883-1973)

The God of love my shepherd is  
Thomas Tallis  
(c.1505-1585)

Something Understood  
Host (*from* Shared Ground)  
The Flower  
Alex Roth  
(1948- )

## **‘My JOY, my LIFE, my CROWN’**

This term the Cherwell Singers present a concert of settings of the poetry of arguably the most skilful and important British devotional lyricist, George Herbert (1593-1633). It seems fitting for a poet who has been described as having “a soul composed of harmonies” that musicians have responded warmly to Herbert’s poetry - some of it enduring as popular hymns, while some has inspired composers to create anthems and songs which attempt to match the beauty of the words in music of great lyrical quality. Thus we present not only some of the well loved and often performed *Mystical Songs* of Vaughan Williams, but also settings by Leighton, Britten and Harris, and by the contemporary composers Grayston Ives and Alec Roth.

Herbert’s first biographer said of him that he wrote “such hymns and anthems as he and the angels now sing in heaven”. We hope that in the beautiful surroundings of Exeter College Chapel the combination of the music matched to such skilfully crafted and inspirational words will lift believers and non-believers alike to a greater appreciation and enjoyment of the enduring legacy of George Herbert.

James Brown

## **George Herbert**

George Herbert was born in Wales to an artistic and wealthy family. His godfather was the poet John Donne. He studied at Cambridge, with the intention of becoming a priest, and excelled in languages and music; but it was his rhetorical skills which led to his appointment as the university’s Public Orator that caught the attention of King James I. He became MP for Montgomery, and the King showed him favour; but after the death of the King, he retired from public life, entered the priesthood, and was appointed rector of a small rural parish on the edge of Salisbury.

Herbert wrote poetry throughout his life, but took advantage of his time as a priest to revise and extend his collection. But he died of consumption only three years after moving to the rectory at Bemerton. Fortunately, shortly before his death he had sent a copy of his collected poems, under the title *The Temple*, to a friend in Cambridge, with the description: “a picture of the

many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus, my Master”, and the instruction to publish them if he thought they might “turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul”, otherwise to burn them. The collection was indeed published by his friend shortly after his death, and the book went through eight editions in the next fifty or so years.

Herbert’s poems are all religious, and some are now widely used as hymns. It is notable that in a time of religious turmoil, the value of his poetry was recognised by those of all religious parties. Many of the poems have intricate rhyming schemes and variations of lines within each stanza. Some are even laid out on the page to form a visual pattern illustrating the words or meaning of the text.

Herbert is commemorated by windows in Westminster Abbey and several other churches and cathedrals, and there is a statue of him on the West Front of Salisbury Cathedral.

## Notes and texts

**Bruce Montgomery** studied at Oriel College, Oxford and went on to teach at Shrewsbury School. He wrote a certain amount of choral music, but is better known for writing the scores for six of the *Carry On* films. He also wrote detective novels under the pseudonym of Edmund Crispin.

The first line of *A true Hymne* – which we have taken as the title of this concert - is the “true” hymn within the poem, which is a reflection on the relationship between truth and beauty in art, and how the inadequacy of the line is redeemed by the sincerity with which it is said. A true hymn must be a repayment “in kinde” of the gifts of art to him who gave them; and the heart’s rhyming is so much more important than the rest that, given that alone, God will mend the song.

### **A true Hymne**

My joy, my life, my crown!  
My heart was meaning all the day,  
Somewhat it fain would say:  
And still it runneth mutt’ring up and down  
With onely this, *My joy, my life, my crown.*

Yet slight not these few words:  
If truly said, they may take part  
Among the best in art.  
The finenesse which a hymne or psalme affords,  
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords.

So if the heart be moved,  
Although the verse be somewhat scant,  
God doth supplie the want.  
As when the heart sayes (sighing to be approved)  
*O, could I love!* And stops: God writeth, *Loved*.

**Grayston Ives** was a chorister at Ely Cathedral, and later sang in the King's Singers. Until 2009 he was Organist of Magdalen College, Oxford, and most of his choral works were written for performance by the choir there.

*Whitsunday* describes the glory of the original Pentecost, but suggests that we have lost touch with it, asking God in the last verse to restore the celebration to its former glory. This may also refer to the increasing pressure from the Puritans to reduce the celebration of holidays. The whole poem, which is shortened here, contains 28 lines (a “perfect” number), and it is the 28<sup>th</sup> poem in the collected volume of Herbert's poems.

### **Whitsunday**

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,  
And spread thy golden wings in me;  
Hatching my tender heart so long,  
Till it get wing, and flie away with thee.

Such glorious gifts thou didst bestow,  
That th' earth did like a heav'n appeare;  
The starres were coming down to know  
If they might mend their wages, and serve here.

The sunne, which once did shine alone,  
Hung down his head, and wisht for night,  
When he beheld twelve sunnes for one  
Going about the world, and giving light.

Lord, though we change, thou art the same;  
The same sweet God of love and light:  
Restore this day, for thy great name,  
Unto his ancient and miraculous right.

**Ralph Vaughan Williams** was a major contributor to the collection of English folk song, and also composed works in all the major genres. Despite his substantial involvement in church music, and the religious subject-matter of many of his works, he was described by his second wife as “an atheist who later drifted into a cheerful agnosticism”.

Herbert’s poem *Easter* is an expansion and reworking of Psalm 57 v7-11. It is in two parts, set separately by Vaughan Williams. In the first part, the poet is exhorting himself to rejoice in the fact of Easter, but he finds this sits uneasily with memories of the pain of the crucifixion. In the second, simpler, part this tension is resolved; Christ has already done what was needed, and the poet has merely to accept the good news.

### **Easter**

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise / Without delays,  
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise / With him mayst rise:  
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,  
His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part / With all thy art.  
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name, / Who bore the same.  
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key  
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song / Pleasant and long:  
Or, since all musick is but three parts vied / And multiplied,  
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,  
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

I got me flowers to straw thy way;  
I got me boughs off many a tree:  
But thou wast up by break of day,  
And brought’st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sunne arising in the East,  
Though he give light, & th’ East perfume;  
If they should offer to contest  
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,  
Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?  
We count three hundred, but we misse:  
There is but one, and that one ever.

*Love (III)* is the final lyric poem in Herbert's collection, and might seem to "solve" the drama a reader traces through the book: is he worthy to sit with God as an equal? The poem's last line: "So I did sit and eat", seems unequivocal: Herbert has found his place at God's table; the choir meanwhile, is wordlessly singing the melody of the plainsong *O Sacrum Convivium* – Thomas Aquinas's meditation on Christ's promise to be present at the communion table. The almost interchangeable use of "Love" for "Lord" in this poem is also worth noticing.

### **Love (III)**

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, / Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow / From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning, / If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here: / Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare, / I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, / Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame / Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame? / My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat.

Much of Herbert's writing is simple and direct, and nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Call*, which contains only a single word of more than one syllable. The "come" of the first line, taken from the end of the Book of Revelation, is the call of the poet to God, but it is also the response of the poet to a call from God.

### **The Call**

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
Such a Way, as gives us breath:  
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:  
Such a Life, as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
Such a Light, as shows a feast:  
Such a Feast, as mends in length:  
Such a Strength, as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy, as none can move:  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joyes in love.

**Kenneth Leighton** studied at The Queen's College, Oxford. Like Vaughan Williams, he was not religious, in spite of writing a considerable amount of music for the church. He taught in Edinburgh (and briefly in Oxford), and had a particular love of the Scottish highlands and western isles.

An antiphon is a piece sung or chanted by two choirs alternately. Herbert's *Antiphon (I)* is a straightforward hymn of praise which has caught the attention of many composers – including Vaughan Williams, who set it as the final movement of his *Mystical Songs*. However, tonight we are presenting the setting by Leighton. The poem is also about praise in church, but has in addition become part of that praise through its widespread usage as a hymn itself.

### **Antiphon (I)**

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,  
*My God and King.*

The heav'ns are not too high,  
His praise may thither flie:  
The earth is not too low,  
His praises there may grow.

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,  
*My God and King.*

The church with psalms must shout,  
No doore can keep them out:  
But above all, the heart  
Must bear the longest part.

Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,  
*My God and King.*

**Benjamin Britten** was perhaps the major British composer of the twentieth century. He wrote a considerable amount of church music, and unlike the previous two composers called himself a dedicated Christian. His pacifism is well-known, and was most strongly expressed in his *War Requiem*.

*Antiphon (II)*, also called *Ode*, is based on the structure and tone of psalms of praise such as Psalms 95-100 and 146-150; it also has similarities to the chorus of saints and sinners in Revelation vii. The subject is God's great love for all mankind, and how neither men on earth nor angels in heaven can find enough ways and words to praise him. A number of critics have remarked that this poem requires music to "flesh it out".



## Antiphon (II)

*Chor.* Praised be the God of love,  
    *Men.* Here below,  
    *Angels.* And here above:  
*Cho.* Who hath dealt his mercies so,  
    *Ang.* To his friend,  
    *Men.* And to his foe;

*Cho.* That both grace and glorie tend  
    *Ang.* Us of old,  
    *Men.* And us in th'end.  
*Cho.* The great shepherd of the fold  
    *Ang.* Us did make,  
    *Men.* For us was sold.

*Cho.* He our foes in pieces brake;  
    *Ang.* Him we touch;  
    *Men.* And him we take.  
*Cho.* Wherefore since that he is such,  
    *Ang.* We adore,  
    *Men.* And we do crouch.

*Cho.* Lord, thy praises should be more.  
    *Men.* We have none,  
    *Ang.* And we no store.  
*Cho.* Praised be the God alone,  
    Who hath made of two folds one.

**William Harris** had his first musical appointment as “flexible” Assistant Organist at St David’s Cathedral at the age of 14. Later he was organist in turn at New College, Oxford (for whom he wrote this anthem), Christ Church, Oxford, and St George’s Chapel, Windsor.

*Praise (II)* is one of Herbert’s best-known works, and is widely used as a hymn. A recurring theme of Herbert’s poetry is that his work is insufficient. In *Antiphon (II)* above he wrote: “Lord, thy praises should be more”, and in this poem: “Ev’n eternitie is to[o] short / To extoll thee”. This has the effect of emphasis rather than compromise, as his confession of inadequacy reinforces his effort at praise.

## Praise (II)

King of Glorie, King of Peace, / I will love thee:  
And that love may never cease, / I will move thee.

Thou hast granted my request, / Thou hast heard me:  
Thou didst note my working breast, / Thou hast spar'd me.

Wherefore with my utmost art / I will sing thee,  
And the cream of all my heart / I will bring thee.

Though my sinnes against me cried, / Thou didst cleare me;  
And alone, when they replied, / Thou didst heare me.

Sev'n whole dayes, not one in seven, / I will praise thee.  
In my heart, though not in heaven, / I can raise thee.

Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears, / Thou relentedst:  
And when Justice call'd for fears, / Thou disentedst.

Small it is, in this poore sort / To enroll thee:  
Ev'n eternitie is to short / To extoll thee.

**Thomas Tallis** wrote his *Third Mode Melody* as one of a number of settings for a collection of metrical psalms assembled by Archbishop Matthew Parker in 1567. It was originally intended for use with Psalm 2. In the usual manner for the period, the melody is in the tenor line.

Herbert's metrical version of Psalm 23 is not a strict paraphrase, but is extended with his own ideas and New Testament images, starting with describing God as the "God of Love". The introduction of "wine" to the cup in the last verse is an allusion to the Eucharist.

### The 23 Psalme

The God of love my shepherd is, / And he that doth me feed:  
While he is mine, and I am his, / What can I want or need?  
He leads me to the tender grasse, / Where I both feed and rest;  
Then to the streams that gently passe: / In both I have the best.

Or if I stray, he doth convert / And bring my minde in frame:  
And all this not for my desert, / But for his holy name.  
Yea, in deaths shadie black abode / Well may I walk, not fear:  
For thou art with me; and thy rod / To guide, thy staff to bear.

Nay, thou dost make me sit and dine, / Ev'n in my enemies sight:  
My head with oyl, my cup with wine / Runnes over day and night.  
Surely thy sweet and wondrous love / Shall measure all my dayes;  
And as it never shall remove, / So neither shall my praise.

**Alec Roth** works across a wide range of genres including music-theatre, song, choral, orchestral, instrumental, gamelan, and music for children. His many collaborations with the Indian writer Vikram Seth include the opera *Arion and the Dolphin*, numerous songs and song-cycles, and the tetralogy *The Rivered Earth*, co-commissioned by the Salisbury, Chelsea and Lichfield Festivals 2006-9. He has developed a particularly fruitful working relationship with the tenor Mark Padmore, and is currently Composer in Residence with Jeffrey Skidmore's choir Ex Cathedra, who have recorded both *The Flower* and *Host*.

In *Prayer (I)*, Herbert evokes the manner in which prayer can be an overwhelming aesthetic activity. The whole poem is a single sentence but it is grammatically incomplete having no main verb. The clauses pile in one after the other without any conjunctions. On their own these fragments are difficult to make sense of, but the poem seems intelligible precisely because its meaning doesn't need to be pinned down. It is a kaleidoscope spiralling through a succession of moods. Beyond grammar, or any argument which could be paraphrased and defended, is "something understood".

### **Prayer (I)**

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,  
    Gods breath in man returning to his birth,  
    The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth ;  
Engine against th' Almightye, sinner's towre,  
    Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
    The six daies world-transposing in an houre,  
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear ;  
Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,  
    Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,  
    Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,  
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,  
    Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the souls bloud,  
    The land of spices, something understood.

*The following note has been provided by the composer, Alec Roth:*

Between 2006 and 2009 I undertook a series of four major works commissioned jointly by the Salisbury, Chelsea and Lichfield Festivals to texts by Vikram Seth, my regular collaborator. In 2003 Vikram had bought the Old Rectory in Bemerton, which had been George Herbert's home for three years until his death in 1633. For the second of our commissions, *Shared Ground*, he decided to pay tribute by taking six of Herbert's poems as models for the text which he wrote for me to set to music. While Vikram's poems closely mirror Herbert's in their structure (metre, rhyming scheme etc), the content is very much his own, and the fourth of the set, *Host* (based on Herbert's *Love bade me welcome*), tells the story of how he came to buy Herbert's house. Vikram was away in India when I set the texts, and so I offered to house-sit for him, in the hope that the location which had inspired the words might also help with the music. I set *Host* as a dialogue between a solo voice singing Vikram's words and the chorus, representing the house etc. I was unsatisfied at first, as the music seemed to want to continue a little when the words ran out. Then, returning from a walk, I happened to glance up and see, carved in stone above the porch, Herbert's message to his successors. With Vikram's permission, I incorporated this short poem as a rather nice rejoinder to his; I hope Mr Herbert would have approved.

**Host**, by Vikram Seth (1952- )

I heard it was for sale and thought I'd go  
To see the old house where  
He lived three years, and died. How could I know  
Its stones, its trees, its air,  
The stream, the small church, the dark rain would say:  
"You've come; you've seen; now stay."

"A guest?" I asked. "Yes, as you are on earth."  
"The means?" "... will come, don't fear."  
"What of the risk?" "Our lives are that from birth."  
"His ghost?" "His soul is here."  
"He'll change my style." "Well, but you could do worse  
Than rent his rooms of verse."

Joy came, and grief; love came, and loss; three years –  
    Tiles down; moles up; drought; flood.  
Though far in time and faith, I share his tears,  
    His hearth, his ground, his mud;  
Yet my host stands just out of mind and sight,  
    That I may sit and write.

**To my successor**, inscription by George Herbert

    If thou chance for to find  
    A new House to thy mind,  
And built without thy Cost:  
    Be good to the Poor,  
    As God gives thee store,  
And then, my Labour's not lost.

*The Flower* is considered by many critics to be Herbert's finest lyric. It is an exuberant, joyful poem in which a single image of the spiritual life is expanded with naturalness and elegance that appear effortless. The poem's clarity would be impressive in the work of a modern writer; in its historical context it is even more so. In *The Flower*, Herbert celebrates the joy that accompanies the spiritual renewal which follows the times of trial. Though he has experienced this many times, yet each time it happens the joy is as boundless as ever. It is clear that what Herbert writes about the flower is to be understood as a picture of man's life in relation to God.

**The Flower.**

    How Fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean  
Are thy returns! ev'n as the flowers in spring;  
    To which, besides their own demean,  
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.  
        Grief melts away  
        Like snow in May,  
As if there were no such cold thing.

    Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart  
Could have recover'd greenness? It was gone  
    Quite under ground; as flowers depart  
To see their mother-root, when they have blown;  
        Where they together  
        All the hard weather,  
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

And now in age I bud again,  
After so many deaths I live and write;  
I once more smell the dew and rain,  
And relish versing: O my onely light,  
It cannot be  
That I am he  
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,  
To make us see we are but flowers that glide:  
Which when we once can finde and prove,  
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide.  
Who would be more,  
Swelling through store,  
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

## Biographies

### **Mark Saberton** baritone

Mark studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. He has sung with many opera companies including Royal Opera, English National Opera, Opera North, Scottish Opera, Garsington Opera, and Longborough Festival Opera.

Mark works regularly with David Owen Norris and The Works with whom he performed *Two Murders* and *a Marriage* and *The Reduced Figaro* in Norway and the UK. With Bampton Classical Opera he has helped to introduce several lesser known classical works to a UK audience notably Salieri's *Falstaff*.

He has been heard several times on BBC Radio 3 and has sung in a variety of oratorios and recitals throughout the UK and Ireland including Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Brahms' *Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*.

Future engagements in 2014 include Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony* on March 29<sup>th</sup> in Rochester Cathedral. He will also play *Scarpia* in Heritage Opera's Summer and Autumn tour of *Tosca*.

## **Steven Grahl** organ and tenor

Steven enjoys a varied career as both organist and conductor. He combines the post of Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford with that of Organist & Director of Music at St Marylebone Parish Church, London, and he was acting Director of the New College Choir during Trinity Term 2010. He is a member of the Oxford University Faculty of Music. Since 2006 he has held the Principal Conductorship of the Guildford Chamber Choir.

Recent years have seen performances in America, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and at numerous prestigious UK venues, such as Westminster Cathedral and St John's Smith Square.

A prize-winning graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford (where he was Organ Scholar) and the Royal Academy of Music, Steven gained the Limpus (highest mark) and Dixon (improvisation) prizes in his FRCO examination, and he is also a holder of the Worshipful Company of Musicians' Silver Medallion.

## **James Brown** conductor

James was Organ Scholar of Girton College, Cambridge and upon graduating studied organ at the Conservatoire de Musique, Geneva with Lionel Rogg. After two years working as an organist in Texas, James returned to England where he is currently Organist of the University Church, Oxford and a lay clerk in New College Choir, with whom he tours regularly as well as participating in broadcasts and recordings. He is also a pianist for the operatic trio Canteremo, and performs with them on the Swan Hellenic Cruise line and has recently completed a five nation tour of South East Asia.

James teaches organ at Abingdon School and New College School and performs regularly with various choirs and choral societies.

James has conducted the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

# The Cherwell Singers

## **Soprano**

Laura Ciccolallo  
Marie Crossland  
Janet Johnson  
Dorien Schouten  
Clare Scott-Dempster  
Stephanie Sumner-Jones  
Lucy Watson  
Steph White

## **Tenor**

Jeremy Bryans  
Iain McLean  
David Sutton  
Fritz Veerman

## **Alto**

Virginia Allport  
Jenny Ayres  
Rachel Bryans  
Julia Middleton  
Lizzie Newton  
Joanna Poulton  
Sally Prime

## **Bass**

Dominic Hargreaves  
Neil Herington  
Paul Hodges  
Simon Jones  
Jonathan Mapley  
Gerald Pickford

The Cherwell Singers is looking to recruit voice members in all parts.  
If you are interested in joining us please contact James Brown at:

[director@cherwellsingers.org](mailto:director@cherwellsingers.org)

The choir is available to hire for weddings and other events.  
To discuss prices and possible repertoire, please contact James Brown at:

[director@cherwellsingers.org](mailto:director@cherwellsingers.org)

Please visit our web site to learn more about the choir, and listen to some of our recordings online. Use the web form to register yourself on our email list, to ensure you receive notification and full details of future concerts.

[www.cherwellsingers.org](http://www.cherwellsingers.org)