



PRESS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

IMPORTANT NEW COMMISSION FOR WORLD WAR ONE COMMEMORATION

2014 marks the centenary of the outbreak of the 1914-18 War. To commemorate this event the Birmingham Bach Choir has commissioned the poet Euan Tait and its own conductor/composer, Paul Spicer, to write a major choral and orchestral work for performance in July 2014. The work is called *Unfinished Remembering* and is planned as a choral symphony (with soprano and baritone soloists) in four movements. In commemorating the Great War, the work also commemorates all wars and, perhaps especially those with which we have been recently involved in Iraq and Afghanistan. Paul Spicer has already produced two successful large-scale choral/orchestral works, the two-hour *Easter Oratorio* (2000) and the hour-long *Advent Oratorio* (2009). *Unfinished Remembering*, however, will be completely different in form to these earlier works and will have four through-composed movements.

The project emanated from the poet Euan Tait and it is his words which must initially describe the work's genesis.

The work is dedicated to The Heroes in Each Generation.

Euan Tait writes of his idea for the work:

'Michael Tippett's opera *New Year* ends with a choice between "the waters of remembering and the waters of forgetting." We must remember, in order to stay human, the reality of our own brokenness, and the anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War is a powerful reminder. This is not a Requiem as such, but that great poem echoes behind the text's anguished questioning and remembering: to remember, to recall ourselves as we actually are - ugliness and beauty - is incredibly painful, but the only way we have a chance to break free.

The text aims to allow for textural contrasts – soloists, chorus, orchestra – and within it are opportunities for rest as well as challenge. Verbal repetitions/motifs suggest possible thematic links between movements for the composer, and I've aimed throughout to make the words powerful and dynamic, and yet at the same time provide a *prima la musica* catalyst for the composer's musical imagination.'

The four movements are given associations with movements of the Requiem. The first movement *Te Decet Hymnus* is in two parts: a *Prelude*, where a large crowd gathers, 'chased' by the urge to remember, and then a main section where the spirits of soldiers fallen in Flanders return home to "continue" imagined lives, watching over Britain. The second movement is a *Dies Irae* scherzo and asks what these soldiers would experience from our contemporary society. This produces a movement of restless, angry, declamatory energy. The

third movement, a *Recordare*, starts with a reflection on soldiers' final moments, and concludes with two 'modern' Psalms, which blazingly affirm our humanity. The Finale is a long *Libera me*. The remembering of the Great War dead is more direct. The crowd, walking away from war graves, carry the guilt of remembering, and yet have the hope for freedom, thus moving the work to a mood of strength and passion, while the work ends with the 'unfinished remembering' of what the Great War will always mean for us, a see saw of troubling questions yet proud gratitude.

Why Paul Spicer as composer? 'The great quality of Paul's music, which inspired me to invite him into this project and made me feel overjoyed when he accepted, was its emotional power and truth. Paul's music has an extraordinary, powerful humanity, an emotional literacy and intelligence that seem to me to be essential qualities for the success of so unique a project – we are here seeking to speak for this generation's search for truth and justice, and in so doing are faced with the example of courage and sacrifice from the young men and women of a century ago - and what more wonderful voice could we give ourselves than a composer who has consistently spoken with such humanity and musical imagination? The wonder of his word setting is obvious from the smallest motet to the grandeur of the Easter Oratorio, and his love of choirs shines through his choral writing.'

Funding and Recording: The Birmingham Bach Choir is immensely grateful to the John Feeney Charitable Trust for their hugely generous funding of the cost of the commission over four years.

The John Feeney Charitable Trust is a long established Birmingham grant-making trust giving priority to applications which are about the arts, heritage and open spaces. It has a special interest in encouraging new work in the arts and is well known for nearly fifty Feeney commissions for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, several of them now part of the repertoire.

It is planned to record *Unfinished Remembering* soon after the first performance and the choir will be raising the funds for both the performance and the recording over a similar time-scale.

Euan Tait was born in 1968 in Berlin, the son of a Highland soldier and a Nairobi born mother – an editor of African fiction. He was first published in John Osborne's *Bete Noire* magazine and more recently in *South*, *Abraxas*, *Obsessed with Pipework* and *Envoi*, and was one of the winners of the Stanza's 2008 Poetry Business' pamphlet competition. Until a few months ago he lived in Wootton Bassett and watched many 'repatriations'.

Paul Spicer is an acclaimed choral director and came to international attention through his work with the *Finzi Singers* with whom he recorded many discs of British music for Chandos Records. He has conducted the Birmingham Bach Choir since 1992 and the London Whitehall Choir since 2000. He has been at the forefront of choral conducting teaching in the UK and set up postgraduate courses in the subject at the RCM and Birmingham Conservatoire. He also teaches at Oxford University. He has written a highly successful biography of his composition teacher, Herbert Howells, and is nearing the completion of a major biography and study of works of Sir George Dyson. The recording of his *Easter Oratorio* was an Editor's Choice in the *Gramophone* when released in 2005. That work has been performed in venues as diverse as Durham Cathedral and the Sydney Opera House.

Paul Spicer has received numerous commissions. These include a song cycle, *A Song for Birds* for Ian Partridge an Elgar Commission from the Worcester Three Choirs Festival, another song cycle for tenor and piano *Beyond imagination fair*, a *Piano Sonata* for Margaret Fingerhut, and an organ work *Prelude in homage to Maurice Duruflé* for Adrian Partington, also performed at the Three Choirs at Worcester and broadcast. The vocal group *I Fagiolini* commissioned an a cappella choral work *Dies Natalis*, premiered at the Purcell Room in February 1995 and broadcast by them later from the Wigmore Hall on Radio 3 The choir of New College, Oxford commissioned a setting of the evening canticles in 1997. Several organ works have been commissioned in recent years the most successful of which, *Kiwi Fireworks*, based on the New Zealand national anthem was written for Christopher Herrick's *Organ Fireworks* series for Hyperion Records, recorded at Wellington Town Hall, NZ. This work has now been recorded five times in various parts of the world. Another organ work, the three movement *Suite for Organ* was commissioned by Ralph Franklin and premiered at the 2002 Lichfield Festival by Andrew Lumsden. Another multi-movement work, *The Deciduous Cross*, for choir and winds to poems by R.S.Thomas (2002) was commissioned by the Birmingham Bach Choir for his tenth anniversary as their conductor.

Recently, Paul has been occupied with major choral and orchestral works. The two-hour *Easter Oratorio* in collaboration with Bishop Tom Wright, one of the foremost New Testament scholars, was commissioned for performance at the 2000 Lichfield Festival. It is scored for choir, boys' choir, four soloists and orchestra. His most recent major work is the hour-long *Advent Oratorio* (2009) for similar forces commissioned by the Lichfield Cathedral Special Choir for their 50th anniversary concert. It sets another libretto by Bishop Tom Wright.

Recordings of Paul's music are available on CD. Regent Records have released his organ music from Truro Cathedral (Robert Sharpe), and his shorter choral works sung by the choir of Selwyn College, Cambridge (Sarah MacDonald). *The Deciduous Cross* was recorded by the Whitehall Choir and the Brandenburg Sinfonia conducted by the composer. *Easter Oratorio* (double CD) is available from www.easteroratorio.com. The *Advent Oratorio* was recorded at its first performance and released on CD shortly afterwards.

The Birmingham Bach Choir has been making a major contribution to the musical life of Birmingham since 1919, and has performed across the country and abroad in Leipzig and Dresden and, most recently, in Italy. The principle focus is on the music of J.S.Bach, but the choir performs music in many styles and from all periods. The choir has commissioned numerous works over the years from composers including the Aaron.J.Kernis, John Joubert, Rory Boyle, Eleanor Alberga, Alexander Mason, Adrian Partington, David Lord and Paul Spicer. It is highly regarded for the musicality and vibrancy of its performances.

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