

Mass (Composite)

21. Benedictus

(EHVV 158)

Engelbert Humperdinck

(1854-1921)

arr. William Melton

Humperdinck, Engelbert

(born 1 September 1854 in Siegburg; died 27 September 1921 in Neustrelitz)

Humperdinck was born in a small town in the Rhineland, his mother a gifted amateur soprano and his father a schoolmaster. The boy was no Wunderkind, and in his late teens seemed destined to have a modest career in an architect's office. Then he took his first compositions to 'the Musical Pope of the Rhineland', Ferdinand Hiller, who immediately accepted the young man into the Cologne Conservatory of Music. This training would later be augmented with private lessons from Franz Lachner, and Humperdinck's studies were completed at the Munich Conservatory with counterpoint and orchestration under Joseph Rheinberger. In quick succession, the young man won three prestigious awards for composition, the first of which paid his way to a sojourn in southern Italy. There he took his fate in his hands and called upon Richard Wagner, who was in residence near Naples, trying to recoup his health and finish the instrumentation of *Parsifal*. Humperdinck would serve as Wagner's apprentice, moving to Bayreuth where he helped Wagner transform his short score of the work into the full orchestral score. Humperdinck was intimately involved with the first performances of *Parsifal*, but had moved on to Paris when he heard the momentous news of Wagner's death on 17 March 1883. The news shattered the young man, and his next ten years would be a nomadic procession: teaching in Cologne, Barcelona and Frankfurt, conducting, editing for publisher Schott of Mainz, and writing opera critiques. Then a request from his sister Adelheid resulted in four songs for a family pageant. He developed these into a Singspiel, and finally a full-fledged opera. The result, *Hänsel und Gretel*, would be the greatest German operatic success of its time.

Fame brought changes, and after a more relaxed interlude in a villa on

the Rhine at Boppard, in 1900 Humperdinck was offered a professorship in composition in Berlin. There his reputation reached its zenith, and hundreds of pupils attended his composition lessons (including Siegfried Wagner, Leo Blech, Kurt Weill, Oskar Fried, Wallingford Riegger and Charles Tomlinson Griffes). Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss were close friends, and Mahler and Puccini respectful correspondents. Humperdinck was awarded membership in the arts academies of Berlin, Paris and Rome, was received by the likes of the Kaiser and Pope Pius X, and dined with Theodore Roosevelt at the White House. His own production went on to include six operas, ten other stage works, works for orchestra, choruses, chamber ensembles, piano pieces, and over a hundred Lieder. His opera *Königskinder* enjoyed a triumphal world premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1910. Then, after the huge popular success of *The Miracle* in London, Humperdinck suffered a stroke that would impair his last decade. The First World War saw his son and most of his students taken by the military, and severe rationing and privation, political upheaval, and financial ruin blighted his final years. At his death a memorial performance was given at the Berlin State Opera, and Victor Lehmann wrote, 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. He was pure in heart. He was a Mensch'. The honours bestowed by his contemporaries have long since faded, and today Humperdinck is remembered almost exclusively as the composer of *Hänsel und Gretel*, one of the most performed operas in history.

A few months after the outbreak of the First World War, the *Berliner Tageblatt* posed the question, 'What are your hopes for 1915?' and published the answers. Humperdinck contributed, 'I hope that the sword of war can be buried for a good, long time'. The peace overtures made by Pope Benedict XV inspired Humperdinck to write an a cappella men's chorus to the words of the mass, 'Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini'. The hoped-for peace did not come and the disappointed composer dedicated the *Benedictus* to a Benedictine Abbey in his hometown, the proceeds from its publication going to a war charity in Switzerland. Humperdinck wrote his old friend Cosima Wagner:

When I sent your birthday greeting last year from a small south German town, it was in the hope that your next birthday would be rung in by the happy sound of bells pealing for peace. Sadly, this hope has not been fulfilled; it seems likely that we are further

than ever from the end of this horrible mechanised war, in which engineers and chemists play the main role. So let us console ourselves yet again with the hope that next Christmas will bring us all that this one has denied us.

The dismal mood of the time influenced the character of the *Benedictus*: quiet and plaintive at the outset, peaking in energy at 'Hosanna in excelsis', and returning to the dark tones of the beginning with 'in nomini Domini'.

Text by William Melton