

## 10. When Christ was born of Mary free (1915)

Sir Hubert Parry  
(1848-1918)  
*arr. William Melton*

### **Parry, Sir Charles Hubert Hastings**

(born February 27, 1848 in Bournemouth; died 7 October 1918 in Knight's Cross, Rustington)

Son of the artist and collector Thomas Gambier Parry of Highnam Court, Gloucester, Hubert Parry took composition classes and honed his talents as pianist, organist and violinist while at Eton. Lessons with Henry Hugo Pierson in Stuttgart preceded Oxford (Exeter College), and time under the supervision of Sir William Sterndale Bennett and Sir George Alexander Macfarren completed his technical training. Nevertheless, it was his piano study with Edward Dannreuther in London that turned Parry into a well-rounded artist. The Alsatian-born Dannreuther was a graduate of the Leipzig Conservatory and an eminent pianist who had introduced the concerti of Liszt, Grieg and Tchaikovsky to English audiences. He was well versed in contemporary music, knew the leading musical figures of Europe personally, and his students were exposed to Wagner and Brahms in addition to the classics.

Beginning with *Scenes from Prometheus Unbound*, premiered at the Gloucester Festival in 1880, Parry produced a body of works that would make him the leading English choral composer of the day. He was named Choragus of Oxford University in 1883, and over the next few years was given honorary doctorates from Cambridge, Oxford and Trinity College Dublin. In 1894 he became director of the Royal College of Music, and pupils there over the years included the likes of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, Herbert Howells and George Butterworth. Parry was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1898, the following year named professor at Oxford and he was made first Baronet of Highnam in 1902. A health crisis in 1908 forced him to shed the Oxford post, but he continued to produce books on musical history and style as well as *Johann Sebastian Bach* in 1909 (he had previously written a slew of articles for Grove's Dictionary). A two-volume biography of Parry appeared eight years after his death, and since then several more have been published, the latest by the scholar Jeremy Dibble in 1992.

There is little doubt that Parry's great abilities as pedagogue and administrator, though invaluable for the cause of music in England, hindered the promotion of his own creations. For Parry's considerable output is rarely to be heard: the opera *Guinevere*, four symphonies (five if the *Symphonic Fantasia* 1912 is counted), overtures, a piano concerto, suites and other orchestral works, three string quartets, three piano trios and various chamber works, secular cantatas and part songs, solo songs, organ

music and pieces for piano. As to Parry's style, Jürgen Schaarwächter has noted, "Long influenced by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Schumann, later by Brahms and at times by Wagner, the important characteristic of his compositional technique was a great seriousness and integrity that was closely allied with the Victorian ideal of beauty." His own generation knew him best for his sacred choral works, which included three oratorios and a large body of anthems, motets, odes and hymns. Yet, except for the shining exception of the iconic *Jerusalem*, which has become a second national anthem to the English, Parry's other works remain little known in the greater world.

The *a cappella* chorus "When Christ was born of Mary free" is a modest example from Parry's catalog, yet one that displays traits shared by his larger works. Based on a 15<sup>th</sup> century text, it was first performed at Royal Albert Hall on December 18, 1915 by the Royal Choral Society under the direction of Sir Frederick Bridge and published in London by Novello the same year. It seems unlikely that this sunny strophic carol with attractive modal details would be composed during the horrific realities of the First World, but the Christmas message of hope has repeatedly inspired composers in dark times.

When Christ was born of Mary free,  
In Bethlehem that fair citie,  
Angels sang there with mirth and glee,  
with mirth, with mirth and glee,  
"In excelsis gloria, In excelsis gloria, gloria."

Herdsmen beheld those angels bright,  
To them appearing with great light,  
Who said God's Son is born,  
God's Son is born this night.  
"In excelsis gloria, In excelsis gloria, gloria."

This King is come to save mankind,  
As in Scripture truths we find;  
Therefore this song we have in mind,  
This song we have in mind,  
"In excelsis gloria, In excelsis gloria, gloria."

Then, dear Lord, for Thy great grace,  
Grant us the bliss to see Thy face,  
That we may sing to Thy solace,  
May sing to Thy solace,  
"In excelsis gloria, In excelsis gloria, gloria."

*Text by William Melton*