

A note for *Tenebrae* by Joseph Phibbs (St. Albans Bach Choir Commission)

*Tenebrae* was composed over the spring and summer of 2005, although my first thoughts for the piece date back to the 2004 St. Albans Christmas Carol Concert, when I was struck by the extraordinary acoustic effect of the opening carol, the choir singing from the far end of the Abbey. I decided to incorporate a similar device into my own piece, using an off-stage chamber choir in conjunction with a main choir.

The main choir sings settings of four poems: the first, David Gascoyne's *The Uncertain Battle*, is from the twentieth century, and the remaining three date from the seventeenth century. Two of these earlier texts are regarded as 'metaphysical poems', a chief characteristic of which is a meditation on the vastness of time and space, and the fleetingness of man's life in relation to this.

Interwoven among these settings, the off-stage choir sing excerpts from the Latin Mass, which relate obliquely to the main settings that surround them. A high soprano also sings with the off-stage choir, adding an individual strand to the overall work. I set myself the challenge of writing a certain amount of fast music for the choir, notably in *Sic Vita*, and in this respect the choral writing at times leans towards the 'instrumental' in style, a modest homage to Britten's early masterpiece, *A Boy was Born*.

A common thread running through many of the texts in *Tenebrae* is that of opposites: illusion and reality, appearance and disappearance, noise and silence, and light and darkness. It is perhaps only in the closing section that a type of resolution is found, the off-stage choir linked textually for the first time with the main choir in the word 'Peace'/'Pacem'. Here, finally, the brutal hysteria of Gascoyne's *The Uncertain Battle*, the fleetingness of King's *Sic Vita*, and the overwhelming vastness of Vaughan's *The World* finds resolution in Fletcher's *A Litany/Dona Nobis Pacem*, where the cleansing properties of tears in the presence of Christ is linked with a closing prayer for peace.

*Tenebrae*, literally 'darkness' in Latin, seemed in the end a fitting title, given the mood of a number of the poems in the piece in which particular situations are set up (battle motions in 'The Uncertain Battle', a world of fleeting visions in 'Sic Vita', and awe-struck wonder in 'The World'), only to be negated at the very end of the poems, often with a sudden sense of stillness and darkness.

The title is not to be taken necessarily as an austere or mournful one, but rather one that evokes a poetic world where darkness and light have a deeper, metaphorical meaning (as they indeed did for the Metaphysical poets). The manner in which the off-stage choir fades in and out of the texture also suggested shades of light and darkness, a kind of musical 'shadow' in the work perhaps.

*Tenebrae* was composed very much with the space and unique quality of St. Albans Cathedral in mind.



