

Christus

(A review written for the Liszt Society Journal
by Christopher Matthews)

“When and where it will ever be heard is of no importance to me”. (Liszt to Carl Gille)

When? Saturday 14th May 2005.

Where? The De Montfort Hall – Leicester.

The first performance for nearly twenty years in this country of Liszt's Oratorio *Christus*, conducted by President of the Liszt Society, Leslie Howard, with the Leicester Symphony Orchestra, Leicester Philharmonic Choir, and soloists Catherine May – Soprano: Wendy Dawn Thompson – mezzo soprano: Tyrone Landau – tenor: James Rutherford – baritone: Stephen Wells – bass, with Nigel Allcoat at the organ, and special guest Simon Callow providing the narrative.

It was certainly an occasion of importance eagerly awaited for by lovers of Liszt's music and members of the Liszt Society in particular, as evidenced by the many members that were in attendance from both this country and abroad.

The performance was preceeded by an illuminating talk given by Leslie Howard on the history of the work, how it came to be written, and the important place it occupies in Liszt's output. (For further detailed information on the work, I would refer readers to Michael Shorts dissertation on *Christus*, which appeared in the Liszt Society Journal, volume 9, 2004).

The *Rorate coeli* theme (drop down ye heavens from above) unfolds at the outset of the work in the simplest and most beautiful polyphony. Such moments really are to be sought out and savoured in Liszt's music (do we perhaps hear in this opening section - and in particular the interval of the rising fifth which occurs in the second bar - a distant echo of the opening orchestral prelude from Elgars Dream of Gerontius?) The instruction for muted strings, and sustained phrases which Liszt calls for – in what is really a very difficult and exposed opening gesture – were communicated well by the strings of the Leicester Symphony Orchestra: a result of the focused concentration of the conductor. There really was a sense of anticipation : *Drop down ye heavens from above*.

The change of time signature at bar 115, brings with it the indication *pastorale*. Here, the sense of the pastoral is explicate, made more so by some very fine playing at this point from the woodwind section.

The *Rorarte Coeli*, is part of the liturgical sequence for the season of Advent, a journey from darkness to light. It is out of this darkness that the soprano soloist emerges, unaccompanied, to begin the second movement with an angelic proclamation: *I bring you good tidings of great joy*.

The starkness of this kind of writing was to become a marked feature of Liszt's later music - both vocal and instrumental - but it is also a natural continuation of the kind of mood that Liszt achieved towards the end of the Dante Symphony; that wonderful moment of renunciation, where the soprano soloist sings the Magnificat. Liszt of course famously confided to Wagner with regard to his Dante Symphony, that he felt unable to pen the music of Paradise. *Christus* seems to go some way towards disproving that.

Halleluja! Is the refrain of the Shepherds to the angelic visitor. Their *piano* response is tentative; awe inspired; but a smouldering and palpable sense of joy inevitably ignites the ensuing movement, as the gravity of the angels message penetrates. The *Gloria* of the tenor soloist is amplified by the full choir, then at bar 109 the choir sing *et in terra pax*, both piano, and in unison: a well rehearsed moment for the Leicester Philharmonic Choir.

Having sufficiently 'warmed up!' the third movement - *Stabat Mater speciosa* - is something of an exposé for any choir performing *Christus*, especially for the first time. On this occasion, the Leicester Philharmonic sang this difficult and exposed movement with the sense of forward movement which prevents the music becoming stagnant, yet lending it all the while the sustained breadth and subtlety that Liszt's indication - *Lento sostenuto, misterioso* - calls for, responding attentively to Leslie Howards direction.

Here is Liszt, the church composer, ever mindful of the liturgical function that he hoped much of his choral music would fulfil. The austerity of this motet is an obvious influence of the effect that Palestrina's music had on his compositional style, but the music also establishes a style that anticipates many of Bruckners more mature motets. Bruckner was familiar with *Christus*, and played the organ for the 1871 performance of the work, which took place in Vienna.

Liszt was not overly confident in the choral singers of his day. In the *Missa Choralis* (1864) for example, he exercised caution regarding the ability - and necessity - for the performers of the work not to falter at some of the more chromatic moments or unexpected changes of key and tempo. He provided an 'optional' organ accompaniment - just as he does in this movement and other movements of *Christus*. Perhaps it can be seen as a measure of Liszt's generosity towards the singers of his day: Liszt, ever practical in his desire to ensure that the birth of a new style, and depth of seriousness in a functional church music, be not be hindered by the challenges of performing this music without the steady crutch of discrete accompaniment provided for by the organ or harmonium.

The remaining two movements of the 'Christmas Oratorio' - as part one of *Christus* is referred to - are purely instrumental movements. During the introductory remarks given by Leslie, he commented that for much of the action that takes place in the Bible, there are few corresponding words. Hence Liszt's use of purely orchestral means to portray this action. The fourth movement - *Shepherds' song at the crib* - must surely contain some of the finest pastoral music to come out of the nineteenth century, recapturing the freshness and innocence of some of Liszt's earlier piano pieces, such as are contained in the *Album d'un voyageur*. Liszt writes a tone poem full of Arcadian delight. The orchestration throughout is superb, and Liszt skilfully creates a genuine bucolic effect with his insightful woodwind writing; the players of the LSO delighting in the challenge and freshness presented by this music.

That the final movement of part one is - as Leslie Howard called it - "one of the finest marches ever written", left one in little doubt of that assertion upon hearing it. This March of the Three Holy Kings was performed with the required sense of regality that the excellent chorale like tune, which emerges at bar 140, requires. The quotation that Liszt uses at this point - from the Gospel of Matthew - indicates a Kingship far greater than that of the three earthly kings.

Part two begins with The Sermon on the Mount. A setting of *The Beatitudes* for choir and organ, which was actually the first part of *Christus* to be written. These famous words of Christ were dramatically portrayed by the excellent Baritone soloist, James Rutherford, who captured not only Liszt's range of dynamic and expressive indications from *dolce* to *fortissimo e energico*, but also the rapt attention of the audience.

One of Liszt's most inspired tunes occurs right at the heart of *Christus* - *Tu es Petrus*. Leslie Howard spent some time discussing this movement during his introductory talk, remarking that this was the movement in *Christus* that the choir had enjoyed singing the most. Liszt's hope that this great tune of popular appeal might become something of a second Italian National Anthem came to naught. Gounoud's *Marcia Pontificale* of 1857 remains the official National Anthem of the Vatican City.

At this point during the evening came the interval, Leslie had humorously remarked that he would have liked the opportunity to perform the work as it would have been during Liszt's day, with several intervals, including one of an hour or more, allowing one time to enjoy a five course meal! There was however at least time to seek out a quick cup of coffee, and keeping a close ear to the ground, it was pleasing to hear so many complimentary remarks from people becoming acquainted with the work for the first time.

The Miracle and *The ride into Jerusalem* conclude part two. These are monumental works in themselves, Leslie pointing out that *The Miracle* contains some of the most excellent orchestral painting that Liszt ever did. The vulnerable little boat of the disciples is tossed about during one of Liszt's storms, until that dramatic moment where the men of the choir sing out in unison - and need to pit their strength against the din of the orchestra - *Lord save us!* That Liszt does not use the whole choir at this point, adds to the effect of vulnerability felt by the disciples, as the waves threaten to engulf them and their boat. Their smallness is emphasised against the powerful forces of nature.

Few composers have depicted *The ride into Jerusalem* with such a sense of theatricality as Liszt does here. Of all the movements of *Christus*, it was this one that made such an impression on Saint-Saens.

It was only with the composition of the choral work *Via Crucis* in 1879, that Liszt's choral writing was to reach such stark and bleak depths of despair, achieved by an absolute sparing down in style, coupled with experimentation of new harmonies and textures. Yet in the *Tristis est anima mea* (my soul is sorrowful), which opens part three of *Christus*, the dark mood indicates the path that Liszt's future music would increasingly take. The searching and sorrowful yet tonally ambiguous unison passages which are given to the violins - and plaintively performed - establish a mood and direction that was to become a much more established feature of Liszt's later music: music of sorrow and despair. The music becomes more involved from bar 69, as Liszt heads towards an *appassionato* climax. Although there were some moments of caution in the string playing during what are some of Liszt's most difficult passages of orchestral writing, it nevertheless made for a dramatic moment as the voice of Christ is heard again at bar 127 - "My soul is exceeding sorrowful".

The delicate *tranquillo* accompaniment that Liszt writes from bar 189 until the end of the movement is worthy of note, and it was sensitively sustained and coloured by the orchestra. Against the inevitability suggested by the triplet movement, Christ sings “let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt”.

Leslie Howard spoke of the next movement - *Stabat Mater dolorosa* – as being one of the best things that Liszt wrote. Comparing it with the achievements of the Piano Sonata, Leslie described this monumental movement – which lasts for twenty minutes – as being exhausting to listen to. There is no doubt that in its own right, it is to be compared with the finest of Liszt’s Symphonic Poems, but to hear it within the context of the whole Oratorio, is to realise that at this point - the moment of Christ’s death on the cross – we are witnessing the emotional and dramatic apex of the entire work.

Of course Liszt had yet to portray the Resurrection. Leslie spoke of the difficulty facing Liszt in having to follow one dramatic moment (the crucifixion) with another (the Resurrection). Liszt’s ingenious solution was the insertion of the well known, yet simple little Easter Hymn *O filii et filiae*, which he had harmonised himself, producing a modal effect by avoiding the sharpened seventh. Liszt notes in the score that the singers should be placed out of sight (accompanied by an harmonium). It was on this occasion sung by members of the Countesthorpe Community College Chamber Choir, who were placed apart from the main chorus.

The final *Resurrexit* comes quickly, fulfilling the sense of expectancy that was suggested by the quiet Easter Hymn. Listeners up until this point, will have detected little of “the tinsel and drum” – to quote Brahms’ famous detractor – in *Christus*, with the exception of several cymbal crashes during the *The ride into Jerusalem*. It is in this final movement, where choir and orchestra are straining every sinew to present the apocalyptic vision of Christ resurrected, that Liszt finally lets the first bells of Easter ring out.

Walter Bache – Liszt’s most famous English pupil – wrote that the memorable first performance of Liszt’s other Oratorio *The Legend of St Elizabeth*; which took place at the Watburg Festival in 1867, was “an occasion of éclat and grandeur of which none who were present could ever forget”. Those sentiments apply equally to this stunning performance of *Christus*, the first in England for nearly twenty years.

It is sometimes easy to forget or to overlook the role that Liszt’s faith played in his life and music, to hear what he considered to be his most important work – *Christus* - performed again, reminds us. I am sure I speak for those members of the Liszt Society that were present on this occasion, in expressing heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Leslie Howard, The Liszt Society, and all those involved for undertaking such a work as *Christus*. To reiterate the words of Michael Short in the previous edition of The Liszt Society Journal, let us hope that *Christus* will not have to wait too long for a further British performance.

(References to bar numbers throughout this article apply to the *Eulenburg Edition* of *Christus*)