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British Choral Music in the Last Third of the 20th Century: Outcomes of the English Musical Renaissance

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Abstract. The present paper considers the main development paths of British choral composition during the last third of the 20th century. The analysis of choral scores by British composers, which were in demand in the global concert scene both at the turn of the century and today, identifies several evolutionary trends: (1) *post-Britten* influenced by the choral music of the outstanding British composer Benjamin Britten; (2) *post-Avant-Garde* combining the achievements of the post-war Avant-Garde with typical features of British choral music; (3) *New Simplicity*, understood as a manifestation of the “contemporary reaction to the complexity of the Avant-Garde” (Levon Hakobian); (4) *democratic* associated with successful attempts to unite the music of academic and popular genres; (5) *moderate academic* based on a limited selection of Avant-Garde innovations placed in the conditions of tonal or modal composition. Along with the presented classification, three common grounds that unite virtually all choral composers of Great Britain are identified: (1) a connection between the past and present of British music, revealed in most works; (2) an unflagging attention to church works representing mainly Christian denominations (Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy); (3) a desire to combine the compositional and technical achievements of continental composers with the genre and intonational specifics of British music. The key conclusion of the article is that contemporary British composers, even in the context of the multi-directional evolution of British choral composition, have remained faithful to the principles first formulated by the figures of the English musical Renaissance.

Keywords: choral music, contemporary composition, choral texture, vocal timbre, British composers

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Британская хоровая музыка последней трети XX века: итоги английского музыкального ренессанса

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена изучению основных путей развития британской хоровой композиции последней трети XX века. На основе анализа хоровых партитур композиторов Великобритании, востребованных в мировом концертном пространстве не только на рубеже веков, но и сегодня, автор выделяет несколько эволюционных направлений: 1) *постбриттеновское*, отмеченное влиянием хоровой музыки выдающегося британского мастера Бенжамина Бриттена; 2) *поставангардное*, соединяющее достижения музыки послевоенного авангарда с типичными чертами британской хоровой музыки; 3) *направление Новой простоты*, понимаемой как проявления «современной реакции на усложнённость авангарда» (Левон Акопян); 4) *демократическое*, связанное с успешными попытками объединения музыки академических и массовых жанров; 5) *умеренное академическое*, основанное на ограниченном отборе авангардных новаций, помещённых в условия тональной или модалной композиции. Вместе с представлением данной классификации автор выявляет три общих основания, объединяющих практически всех хоровых композиторов Великобритании: 1) выявляемая в большинстве сочинений связь прошлого и настоящего британской музыки; 2) неослабевающее внимание к церковным сочинениям, представляющим в основном христианские конфессии (католицизм, протестантизм, православие); 3) стремление к соединению композиционно-технических достижений континентальных мастеров с жанровой и интонационной спецификой британской музыки. Ключевой вывод статьи — современные британские композиторы даже в условиях разновекторности эволюции британской хоровой композиции сохранили верность принципам, впервые сформулированным деятелями английского музыкального ренессанса.

Ключевые слова: хоровая музыка, современная композиция, хоровая фактура, вокальная тембрика, композиторы Великобритании

The phenomenon of the English musical Renaissance currently associated with the names of Mackenzie, Parry, Stanford, Elgar, their students and followers — Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, George Dyson, Herbert Howells and others — was a powerful impetus for the development of British music. Drawing on national musical traditions rooted in folkloric examples and works of old masters from Dunstaple to Handel, British composers have distinguished themselves in the music

of various genres. However, it was perhaps in the field of choral music that the role of British composers in the pan-European context by the end of the 20th century could be described as key. This situation is due to both the emergence of a number of iconic names in the last third of the last century and the diversity of trends in the development of British vocal composition, which created a concert repertoire for choral groups of various lineups and performance capabilities that is constantly heard on world

stages. The present article aims to identify the main developments of British choral music in the last third of the 20th century and briefly describe each of them.

Successors of Benjamin Britten

The early 1970s in the history of Britain's choral music are associated with the strong influence of Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) and his followers, including Michael Hurd, Kenneth Leighton and William Mathias. Being the author of one of the first Britten's biographies, [1] Michael Hurd (1928–2006) continued Britten's tradition of creating works for both professional and amateur (mainly children's) groups. He is the author of 15 musical and dramatic works written specifically for children, including two operas, seven pop cantatas, three ballad cantatas, a morality play, and an oratorio. The very listing of the genres of these musical compositions testifies to the stylistic pluralism of Hurd, who is equally inclined to create works in traditional academic genres and compose popular music. The democratic approach of the composer, which sought to popularise choral music, was also expressed in the predominance of monophonic, chordal texture. In his most famous compositions — *The Shepherd's Calendar* choral symphony for baritone (1975) and *Night Songs of Edward Thomas* cycle (1994), Hurd, along with the above-mentioned textural types, uses the resources of imitative presentation (typically short free canonical episodes) and antiphons of male and female choirs.

Having come under the influence of twelve-tone music in his youth, Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988), adheres to the definition of a tonal centre even in his serial experiments.

A possible reason for this was the young composer's predominant interest in Berg's unorthodox serial experiments and examples of Dallapiccola's "dodecaphonic bel canto." [2, p. 287] The desire to create tonal as well as modal music was also determined by the priority of church works in Leighton's choral legacy. A deeply religious man, he moved beyond the creation of compositions for the Anglican Church to pay greater attention to Catholic choirs that admitted the use of more complex textural graphics. The fidelity to the traditions of old British polyphony in Leighton's polyphonic masterpiece *Laudate pueri* (1973) for three choirs *a cappella* is presented in dialogue with the musical tendencies of the second half of the 20th century: here, antiphonal and imitative-polyphonic texture is combined with the syllabic division of the word, as well as with stereophonic effects achieved through the disposition of the choral groups prescribed by the composer (these schemes are reminiscent of those that preceded the scores of Nono, Berio and Stockhausen in the 1960s and 1970s).

An example of Leighton's work for the Anglican Church is the 1972 cycle *Magnificat & Nunc dimittis*. In comparison with the composer's Catholic works, the choral texture is noticeably simplified and most often presented in chord form. In a number of cases, Leighton uses the resources of textural *crescendo*,¹ gradually including choral voices into the overall vertical.

The use of simple harmonic verticals also distinguishes many works by Leighton's younger contemporary, William Mathias (1934–1992): *Missa-brevis* op. 64 (1973), *Missa aedis Christi* op. 92 (1983) and numerous motets. Mathias

¹ The techniques of *crescendo/diminuendo* in relation to texture are considered in works by Valentina Kholopova. [3]

was a lifelong devotee of tonal and neo-modal music stemming from his deep love of early British music, which he carried throughout his life, beginning with his involvement in the 1950s with The Elisabethan Madrigal Singers choir founded at the Aberystwyth University. Mathias' immersion in the study of ancient polyphonic masterpieces went beyond the Renaissance era; *Missa-brevis* op. 64 for choir and organ (1973) finds the use of *Ars antiqua* rhythmic modes, while the archaic atmosphere in *Cantate Domino* for choir and organ (1987) is ensured by a partial reproduction of the textural appearance of parallel organum.

A deep interest in early British music and literature was also characteristic of Nicholas Maw (1935–2009), a composer who is more often associated with neo-romanticism in musicological literature. This perception of his work is primarily dictated by the study of his chamber-instrumental heritage, as well

as individual statements by the composer, which position his art as an attempt to restore the connection between contemporary music and romantic tradition.² However, in his choral music, Maw establishes connections not only with the Romantics, but also with composers of previous eras. One of Maw's most famous choral works is the cycle *Reverdie* (1975) for male choir based on texts by anonymous poets of the 14th–15th centuries. Along with the chordal and homophonic-harmonic textures actively used by the composer with the relief and background differentiation carried out through both dynamics and strokes, an example of neo-Renaissance counterpoint is traced with the representation reminiscent of the polyphonic scores of the 15th–16th centuries with their typical independence of vocal voices from a single bar line (Example No. 1).

The composer is generally characterised by a predominant interest in working with texts

Example No. 1

Nicholas Maw. *Reverdie*. No. 3 "Al Nist by the Rose", mm. 1–12

Andante sostenuto
p espr.

TENOR II

Al nist by the rose, — rose, — Al nist by the

rose, — I lay, by the rose, — rose, —

pp

BARITONE

p espr.

Al nist by the rose, — rose, —

rose, — by the rose — I lay, I

Al — nist by the rose — I lay —

² Let us cite one of them: "I am increasingly concerned with what music has lost — those moments the composer can no longer work with. I want to work with them again ... Around 1914, for obvious social and political reasons, there was a certain pause in the natural development of the tradition <...> It seems to me that I am trying to restore that tradition." [4, p. 98]

of ancient poets: 17th-century poets John Hall, Thomas Browne, Joseph Beaumont, as well as numerous works of English and Anglo-Saxon anonymous lyric poetry dating back to the 14th, 12th, and even the 8th centuries. The striking archaism of Maw's works is largely determined by ancient poetry. Thus, the cycle *Three Hymns* (1989) presents an untypical for the end of the 20th century interpretation of the organ part, which rather complements the vocal stanzas with improvisational interludes than provides harmonic support. In the third number, the solo voices of the soprano and alto sound alternately against the background of a sparse organ accompaniment, which literally immerses the listener in the atmosphere of *quasi*-medieval music.

Influence of the European Avant-Garde

Taking an opposite direction to the Britten and post-Britten branches of British choral composition in the second half of the 20th century are the works of a number of composers who paid special attention to contemporary writing techniques inherited from the masters of the first and second European Avant-Garde. This trend in British music of the last three decades of the 20th century is primarily associated with the work of composers from the New Music Manchester Group and Brian Ferneyhough.

The New Music Manchester Group was formed in 1953 by the students of the Manchester College of Music (composers Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies, pianist John Ogdon and conductor Elgar Howarth). The father of Alexander Goehr (b. 1932), the oldest member of the group, was the composer and conductor Walter Goehr, himself a student of Arnold Schoenberg and Ernst Krenek. The study of the basics of twelve-tone technique under the guidance of his father, acquaintance and friendship with Boulez influenced the compositional and technical

solutions of the composer's early works sustained mainly in the serial technique. Due to attention to contemporary choral music and a deep knowledge of the old masters' works, Goehr both created unique works in which seriality was combined with the principles of modal composition, motet strophes and inclusion of madrigalisms (a remarkable example is *The Death of Moses* oratorio (1991–1992)). Like Luciano Berio, Goehr worked on a reconstruction of some of the lost scores of Claudio Monteverdi: in 1994–1995, Goehr restored the opera *L'Arianna* by the great Italian master, which became a notable event in the musical life of the late 20th century. It is remarkable that such a coexistence of contemporary composition methods and early music seems completely organic for Goehr and consistent with the concept of contemporary music, to which he once gave the following definition: "Contemporary music is a balanced culture with its own performing style, its own range of ideas, and therefore its own sound. This is the culture I belong to, if I belong to any culture at all" (Cit. ex: [5, p. 434]).

The multifaceted musical world, in which the latest technical principles coexist with the experience of musical composition from past centuries, is also represented by the choral work of Alexander Goehr's close friend, his colleague at the New Music Manchester Group, Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016). Like Goehr, Davies studied Arnold Schoenberg's scores while still in Manchester, attending the Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt in 1956–1957, and subsequently studying with Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter in the USA, as well as with Goffredo Petrassi in Italy. At the same time, in the 1950s, he was preparing fragments of *Vespro della Beata Vergine* by Monteverdi for a concert, while in relation to his works, he used terminology that referred to the experience of ancient composition (hocket, isorhythm, *cantus firmus*, etc.).

Davis wrote about the need for contemporary composition knowledge to take into account both the latest music and the musical traditions that preceded it: “Most young composers are familiar with at least the most superficial aspects of Schoenberg, Bartók, Stravinsky, etc. — perhaps even of Messiaen or Stockhausen — but they know surprisingly little about more ancient composers — their training has led them to take for granted that they know all there is to know about them.”³

Francis Routh noted that contemporaries said about Davies: “He is a neo-mediaeval composer to the same extent as Stravinsky was a neo-classical composer.” [6, p. 233] The analogy with Stravinsky in this case is non-accidental: similar to the works of the Russian composer, many of choral pieces by Maxwell Davies are characterised by polyrhythmic overlays and frequent changes of meter. One of the prototypes of such a temporal organisation for the composer becomes the scores of the old masters, who used a constant conjugation of the perfect (ternary) and imperfect (binary) temporal organisation. The whimsical changes between perfect and imperfect metrics, as well

as the superposition of the two principles, are found, for example, in *Apple-Basket* (1990) — a composition that approaches the complexity of its metric rhythm to the compositions of Brian Ferneyhough. The works of Maxwell Davies are also characteristic of the landscape style of the 20th-century British choral music classics, such as Frederick Delius and Vaughan Williams. The *Westerlings* cycle created in 1976–1977 has an original subtitle: “Four Songs and a Prayer, with Seascapes.” If the songs are traditionally based on a verbal series (the poems of the Scottish poet George Mackay Brown), then the landscapes are a wonderful example of free choral vocalises. The texture is based on complementary choir figurations literally illustrating the slowly changing sea waves. The figurations are performed either with a closed or open (phoneme *A*) mouth (Example No. 2).

One of the most famous British composers of the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries, Harrison Birtwistle (1934–2022), is also distinguished by the interaction of old and new, resulting in the attainment of his own original style. Tatiana Tsaregradskaya reveals a certain pattern in the composer’s

Example No. 2

Peter Maxwell Davies. *Westerlings*. No. 1.
Seascape I, mm. 20–24

The image shows a musical score for four vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The score is for Example No. 2, Peter Maxwell Davies' *Westerlings*, No. 1, Seascape I, measures 20–24. The tempo is marked 'poco a poco più mosso'. The Soprano part has lyrics 'Ah' and dynamic markings *p*, *mp*, *mf*, and *f*. The Alto part has lyrics 'Ah' and dynamic markings *mf* and *f*. The Tenor part has lyrics 'Ah' and dynamic markings *f*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *f*, *pp*, *f*, and *f*. The Bass part has lyrics 'Ah' and dynamic markings *f*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, *f*, *pp*, *f*, and *f*. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

³ Cit. ex: Jones N. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies: The Man and the Music. *Online Research Cardiff*. 2019. URL: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/132410> (accessed: 20.01.2026).

creative evolution, consisting of progressive attention to the works of the old masters: “If at the beginning of his creative path, Birtwistle was in the zone of historical dialogue with his older contemporaries Stravinsky and Messiaen, then as he moved towards creative maturity, he discovered an interest in other musical styles and eras, in particular the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque.” [7, p. 97] At the same time, ancient Greek mythology, including the famous myth of Orpheus, also had a major influence on the work of the British composer, determining the concept of Birtwistle’s key works: instrumental *Tragoedia* (1965), *The Mask of Orpheus* opera (1986) and *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus* dramatic scene (1970) for soprano and five instruments. Among the choral works closely connected with the myth of Orpheus, which became, in the apt expression of Tsaregradskaya, “a ‘spinal cord’ for the composer’s work,” [8, p. 258] let us recall *Meridian* (1970–1971) for mezzo-soprano, two female choirs and instruments, *The Fields of Sorrow* (1972) for two sopranos, choir and 16 instruments and *On the Sheer Threshold of the Night* (1980) for 16 voices.

Birtwistle’s appeal both to the world of Antiquity and to the music of the European masters of the *Ars Nova* and the Renaissance is entirely understandable given the special significance that ancient art had for composers of the 15th and 16th centuries. It is no coincidence that the madrigal genre with its characteristic theme of love and death so often featured the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which remained one of the genre’s most famous embodiments for centuries. However, the next turn to the theme of Orpheus in Birtwistle’s work is striking in its unprecedentedness. Twelve singers are arranged on the stage in a semicircle; the left and right parts of the semicircle are represented by male and female voices, respectively; two soloists standing on

opposite sights of the stage perform the parts of Hades (Bass 4) and Eurydice (Soprano 1). The part of Orpheus is assigned to two voices: countertenor (Alto 4) and tenor (Tenor 1). On the one hand, this literally corresponds to Orpheus’s borderline position between light and darkness, between love and death; on the other hand, as Tsaregradskaya writes, it also reflects “the two-sided nature of Orpheus”: “To the left of this pair [countertenor and tenor. — *A.R.*] the men are ranged, and the women are to the right. The men represent the ego (reason), while the women represent anima (intuition). These two forces play against each other during the entire piece.” [Ibid., p. 270] The struggle between two forces on the arena of Orpheus’s consciousness is literally reflected in the score, where Orpheus part (the duet of countertenor and tenor) is in the centre — between female and male voices. To create an audible contrast between the two beginnings, Birtwistle prefers to use the extreme registers with the stroke and rhythmic opposition. The soprano timbres performing their lines in a tense tessitura under conditions of the finest nuances acquire great importance. According to Tsaregradskaya, “this kind of singing makes the impression of a ‘choir of shadows’ with their immaterial and ‘un human’ singing.” [Ibid., p. 271] Perhaps, Birtwistle’s study of Avant-Garde scores from the 1950s to 1970s, particularly the works of Luigi Nono, also played a role in this timbre decision. In particular, Birtwistle’s approach is reminiscent of Nono’s similar decision in the score of *Al gran sole carico d’amore* to avoid likening his heroines to ordinary people and to approach the unreal sound of the female voice embodying the singing of higher beings through predominantly ensemble (non-solo!) intonation at the border of the second and third octaves.

Along with the works of Alexander Goehr, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Harrison Birtwistle, the direction closely connected with the

development of post-war Avant-Garde ideas is represented by the work of Brian Ferneyhough (b. 1943), who clearly asserts himself already in his first choral work, *Missa brevis* (1969). Taking as his starting point the timbral experiments of Schoenberg, i.e., a combination of *Sprechgesang* and traditional singing with the use of ensembles of voices with contrasting levels of tessitura tension, in conjunction with the temporal and textural ideas of the post-war Avant-Garde, Ferneyhough created his own distinctive choral style, combining sharply dissonant chromatics, complex metro-rhythmic basis and untypical timbral solutions of the vocal score.

Each new choral score by Ferneyhough presented performers with new challenges determined by the ideological specifics of the work, as well as reflecting the general trends in the development of choral composition. In this regard, Ferneyhough's second choral opus, *Time and Motion Study III* (1974) is very indicative. It is the third work in a series of pieces "whose title is a pun on the efficiency tests to which British workers were subjected in the 1960s," as Paul Griffiths writes. [9, p. 302]

Time and Motion Study III places extraordinary demands on the singers: in addition to the extremely complex intonational and temporal organisation of the lines of choral voices, each singer is required to master virtually the entire palette of articulation techniques that existed at the time the score was created. The latter circumstance indicates that Ferneyhough was deeply immersed in the study of the scores by his contemporaries: a multi-level application of *Sprechgesang*, phonation with excessive breathing, differentiated by the intensity of vibrato, as well as original textural

solutions. With regard to the latter feature, let us point out that the diagonal texture that became widespread in Ferneyhough's late choral works is the evidence of the impression the composer experienced from his acquaintance with Nono's *Prometeo*.⁴ This conclusion is also prompted by an understanding of the goal pursued by the Italian and British composers, which consisted in striving for maximum timbre mobility of melodic lines (more precisely, melodic diagonals) and harmonic consonances, which can be seen by comparing the scores of specific musical-theatrical projects *Prometeo* by Nono and *Shadowtime* by Ferneyhough, completely devoid of what can conditionally be called spectacle. Drawing on Nono's experience, Ferneyhough came to the formation of an opera performance that was "played out" only on an auditory level, representing a phenomenon that Sigrid Weigel aptly called "sound choreography" (*eine Art Klang-Choreographie*). [11, p. 29]

The connection between Ferneyhough's project *Shadowtime* and Italian music of the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries is noteworthy, which is confirmed by the composer's testimony about his musical interests. When asked by Paul Griffiths what the composer would like to listen to in his spare time, Ferneyhough replied: "Almost anything from the Italian renaissance, primarily Monteverdi, the Gabriellis and their contemporaries. The exuberant pleasure in the architectural play of masses in the latter and the mannerist intensity of every detail of the former — not to speak of his amazing timing — have always exercised a powerful pull." [10, p. 247] In relation to the latter — Ferneyhough's interest in the time manipulation by Gabriellis and his contemporaries —

⁴ Brian Ferneyhough pays considerable attention to late Nono, in particular to his quartet and the "tragedy of hearing" *Prometeo*, in his conversation with Jeffrey Stadelman in 1992. See: [10, p. 484].

the observation of Jean-Pascal Chaigne about the connection between the works of the British master and the masterpieces of the Renaissance in the recording of tempo changes is also indicative: "...many proportions used here (*Kurze Schatten II* by Ferneyhough. — *A.R.*) determine different speeds of sound and in this case have the same function as in Renaissance music, where proportion was the only way to introduce a change in the speed of performance into writing." [12, p. 285]

What Ferneyhough took from the composers of the first Avant-Garde wave (primarily Schoenberg) and his older contemporaries — representatives of the post-war Avant-Garde (especially Nono) — led him not only to create works that became real encyclopaedias of contemporary choral writing due to the richness and even apparent redundancy of performance techniques, but also formed the image of his performer as ready for a constant search for something new, overcoming himself and, thus, in the words of Richard Toop, capable of "preserving the idea of art as an endless search for the transcendent" (Cit. ex: [13, p. 145]).

Opposition to Avant-Garde Tendencies: John Tavener and Michael Finnissy

Taking an entirely different tack to the work of the New Music Manchester Group and Brian Ferneyhough, John Tavener (1944–2013) is the most prominent British representative of the school of New Simplicity. Since the 1980s, choral music has occupied a dominant position in the work of the composer, who converted to the Orthodox faith in 1977. During this period, Tavener's true world bestsellers appeared: *Funeral Ikos* (1981); *The Lamb* (1982) and *The Tiger* (1987) based on the texts by William Blake; *Love Bade Me Welcome* (1985) based on the texts by George Herbert; *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis* (1986). The high popularity of these compositions is largely due to their characteristic static, peaceful atmosphere,

the predominance of a verse-chorus structure, and the clear diatonic basis of the melodies developing against the background of sustained organ points, similar to the isons of ancient chants. Isons are one of the most characteristic features of John Tavener's music, which is largely responsible for its leisurely, meditative and timeless character.

Tavener's close friend and spiritual mentor, the Orthodox nun Mother Thekla, provided great assistance in forming the textual basis of his works. A number of the composer's works feature her original texts, but in most cases, she was more of a compiler of a verbal series from fragments of liturgical texts, excerpts from the Bible, and in some cases, inclusions of secular literature. These include one of John Tavener's most famous works, *Song for Athene* (1993), which was created on the death of Tavener's close friend, the Greek actress Athene Hariades. The work became famous throughout the world due to its performance during the funeral ceremony of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997. The text of the choral piece rather organically combines fragments of an Orthodox funeral service, the Gospel of Luke, and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The inclusion of Shakespeare's texts is a tribute to the memory of the Greek actress, who was a renowned interpreter of the works of the great English playwright in Greece and abroad. Let us also focus on the reverberation effects of Tavener's scores. The coda that concludes the composition is an example of a jubilant, solemn chant, in which the division of the choral parts into melodic voices and organ points provides the sound with an incredible volume achievable even when the composition is performed by a chamber ensemble.

The study of British choral music in the last quarter of the 20th century leads to the establishment of unexpected parallels between the work of individual composers, which largely clarify the accepted notion

in contemporary musicology about the main development trends of British music. Thus, Michael Finnissey (b. 1946), most often considered a representative of the New Complexity, appears in his choral music to be closer to John Tavener than to Brian Ferneyhough. Finnissey's two main sources of his choral work inspiration are ancient Christian chants and the world of folklore.⁵ The composer's sacred works have harmonic, polyphonic or heterophonic texture, which is often combined with sustained tones of individual parts (Example No. 3). Finnissey's work is also characterised by the long development of melodic horizontals, free from metric determination. His scores often contain sections of monophony or diaphony, recreating the sound of ancient organums (a well-known example is *Seven sacred motets*, 1991). His works also discover the textural organisation

characteristic of Dunstaple's motets — a combination of the conventional *cantus firmus* tenor with its coloration (*In mense autem* motet from the above-mentioned cycle).

In *Magnificat & Nunc dimittis* (1986), the polytextuality typical of 13th-century motets is used: Finnissey superimposes two verbal series connected by a single textual source of Gospel prayers (*Magnificat*, *Nunc dimittis*) presented simultaneously in English and Greek. In this case, different textural solutions are chosen: *Magnificat* is characterised with the heterophony of female voices (English text) against the background of a rhythmic (similar to a harmonic ison) duet of the outer parts, complemented by the pulsation of the tenor. *Nunc dimittis* represents an example of homophonic-harmonic texture: the female choir and the tenor part create a chorale

Example No. 3

Michael Finnissey. *Magnificat & Nunc dimittis*, mm. 1–3

Animatedly (♩) – Excitedly – Raw-edged.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves are vocal parts with lyrics in English: "My soul doth mag - ni -". The third staff has lyrics in Greek: "A - - - nas - - - ta -". The bottom two staves are piano accompaniment. The score is marked with a forte dynamic (ff) and includes performance instructions: "Solo" and "Animatedly (♩) – Excitedly – Raw-edged." The music features long melodic lines and complex rhythmic patterns.

⁵ Let us cite an excerpt from the work of the British pianist and musicologist Ian Pace, which lists the main musical areas of interest to Finnissey: "Those familiar with Michael Finnissey's music will know that he draws extensively upon a range of pre-existing musical sources, whether from the Western art music tradition, early twentieth-century popular song, music hall, or many folk and vernacular musics from different parts of the world." [14, pp. 57–58]

background (English text) for a peculiar psalmody of the bass (Greek text). Almost all of Finnissy's spiritual works are characterised by abundant melismatics with chromaticism, adding an expressive sophistication to the compositions.

Democratisation Trends of Choral Music

An important phenomenon in the history of British choral music in the last third of the 20th century was the work of composers who advocated the democratisation of choral art and its rapprochement with the sphere of mass music.⁶ A definite starting point for this trend, which later became characteristic of choral art in other countries, was the premiere of Andrew Lloyd Webber's rock opera *Jesus Christ — Superstar* in 1970. An important place in the composition, which combines rock style with elements of classical operatic dramaturgy, i.e., the presence of a leitmotif system, recognisable genre features of recitatives, arias and ensembles, was occupied by choirs, whose music gained extraordinary popularity remained in the future. It is enough to recall such musical numbers as *Jesus Christ — Superstar*, *Hosanna* and *Last Supper* to be convinced that even today they are performed in the programs of festivals and individual choral concerts. The secret of their success, along with a memorable melodic basis and vibrant rhythms, was the relative simplicity of the musical material, concerning both the ranges of the choral parts and the tessitura conditions used, as well as the simplicity of their textural design. The choral numbers of Webber's rock opera are typically presented in unison (in an octave) or in simple harmonic

two-part singing (less often, three-part singing). The choral score has no classic division into four parts (SATB): the composer either indicates specific characters (apostles, priests) or differentiates the parts by gender (girls and boys). The choral score is similarly structured in most of Webber's musical opuses staged in the 1970s and first half of the 1980s: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1968–1972), *Evita* (1976–1978) and *Cats* (1981).

In the following decade, Lloyd Webber's choral writing became more complex,⁷ which is especially noticeable when getting acquainted with the score of his famous Requiem (1984). This work immersing the line of secularisation of the liturgical genre in the bosom of pop stylistics stands apart not only in the composer's legacy, but also in the choral music of the late 20th century, since it largely influenced the appearance of works by Karl Jenkins, Bob Chilcott, John Leavitt, Dan Forrest and other authors advocating today for the fundamental democratisation of academic choral genres. Despite a certain stylistic affinity with the composer's musicals, this work is distinguished by the diversity of its textural structure: the resources of imitative polyphony also acquire a significant role along with the chordal, homophonic-harmonic texture. The stylistic "marginality" of the Requiem is expressed by both tonal-harmonic and intonational means and the phenomenon of combining symphonic and pop musical instruments, as well as by the choice of performers for the solo parts of the premiere — classical opera tenor Plácido Domingo and the famous pop singer Sarah Brightman.

⁶ The presence of two complementary lines in the development of British choral music, which can be conditionally called elitism and democracy, is also characteristic of the initial stage in the British musical Renaissance. For details, see: [15, p. 66].

⁷ For example, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) already presents the classical four-part mixed choir; the resources of antiphonal presentation are actively used along with monophony and chordal texture.

If for Lloyd Webber, the composition of the cantata-oratorio genre is, in a certain sense, a striking exception in his choral legacy, which was mainly oriented towards the sphere of musical theatre, then for John Rutter, on the contrary, classical choral genres associated with both the sphere of sacred and secular music are fundamental. As an outstanding contemporary choirmaster, Rutter creates works for choral groups of various levels, while sensitively understanding the capabilities of non-professional choirs. Despite the eclecticism of Rutter's choral music,⁸ which has been emphasised by some researchers, the composer clearly understands the line that separates academic choral music from mass one. Rutter's first major vocal-symphonic work, the cantata *Gloria* (1974), was already a huge success and defined the direction that Rutter has taken since the 1980s to the present day: the creation of clear tonal-harmonic music in understandable classical forms intonationally connected with examples of popular music, including jazz (recall the cycle of choral miniatures *Birthday Madrigals* (1995), which presuppose both the variability of the instrumental composition of the performers and the ability of the pianist accompanying the choir to improvise). At the same time, Rutter's works are examples of academic music in the solution of choral scores: here, a variety of classical choral texture types are encountered: chordal, antiphonal, imitative-polyphonic (up to the creation of an allusion to a fugal presentation

in the finale of *Gloria* or in "Fecit potentiam" from *Magnificat* (1990)). Rutter's bright melodic talent often leads to the introduction of a homophonic-harmonic organisation with the melodic relief of the solo part (less often, the voice) developing against the background of a chordal support for the rest of the choir.

The Middle Way of the Evolution of British Choral Music

A portrait of British choral music in the last decade of the 20th century would be incomplete if, given a presentation of the extreme tendencies in its evolution — the development of timbre and textural innovations of the Avant-Garde of the first and second waves and the fundamentally opposite trend of choral democratisation oriented, among other things, towards the field of popular culture — we neglected the music as representing what could conditionally be called the middle path in the development of contemporary choral composition in Great Britain. This path is associated with the work of those composers who, despite their stylistic differences, are united by the search for new possibilities within the framework of existing academic genres and moderation in the application of various innovations in the field of contemporary composition. Among the latter, let us recall the work of composers representing different generations, but who became famous mainly in the 1980s and 1990s: James MacMillan, Roxana Panufnik and Thomas Adès.

⁸ Let us cite an excerpt from Zhu Xuanyang's article: "Analysing the compositional style of J. Rutter, one might come to the conclusion that his music is eclectic. With its 'roots' and genre preferences, it undoubtedly goes back to the origins of ancient Christian music <...> However, the influence of the centuries-old choral traditions of England and the French culture of the early 20th century can be traced in his compositions. The genre features of American classical jazz and its associated vocal art can also be considered as an addition to the stylistic 'eclecticism' in his compositions." [16, p. 36]

For the Scottish composer James MacMillan (b. 1959), the field of choral music has always been a beloved and enduringly revered one. The composer's first major premiere in the United Kingdom was the work for choir and organ *Cantos Sagrados* (1989), which continues the line of combining secular and sacred texts in one work, dating back to Vaughan Williams and Britten. However, in this case, the composition theme was not a protest against the war, but a denunciation of political tyranny and the repression of a totalitarian state against its citizens. Along with texts from Catholic liturgy, the libretto is based on fragments of works by Ariel Dorfman and Anna Maria Mendoza, which have been translated into English. The construction of the composition based on several verbal sources is also characteristic of the cantata for choir and strings *Seven Last Words from the Cross* (1993). As in *Cantos sagrados*, the two groups of literary sources (in this case, the Gospel and liturgical texts) are differentiated phonetically through the use of English and Latin. Already here, the functional division of texture into melodic voices (within the framework of a harmonic or imitative-polyphonic texture) and harmonic support voices, typical of MacMillan's choral music, is evident. Melismatic (appropriative notes, trills) plays a significant role in the melodic development, adding an expressive tone to the predominantly diatonic intonation of MacMillan's compositions.

MacMillan's works for choir *a cappella* are among the undisputed world leaders in the number of performances among contemporary choral compositions. His famous play *A Child's Prayer* (1996) written in response to the atrocious terrorist attack on a primary school in the Scottish town of Dunblane received wide distribution around the world at the turn of the century. The textual basis of the composition was the prayer that children read in preparation for their first Communion.

In the outer sections of the three-part structure, the composer distinguishes two main layers in the texture: (a) the choir performing chords similar to the ringing of bells; (b) the voices of two solo sopranos singing a duet of a pure, soulful melody in the upper register. The culmination is the middle part of the work, based on the ever-increasing rhythm of the choral antiphons with the single word "Joy." A striking example of textural differentiation can be found in *The Gallant Weaver* play (1997) created based on the text of a poem by MacMillan's favourite poet, Robert Burns. The basis of the composition is a three-part canon of the soprano part against the background of barely audible chords of the choir, which create an incredible volume of sound. Using exclusively the resources of modal diatonicism in conjunction with the means of textural and dynamic *crescendo*, the composer creates a composition that throws a sonic "bridge" into the Renaissance era and demonstrates the possibilities of creating vibrant works based exclusively on the classical resources of vocal composition even at the end of the 20th century. This skill is largely based on the ideological platform of the Catholic composer, for whom, as Joel Clarkson writes, "theology and music go hand in hand." [17, p. 11]

Moderate use of innovations in contemporary composition and a deep knowledge of the choir's capabilities distinguish the works of MacMillan's younger contemporaries — Roxana Panufnik and Thomas Adès. Roxana Panufnik (b. 1968), daughter of the renowned Polish conductor and composer Andrzej Panufnik, who emigrated to the UK in 1954, was trained as a composer at the Royal Academy of Music and became widely known in the 1990s due to a number of outstanding premieres. One of them, *Westminster Mass*, written in 1997 for the 75th birthday of Cardinal Basil Hume demonstrates a deep knowledge of the traditions of British choral music

(attention to the two-choral organisation with an abundance of colourful antiphons) and, at the same time, an interest in the innovations of temporal and textural organisation that became widespread in the 20th century. Like many of Panufnik's subsequent works, *Westminster Mass* is distinguished by the active use of asymmetrical meters, the resources of polyrhythmic superposition of duplets and triplets, as well as polymetry associated with the combination of contrasting metric organisation within one measure (a classic case is the superposition of 6/8 and 3/4 meters in *Gloria*). The texture of *Westminster Mass* demonstrates the effects of artificial reverberation, which came from the choral music of the post-war Avant-Garde, created by prolonging ("suspending") the tones of the melody within a polyphonic harmonic texture. Along with the syllabic division of the word, polylingualism is widespread: two main phonetic series are compared — Latin and English — both sequentially (for example, in *Kyrie*) and jointly (see *Deus, Deus meus*).

The interaction between the past and present of British music is also revealed in the analysis of the works by Thomas Adès (b. 1971). Adès' first choral compositions demonstrate his passion for early British choral music. In 1992, he wrote the *Fool's Rhymes* play based on the texts of John Donne and folklore sources from the 14th and 16th centuries; in 1997, he created *The Fayrfax Carol*.⁹ Referring to ancient texts does not lead to citing intonation material. Nevertheless, one can speak of stylisation (use of imitative texture, introduction of sequences and *solī — tutti* contrasts) combined with the resources of chromatic tonality or with unusual instrumentation (use of a prepared piano in *Fool's Rhymes*).

Conclusion

The works of MacMillan, Panufnik and Adès are an example of how the foundation of the English musical Renaissance — British early music and folklore — remained a source of inspiration and compositional basis for masters of the late 20th century. In trying to find an explanation for this phenomenon, several defining constants can be seen in the development of British choral music:

1. Deeply rooted in national traditions, the work of most British composers constantly corresponds to the music of previous generations — from Dunstaple to Elgar and Britten — as well as to the diverse world of Britain folklore.

2. An important area of choral creativity popular in Great Britain throughout the 20th century was sacred music represented by both works for the Anglican and Catholic churches and Orthodox compositions (Tavener), as well as works synthesising the traditions of sacred music of various religious denominations (Delius, Fanshawe, Tavener, Jenkins).

3. The work of British composers demonstrates a flexible interaction between national vocal and choral characteristics and general European trends in the field of musical composition techniques.

The leading position of British choral music in Europe can largely be explained by the high performance level of the country's choral groups. A distinctive feature of UK choral professionals is the narrow specialisation of each outstanding choral group, sufficient to achieve high-quality performance of works of a particular period. The British choirs and ensembles of the late 20th century include groups that either perform medieval and Renaissance music, as well as examples

⁹ Robert Fayrfax (1464–1521) is an outstanding composer of the English Renaissance, one of the most famous predecessors of the Elizabethan composers Tallis and Byrd.

of contemporary choral music oriented towards early polyphony (Paul Hillier's Hilliard Ensemble, Jeremy Summerlee's Oxford Camerata) or specialise in the interpretation of baroque and classical works (John Eliot Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir, Robert King's King's Consort Choir), as well as groups known for performing primarily contemporary choral music (James Wood's New London

Chamber Choir, Harry Christophers's The Sixteen ensemble).

To sum up all of the above, it is difficult to disagree with the thought expressed by Edward J. Dent on the pages of the *Music & Letters* magazine back in 1925: "We English are by natural temperament singers rather than instrumentalists. <...> Our instinct, like that of the Italians, is to sing." [18, p. 225]

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