



HERBERT HOWELLS (1892–1983)

Bernard Benoliel

HERBERT HOWELLS was a man and a composer of enormous integrity. Like Anton Bruckner and Gabriel Fauré, he was not pushy, egocentric or fashionable, neither was he weak nor humble—he was just modest. In common with these two masters, this very undervalued quality has been responsible for a general neglect of his music and a serious under-estimation of his creative achievement. He was the finest British composer of his generation and one of the finest of his time from any country. The core of his output, the large-scale works for chorus and orchestra—*Sine Nomine* (1922), *Hymnus Paradisi* (1938), *Missa Sabrinensis* (1954), and *Stabat Mater* (1963)—are masterpieces of 20th-century music. They are the cornerstones of a creative edifice that contains a sizeable body of works in most musical genres except opera.

Howells told me that he could not put into words how much Ralph Vaughan Williams the man and the composer meant to him. He was present at the first performances of the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and, later, the *Pastoral Symphony*. These two masterpieces were the most profound 20th-century influences on his own music and his life-long friendship with R.V.W. began at that first performance of the *Tallis Fantasia*. Howells came under the spell of Hubert Parry while a student at the RCM and he responded both to his musical genius and his unique human qualities. He said to me recently that Parry was definitely the greatest man he had ever known. The structures which Parry used in his finest cantatas had a marked influence on Howells's musical thought; but the greatest influence of all was the age of Tudor polyphony. Howells said to Christopher Palmer that 'All through my life I have had this strange feeling that I somehow belong to the Tudor period'. On other occasions he remarked that he was a Tudor composer working in the 20th-century. It coloured his views on the role of the composer in society and, of course, the music itself, which is elaborately contrapuntal.

Howells's music arouses feelings of passionate longing and throws up images connected with light. The latter is the unique aspect of his creative gift. The end of the *Hymnus Paradisi* is a flood of warm gold and white light. It suggests a stained glass window that might have been imagined by Turner. Howells, like Vaughan Williams, was a superb example of the Libran Glyph \approx . The lower line stands for the personal ego, matter, and the temporal experience; the upper line represents the objective, non-temporal state and experiences related to the eternal, universal mind. Those of us who love Howells's music are grateful to him for giving powerful expression to both aspects of the symbol.

