

HERBERT HOWELLS'S ORGAN WORKS? CRITICAL RECEPTION, PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND THE CASE FOR REAPPRAISAL

FEBRUARY 23rd, 2013, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Herbert Howells. In the years which have passed the historical view of Howells has changed significantly. With the publication of Paul Spicer's biography,¹ Christopher Palmer's 'A Centenary Celebration' (two editions, 1992 / 1996)² and numerous recordings (most notably of Howells's Orchestral and Chamber works), Herbert Howells has gone from a being a composer known exclusively for his church music, to being considered for his all round contribution to British music in almost every field excluding that of opera. As our overall view of Howells changes it seems only natural that we should reassess the music that has become popular in this new context. It could be argued that such a reappraisal of his organ works is overdue.

Howells music tends to polarise opinion, with many fervent admirers as well as those who avoid it completely. This is demonstrated by the fact that his outstanding masterpiece, *Hymnus Paradisi*, has only just been given its first performance at the Proms (Summer 2012), gathering widespread critical praise. A disc of Howells's choral music from Trinity College, Cambridge (Hyperion CDA67914) was praised as an 'exceptionally fine release' of 'resplendent settings' with 'sublime treatment', a review which ended: 'Performances throughout are beyond criticism in their unruffled composure, keen sense of poetry and abundant communicative spirit'.³ In contrast to such ecstatic criticism, Howells's organ works have yet to make their impact and there are many examples of major recitalists eschewing the majority of his output altogether. Dame Gillian Weir (a former Howells pupil at the Royal College of Music) even went as far as listing Howells's music as one of her dislikes in a Radio 3 interview. So what are the problems with the Howells organ works and how might a reappraisal help?

Recitalist Nigel Allcoat once remarked that he often felt let down by Howells's organ music when the choir did not come in. Whilst obviously a tongue-in-cheek remark, it does highlight a problem in many performances that they fail to present a strong enough sense of the overall architecture of

the music. A desire to bring out the improvisatory style of Howells's music can often lapse into a poorly-defined performance. Professor John Caldwell articulates the issue most clearly in his *Oxford History of English Music*:

The (first) three Rhapsodies (1915–18) and the first set of *Three Psalm Preludes* (1915–16) are bold, striking works for a large, orchestrally coloured instrument. By the time of the sonata of 1933 his idiom had become terser, but he still demanded the resources of a Romantic monster, perhaps a concert-organ in this case, and the outcome is a dichotomy between style and resource, especially in the lengthy first movement, where the music is bespattered with accents that cannot be literally represented on an organ at all. The second set of *Three Psalm Preludes* (1938) and the *Six Pieces* are less amenable to this criticism, though the more vigorous movements still perpetuate a gap between expectation and a feasible result. The more reflective pieces, however, even though they may (as in Master Tallis's Testament) entail a spurious archaism, are among the most satisfying English organ works of the mid-century.

The *Concerto for String Orchestra* fulfils many of the expectations only partially realised in the organ sonata.⁴

The central question is whether Caldwell was right to observe a 'dichotomy between style and resource' which 'perpetuate a gap between expectation and a feasible result'. In short, do Howells's organ works work on the organ? His final comment about the *Concerto for String Orchestra* is particularly important in this context because it implies that outside the organ idiom Howells did succeed. So what is it (if anything) that holds back the organ works?

Critical Reception

There is a sense in which Caldwell perpetuates an ongoing rejection of certain British composers from the 1970s onwards, thus critical reception of the organ works goes from the highly positive statements (up to the 1950s) such as:

... no one will dispute that among our first six composers today there is none who understands the organ so well as Herbert Howells, or who has cared for our instrument so long and so much.⁵

to the highly negative reviews seen in the 1970s and 80s:

The absence of almost any style in much contemporary organ music makes it more or less impossible to criticize in a way that has any meaning. Often the purpose of the music is non-existent and its system

of composition intentionally without all those restricting principles which have caused traditional music to run dry ... This Partita emphatically emphasizes the problems of style in Herbert Howells's organ music. Many of Howells's best compositions have been small pieces, like Lambert's Clavichord and the early Psalm-Preludes for organ, stylistically conservative and retrospective in outlook, qualities which will not go easily with modern notions in organ design (Howells described as 'twenty-five thousand pounds worth of dominant seventh' the effect of the big chord in S.S. Wesley's Blessed be the God and Father, and this for him is one thing for which organs are really necessary – at 1948 prices).⁶

Dalton's analysis, like Caldwell's, centres on the perception that Howells's music was written for, and therefore only performable on, an unfashionable style of instrument, thus they reject music and intent simultaneously. This sort of interpretation is clearly problematic. Howells's own view of the organ and what music was suitable for it changed during his lifetime. At the start of his career *The Music Teacher* reports that in Howells's op.17 Rhapsodies, he has taken a 'modern view of the instrument':

The modern organ is a marvellous colour-medium, and demands a suitable idiom for making full use of its resources. 'It can give bursts of colour that are not possible on the orchestra,' says Mr. Howells; 'why, then not take advantage of its capacities? It's absurd to think that only contrapuntal writing is suitable for the organ. And even if it were – we can't compete with Bach.'⁷

However, by the end of his career, Howells had taken on a far more neoclassical outlook, expressing a desire to go back to organ works such as the trio sonatas of Bach and demonstrating 'a reaction against his own and other works in which textures have been burdened and overloaded',⁸ and this is clearly seen in works such as the fourth Rhapsody and the large scale Partita. With over sixty years separating the first and last of his organ works, it is not surprising that a unified approach to Howells's organ works is bound to produce unsatisfactory results.

Performance Practice

My central proposal is that it is not Howells's music that is at fault but its performance. For such a central figure in British music, there has been relatively little written about how to perform his music. Relf Clark's article 'The Organ Music of Herbert Howells: some general considerations' was the first to consider sources of evidence for the interpretation of this music.⁹ At the heart of Clark's analysis is the centrality of the Gloucester Cathedral

organ in Howells's creative mind when writing organ music – 'Neil Howells, a nephew of the composer, reported that Herbert Howells told him that whenever he composed for the organ, he was thinking of "the old organ at Gloucester"'.¹⁰ From this starting point, Clark considers the Gloucester instrument and others which Howells knew (such as Salisbury), alongside other sources of information such as the organ primers of the day by Buck and Alcock. He uses this information to outline the manner in which a crescendo would be obtained, but he also highlights problematic moments, such as those preceding the climax of Psalm Prelude set 1 no. 1 when 'Howells asks for a *crescendo*, even though both hands and both feet are engaged: Sidney Campbell reported that when tackled about this, Howells had no recollection of what had been going through his mind at the time'.¹¹ This is typical of Howells's attitude to his works; although he often made extensive revisions to scores, after they were published he rarely had anything to say about how they might be performed and on several occasions did not even recognise his own works. He was notoriously sensitive to criticism and while working with John Birch on the latest of his organ works he took Birch's questions about his intentions for specific passages as cues that he ought to rewrite problematic moments, when Birch meant nothing of the sort. In addition to this, Howells was also prone to romanticising his recollections in later life and many of his stories would be purposefully inaccurate, so it may be that even though he did make comments about the Gloucester organ, he may not have meant it at the time of a particular composition. It should also be noted that he had two very distinctive characters: the highly refined, dapper and well spoken outward one and the extremely passionate, restless and chronically self-doubting inner one, which few ever saw; thus you would be unlikely to get a honest answer about something so personal as to what a piece was really about. Howells did, however, remark that his favourite three instruments were 'the old Gloucester organ, Durham and St Mary Redcliffe',¹² having spent extensive periods in Bristol as a child whilst his father was there on work, and having visited Durham as an external examiner to the university throughout the 1940s.

Clark's article considers some of the influences on Howells's music, making illuminating references to Elgar and Vaughan Williams in particular. Howells made systematic study of the Elgar Violin Concerto in preparation for writing his B minor Violin Sonata and many Elgarian traits made it into the first set of Psalm Preludes in particular, although whether particular stylistic traits in Howells's music were inspired by Elgar's or Parry's string writing is hard to tell. The weeping appoggiaturas which characterise the opening of the first Psalm Prelude are certainly a more defining element of Parry's melodic gift. In reference to Howells's knowledge of early music though, Clark claims 'there does not appear to be any evidence (unless one

regards the music itself as evidence) that Howells made a detailed systematic study of early keyboard music'.¹³ Bearing in mind how closely Howells mirrors (both in form and style) sixteenth and early seventeenth century models in *Lambert's Clavichord* (1926/27) it seems inconceivable that he did not. Further evidence is provided in a radio broadcast in 1962 when he recalled:

About forty years ago the great Hungarian composer, Bartók, invited me to tea and talk in London. He played exciting percussive pieces of his own. It was thrilling: a tornado of sound. He invited me to play to *him* – anything I wished. This is the sort of thing I chose:

(Music illustration) *His Rest* (Farnaby)

I added a *Pavane* by William Byrd, and *The Carman's Whistle* and *Tower Hill*.¹⁴

Of all the influences on Howells in the early twenties (especially Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky and Ravel), it is perhaps quite a shock that he would have picked these Tudor movements at such an important moment. The recollection came as part of a radio programme on the then recently composed *Howells's Clavichord*, a work which he saw as belonging 'equally to the sixteenth and twentieth centuries'.¹⁵ This predilection for Tudor music became a dominating force in Howells's music, from the direct pastiches of *Lambert's Clavichord*, to the highly decorated contrapuntal textures of the *Stabat Mater*; the music of Byrd and his ilk affected how Howells thought. In this vein, we should consider how interchangeable early music works were. Just as many Byrd works were performed in keyboard, consort and choral forms, so some Howells works could be regarded as not specifically for one particular medium. Indeed Howells considered scoring some of *Lambert's Clavichord* and making a organ concerto out of some movements, and Palmer wondered if the movements of *Howells's Clavichord* were in fact 'keyboard studies for an orchestral work'.¹⁶ This has an important effect on how we conceptualise the organ works, particularly the *Six Pieces*. It may be that we should perform its Sarabands and *Master Tallis's Testament* as though they belong 'equally to the sixteenth and twentieth centuries'. Certainly the dance-element is often lost in over-registered and weighty performances that lack rhythmic finesse. John Birch questioned whether *Master Tallis's Testament* would work anywhere if played at the marked 'quaver = 60' which he regarded as too slow for the dance to come across. It may be that Howells would have been better off replacing the initial *tenuto* marks on the second and third g's with accents. Certainly recordings in seemingly unlike places, such as Gavin Robert's on the Rieger organ in St Marylebone Parish Church (2008), demonstrate how many of the details

of Howells's music come across more effectively when not played on large romantic instruments in large acoustics.

This question of how we conceptualise Howells's organ works has other elements too. Take, for example, Robin Wells's introduction to the *Intrata* (1941) in the *Musical Times*:

The *Intrata* is a large-scale piece of about eight minutes' duration; Howells must have had the lofty spaces of Gloucester or Salisbury cathedrals in mind when he wrote this tribute to his mentor, for here one needs to be able to savour the thrill of the full organ reverberating around such a building, contrasting with the soft strings and celestes melting into the dark shadows of the stonework.¹⁷

Wells' comments echo the default aesthetic view of Howells by many organists, but other than the fact that this piece was written in tribute to Sir Walter Alcock (Organist & Master of the Choristers at Salisbury from 1916 until 1947), we have little evidence that this was the ideal sound for the work and the complex harmonies of the climax at the centre of the work make performing the work in a large building very difficult: again so much rhythmic and textural detail is lost. Recent reviews of Howells recordings in smaller acoustics, or very closely recorded, validate this: 'How good it is to hear the St Paul's Service not swallowed up by the dome of that cathedral' writes Peter Quantrill for *The Gramophone*.¹⁸ Howells's own views are highlighted in report that he wrote on BBC radio broadcasts in 1950:

One of the priceless possible gifts the scientific control of transmission might make to English (or other) Church music would be the ridding it of those very echo defects with which our Cathedral – and Church – acoustics have murdered it through the centuries. In its proper home (the Church) much of the logic of contrapuntal choral-writing has been obscured.¹⁹

There was extreme vagueness in the Organ element in these performances, despite even Mr Wills' skill. It sounded too distant, and was (in effect) too nearly a poor relation at the feast.²⁰

Parson's diction was of great clarity. But the Organ accompaniment (even in the hands of unrivalled George Thalben-Ball) was – anywhere outside the place of performance – too 'remote', fitful, and divorced from the voice, especially in the quieter sections. (Could a revised balancing have set this to rights?) The voice was a giant, the organ a pigmy.²¹

Howells also addresses questions of registration (referring to Thalben-Ball 'at the organ'):

No man in this country comes nearer to making a success of the intractable, unconfined, and scattered sound-material called 'organ-tone'. In certain types of flamboyant music even his great skill is unavailing; and that is a measure of the enormity of the task facing all 'straight' players of the organ.²²

[The success of one recital was down to] the marked skill of Mr. Goldsbrough in avoiding 'overloading' registration, and his willingness to exploit individual stops, giving (as it were) two or three simultaneous distinct but simple line of tone-colour.²³

These comments seem to contradict the view (found in passages such as the one quoted above from Robin Wells) that Howells's organ music is all about colour, and that an overall wash of sound is more important than clarity of detail. Harvey Grace's review of the second set of Psalm Preludes in the *Musical Times* provides further evidence of Howells's priorities (which I have highlighted in bold):

The dissonances are bolder, the tonality frequently has a touch of indefiniteness that is both suggestive and attractive, the polyphony is sometimes of chords rather than of single parts, and the melodic line is perhaps less immediately ingratiating than in the earlier set. But there is no falling-off in invention, in the building of climaxes, **in the sense of colour (musical colour, not that of the organ-builder) ... The registration in all three Preludes is simple ...**

Clearly all that is needed is 8-ft. tone, and preferably one stop instead of several: the player's concern is to choose a stop that will ensure clearness for the left hand without making the right hand over-prominent.

This subject is chosen for quotation because its development, chiefly by harmonic and rhythmic changes, produces a typical Howells climax – long and gradual, and, until its summit, produced by a crescendo of emotional intensity rather than of power. Failure to realize this distinction may lead players to discount the climax by adding stops too soon. For instance, one is tempted to bring on some stops at this point:

Musical Example

But the wider layout and **the touch of urgency provided by the canon are in themselves sufficient to produce an impression of growing power.**²⁴

Grace goes into further detail about when changes of registrations would be appropriate, noting:

A point in regard to registration: at the end of the first page occurs a passage, marked to be played with both hands on the Swell, where the

right-hand parts run into those for left hand with awkward results from the playing point of view. At first sight the direction appears to be a misprint: surely the hands should be on different manuals? I wrote and asked the composer. Here is his reply, for the guidance of players on this and another point: 'The mark is correct; the right hand joins the left on the Swell. **My wish there is to have unity of texture and colour above all. The ideal of the passage would be the balanced tone of a string quartet.**'

He says later: 'The thing I hope that players will most resist is fussy and oft-changing registration. It would injure continuity, especially in Nos. 2 and 3. I feel that flexibility of movement matters far more than variety of colour.' I hope Howells won't mind my quoting his letter: **it explains his sparing use of registration, and incidentally is a useful reminder of a principle in organ-playing that is too often forgotten by players who have at their disposal an array of pistons.**²⁵

It should be noted that the principles highlighted stand in direct opposition to those heard in the majority of modern recordings of Howells's organ (and organ accompanied) works and especially those on large instruments, aided by devices such as sequencers and steppers.

I mentioned earlier John Birch's comments about the metronome marking on *Master Tallis's Testament* being too slow. The reverse is also true; for example, Psalm Prelude set 2 no. 3 gets up to crochet = 138 towards the end and seems far too hurried at that speed, even in the driest acoustic. To give a better sense of appropriate tempos and use of rubato within Howells output it is helpful to refer to recordings. Recordings by organists such as Harold Darke, John Birch and David Willcocks demonstrate a significantly consistent approach to Howells's organ music.²⁶ In it, Darke achieves a remarkable sense of the overall architecture of the piece by using only very simple registration changes, with a striking sense of forward momentum through his choice of tempo and careful moderation of rubato. David Willcock's 1967 recording of Howells's music for Argo from King's College Cambridge included the first Psalm Prelude, and again we hear a performance with considerable rhythmic momentum (no sense of the pre-ensong improvisation here) and the use of primary-coloured registration. Both recordings would be considered fast by modern standards, but given the close relationship both players had with the composer, can be considered authoritative.

John Birch was on the staff of the RCM for thirty-eight years from 1959 and it was he who premièred the large scale Partita for organ in 1971. Howells had become acquainted with the young Edward Heath in his Oxford days (then organ scholar of Balliol) and promised that if Heath was ever to

become Prime Minister, Howells would write a piece for him. Within days of taking office Health wrote to Howells to ask where his piece was! There was some discussion of the piece amongst the RCM staff and this led John Birch to inquire 'when the piece was going to have its first outing'. Howells answered that there were no arrangements in place. Birch then asked if he could include it in a forthcoming recital at the Royal Festival Hall.

From its angular lines and often thin contrapuntal textures, you would be forgiven for thinking that Howells had the RFH organ in mind from the start. It certainly fitted in well alongside the other works in the programme, all of which were by Bach (Allabreve, Pastorale, Fantasia in C minor and several chorale preludes), following the RFH rules which stipulated that each 55-minute recital had to contain at least twenty minutes of Bach. Once again Howells produced a piece that worked well on a very specific instrument and indeed the first performance (which was preserved by the BBC and is now in the British Library Sound Archive) was a great success. Howells himself though, despite having tremendous respect for Birch's playing, complained that his Partita had been premiered on the 'worst organ in the land'. Indeed Howells had become nervous about the first performance earlier and had asked Birch to help him adjust the score as he began to have doubts about 'notes, textures and an overall style that was, possibly, too modern'. The copy which Howells had given Birch was extremely faint, so Birch had had to go over it in pen to make it readable. Having learnt the work through this process, Birch resisted any changes to what he regarded as a very fine work. Few of today's recordings come anywhere near the energy, drive and excitement of this first performance and this is partly due to the fact all of the presently available recordings are on large romantic instruments that would suit the early works (especially the Rhapsodies) but not the neoclassical ones such as this Partita. Although a rather different work, it may be that the Sonata (1932/33) is also more successful on a neoclassical instrument in a clear acoustic. Certainly, its musical material, with its reliance on small rhythmic cells and a multitude of accents, demands a very sensitive action and crystal clear acoustic.

For Birch, the later organ works captured Howells the man perfectly: 'he was, in a word, restless. Music and man were tense, always moving forward, with such attention to detail and a successful performance has to be sympathetic to this. Detailed music demands a simple registration scheme and Herbert's music is hard enough to play without piling on further layers of detail – that's just overindulgent'.²³ As an editor for Novello at the time, it was Birch who chose the now famous cover to the 'Modern Organ Music' which reproduced part of the final bars of the Paean. He also secured the publication (through Novello) of the Fourth Rhapsody (dedicated to Birch) when the American firm of H. W. Gray went bankrupt, a work which shared

many traits with the Partita and the *Flourish for a Bidding*.

Howells as a teacher and friend was often a highly complex and contradictory character. As Birch highlights in the case of the Partita, Howells was consumed by doubts and often lacked confidence in his works and while he was continually revising and rethinking his works and musical techniques, it was often not necessary. 'Howells organ works certainly make very high demands of players, especially in terms of understanding',²⁸ but these are difficulties of performance, not of composition or idiom.

In this context it is worth briefly mentioning Howells's working methods in other genres. While working on his Cello Concerto I noticed that Howells's orchestral short scores are very similar in style (and particularly texture) to the organ works. For a direct example you only have to listen to the climax of the *Elegy for Viola and String Orchestra* (in which Howells quotes the climax of the first Psalm Prelude) to realise how well his organ writing transfers to become an orchestral string texture – a quotation which becomes all the more poignant when you consider that Howells wrote the Elegy in memory of his friend Francis Warren (a fellow RCM student) who was killed in the Great War, and that the Psalm Prelude in question is a commentary on Psalm 34, verse 6 – 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles'.

There are more examples of where a deeper understand of Howells's complete output would help those attempting the organ works. How many organists, for example, consider the first three rhapsodies alongside other works from the period? The rhapsody form had become a preoccupation for Howells and alongside the three for organ from this period we also have the Rhapsody for Baritone, Violin, Cello and Organ (1917), Rhapsody for Piano (1919), Rhapsodic [Clarinet] Quintet (1919) and, finally, the Pastoral Rhapsody for Orchestra (1923). In all of these works Howells sought to give a rhapsodic impression of music which was free from artifice, improvised and 'modern' in the sense that they rejected traditional forms. However, this was only an impression and the musical material is in fact highly organised, utilising a strict economy of material which is under continual development.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted, albeit briefly, some of the difficulties facing those who attempt the organ works of Herbert Howells and it may seem to the reader that we end up with more questions than answers. However, this process is very important if we as organists are going to match the standards which are beginning to emerge in other genres. Just as our understanding and approach to composers such as J.S. Bach comes under constant challenge and renewal, we need to approach the music of Howells and other twentieth

century British composers in a critical manner which seeks to put the music itself before any preconceived theories on organ design and use.

The key to understanding Howells's organ music may come, for many, through his other music; so if you are considering the Sonata – why not study the oboe or clarinet sonatas first? The careful balance of tone in the middle Psalm Preludes – why not listen to the 'In Gloucestershire' String Quartet? The Paean or *Flourish for a Bidding* – why not start with the orchestral coronation work, *King's Herald*?

From recognising the considerable stylistic changes in Howells's output, I am still not convinced that many of the organ works would be successful on the same type of instrument and I am reminded of the late David Sanger's performances of Parry's organ works at Queen's College, Oxford; performances which brought out Parry's marvellous counterpoint and neo-baroque energy in a way that the numerous recordings on large Victorian instruments could never replicate. It may be that two parallel performance traditions emerge in the future, in a similar approach to those for Max Reger's music, and, in this way, overcome the 'dichotomy between style and resource' which John Caldwell lamented. Ultimately, successful performance requires a deep understanding and sympathy for the music and it is perhaps best to finish with words from an organist who had both, Harvey Grace.

My high opinion of these pieces [*Howells's Psalm Preludes, set 2*] results from close acquaintance. I say this because, as was implied above, they may be found less immediately attractive than the earlier set. But a piece of music, like a person, may be the better rather than the worse for needing to be known. I fancy, too, that these later Preludes depend in an unusual degree on the player. No. 3, for instance, may easily sound disjunct unless it is given the right firm handling and rhythmic drive ... In a word, the Preludes are not mere organ music, but works of character and significance that happen to be written for the organ. An occasional reminder of the distinction is useful.²⁹

Notes

I am very grateful to the late Dr John Birch for allowing me to interview him several times, a process which led to the writing of this article.

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awards/2012/choral (accessed 9/1/13).

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 10. *Ibid*, 43.
 11. *Ibid*, 45.
 12. Interview with Dr Birch, 9/8/11
 13. Clark, 52.
 14. Palmer 1992, 407.
 15. *Ibid*, 407.
 16. *Ibid*, 410.
 17. Robin Wells, 'Howells's Unpublished Organ Works', *The Musical Times* 128, No. 1734 (Aug., 1987), 455–459.
 18. <http://www.gramophone.co.uk/reviews/howells-choral-works> (accessed 9/1/2013).
 19. BBC Report, Howells Archive, The Royal College of Music library, 2–3.
 20. *Ibid*, 10.
 21. *Ibid*, 11.
 22. *Ibid*, 18.
 23. *Ibid*, 29.
 24. Harvey Grace, 'New Music', *The Musical Times* 81, No. 1167 (May, 1940), 209.
 25. *Ibid*, 210.
 26. Harold Darke's 1965 recording of the first Rhapsody is freely available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGojD3YfUqw>
 27. Interview with Dr Birch, 9/8/11
 28. *Ibid*.
 29. Grace, 210.