

Sermon in Music

- i) Hymn to the Creator of Light – John Rutter
- ii) Light of the World – Edward Elgar

John Rutter is one of the most popular and prolific composers of sacred music of his generation, writing music that is tuneful and approachable. He is particularly famous for his original Christmas carols and for many other anthems, as well as more extended pieces, such as his settings of the Magnificat and the Requiem – this evening's Sermon in Music begins with one of his less well-known works, Hymn to the Creator of Light.

Written in memory of Herbert Howells and first performed at the dedication of a memorial window to Howells in Gloucester Cathedral in 1992 (the centenary of his birth), it was dedicated to the three cathedral choirs of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester, who gave the first performance during the Three Choirs Festival of that year. The basic text is by Lancelot Andrewes, (Bishop of Winchester and one of those responsible for the King James Bible) but it also incorporates the text of the German hymn 'Schmücke dich, mein' liebe Seele' in the customary English translation ('Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness') by Catherine Winkworth. The traditional hymn melody, by Johann Crüger, is also used in the closing pages, emerging quietly in unison sung by half the choir. Rutter uses antiphonal effects throughout, and there are also challenging harmonies and constantly shifting metres which make this very untypical of the composer's style – it is a powerful tribute to some of Howells's later works. However, the final section, from the first entry of the hymn-tune, settles into a warm E major tonality, leading to a gentle yet serene conclusion.

The second anthem, 'Light of the World' by Elgar continues the theme of light, appropriate for Candlemas. It is an excerpt from an oratorio, 'The Light of Life' also composed for the Three Choirs Festival (the 1896 festival in Elgar's home city of Worcester). This was Elgar's first oratorio, preceding 'The Dream of Gerontius' by four years, and was the longest work he had yet composed. The text is taken from St John's Gospel (the story of the blind beggar whose sight is restored by Christ) with additions by the Rev E Capel-Cure. This chorus is the conclusion of the oratorio and is very typical of the mature Elgar's style despite being a comparatively youthful work.