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## Part II - De Profundis: Deep Personal Grief Precipitates Musical Masterpieces

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# De profundis: deep personal grief precipitates musical masterpieces

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by Karen DeMol

## Part II. *Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine!*

### Herbert Howells composes in response to the sudden death of a young son.

#### *The circumstances*

Two statements appear invariably in writings about the English composer Herbert Howells (1892-1983), in books, articles, and CD liner notes alike: that the death of his son Michael was the profound crisis of his life, and that the *Hymnus Paradisi* he wrote in response is his finest work.

Howells spent the majority of his career at the Royal College of Music; joining the RCM faculty at the age of 28, he continued his teaching of composition there until the age of 80. He wrote in a time when choral music was thriving. England in

the early and mid-twentieth century had a flourishing company of choral composers: from Charles Stanford and Hubert Parry to Benjamin Britten and William Walton, choral writing was cultivated for the services of the Church of England, as it had earlier been cultivated from Praetorius to Bach for the services of the Lutheran Church in Germany. Despite an early mass (1912), most of Howells' early music had been instrumental. But after the composition of the *Hymnus Paradisi*, he increasingly turned to choral music; in the 1940s and 1950s he wrote some fifteen motets and anthems for church use. Like many others, Herbert Howells had written music related to "distant" deaths; although his *Requiem* (1932) was in response to no specific death, his *Take Him, Earth, for Cherishing* (1964) was written in commemoration of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

In the mid-1930s Howells' compositional career had waned. Then a life crisis—the death in 1935 of his nine-year-old son, Michael Kendrick Howells—precipitated a new period of creativity. According to Hugh Ottaway, in 1938 Howells wrote *Hymnus Paradisi* "to overcome three years' grieving."<sup>2</sup> The work was held privately and not performed until 1950.

In August, 1935, the Howells family began their summer vacation. Howells' diary records the excursions of the days, hiking and exploring the lovely Gloucester countryside. But in the entry for August 31, he notes that Michael appeared "lack-lustre" and complained of not feeling well—the first indication of illness. In frightening swiftness, the daily accounts move from the initial "unwellness" to doctors' visits to an ambulance

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ride to a hospital, during which Michael turned blue-black from lack of oxygen, and then death on September 6, after barely a week of illness. The death has been variously attributed to polio, spinal meningitis, or a neurological disorder. Howells' diary records details of the funeral. Later he wrote to Diana Oldridge, "it was something good—anyhow—to find flowers for beloved Mick and your note to us. Bless you for them. But I feel too frozen up to write—at any rate yet—I wish I could comfort D [Dorothy, his wife]—Keep us in mind for a long time."<sup>3</sup>

Howells' diary falls blank for the rest of 1935. In 1936 entries begin again, detailed entries of daily activities in which every common thing reminds him of Michael. The despondent entries continue until after the first anniversary of Michael's death, when he wrote on September 11, 1936, "I think we at last felt less desolate than for the whole of the past year."<sup>4</sup>

It was his daughter, Ursula, who suggested that her inconsolable father commemorate Michael in music. No diary survives from 1938, the year in which Howells composed *Hymnus Paradisi*. Having completed the work in short score by 1938, and "achieved through its composition a personal catharsis in relation to his sorrow,"<sup>5</sup> he put it away as "a private and personal document."<sup>6</sup> The first mention of the work in Howells' diaries appears in 1949, which mentions the playing of the piece for Herbert Sumsion.<sup>7</sup> Sumsion, master of the music at Gloucester Cathedral, approached Howells for a work for the 1950 Three Choirs Festival. Sumsion's practice was not to commission new works, but to ask composers if they had anything they wished to have performed.<sup>8</sup> Burn writes,

Howells played through his 'Revised Requiem' [as he called it] to him; Sumsion realizing that here was a work of immense quality offered to perform it; it was, however, only after Gerald Finzi, Vaughan Williams and Adrian Boult expressed similar views that Howells agreed. He then orchestrated the work and probably composed the orchestra *Preludio* at this time. The title was Sumsion's inspired suggestion. Howells conducted the first performance of *Hymnus Paradisi* on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 1950.<sup>9</sup>

Sumsion later felt "that, were he to be remembered for anything he accomplished at the Three Choirs Festival, he would like the Gloucester first performance of *Hymnus Paradisi* to be top of the list."<sup>10</sup>

The performance having been agreed to, Howells' 1950 diary records work on the performance preparations with short notations of scoring work and rehearsal—and taking note on September 6, 1950, of the 15th anniversary of Michael's death.<sup>11</sup>

Poignantly, the piece he composed in response to the death of his young son is "generally accounted Howells' masterpiece."<sup>12</sup> Before addressing the public response to *Hymnus Paradisi*, however, I wish to describe my own. Before embarking on the research for this article, I was not well-acquainted with Howells' music, only occasionally hearing individual pieces in various contexts. And so I decided to begin my research by listening to all of Howells' music in chronological order, so as to experience *Hymnus Paradisi* in its place in the sequence of his work. My first response was to be astounded at the significant leap in the compositional mastery of this piece and at the significant leap in its comparative impact on me during this listening endeavor. What I heard musically was greater thematic unity, greater complexity of texture, and richer harmony than in earlier pieces. What I experienced emotionally was both a more profound darkness and a more sublime transcendence. I surmised that the crisis of grief had precipitated a sudden and significant increase of Howells' compositional depth and mastery, and a comparison of the scores of *Hymnus Paradisi* with the earlier *Requiem* corroborates the perceptions of my ear. The following analysis documents the transformation from the earlier *Requiem* to the *Hymnus Paradisi*, a transformation precipitated by grief and yielding a masterpiece.

### *The music*

Three years before he composed *Hymnus Paradisi*, Howells composed his *Requiem* (1932, published 1981); the work was conceived for Boris Ord and King's College Choir, Cambridge, but evidently never submitted.<sup>13</sup> In composing *Hymnus Paradisi*, Howells referred to the earlier *Requiem* and originally titled the work the "Revised Requiem." There are strong similarities in the broad outlines

of the two works; for example, neither strictly follows the traditional Latin requiem text, and both include settings of Psalm 23 and 121 and the passage from Revelation 14 used in the Anglican Burial Service. Some musical techniques are held in common as well. And, importantly, thematic seeds for the *Hymnus Paradisi* can be found in the *Requiem*. But the *Hymnus Paradisi* is far richer; in it the rather bland quality of the *Requiem* has been transformed into a profound expression, at once personal and universal, an expression involving a movement from darkness to light—a Christian

loistic, and vocally demanding. Also, while the *Requiem* is unaccompanied (an organ part is provided for rehearsal with a very few performance passages *ad lib.*), the *Hymnus* employs full orchestra with all its rich possibilities for tone color.

The texts of both works are drawn from multiple services. The assemblage may be of Howells' own making, though it has been suggested that he fashioned it after an earlier work, the 1915 *Short Requiem in D Major, in memory of those fallen in the war*, by Walford Davies.<sup>15</sup> The *Requiem aeternam* and *Sanctus* texts are drawn from the tradi-

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movement, even if Howells did not intend it so. The analysis presented here is intended to detail that transformation, focusing on the role of thematic structure and integration, texture, dynamics, and scale. In addition, there is the powerful role of the orchestra, particularly in the prelude and the last movement.<sup>14</sup>

#### Scale, text, and structure

There are differences between the works in scale and structure. One obvious difference is the length: the *Requiem* is about sixteen minutes long, while *Hymnus Paradisi*, at forty-five minutes, is three times that long, duration intensifying the musical and emotional effects. As each work is comprised of six movements, individual movements of the *Hymnus* are thus much longer and broader in conception than in the *Requiem*. For example, though the two "requiem" movements (*Requiem* III and *Hymnus Paradisi* II) use the same text and the same melodic theme, they are different in structure and in scale. The "Requiem (1)" movement of the *Requiem* is about three minutes long and is entirely choral. The corresponding movement in the *Hymnus* is nine minutes long, with orchestra, and inserts soprano solos on the same text. The *Requiem* includes brief solos for all voice parts, which could be sung by choir members; in the *Hymnus Paradisi* the solo roles are significantly more extensive, so-

tional *Missa pro defunctis*. Psalm 23, the *Salvator Mundi*, and the Revelation passage, "I heard a voice from heaven," appear in the service for the Burial of the Dead, as found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Psalm 121, appearing in both works, is often but not always used in the Burial Service. And the text for the last movement of the *Hymnus Paradisi*, "Holy is the True Light," comes from the Salisbury Diurnal, the breviary for the day-time offices in the liturgy unique to Salisbury, England.

Some movements are roughly equivalent. (See Appendix I for complete texts and a chart of equivalent movements.) Movements III and V of the *Requiem*, "Requiem aeternam (1) and (2)," are roughly parallel to movement II, "Requiem aeternam," of *Hymnus Paradisi*. Movement II of the *Requiem* and movement III of *Hymnus Paradisi* are both settings of Psalm 23. Both movement III of the *Requiem* and movement V of the *Hymnus* are settings of the text from Revelation. There is a textual connection—the use of Psalm 121—between the fourth movements of both works, though musically these movements are very far apart.

But there is simply no equivalent in the *Requiem* of the framing movements of *Hymnus Paradisi*, the profoundly dark "Preludio" and the ecstatic "Holy Is the True Light."<sup>16</sup> Other pronounced differences are the greater depth of darkness of the *Hymnus*—written by a man who now intimately knows

grief—and the greater integration of thematic material. In the *Requiem*, two themes—a theme of grief and one of quiet comfort—are presented. Though somewhat related, they do not interact much within the piece. In Istad’s words, “Many of the ideas in *Requiem* rarely venture far from their inception.”<sup>17</sup> In the *Hymnus Paradisi*, these themes permeate the entire work. While the *Requiem* has a modest range of emotion, the *Hymnus* is suffused not only by deep darkness but also by great light, expressed in a texture whose seed is in the *Requiem*. In the *Requiem*, this seed is passing; in the *Hymnus*, it is dominant. Further, range and dynamics in the *Hymnus* are more deliberately plotted and more powerfully used. The *Hymnus* transforms material of the *Requiem*, which does not greatly facilitate listener engagement, into a universal experience of grief and a movement from darkness to light. The differences between the works and transformation of composition technique evident here warrant further discussion.

#### Dominant atmosphere

The first transformation—the greater darkness of the *Hymnus Paradisi*—is evident in the different atmospheres established at the outset of the two works. The *Requiem* begins with a short setting of *Salvator Mundi* that is harmonically relatively simple. There is little “pain” in the harmony, which is largely triadic. There is mild dissonance on the first syllable of “Savior.” Two instances of harmonic “bite” appear as word-painting within a generally consonant movement—on “cross” in m. 12 and “save” in m. 18. The ending of the movement intensifies the peaceful atmosphere, presenting sweet parallel thirds in the sopranos and altos and concluding with a soft major triad. The movement has somewhat the style of a church anthem. And in fact, a note in the score indicates that this movement as well as three others “may be performed separately as anthems or introits.”<sup>18</sup>

In stark contrast, the *Hymnus Paradisi* begins with a brooding orchestral *Preludio*, painfully dissonant. The principal theme, low and of narrow range, is presented by the cellos. Upper strings enter in imitation, but at jarring intervals. Loud bursts of brass and full orchestra disrupt. In this darkness, a second theme appears, which will be

used later in mvt. III for the text, “The Lord Is My Shepherd.” Musically, this quotation fits common prelude practice of stating the work’s principal themes. Emotionally, in this darkness, it grasps at a Psalm of comfort. This second theme is presented first by strings in a questioning mode, then poignantly by the solo oboe, and then again, angrily, by the strings. The movement concludes with the principal theme, again in the cellos and low clarinet, but a half-step lower than at the outset, punctuated by minor chords in the very low brass.

#### Thematic unity and transformation

The second transformation regards the use of similar material to express darkness and light. There is a definite thematic relationship between the two works. The framing and uniting theme of the *Hymnus*, which forms the initial and final phrases of the entire work and which appears throughout, is an exact quotation of the phrase beginning and ending the first “requiem” movement of the *Requiem* with the text, “requiem aeternam.” This somber theme has a narrow range and is stepwise with one interval of a third, suggestive of the passivity and oppressiveness of grief (Exs. 1 and 2).

Ex. 1.

Herbert Howells, *Requiem*, III, “Requiem aeternam 1,” soprano, mm. 1-3 and 33-35<sup>19</sup>



Ex. 2.

Herbert Howells, *Hymnus Paradisi* II, “Requiem aeternam,” soprano, mm. 1-3



Though melodically identical, this theme, when it first appears in the *Hymnus*, is given a richer context: there is a controlled rest at the outset, overlapping the end of the *Preludio*: and in-

stead of a simple metronomic marking, the direction is for a slow and tender presentation—*lento, teneramente*.

In the *Requiem*, similar themes are used in other movements. The opening themes of “Requiem aeternam (1)” (mvt. III) and “The Lord Is My Shepherd” (mvt. II) are related, as is the opening of the fifth movement, “Requiem aeternam (2)”. But each theme is specific to the movement in which it is introduced, not appearing in other movements.

In contrast, the principal theme of the

But there is simply no equivalent in the *Requiem* of the framing movements of *Hymnus Paradisi*, the profoundly dark "Preludio" and the ecstatic "Holy Is the True Light."<sup>16</sup>

*Hymnus* pervades the work, figuring prominently in movements I, II, IV, and VI. As stated, it opens and ends the dark *Preludio*. In the first choral movement, “Requiem Aeternam,” it appears at the beginning and at the end in the choir (mm. 107-113) and twice in the following orchestral coda—once high and loud (mm. 124-126), once low and quiet (mm. 128-130). In the soaring “Sanctus,” (movement IV), it interjects a reminder of the solemn, sad opening: about three-quarters of the way through the movement, theme one appears first in fragments, then as a whole in the viola (mm. 169-173 and 179-184). At the very end of the last movement, after the ecstatic singing of the text, “Holy is the true Light, and passing wonderful...Alleluia!” and the following simple and quiet return of the “requiem” text in the wording now drawn from the Agnus Dei, *Requiem aeternam, requiem dona eis sempiternam*, this central theme returns, first beneath the choir as it descends in pitch and volume from the rapturous heights of music and text (mm. 161-170), and then, utterly alone, by violas in unison as the last statement of the piece (mm. 176-181), transfigured at the end by a major triad, like a Picardy third—grief not forgotten or annulled, but both abiding and muted. The glorious vision of light past, grief remains. (Ex. 3).

Ex. 3.

Herbert Howells, *Hymnus Paradisi* VI, “Holy Is the True Light,” mm. 176-181, orchestral reduction



Of the seventeen prominent appearances of this theme throughout the work, this final appearance is the only one that is tonally conclusive, indicative of

an overall structure for the *Hymnus* which is missing in the *Requiem*. In the early presentations of this theme—in the *Preludio*, the “Requiem aeternam,” and other instances—the theme begins on E, but ends on D, yielding some tonal ambiguity that is not entirely clarified by the underlying harmony. The scale in these instances is minor. This pattern of ending a step lower than the starting pitch appears on other pitch levels in later presentations. In a handful of instances, the theme begins and ends on the same pitch, but that pitch is the third or fifth of the triad; at other times the underlying harmony is in inversion, or is dissonant. Howells has carefully delayed complete resolution of the theme’s tonal ambiguity until the concluding presentation (Ex. 3), in which the theme begins and ends on E-flat, omitting the final D of earlier presentations. The E-flat is the root of the final E-flat major triad, confirming the clear tonal close. The final chord is major, not minor. Above this long final triad, the A-natural in the theme provides a Lydian flavor, a touch of brightness within the quiet, somber ending.

A second important theme in the *Hymnus Paradisi* is organically related to this main theme. The chant-like opening theme of movement III, “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” appears already in the *Preludio* and was also used in Movement II of the *Requiem*; it is similar to the first theme in range and intervallic content, but it has a contrasting shape

(Ex. 4). As the second most important theme in the *Hymnus*, it seems to express, out of the same intervals but in a different shape, a theme of hope—the reverse, as it were, of the main theme’s darkness. It is presented by the soprano soloist at the outset, followed by the tenor soloist and the chorus, by the chorus in unison in the middle (mm. 80-81), and by the tenor soloist at the end (m. 92). The head of this theme is played by the orchestra, like an anchor of peace, under the turbulent choral “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (mm. 27ff). The theme reappears in the soprano and later the choir for the serene “But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life” (mm. 71ff and 80ff).

Ex. 4.  
Herbert Howells, *Hymnus Paradisi*, III, “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” soprano solo, mm. 1-2.



In the final movement, the melody setting “Holy is the True Light” is also similar in range and intervallic content, though more buoyant in rhythm and in shape (Ex. 5). Significantly, none of these related themes is used for the *alleluias* in the last movement.

Ex. 5.  
Herbert Howells, *Hymnus Paradisi*, VI, “Holy Is the True Light,” soprano, mm. 31-32.



### *Pitch height and dynamics*

Important in the transformation of the *Requiem* to the *Hymnus Paradisi* is the emergence of the metaphor of darkness and light, light gradually growing as the dominant effect. The means of darkness have already been discussed. The means of light include pitch height, strong dynamics in tandem with extreme pitch height, and texture—a thickening of texture from four to eight and nine parts, with the orchestral parts often *divisi*.

As the darkness is portrayed by dark orchestral

colors, low orchestral and vocal pitch, and themes of restricted range, so light is portrayed by bright colors, high pitch, and melodies of wide range. Pitch height and dynamics become extreme, sopranos reaching to A, A-flat, and B-flat 5, and dynamics to *fff*. Often the sense of meter is obliterated. With these extreme pitches and with metric moorings loosened, the music lifts into an atmosphere of ecstasy. In addition, unique textures and harmony contribute to the translucence. The texts set in this manner are texts of yearning, light, and glory, the effect a vision of and longing for *lux perpetua*.

Though a glimmer of these techniques for “light” passages appears in the *Requiem*, their employment is prominent and powerful in the *Hymnus*. First of all, the *Requiem* has no overall emphasis of or “plot” for pitch height. In each movement, the sopranos sing F-sharp5 or G5, but only briefly; the rhythmic duration of the high pitches is a dotted quarter note or less. There is no general correlation of these brief peaks with dynamics. One movement, though, does contain a significant passage: in movement V, “Requiem aeternam (2),” at the text “et lux perpetua,” the sopranos sing A5 for the relatively long duration, in this work, of a half note tied to an 8<sup>th</sup> note, *forte* (m. 20). Two measures later, they again reach for A5, now supported by basses singing C-sharp4; the duration is a dotted half note, all voices *fortissimo*. Though brief and not developed elsewhere in the *Requiem*, this passage could be the seed for the powerful and sustained “light” passages in the *Hymnus*.

In the *Hymnus*, such high pitches with sustained durations at strong dynamic levels become a powerful factor in the creation of the moments of light. These passages appear in alternate movements, movements II, IV, and VI, with the most intense instances appearing in the last movement. In movement II, the sopranos gradually achieve higher and longer high peaks, the earlier peaks sung *forte* and the later ones *fortissimo*. The last and longest appearance is further emphasized by a forceful figure following in the brasses.

Of the several moments of high pitch in the fourth movement, the most powerful appears about a third of the way into the movement, when the soprano soloist sustains A5 for eleven beats (mm. 85-88), crescendoing into a G5 held for five and a half

beats, now doubled by the choral sopranos, all at *fff* (mm. 89-90). The effect is that of being transported into a rhapsodic vision of holiness—*sanctus*.

Four times, the sixth and final movement achieves extreme pitch heights sung *fff*, all of them luminous moments. In the most significant one (mm.102-133), in close succession, the sopranos sing B5, the highest pitch in the work, for four beats, G5 for eight beats and again for twelve beats, followed shortly by B-flat5 for five beats. The entire passage is sung at *ff* or *fff*. In all these instances, the basses also are singing high, carrying B-flat3 or C4. The texts carried in this ecstatic culmination of the movement and of the entire work are “alleluia, “rejoice,”

choral voices (SSATBB), plus either the soprano or the baritone soloist. In the last movement of the *Hymnus*, the even denser texture is created by eight and nine choral voices throughout, plus soprano and tenor soloists, all singing together in this final vision of light. In all the “light” passages there is a preponderance of triads in second inversion and seventh chords in second and third inversion—sonorities of rich color but light weight.

#### Union of pitch height, dynamics, and shape in movements II, IV, and VI

All the factors described above are integral to

Though a glimmer of these techniques for “light” passages appears in the *Requiem*, their employment is prominent and powerful in the *Hymnus*.

and “evermore.” As this peak begins to subside into a final set of *alleluias*, the soprano solo sustains A-flat5 for 17 beats, *mf* (mm. 142-144), followed at the end of the movement by G5 carried for almost as long by all sopranos, *piano* (mm.171-174).

#### Texture

The textures of *Hymnus Paradisi* can be related to those of the earlier *Requiem*, but they are again extended and taken to new levels of intensity. In the *Hymnus*, this polychoral, polychordal writing becomes pervasive, appearing in four of the six movements, particularly in the alternate movements I, IV, and VI, and extensive. In the second movement of the *Hymnus*, there is a gradual expansion from a four-part choir to two semi-choirs, an expansion that has precedents in the first and especially the third movements of the *Requiem*. In both works the setting of Psalm 121 begins with a three-part women’s choir, in counterpoint with a solo voice; choral basses enter later. In the *Requiem*, the setting of this Psalm is relatively simple and short, while in the *Hymnus*, it is extensively developed and united with the text of the *Sanctus*. The textures of the last movements also are related, being the densest of both works. The last movement of the *Requiem* begins with SATB voices, one or two of the parts occasionally *divisi*; at the end (m. 33 ff), the texture expands to six

the overall shape of their respective movements, notably shaping movements II, IV, and VI in the movement from darkness to light. Though each movement is unique and worthy of description, a description of one will suffice here.

The seed for the texture and harmony of the second movement, the “Requiem aeternam,” can be found in the parallel movement of the *Requiem*. But the differences are profound. Both begin with largely triadic harmony in four parts using traditional harmonic functions. In both, passing tones and suspensions, some of them chromatic, provide mild dissonance. In both, the voices sing in their lower ranges. The voices gradually draw apart into two semi-choruses, which are harmonically independent of each other; their individual vocabularies of triads, seventh chords, and occasional added-note chords result in a translucent, mystical texture of polychords. The length and shape of this passage is modest in the *Requiem*. But in the *Hymnus*, the passage (mm. 7-46) becomes a great arch of pitch and dynamics. A soprano soloist takes over the text, supported by the higher woodwinds and an arpeggiating harp. The vision of light is then carried to a more intense level by the semi-choruses and soprano soloist together, the text layered between them. The polychordal texture intensifies, solo and choral sopranos reach A5, and dynamics grow to *fortissimo*. After this rhapsody of vision and yearning, the voices diminish in pitch and

volume, presenting the text in homophonic texture, as if being brought back to earth and to grief. The orchestral ending is turbulent and disquieted, low brasses harmonically at odds with each other.

Throughout the *Hymnus*, dark and light are not apart from each other; but the framing movements shift the balance. In the “Preludio” deep darkness prevails, with an interjection of comfort; in the last movement, rhapsodic visions of light prevail, but with a closing reminder of grief.

### ***The reception***

How did others respond?

Of that first performance, Reginald Jacques writes,

I shall never forget its impact upon me at first hearing.... I attended the performance to determine the suitability of the work for inclusion in the Bach Choir's programmes. On all other similar occasions, despite firm resolutions, so often made and so often broken, it has been impossible, even while the music was going on to prevent part of one's mind from busily weighing up the pros and cons of possible rehearsals and performance. Would the choir like to study the work? Should I enjoy conducting it? How long would it take in rehearsal and what other music would best support it in a future programme? No such questions, on this occasion, even occurred to me. From the first solemn announcement of the opening theme to its reappearance at the very end when it rises to catch a gleam of light before fading into silence, Herbert Howells' work took complete possession of me; for days afterwards I could think of little else, and I knew no peace until I had mastered its complexities.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding that same first performance, Sir Ivor Atkins, friend of Elgar, wrote to Howells, “I never had an opportunity of telling you at Gloucester how greatly impressed I was with your *Hymnus Paradisi*, which rang so very true and was so completely satisfying. You have not done so much of this sort of thing and I was amazed that all unbeknownst to us you should have attained to such combined choral and orchestra heights. Our blessing upon such efforts....”<sup>21</sup> *Hymnus Paradisi* was rapturously

received by critics and public and entered the Three Choirs repertoire immediately.<sup>22</sup> The first London performance followed quickly, broadcast directly from the Royal Albert Hall.

Though written to work out the grief of a man who considered himself not very religious,<sup>23</sup> the work has elicited spiritual responses by others. D. Ritson-Smith, Honorary Treasurer of the Royal Philharmonic Society, wrote to Howells on April 19, 1951, “what is ... remarkable is the fact that through my own misfortunes of the past years I have become *very* skeptical of any comfort or appreciation of any divine control or appeasement of my trouble yet I appreciate the intense sincerity of your work.”<sup>24</sup> On the same date, Edmund Rubbra wrote, “Bless you for having the courage not to be ashamed—in these materialist days—of asserting the perennial beauty & depth of spiritual things.”<sup>25</sup> The Lady Olga Montagu wrote on April 30, 1951, “It makes Death seem easier & the Future more sunlit and glorious.”<sup>26</sup> Marion Scott, Howells' friend, wrote on May 6, 1951,

The *Hymnus Paradisi* moved me intensely when I heard it. I think it has everything ... [—] consummate mastery as a musician, and a sure vision of truth and the spiritual world beyond this one [—] that is only attained by the very, very few. (Bach is one of them.) In it you have given to the world something that will be precious to all who can feel music, and something that brings true comfort to all who have experienced sorrow.<sup>27</sup>

In 1978, Elizabeth Veale, an amateur singer in the Bach Choir that performed the work, wrote, “It seems to me to be such a clear expression of faith and although not a particularly religious person I found last night to be an enriching experience, and one for which I thank you.”<sup>28</sup>

Christopher Palmer writes, “Few will doubt that the ‘spirit of Delight’—the urge to compose—came back to Herbert largely as a result of Michael's death... [;] even if Howells' profoundest and most urgent thoughts about Michael and mortality were embodied in *Hymnus*,”<sup>29</sup> other rich compositions were influenced by this bereavement, such as the *Cello Concerto*. Later, Ralph Vaughan Williams was to write *Dorothy Howells* (Oct. 17, 1952), “it

seems to me and many others that Herbert after some years of incubation has suddenly burst forth into a new birth. Could you persuade him to give himself leisure to write more splendid works like the *Hymnus*?<sup>30</sup>

Hugh Ottaway has commented that Howells' music is "more widely respected than performed."<sup>31</sup> Yet this long, challenging, and somber work has enjoyed a substantial number of performances since the initial performance at the Three Choirs Festival in 1950. It was quickly performed again at the Three Choirs Festival, in 1956. According to the publisher, Novello, it has been performed every year since

that involvement in the music. Considering a similar experience with Bach's *Erbarme Dich*, Naomi Cummins writes, "Why does the music bring such involvement? What is it in the music that allows a personal and emotionally charged form of identification?"<sup>34</sup> Drawing on hermeneutical and semiotic theories, she posits that significance is not simply *represented* or *depicted* or even *evoked*, but rather *embodied* in the music; the listener, through listening, is drawn into that embodiment, and can be changed through this experience. Surely this is the experience of many who listen to *Song of Triumph* and *Hymnus Paradisi*.

What can be added to the list of these "radiances" is a new outpouring of creativity, as demonstrated by the experience of Howells and Grotenhuis.

2001 by various choirs in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and again at the Three Choirs Festival in 2007.<sup>32</sup> In 1986 it was performed at the InterVarsity Choral Festival in Australia, a festival dedicated to the performance of large-scale choral works, and has been performed frequently in Canada and the USA. Currently several recordings are in print.

*Hymnus Paradisi* is a transformation, not only of a previous work but also of the Howells' compositional mastery. It is also a major choral work of profound depth and beauty, in which "a visionary splendor and a sense of loss are found to be inseparable,"<sup>33</sup> and which is experienced by many as deeply spiritual.

"Experiencing as deeply spiritual" can be considered an entirely subjective experience. But is something more here? We have discovered that the works of Dale Grotenhuis and Herbert Howells show such sudden and remarkable growth precipitated by grief, and achieve such new heights and depths of compositional mastery, that listeners can hear the difference, and that the changes can be documented. Is there not anything more to be said about how this music, personally conceived, draws listeners into itself as a profound and universal experience, such that an intentionally-objective listener such as Reginald Jacques abandons his detachment? Greater competence does not alone account for

#### **Dona nobis pacem**<sup>35</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff has written, "Suffering is the shout of "no" by one's whole existence to that over which one suffers—the shout of 'No' by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain, to death, to injustice, to depression, to hunger, to humiliation, to bondage, to abandonment. And sometimes, when the cry is intense, there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears: a glow of courage, of love, of insight, of selflessness, of faith. In that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be."<sup>36</sup>

What can be added to the list of these "radiances" is a new outpouring of creativity, as demonstrated by the experience of Howells and Grotenhuis. No one would desire the intense grief of losing a child, and no one would wish such suffering on another. Surely grief colored Grotenhuis's and Howells' lives all the subsequent days of their lives. Yet out of their loss came the potential for creative transformation for the griever, and blessing for others.

It is a paradox of pain—and of grace—that Grotenhuis's and Howells' most wrenching loss and pain led to new heights of compositional achievement, resulting in works that are their masterpieces and that serve as rich gifts to us. We hear the stories of their losses with compassion; we receive their works with gratitude.

## Appendix 1

### Movements of Herbert Howells' *Requiem* and *Hymnus Paradisi*

#### Requiem

##### **I. Salvator mundi**

Savior of the world,  
Who by thy Cross and thy precious Blood  
Have redeemed us,  
Save us and help us we humbly beseech thee,  
O Lord

*(from the Burial Service,  
1928 Book of Common Prayer)*

##### **II. Psalm 23**

The Lord is my shepherd,  
Therefore can I lack nothing.  
He shall feed me in a green pasture,  
and lead me forth beside the  
waters of comfort.  
He shall convert my soul,  
and bring me forth beside in the paths of  
righteousness, for his Name's sake.  
Yea, though I walk in the valley of the  
shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil; thy rod and thy staff  
comfort me.  
Thou shalt prepare a table before me  
against them that trouble me;  
thou hast anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup shall be full.  
But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

##### **III. Requiem aeternam (1)**

Requiem aeternam dona eis.  
Domine, et lux perpetual luceat eis. ,  
*(Rest eternal grant unto them,  
O Lord, and may light perpetual shine upon them)*  
*(from the Missa pro Defunctis)*

#### Hymnus Paradisi

##### **I. Preludio**

##### **II. Requiem aeternam**

Requiem aeternam, dona eis  
et lux perpetual luceat eis.  
*(Grant them eternal rest,  
and may perpetual light shine on them.)*

*(from the Missa pro defunctis)*

##### **III. Psalm 23**

*Same text as in Requiem*

#### IV. Psalm 121

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,  
from whence cometh my help.  
My help cometh even from the Lord,  
who hath made heaven and earth.  
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved  
and he that keepeth thee will not sleep.  
Behold, he that keepeth Israel  
shall neither slumber now sleep.  
The Lord himself is thy keeper;  
He is thy defence upon thy right hand  
So that the sun shall not harm thee by day,  
neither the moon by night.  
The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil,  
yea, it is even he that shall keep thy soul.  
The Lord shall preserve thy going out  
and thy coming in,  
From this time forth and for evermore.  
I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills.,  
from whence cometh my help.

#### V. Requiem aeternam (2)

*(Text same as for movement III)*

#### VI. I heard a voice from heaven

I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me,  
Write, from henceforth,  
blessed are the dead which die in the Lord,  
Ev'n so saith the spirit;  
blessed are the dead which die in the Lord,  
for they rest from their labours.

*(Revelation chapter 14, verse 13, from  
the Burial Service)*

#### IV. Sanctus (Psalm 121)

Psalm 121 same text as in Requiem

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus

Dominus, Deus Sabaoth

Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua

*(Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth,  
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.)*

#### V. I heard a voice from heaven

*Same text as in Requiem)*

#### VI. Holy is the true light

Holy is the true light,  
and passing wonderful.  
Lending radiance to them that  
endured in the heat of the conflict.  
From Christ they inherit a home  
of unfailing Splendor  
Wherein they rejoice with gladness  
evermore.

Alleluia

*(from the Salisbury Diurnal,  
translated GH Palmer)*

Requiem aeternam,  
Requiem dona eis sempiternam.

*(Rest eternal, grant them eternal rest.)*

*(from the Missa pro Defunctis)*

## Endnotes

1. "Grant them eternal light, Lord." From the text of the Requiem mass.
2. Hugh Ottaway, "Herbert Howells," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, Vol. 8 (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1980), 746.
3. Christopher Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Centenary Celebration* (London: Thames Publishing, 1992), 92-94. Andrews' entry for this book indicates that Palmer had access to Howells' diaries, now housed in the library of the Royal College of Music.
4. Palmer, 96.
5. Andrew Burn, CD liner notes for *Hymnus Paradisi* (Naxos 8.57-352).
6. Herbert Howells, "Howells on Howells," in Christopher Palmer: *Herbert Howells; A Centenary Celebration*, 414.
7. Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Centenary Celebration*, 105.
8. Palmer, 106.
9. Burn, CD liner notes for *Hymnus Paradisi*.
10. Palmer, 107.
11. Howells also composed a hymn tune which he named "Michael," an endeavor independent of the *Hymnus Paradisi*. Among other sources, it appears with the text, "All My Hope on God is Founded" in the hymnal *Rejoice in the Lord*, ed. Erik Routley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985).
12. Ottaway, "Herbert Howells," 746.
13. Robert Michael Istad: *Herbert Howells' Requiem and Hymnus Paradisi: Works of Interconnected Genesis and Development*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2006), 2.
14. It is not possible to ascertain changes between the score of the *Revised Requiem* of 1938, the score written and sequestered, and the score of the *Hymnus Paradisi* of 1950, the score orchestrated and published. The sketches named in the annotated catalogue of extant Howells documents provided by Paul Andrews are largely undated. Andrews writes, "All the ms material that is in any way complete seems to date from 1950, other mss consisting of undated sketches; there are no scores of complete movements surviving from the period of the work's first gestation and it impossible or, at best, unwise to try to ascertain how much composition or re-composition took place in 1950." (Andrews, *op. cit.*, 326). Of necessity, then, the analysis here is based on the published score of 1950.
15. Andrews, *op. cit.*, 282. Also, Brent Miller, "The Sacred Choral Music of Herbert Howells" (Master's paper, Ball State University, May, 1994).
16. The *Preludio* and the orchestration were provided twelve years after the original composition. No doubt there were emotional and compositional changes for Howells during those years; but for lack of documentation (see footnote 25), this study cannot address them.
17. Istad, *Requiem and Hymnus Paradisi: Works of Interconnected Genesis and Development*, 88.
18. Herbert Howells, *Requiem* (score). (London: Novello and Company Limited, 1981).
19. Permission from Novello to include examples from *Requiem* and *Hymnus Paradisi* is pending.
20. Reginald Jacques, "Howells' 'Hymnus Paradisi.'" *Music and Letters* XXXIII No 3 (July, 1952), 193.
21. Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Centenary Celebration*, 29.
22. Palmer, 109.
23. Alan Ridout, *A Composer's Life*. (London: Thames Publishing, 1995); referenced Andrews, 912.
24. Palmer, *Herbert Howells: A Centenary Celebration*, 112.
25. Palmer, 112.
26. Palmer, 113.
27. Palmer, 114.
28. Palmer, 116.
29. Palmer, 117.
30. Palmer, 117.
31. Ottaway, "Herbert Howells," 746.
32. Information provided by Victoria Small, Promotion Administrator, Chester Music/Novello & Co., who could provide records only since 2001.
33. Ottaway, "Herbert Howells," 746.
34. Naomi Cummins, "The Subjectivity of 'Erbarme Dich,'" *Music Analysis* XVI No. 1 (1997), 5.
35. "Grant us peace." From the text of the Requiem mass.
36. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 96.