



**Cantus in Choro**  
A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

Robert Saxton talks  
to *Malcolm Bruno* about  
the influences on his  
music and explains why  
Schoenberg is the  
'quintessential Jew'

# A musical rabbi

**Y**ou'll be surprised to know that the musical background in my family comes from my father's mother – a Yorkshire lass, and the only gentile we know of – who, extraordinarily, converted to Judaism to marry my grandfather just off the boat in 1920, though it was her husband, an excellent singer, who introduced me to music in the first place.' Robert Saxton gestures enthusiastically as I relax into a sofa of his graciously appointed apartment at Worcester College, Oxford, where he has succeeded Robert Sherlaw Johnson as Tutorial Fellow in music. As he tells the story of his family, I realise how multinational Britain has been, even stretching back throughout the last century. 'My other grandparents came from Eastern Europe – Lithuania, Russia and Krakow. Their occupations followed the normal course of Jewish immigrants: my great uncle was a theatre impresario (ran the Windmill Theatre during the Forties) while others were academics like the one we've recently discovered who had worked closely with Einstein during the late Forties.'

From the age of seven Saxton found himself in Hebrew school in a liberal synagogue in north London, but he was not to remain indefinitely in this world familiar to so many Jewish schoolboys. 'My parents felt that, though they wanted me to know my heritage, I should be part as well of a society that had saved so many of their family. So they sent me to Bryanston in Dorset. It boasted a mix of privileged boys – sons of rich Arabs, B-grade movie directors, along with musical talent like Mark Elder and John Eliot Gardiner who had preceded me. Remarkably for the time, there was no hierarchical overkill, but a spirit of mutual interest, typified perhaps best by the chaplain, Paddie McGee. A liberal Anglican, he had instituted a virtual course in comparative religion, to replace the more familiar, doctrinaire scripture lessons, long before it would have been politically expedient to do so. I found them totally stimulating, to the extent that I came to dread the weekly visits of a peripatetic rabbi, for whom my newly found curiosity in Jesus was very worrying indeed.'

During these school days in chapel Saxton heard many familiar Protestant hymns and English church music. 'I was also struck by the King James Bible and, knowing the Old Testament through the tones of the Orthodox cantor, it was the majesty of its Elizabethan delivery that I found amazing. And as I now enjoy making a contribution of my own to the repertory of contemporary Anglican music – along with colleagues like Jonathan Harvey and James MacMillan – I look back happily on those early days of entering this amazing world of sacred music, albeit as a novice with an "honorary" membership.



'English polyphony has always continued to fascinate me, because I'm interested in the total fabric of music – horizontal and vertical. Hindemith used to talk about pre-imitative counterpoint, and it's just that linear discipline that pre-baroque polyphony offers the composer. The level of complexity is adjustable, like a slide-rule, whether one is writing for amateur or professional singers, a cappella, with instruments, or instruments alone. In my recent *Alternative Canticles* (for Stephen Darlington at Christ Church, Oxford) I've tried to create a polyphonic web, less chromatic than my earlier style, but a genuine polyphony with detailed vertical control – though not to excess given the forces. In the process of crafting such music, I feel like one of my ancestors of an eastern ghetto, tailoring a suit: made to the occasion, with the quality of craftsmanship – of stitching and hemming – remaining constant no matter how plain or decorated the final suit's design.'

There is so much to explore in Saxton's furtive mind and music, spanning now nearly half a century. I find myself having to impose arbitrary limits, in the course of an afternoon's conversation, to explore just his choral and sacred music. But no matter how much or little of his music, his inclination is divided – in the words of Faust, *two souls dwell within his breast* – between a natural affinity to the composers of his and earlier generations of the British Isles, and a rudimentary connectedness to the tradition of the Austro-Germanic world and to his Eastern European origins.

'I learnt violin and piano from a young age, and by the time I entered school I was writing my own music. I wanted help and advice, so fearlessly I

**Robert Saxton's works are available from:**

Chester Music & Novello & Co  
8-9 Frith Street  
London W1D 3JB  
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New York, NY 10010  
+1 212 254-2100  
schirmer@schirmer.com

above Elisabeth Lutyens,  
study with whom Saxton found  
'immensely satisfying'

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approached the best-known British composer, Benjamin Britten. Incredibly he not only answered the letter of a nine-year-old school boy but willingly and supportively entered into a correspondence that went on for years, until I was about 16. Clearly, he identified with earnest young composers of talent, realising that they needed a gentle, affirmative, grandfatherly hand as they ventured forth toward musical self expression.

When Saxton was 16, Britten insisted that he should have first-class tuition. It was through his violin teacher, the pianist Susan Bradshaw and eventually Richard Rodney Bennett that he would study with Elisabeth Lutyens for four years, two of which coincided with his tenure at Cambridge.

BBC Singers. A setting of psalm texts in Latin, *I will awake the dawn*, is a virtual symphony for voices in four continuous contrasting movements, complete with a Hallelujah chorus finale! In 1992 a commission from the City of London Festival gave him a chance to set John Donne's 'At the round earth's imagin'd corners' for John Scott at St Paul's Cathedral. And as a performance at St Paul's would suggest, this a cappella work is on a grand polyphonic scale of nine parts, while the simpler psalm setting *O Sing unto the Lord* for choir and organ dates from 1994.

His Jewish roots have appeared in two non-ecclesiastical works from the later Nineties: the gently moving *Prayer before sleep* for soprano, cello

## **'of course it all boils down to Stravinsky and Schoenberg. As great a landscape as Stravinsky's music encompasses, Schoenberg is for me like Mount Sinai'**

'I had heard her music on Radio 3 and admired it. She was to give me exactly the discipline that I needed. For although I had discovered Berg and Schoenberg by the time I was a teenager, and was at once attracted by the richness of this new and difficult music, it was she who insisted that if I wanted to write serial music I had to do it properly: I couldn't just cobble together a pastiche by ear. Study with her was immensely satisfying. After Cambridge, where I had studied with Robin Holloway, I went on to Oxford, where my postgraduate supervisor was Robert Sherlaw Johnson. Later on there was the chance for a fellowship at Princeton. This was during the mid-Eighties, just beyond the peak of serialist composition in America, and it was a great experience to find myself on a campus with the friendly companionship of one of the great figures of the post-war movement, Milton Babbitt.'

Following his musical development, Saxton's choral works have accompanied him throughout his career and are approachable and rewarding for the dedicated musician. *A Child of Light* (1984) for trebles and organ is a choral rendering of an instrumental virtuoso work *The Circles of Light* of the same year, written for the London Sinfonietta. It is an unusual Christmas carol, almost Ivesian in disposition, in which the composer's own text portrays the shepherds becoming the wise men. Three years later the darkness-to-light theme continued in a non-liturgical choral piece for the

and piano, in his own words again and closing with a Hebrew text, written in memory of the much loved Rabbi Hugo Gryn; and the *Invocation, dance and meditation* on the text of a Russian rabbinical prayer, for viola and piano. And in the past few years, along with his *Alternative Canticles*, are works for Edward Wickham's Clerks' Group, again a cappella. A first work (in Hebrew), the *Dialogue of God and Zion*, is based on a sixth-century text in which Zion is portrayed as a deserted woman.

His writing for the group has expanded into a BBC Proms commission of *Five Motets*, given its first performance in September this year, in which his music is designed to be interspersed with early polyphony. It is a fascinating cycle tracing the faith-story of a nomadic people, following Abram from Ur to Haran to Canaan, meeting Miriam dancing on the shore of the Red Sea, and on to Jacob who, having betrayed his brother Esau, escapes in his grandfather's steps back to Haran, confronted by angels en route. Latin and English are mixed, and again additional text is supplied by Saxton, as a form of *midrash* (commentary) on the biblical story. The sense of journey and return is implied musically in its harmonic structure (moving from E to A; from A to E flat; to B flat; to A flat; to E – the middle section at a tritone from the opening and closing, expressing the most distant destination on his journey).

In many ways these *Motets* may be closest to his largest-scale conception and the culmination of

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THE RED HOUSE, ALDEBURGH, SUFFOLK

Dear Robert,

I am sorry not to have answered your letters & MISS began B/V I have been away in Venice for sometimes, & only just found them all on my return.

If it worries you too much to work away from the piano, I should go back to it. Only try & think about kind of things you want to write before you sit down at it. And remember that <sup>there</sup> will always be 10 fingers playing <sup>the music</sup> at

that volume, above & voice with differently from piano. But that I am sure you realise. Try & think of the melody, the rhythm, the accompaniment, the flow of it all (I don't instrument) as far as possible all together! Certainly all always just the same kind (I am sure that is Schubert's Trout he thought of the accompaniment first). For writing, play & sing as much of what you write as you can, & find out how <sup>you</sup> feel like the bits that don't work. (I should like to be a Tenor in the last 7 bars of no. 2 Cantata - they did they get left out? - or at the end of no. 3 - please! that's best!) And love  
 Arnold Schoenberg



'Like Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* this will be a sacred work, though not liturgical. It will be serious and at times absurd and hilarious, it will not be smugly religious.' Though at the same time one can tell from Saxton's own passion for the project that it will be an amazing journey of faith. And the mention of Schoenberg is not a casual one in passing, as I ask this composer the musical source of his inspiration: 'Bartók, Berg, Bach, late Haydn, Mozart – and more recently Beethoven and Brahms.' But as I push him on the 20th century, he replies without hesitation 'of course it all boils down to Stravinsky and Schoenberg. As great a landscape as Stravinsky's music encompasses, Schoenberg is for me like Mount Sinai.'

all his sacred music, which is yet to appear in an opera *The Wandering Jew*. Revolving around a single narrative, we journey through the seven days of Creation, plus one to return: beginning in a concentration camp, but with a quick flashback to Jerusalem in 70 CE and the destruction of the Jewish temple; moving on to a lonely desert scene full of associations with Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist and Jesus; then on to the Iberian peninsula before the expulsion of the Jews. Further scenes, moving northward, take us to Goethe's *Faust*, to the sacrifice of Wotan, to a *commedia del'arte* in Venice, in which – in a play within a play – our wandering hero finds himself playing himself. A final scene, in the opening concentration camp, unites the protagonist, in the guise of a beggar, with Jesus. It's a fantastically rich conception uniting the whole of western history in this sole 'everyman' who takes us from the ancient world through medieval and renaissance Europe to our own lifetime.

And I reflect that when I was a young composer myself some 25 years ago in New York, Schoenberg – who had penetrated the whole of contemporary music in America – was an obsession in all musical circles, and an obsession for the *New York Times* reviewers. But these days, in that same city and especially in London, he seems all but eclipsed by Stravinsky. So I press Saxton for further explanation. 'Schoenberg for me is the quintessential Jew – always the outsider, always questioning everything. Look at his career from *Gurre-Lieder* to *Moses and Aaron* to *A Survivor from Warsaw*. It's not jolly music, it won't necessarily lull you to sleep, but it will change you. It's full of white-hot inspiration. The tireless questions that consume him are a rabbinical duty: he's a musical rabbi – as Bernstein said of himself, and as I now see myself with my students. It is the most important part of being a composer: wrestling with these contrary angels and not yielding.' ■

above one of many letters of encouragement that Saxton received from Benjamin Britten  
 Courtesy of Robert Saxton,  
 right Arnold Schoenberg: an obsession in all musical circles  
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