

## Three Hymn Tune Fantasias [2013]:

### [i] Prelude & Fugue on 'Iste Confessor'

### [ii] Improvisation on 'Slane'

### [iii] Toccata on 'King's Lynn'

These pieces were privately commissioned by Nicholas Jardine. Formerly Head of English at Haileybury, he is an accomplished amateur organist, involved as a consultant in the installation and upkeep of church organs in the parishes of Hertfordshire. Nicholas requested some works founded upon English hymn tunes, but left the choice of those tunes to me. Being naturally attracted to the modality of earlier examples, I steered clear of Victorian hymnody. I avoided undue bias towards minor keys in two ways: first, by choosing for the middle movement the Irish tune *Slane*, whose major-key tonality is inflected by folk tradition rather than 19<sup>th</sup>-century harmonic principles; and, secondly, by exploiting the Dorian mode in the opening Prelude & Fugue on *Iste Confessor*, where a balance is struck between G major and D minor. The Prelude inhabits primarily the former and the Fugue the latter, but both seek to embrace the authentic modal sense of a fulcrum that allows the music perpetually to lean either way.

The Prelude deliberately suggests many aspects of mediaeval practice, with hints of *organum* (the parallel doubling-up of melodic lines at the 5<sup>th</sup> and octave) and glimpses of the hymn melody embedded in the unfolding discourse. My intention was to avoid overt exposure of the tune, saving that for the closing stages (where, with any luck, it might seem both inevitable and not wholly foreseen). The Prelude remains fairly muted, proceeding some way before the pedals are involved. It evokes the spirit (rather than letter) of variation form by presenting a starkly unadorned statement at the opening, like a verset, then announcing a flowing line of triplet quavers, against which the initial theme is further explored. After rhapsodic exploration of elements of the hymn tune, the Prelude resumes the manner of its opening, subsiding finally onto an unresolved E. This is then contradicted by the rising D-A of the Fugue subject, a simplified or distilled version of the hymn tune.

The Fugue takes its cue from Bach's great triple fugue in E flat, BWV 552 (the spuriously-nicknamed 'St Anne'), in which a series of expositions based on the main subject is unfolded against countersubjects evolving from one another like a set of variations. It also nods towards Duruflé's presumed homage to that work, the *Prélude et Fugue sur le nom d'Alain*. Adhering rigorously to consistent countersubjects, the Fugue explores various *stretti* (entries of the subject and its variants which overlap instead of lying end-to-end), before reaching a junction where the second of its three sections begins. (A leaning towards the Bach model is fairly explicit at this point.) Gradually a set of fugal subject entries builds up from the pedals to the top of the texture, at which point the hymn tune begins finally to emerge more obviously. The final section resumes exploration of the triplet figure from the

Prelude, now placing it in modal D minor rather than G major. Initial imitative entries soon give rise to free toccata-like figuration, and the triplets destabilise things rhythmically by insisting on their repeating groupings against a prevailing minim pulse. Finally the entire tune is stated by the pedals. From this emerge the latter stages of the hymn tune in majestic chordal form. An energetic *coda* hints once more at the material of the Prelude. The final chord is an obvious salute to Jehan Alain's iconic *Litanies*, but also a logical summation of the modal process at work throughout the Prelude & Fugue.

The Improvisation on *Slane* presents a flowing triplet pattern which is a rhythmically ironed-out statement of the hymn tune's opening line. In deliberate contrast with the foregoing music, this movement is rhapsodically contemplative, its motivic hints of the tune emerging incidentally and imposing only a subliminal kind of unity. The opening stages should, I hope, enable the tune to feel expected *in toto* for some time before it actually arrives. When it does, it is heard in its customary tonality of E flat major, but transposed within this so that it begins on the fifth of the scale rather than the keynote, thus finding different harmonic possibilities. A further rhapsodic passage intervenes before the theme is heard complete. This time, its final stages dissipate into free variation, taking the music down a tone before allowing further free exploration of its content to become more overtly folk-related (an improvisatory passage perhaps loosely evokes the playing of Uilleann pipes). The Improvisation ends not on a chord of E flat but on a bare fifth of B flat, confirming an open-endedness hinted at by the movement's opening.

The Toccata on *King's Lynn* features the least-known hymn tune in the set. Of mediaeval provenance, it doubtless owes its appearance in the English Hymnal to the appeal which it must have held for Vaughan Williams during his editing task in 1906, at which point it acquired words by G. K. Chesterton. The Toccata opens with a broad introduction confining itself to the hymn melody's opening line. The toccata 'proper' explores fragments of the tune in various guises against a relentless jig-like rhythm, offsetting them by means of more complete melodic lines from the pedals. Hints of the introduction, including 'retrograde' (backwards) statements and inversions of its opening notes, finally lead to its actual return, this time higher than before and in more climactic form. There is a headlong *coda* but the music refuses to settle finally into the major key, preserving the hymn tune's austerity in an unresolved final chord which perhaps recalls that of the earlier Fugue.

The *Three Hymn Tune Fantasias* are conceived to be played in recital separately or as a single work. The Prelude & Fugue form an integral design, but could nonetheless be presented as opening and concluding voluntaries before and after a single service. Above all, the music deploys counterpoint to an extent apparently seldom attempted by organ composers these days. I hope that this conveys both my indebtedness to a compositional past and some sort of worthwhile adherence to an honourable tradition.

