

ORATORIO again

RTHK Radio 4
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 2
Sunday 14 december 2008

KANE: Welcome to another “Oratorio” programme. I’m Ciaran Kane, presenting a short season of not-too-often heard vocal and choral works that are mostly labelled ‘oratorios’. Today’s composer called his work a “cantata”, which in this case is actually much the same thing. For it’s a musical setting of the life and legends of a holy person; and the origin of ‘oratorio’ is a musical presentation of some religious theme or biblical story or some such edifying or educational subject, held in a ‘prayer-room’, the Oratory. Bach’s great Christmas and Easter “Oratorios” are actually a series of *cantatas* for different festive days of those seasons. In the popular celebration of the *Christmas* season, we have the figure of Santa Claus, the bringer of gifts for children. Before being Americanised, he was Sinter Class, a prominent figure of the *Dutch* celebration of Christmas, deriving his name from Saint Nicholas, a very popular saint for centuries throughout Europe and the Middle East, dedicatee of many churches, and patron of countries, cities, towns and numerous trades, avocations and occupations. Legends about him and his care for children, and his festival-day being in early December, have given him the association with Christmas. So, for the season we’re in, I’m presenting today Benjamin Britten’s Cantata, “St Nicholas”, written in 1948, for the centenary celebrations of Lancing College. It was the same year that Britten founded the Aldeburgh Festival together with Eric Crozier, who had directed his first opera, *Peter Grimes*, and became director or librettist for several of Britten’s operas. Crozier is the author of the moving and occasionally funny text for “St Nicholas”. The score is prefaced by a long-ish note *about* Nicholas, his life and legends. The part of Nicholas, telling his own story, is sung by a solo tenor (in this recording, Peter Pears), while the chorus describes his miraculous adventures, prays to the Lord, dialogues with Nicholas, and carries the story forward. In the Introduction, the chorus asks

Nicholas to 'strip off his glory and speak to them', and the saint addresses his modern audience. [342]

MUSIC: Britten : St Nicholas CD 28163 # 1 5:18

KANE: The Introduction of Benjamin Britten's "St Nicholas". The birth of Nicholas is told by the chorus, and how he grew in holiness; including the incident when, taken to church at Christmastime, he climbed up on the font to be baptised. How the *boy* Nicholas changed to the young man, is *thrillingly* portrayed in the music. Nicholas himself then describes how he came to give away his wealth and dedicate himself to God. [72]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e ## 2,3 6:46

KANE: Nicholas' journey to Palestine is graphically told in the text, the music picturing the sea-journey and especially the great *storm* that blows up, and then its aftermath. [27]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e # 4 7:33

KANE: Nicholas next comes to Myra and is chosen to be bishop there, dedicating himself to serve his people. The scene ends with all the people (chorus and *audience* in performance) singing the familiar 'Old Hundredth', "All people that on earth do dwell". But then persecution comes to the young church, and we hear Nicholas' prayer and sermon from prison. [59]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e # 5, 6 9:46

KANE: The next two sections of Benjamin Britten's "St Nicholas" tell some of his miraculous legends --- how in a time of famine he restored to life three little boys who'd been killed and pickled: then, a series of stories of his piety and marvellous deeds that, in the telling keep his memory alive. [53]

MUSIC: a s a b o v e ## 7, 8 11:31

KANE: The final scene is the death of Nicholas, which he calls his "coming to life, to final birth". His words are accompanied by the chorus singing

