



THE CAROLS OF HAROLD DARKE
*More Than *In the Bleak Mid-Winter**

by Richard Waters

Harold Darke (1888–1976) composed his best known piece, the carol *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, nearly one hundred years ago. Despite the fact that he composed more than forty pieces for choir, Darke is most often identified by this single work, which is still sung by countless choirs around the world every December. Darke's most substantial output came in the form of carols, anthems, and service music. These pieces remain largely unknown to choral directors outside of England, and would be welcome additions to the repertory of many church, collegiate, and community choirs. Darke's carols are of particular interest because they are his most accessible pieces, and all but one remain in print.

Biography

Harold Darke—composer, organist, conductor, and teacher—was born on October 29, 1888, in London. He was the youngest of five children born to Samuel and Arundel Darke. All of them were musical, although Harold was the only one to pursue music as a career.

In 1903, at the age of fourteen, Darke won an organ scholarship to the Royal College of Music. There he had the opportunity to study organ with Walter Parratt, who taught many of England's cathedral, parish, and concert organists, including Henry Walford Davies, Herbert Howells, Thomas Tertius Noble, Boris Ord, and Ralph Vaughan Williams.¹ In 1908, Darke was awarded a two-year composition scholarship, which allowed him to study with Charles Villiers Stanford. Darke was a highly successful student, as evidenced by the numerous awards that he won during his time at the Royal College of Music, including the Arthur Sullivan Prize, the Dove Prize, and the Tagore Gold Medal, which is awarded to the best student of the year. He graduated in 1910 with degrees in organ and composition.

In 1916, after serving as organist of St. James' Church, Paddington, for five years, Darke received what would become the most important appointment of his career: organist and director of music at St. Michael's Church, Cornhill. It was a position that he would hold for fifty years. During his extraordinary tenure, he transformed St. Michael's into a center of musical activity in London.² Soon after his arrival, Darke instituted a series of weekly lunchtime organ recitals. These recitals are still an important part of the music ministry at St. Michael's today.

Darke received his Doctor of Music degree in composition from Oxford University in 1919. He was subsequently appointed to the staff of the Royal College of Music, yet another post that he held for half a century. His teaching duties at the College included organ, composition, harmony, and counterpoint. The

same year he also founded the St. Michael's Singers, a choir of approximately eighty singers. One of the stated objectives of the choir was to perform Bach's *St. John Passion* annually during Holy Week. The choir also frequently performed new music by many of England's leading composers.³

Darke was appointed in 1941 as interim organist and choir-master at King's College, Cambridge, while Boris Ord served in World War II. The Darke family moved to Cambridge in March 1941, in time for Harold to conduct services for Holy Week. While at King's College, Darke still managed to keep up with most of his duties in London. Although he had a deputy who handled the Sunday services at St. Michael's, Darke traveled to London by train in order to continue his lunchtime organ recitals on Mondays, and to teach at the Royal College of Music on Wednesdays. On July 26, 1943, he gave his 1,000th Monday lunchtime organ recital at St. Michael's.

The end of World War II in 1945 brought an end to Darke's tenure at King's College. He stayed through December to help with the transition as both Boris Ord and organ scholar David Willcocks returned from the war. Darke's final service was a Choral Evensong on Christmas Day; the music included his own *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis in F*. For his service to the university, Darke was elected as a Fellow of King's College and was granted the honorary degree of Master of Arts.⁴

Darke's activities did not slow down in the later years of his career. He continued his work at St. Michael's and the Royal College of Music, and was active as a composer, recitalist, and adjudicator. He celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday in 1963 by presenting an organ recital at Royal Festival Hall. In June 1966, he retired from St. Michael's Church after fifty years of dedicated service. In recognition of his lasting contribution to the musical landscape of the nation, Queen Elizabeth II awarded Darke the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the New Years Honours List. In October 1968, he played another recital at Royal Festival Hall to celebrate his eightieth birthday.⁵

In 1969, Darke retired from the Royal College of Music after an astonishing fifty-year tenure. He gave yet another recital in 1973 at Royal Festival Hall, this time in celebration of his eighty-fifth birthday.⁶ He presented his final organ recital at Durham Cathedral in 1976, only a few weeks before his death.⁷ Harold Darke died in Cambridge on November 28, 1976, at the age of eighty-eight.

Compositions

Harold Darke lived in an era that experienced an historic musical revival in England. The rebirth of English church music was spawned by a stronger emphasis on education, higher standards of composition, and a renewed interest in music of the past. Darke's efforts as an organist, conductor, teacher, and composer made an enduring impression on the musical landscape of his native country.

Darke wrote music for a variety of genres. Despite his distinction as one of the finest organists of the twentieth century, Darke composed only fifteen pieces for the organ, including the frequently performed *A Meditation on Brother James's Air*.⁸ Other compositions include eleven piano works, three pieces for strings,

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Table 1

The Carols of Harold Darke			
Title	Year	Form	Forces
<i>In the Bleak Mid-Winter</i>	1909	anthem	SATB, ST soli, organ
<i>Love Came Down at Christmas</i>	1911	hymn	SATB unaccompanied
<i>Cradle Hymn</i>	1912	anthem	Unison voices, piano
<i>The Holy Well*</i>	1913	anthem	SATB, SATB soli, piano
<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	1914	anthem	SATB, S solo, organ
<i>A Christmas Carmen</i>	1915	hymn	SATB unaccompanied
<i>When Christ Was Born of Mary Free</i>	1916	hymn	SATB, S solo, organ
* Not Published			

five violin sonatas and romances, six miniatures for oboe and piano, six orchestral works, sixteen songs, and seven part-songs. Most of these compositions date from the 1900s through the 1910s, from the early stage of his compositional career; and many of them remain unpublished.

By far the most recognized and popular genre of Darke's works is his choral music. He wrote more music for choir than for any other medium; the overwhelming

majority of these compositions are sacred works, including seven carols, sixteen anthems, fourteen service music settings, eight extended or multi-sectional works for choir and instrumental accompaniment, and nine hymns.

Carols

Darke composed his first carol in 1909, at the age of twenty-one. He would go on

to write six more carols in the next seven years. An old family friend, Margaret Agnes Calkin, contributed to the cost of Harold's education following the death of his father in 1902 at the age of fifty-six. Darke composed the carols, which all bear the inscription "To MAC," as Christmas presents to Calkin as an expression of thanks for her generosity.⁹

Two distinct types of carols emerge upon examination of their formal structure: those that are strophic hymns and those that are through-composed anthems. Table 1 shows a complete listing of these works.

Two of the three hymn-like carols contain a refrain at the end of each stanza. The anthem-like settings may be distinguished from their hymn counterparts by their independent accompaniments, which Darke frequently varied from stanza to stanza. However, the four anthem-carols bear some resemblance to the hymn-carols by maintaining the same melody throughout each stanza.

Three of the carols draw their texts from one of England's most important female poets, Christina Rossetti.¹⁰ Many of Rossetti's poems are deeply religious, reflecting her strong devotion to the Anglican Church. She is the only literary source whom Darke used more than twice in any of his sacred choral music.

Darke's carol settings are more reserved than his anthems or service music.

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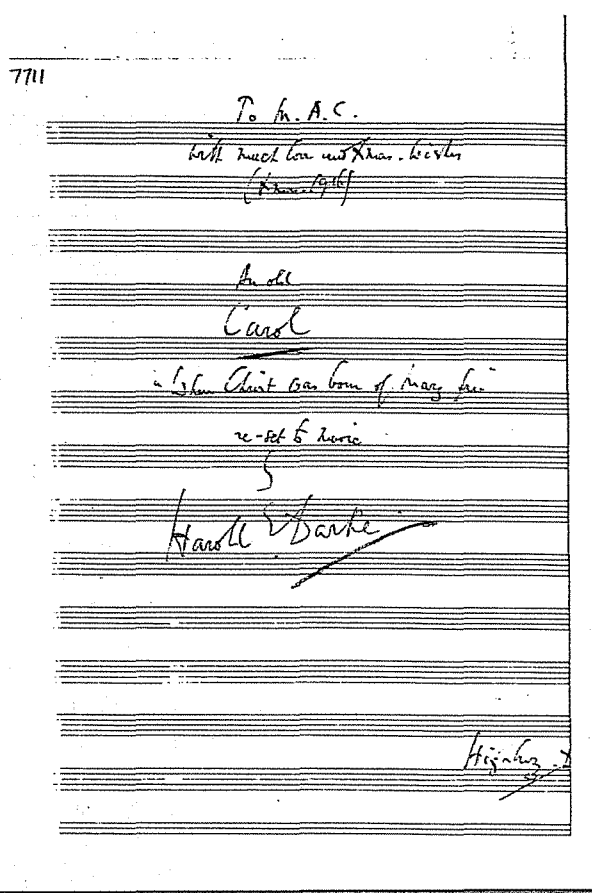
The melodies are memorable and easily-sung, the vocal parts contain very little *divisi*, and the harmonic language remains simple and straight-forward. The tonal center of each carol is clearly defined and rarely changes, unlike much of his other choral music. Two factors help explain this conservative tonal approach. First, the carols are all early works, when Darke was still developing his own style as a composer (his more adventurous harmonic writing would come later in his career). Second, as outlined in the *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, carols are generally contemplative and simple in spirit.¹¹ Darke was certainly aware of the long history of the English carol, and added to the genre in a way that reflected that tradition.

Six of the seven carols were published soon after their completion, and remain in print to this day, either as separate octavos or as part of a collection or anthology. They are organized below based on their classification as either a hymn/carol or an anthem/carol.

Hymn/Carols

Love Came Down at Christmas (1911) is the shortest carol that Darke composed. There are eight measures of music; when all three stanzas are sung the carol is only twenty-four measures in duration. It is scored for unaccompanied SATB choir, with text by Christina Rossetti.

This succinct carol, set in A[♯] major, consists of four two-bar phrases. Each phrase includes a set of quarter note triplets. (Figure 1) Darke very rarely used triplets with such frequency in his choral music. It was an interesting choice, since it was not one that was required by the text—the words could just as easily be accommodated with the use of quarter notes. The use of triplets, however, provides rhythmic variety and a gentle, undulating pulse. The text and brevity of *Love Came Down at Christmas*



The cover page of *When Christ Was Born of Mary Free* with the inscription "To MAC."

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make it suitable for use as an introit for a Christmas Eve service.

A Christmas Carmen (1915) is a festive setting of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem scored for unaccompanied SATB choir. There are two stanzas, each of which is fol-

lowed by a refrain; the texture is homophonic and the music for the two stanzas is identical. The entire composition lasts sixty-six measures: each stanza is twenty measures long, and the refrain is thirteen measures.

Two stylistic features stand out in *A Christmas Carmen*. First, the tonal center of the carol is A Mixolydian. This is the only carol in which Darke used a mode. There are several instances in which Darke used C[♯] to imply the Dorian mode, thus creating modal mixture. The second unusual feature of *A Christmas Carmen* is the use of changing meter. While this technique is common in Darke's other choral music, it is not a characteristic that is often found in traditional carols. *A Christmas Carmen* is the only one of Darke's carols that does not remain in the original meter for its entire duration. Darke set the first eight measures of each stanza in 4/4 time, and the remaining twenty-five measures of the stanza and refrain in 3/4 time. This change in meter efficiently accommodates the text

and, combined with dynamic markings that never go below *mezzo forte*, creates a driving energy which appropriately reflects the spirit and mood of Whittier's poem.

When Christ Was Born of Mary Free (1916) was Darke's final contribution to

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Figure 1. Harold Darke, *Love Came Down at Christmas*, Melody, mm. 1–8.

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the carol genre. He scored the carol for soprano soloist and SATB choir with organ accompaniment. This fifteen-measure strophic setting consists of four stanzas, each of which is followed by a refrain. The text is believed to be from the fifteenth century, although the identity of the author is unknown.

Several discrepancies exist between

the manuscript and the printed score of *When Christ Was Born of Mary Free*. For example, the first nine measures feature a soprano soloist, simply marked "solo" in the manuscript. In measure 10, when the full soprano section enters, Darke clearly marked "Tutti" above their line in the manuscript. The printed Novello edition, including the 1996 re-engraving, marks the beginning line for "Soprano." The printed edition confuses Darke's intent, as the other voice parts are also listed in the singular form (Alto, Tenor, and Bass). There is no Tutti indication in measure 10 of the Novello edition to indicate a change from soloist to full choir.

In addition, while the manuscript does

not specify which keyboard instrument should be used to accompany the choir, the Novello edition marks it for organ. The writing style found in the keyboard does seem to imply that Darke had the organ in mind when composing the accompaniment. Certain measures would be problematic on the piano, where the left hand would need to simultaneously play two pitches that are a twelfth apart. Such passages may be easily executed on the organ, where the lowest note is played on the pedal and the left hand plays the remaining pitches.

Darke utilized imitative entrances in the refrain of *When Christ Was Born of Mary Free*. Each voice part begins one beat



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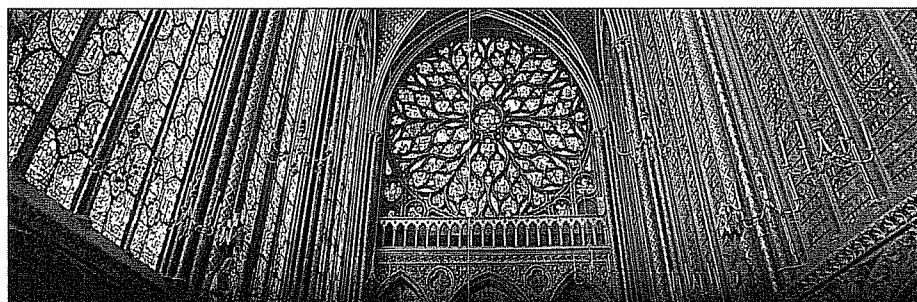
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after the other, beginning with the basses and followed by the altos, sopranos, and tenors. The musical material is similar for the first few beats, and then features more independent writing. The organ doubles all of the vocal parts throughout the refrain. The last few measures feature a divided soprano part, as well as a rare three-part *divisi* in the bass section.

Anthem/Carols

In the Bleak Mid-Winter (1909) is by far Darke's best known and most beloved work. There are at least forty recordings currently available on compact disc and many more on older cassettes and albums. The carol is still a favorite at King's College, Cambridge, where Darke served as interim organist and choirmaster during World War II. It was first included in the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's College in December 1945, with Darke conducting and Boris Ord (who had just returned from service in World War II) at the organ.¹²

In the Bleak Mid-Winter was one of Darke's earliest compositions, and was the first of seven carols dedicated to Margaret Agnes Calkin. It was originally published by Stainer and Bell in 1911. Darke scored the carol for soprano and tenor soloists, SATB choir, and organ. For his setting, Darke used four of Christina Rossetti's five stanzas. The carol is in G major, and is fifty-eight measures long. Nineteen of these measures (stanzas one and three) are repeated.

Stanzas one and three of *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* call for soprano and tenor soloists, respectively, accompanied by the organ. A two-measure organ introduction precedes each of these stanzas. The range of the melody spans only an octave plus a major second. Darke's skill for writing a memorable, easily sung melody has con-

7-35

To my dear friend and "Mother". Xmas day 1911

CAROL.

"Love Came down at Christmas"

Christmas Carol: Harold Spindle

The manuscript to *Love Came Down at Christmas*.
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tributed to the continued popularity of this carol through the years.

Stanza two features the full choir singing unaccompanied. The music briefly begins in the relative key of E minor in measures 20

to 21, but by measure 22 the harmonic structure found in the lower three voice parts is virtually identical to that found in the organ part in stanzas one and three. The fourth stanza begins with the sopranos and altos, with the left hand of the organ providing the supporting harmony.¹³ Darke slightly altered the melody in these four measures, although the basic contour remains the same. Measures 41 to 50 are identical to measures 24 to 33, with very slight rhythmic alteration in some of the lower voices to accommodate the different text. Darke elongated the final phrase of stanza four and repeated a portion of the text. Figure 2

compares the end of stanzas two and four. The carol concludes with the same serene organ music that appears in the introduction, ending with a plagal cadence.

A comparison with Gustav Holst's fa-

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35

S A Je - - - - - sus Christ.

T B Je - - - - - sus Christ.

51

S A give my heart, give my heart.

T B give my heart, give my heart.

f *mp* *pp*

Figure 2. Harold Darke, *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, mm. 35–37 and mm. 51–55.

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familiar setting, composed three years earlier for the first edition of *The English Hymnal*, reveals an assortment of similarities and differences. The melodic contour of the first two measures of each tune is remarkably similar. Holst's melody is mostly stepwise, with no leap greater than a perfect fourth. By contrast, Darke's tune features several more leaps, including fourths, fifths,

and two sixths. Rhythmically, the two settings are nearly identical until the last line, where Darke chose an expanded ending. (Figure 3)

Overall, Holst's setting is more repetitive, both melodically and harmonically, than Darke's version. Lines 2 and 4 are identical, as are the first two measures of lines 1, 2, and 4. In Darke's setting, the

first two measures of lines 1 and 3 are nearly the same, as is the first measure of lines 2 and 4; however, no phrase or line is identical. Both renderings are of strong merit and have stood the test of time, as demonstrated by their inclusion in *The New Oxford Book of Carols* in 1992.

Cradle Hymn (1912) is a setting of the first two verses of the familiar text "Away in a Manger."¹⁴ Darke's setting is forty-eight measures long and features piano accompaniment. It is the only carol that Darke did not score for SATB choir: The manuscript marks the vocal line simply as "Voice." This carol would work equally well as a solo or as a piece for unison choir.

The gentle melody of *Cradle Hymn* is exactly the same in both stanzas, with the exception of one additional pitch at the very end of the second stanza. Even in such a short composition, Darke's writing features detailed dynamic

contrast throughout. The carol consists of a four-measure introduction, two seventeen-measure stanzas (with a four-measure interlude), and an eight-measure codetta. The thirty-four measures of vocal writing contain seven different dynamic markings, as well as several *crescendi* and *decrescendi*.

Darke contrasted the two stanzas of *Cradle Hymn* by varying the manner in which the piano accompaniment provides the harmonic support. In the introduction and first stanza, the accompaniment is more peaceful, anchored in the left hand by quarter, half, and dotted half notes. In the interlude and subsequent second stanza, Darke created a sense of forward motion by featuring a steady display of eighth notes in the left hand. Here, Darke showed that he was comfortable writing for either the piano or the organ, and understood the differences and possibilities of the two instruments, even at such an early stage of his compositional career. The accompaniment style used in the first stanza returns for the conclusion of the second stanza and remains through the codetta, which features a subtle hemiola (a common feature in much of Darke's

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5 In the bleak mid - win - ter Fros - ty wind made moan,
 9 Earth stood hard as ir - on, Wa - ter like a stone:
 13 Snow had fal - len, snow on snow, Snow on snow,
 In the bleak mid - win - ter, Long a - go.

Figure 3a. Gustav Holst, *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, Melody, mm. 1–16.
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3 In the bleak mid - win - ter Fros - ty wind made moan,
 7 Earth stood hard as ir - on, Wa - ter like a stone:
 11 Show had fal - len, snow on snow, Snow on snow,
 15 In the bleak mid - win - ter, Long a - go.

Figure 3b. Harold Darke, *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, Melody, mm. 3–19.
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But what have I, a lit - tle child, To guide me home from — far,

Sopranos
31

I must be like these good Wise Men, With heav'n - ward heart and — look: —

Figure 4. Harold Darke, *A Christmas Carol*, mm. 5–8 and mm. 31–34.
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music).

*A Christmas Carol*¹⁵ (1914) is Darke's longest carol, spanning eighty-six measures. This carol is scored for soprano solo, SATB choir, and organ accompaniment. Darke set five of the nine stanzas from Christina Rossetti's poem.

Darke utilized a variety of vocal forces in *A Christmas Carol*. He scored each stanza for a different combination of voices. A soprano soloist begins the carol, the men sing stanza two, while the full choir sings stanza three. The soprano soloist returns for the fourth stanza, while the choir joins the soloist for the final stanza. In the stanzas that are sung by the choir, Darke created further variety by using unison writing for the first four to six measures before dividing the choir into parts. For the second stanza, Darke featured two- and three-part writing for men's voices. The third stanza contains the most diversity. After singing in unison for five measures, the choir divides into four parts for the next phrase of text. This is followed by a short phrase for sopranos and altos, and

concludes with imitative entrances for all voices.

Darke used the same melody in four of the five stanzas. One notable alteration

The organ plays a supportive role in *A Christmas Carol*, as opposed to the independent character it often displays in Darke's other choral music. There are

Nearly one hundred years after the composition of *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, Harold Darke is still fondly remembered by those who knew him for his impact on English church music.

occurs in the second phrase. Although the basic contour of the melody is unchanged, the pitches used in subsequent stanzas are higher than those found in the first stanza (Figure 4). In the fourth stanza, the soprano soloist has an entirely different melody, providing contrast from the preceding stanzas.

no organ interludes between the stanzas; instead, Darke concluded each stanza on either a dominant or diminished chord, only to be resolved at the beginning of the subsequent stanza. (Figure 5)

The final stanza begins with the original melody, featuring further variations and modifications. The only substantial



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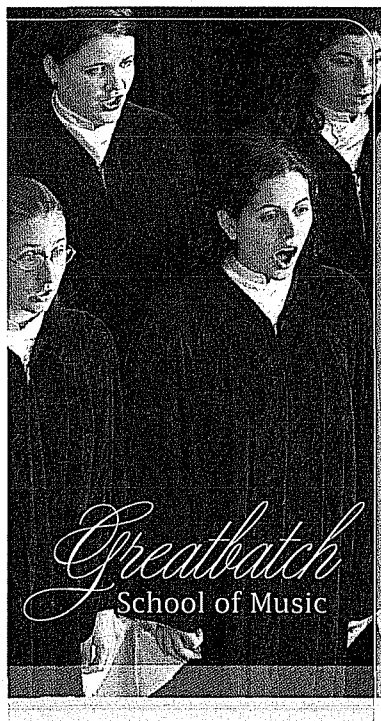
Figure 5. Harold Darke, *A Christmas Carol*, mm. 9–17.

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repetition of text is found in the last phrase ("All 'Glory, glory' given to Thee through all the heavenly height"), which is restated for the final twenty-three measures of the carol. Darke introduces new musical material as the music builds, leading to the only *fortissimo* moment of the piece. At this moment, the soprano soloist returns; it is the only time that the soloist and choir sing in the same stanza. The organ accompaniment then assists in the gradual *decrescendo* to the *pianissimo* conclusion. The choir sings the final F major chord: unaccompanied, hushed, with seven-part *divisi*.

Assessing Darke

Nearly one hundred years after the composition of *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*, Harold Darke is still fondly remembered by those who knew him for his impact



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on English church music. He displayed a commitment to high musical standards as a composer and a performer, a dedication to the performance of new music by his friends and colleagues, a fondness for the music of the past (particularly the music of J. S. Bach), and a devotion to his unending work as a teacher and mentor. All these endeavors helped to advance the cause of English music during its renaissance in the twentieth century.

In a 1945 interview, Darke spoke of his concern for the future of English church music, particularly of his anxiety that there would be a return to lower musical standards through the acceptance of "trivial" and "vulgar" music. He urged the younger generation to strive to live up to the great tradition they had inherited:

There is no short cut to success in music. We find budding musicians who are graceful stick-waggers, but unless they possess the ability to hear an inner part, unless they can read a score, unless they can

visualize sounds, and unless, above all, they have the power of holding their players and singers, of molding them to their will, and of imparting something of themselves to them and to their hearers, then all else is of no avail.¹⁶

Darke's choral compositions have not achieved the level of recognition obtained by the music of his more prominent countrymen, such as Parry, Stanford, Howells, Vaughan Williams, and Britten. His relatively small output (a result of his busy schedules at both St. Michael's Church and the Royal College of Music) and conservative compositional style are two factors that may explain why much of his music has not escaped the boundaries of his native country. Many of his choral works remain in print today, including the recent reissue of three carols by Stainer and Bell. Several anthems formerly out of print have also been reissued in the last few years. Hopefully, even more of them will soon become available, so that a new genera-

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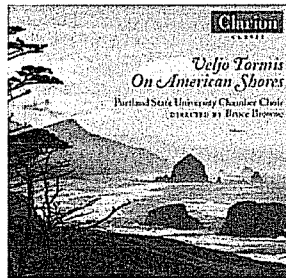
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tion of conductors, singers, congregations, and audiences may experience this body of repertoire.

NOTES

- ¹ "Sir Walter Parratt's Pupils," *Royal College of Music Magazine* 20 (1924): 46-8.
- ² H. C. Colles, "Harold (Edwin) Darke," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., ed. Eric Blom (London: Macmillan, 1954): 2:598.
- ³ Gwilym Beechy, "Harold Darke's Church Music," *The Musical Times* 129 (August 1988): 427.
- ⁴ Richard Barnes, "The Darke Ages," *Kings College Choir Association* (1997-8): 25.
- ⁵ Michael Darke, e-mail, October 20, 2003. The author is most grateful to the composer's only surviving son, Michael, for his assistance in providing scores, manuscript copies, and biographical information.
- ⁶ Stanley Webb, "Darke, Harold (Edwin)," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 7:23.
- ⁷ Mark Venning, e-mail to author; August 20, 2004.
- ⁸ Nearly all of Darke's organ works were recorded in 1991 by Jonathan Rennert, the current organist and choirmaster at St. Michael's.

- ⁹ Michael Darke, e-mail to author; November 8, 2003.
- ¹⁰ *In the Bleak Mid-Winter, Love Came Down at Christmas, and A Christmas Carol*.
- ¹¹ Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, eds., *The New Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xii.
- ¹² Jean Burns, e-mail to author; August 23, 2004.
- ¹³ Some directors choose to perform this section unaccompanied by having the men sing "hum" or "loo."
- ¹⁴ Darke composed another piece by the same title in December 1955 for the christening of his granddaughter, Valerie Ann Darke. This unpublished composition is scored for unaccompanied SATB choir; with text by Isaac Watts ("Hush! my dear, lie still and slumber...").
- ¹⁵ *A Christmas Carol* is listed in some sources as *The Shepherds had an Angel*, a reference to the first line of the text.
- ¹⁶ Donald Brook, *Composers' Gallery: Biographical Sketches of Contemporary Composers* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1946; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 54 (page citation is to the reprint edition).



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