

Music Listening for the Easter Season—Easter IV

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This article is the fourth installment in a series begun some weeks ago, born of my desire to highlight choral music which might be presented live in church at this time, but cannot be due to the inability of congregations and choirs to worship together in person. Fortunately, in spite of the circumstances, we are not left entirely bereft of the sound of choral music in this time, but we have access to a vast library of recorded performances on the internet. With an eye to the Fourth Sunday of Easter, I have chosen six choral pieces which may provide for musical meditations this week. The first three are settings of the Easter responsory *Surrexit pastor bonus*, translated “The good shepherd has arisen.” The remaining three pieces are settings of Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” I have given some background for each of these six pieces, and their texts and a YouTube link to a performance are also provided. I hope that the recorded voices singing these sacred words to inspired music will speak powerfully to all who read and listen.

Surrexit pastor bonus

The Good Shepherd is a description and image which is given considerable importance in Holy Scripture, and that plays a significant role in our Eastertide liturgies. Specifically, the Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Easter is addressed to God “whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people.” *Surrexit pastor bonus* is the Latin incipit of the second Matins responsory for Easter Monday. This text declares and rejoices that the good shepherd, who has lain down his life for his sheep, has indeed risen. This responsory text, derived from John 10:11, has been set to music by many composers. In my previous article on choral music for Easter Vigil and Easter Day, I discussed a setting of this text by the German composer Michael Haller (1840–1915). In this article I will discuss three other settings: the first by Orlando di Lasso (c. 1532–1594), next an earlier setting by Jean L’Héritier (c. 1480–c. 1551), and finally, a more extended setting by Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847).

More about these three pieces and their composers:

Orlando di Lasso (c. 1532–1594) was one of the most prolific and admired European composers of his time. Born at Mons in the Franco-Flemish province of Hainaut, he was well traveled particularly in northern Italy, but was centered in Munich much his adult life. His compositions include about sixty authenticated Mass settings, most of which are elaborate parody works based upon motets, often his own, as well as French chansons, and Italian madrigals from such composers as Gombert, Willaert, Resta, Arcadelt, Rore and Palestrina. Lassus, as he was also known, set the responsory text *Surrexit pastor bonus* for five voices in his 1562 collection of sacred songs published in Nuremberg. This motet begins with an upward sweeping phrase sung by the highest three voices. The two lower voices then echo the same. The two soprano parts joyfully weave among one another through the motet, and it concludes with many alleluias.

Jean L'Héritier (c.1480–c.1552) takes us to France, and back in time to the generation of composers following Josquin des Prez (c.1450–1521) and Jean Mouton (c.1459–1522) with whom L'Héritier likely studied at the French royal court. In 1506 L'Héritier made his first trip to Italy where, in 1521, he was named *maestro di cappella* at San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. After serving in a number of posts in Italy, he returned to France around 1530. There he served as Chapelmaster to the papal legate at Avignon where he enjoyed lucrative prebends. The source of L'Héritier's setting of *Surrexit pastor bonus*, and six of his other motets, is a 1536 choirbook of the Julian Chapel in the Vatican. L'Héritier's setting of *Surrexit* is for six voices. It is rather more extended than di Lasso's setting and includes additional text. It is likely that this motet was intended to be sung at an Easter mass rather than as a responsory at matins. At first hearing of this relatively sober setting, the harmonic intensity and frequency of cross relations between voices might seem more English in character than either French or Italian.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) blossomed early as a conductor, composer and pianist. His initial music studies in Berlin were followed by travel in England, Scotland, Italy and France before his 1833 appointment as music director in Düsseldorf. Two years later he became conductor of the *Gewandhaus* concerts in Leipzig where, together with composer Robert Schumann and others, he founded the *Leipzig Conservatorium* in 1842. Mendelssohn's 1829 Leipzig performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* decisively helped to stimulate the nineteenth century rediscovery of the music of J. S. Bach. Mendelssohn's contributions as a composer span the categories of orchestral, choral, stage, chamber, piano, vocal and organ works. His music is said to have set the canons of mid-Victorian musical taste. In Mendelssohn's time, the designation *motet* was often applied to choral compositions, scored for voices and instruments, which may have comprised several contrasting movements. Mendelssohn's *Surrexit pastor bonus* is such a work, similar in nature to a short cantata. It is in four movements, the first and last being scored for four treble voices (with three soloists in the first movement) and organ. The second movement is a duet for two sopranos and is in the relative minor key. The third movement is little more than an interlude for alto solo which connects the second and fourth movements. Mendelssohn's *Surrexit* was one of three motets he composed in 1830 for the nuns of Trinitá de Monti in Rome.

Here are the texts and YouTube links for three settings of *Surrexit pastor bonus*.

Surrexit pastor bonus—Orlando di Lasso (c.1532–1594)

Surrexit pastor bonus, qui animam suam posuit pro ovibus suis, et pro grege suo, mori dignatus est, alleluia.

The good shepherd has arisen, who laid down his life for his sheep, and for his flock deigned to die, alleluia.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLYJdm0eIXw>

Surrexit pastor bonus—Jean L'Héritier (c.1480–c.1551)

*Surrexit pastor bonus, qui animam suam posuit pro ovibus suis, et pro grege suo, mori dignatus est, alleluia.
Et enim pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus. Alleluia.*

The good shepherd has arisen, who laid down his life for his sheep, and for his flock deigned to die, alleluia. For Christ, the paschal lamb, has been sacrificed for us. Alleluia.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUE-KimK_Ks

Surrexit pastor bonus, Op 39/3—Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)

*Surrexit pastor bonus qui animam suam posuit pro ovibus suis, et pro grege suo mori dignatus est, alleluia!
Tulerunt Dominum meum et nescio ubi posuerunt eum. Si tu sustulisti eum, dicito mihi et ego ollam.
Surrexit Christus spes mea: praecedet vos in Galilaeam. Alleluia!*

The good shepherd has arisen, who laid down his life for his sheep, and for his flock deigned to die, alleluia.

They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they put him. If you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.

The risen Christ is my hope; He goes before you into Galilee. Hallelujah!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ii7UuL2uwE8>

Psalm 23

The twenty-third psalm is without doubt the most well-known text of the entire Psalter. It is one of the most concise and yet broadly encompassing devotional texts in all of scripture. Its recitation is called for at baptisms, marriages, funerals, and various other occasions including the principal Sunday Eucharist on Lent 4 (Year A) and Easter 4 (Years A and B). The compilers of the 1979 American *Book of Common Prayer* considered this psalm to be of such pastoral importance that it is given in three different English translations. (See pp. 476, 477, 612 and 613.) Musical settings of Psalm 23 abound. The discussion below, however, will be limited to three distinctive twentieth century choral settings. All three are by English composers, one of whom is still living. Herbert Howells chose to set Miles Coverdale's translation which has been the English Prayer Book standard text since 1662. Lennox Berkeley and Howard Goodall, on the other hand, set the King James Bible version of text.

More about the composers and their settings:

Herbert Howells (1892–1983) was a student of Stanford and Parry at the Royal College of Music in London and was a close friend of Vaughan Williams whom he considered a mentor. Howells' setting of Psalm 23 is the second of six movements which comprise his *Requiem*, a work for unaccompanied voices, composed in the early 1930s but only published in 1980 shortly before the composer's death. Substantial parts of this *Requiem*—which was presumably intended for King's College, Cambridge,

but never delivered—were later incorporated in Howells' *Hymnus Paradisi*, a large-scaled work for chorus, soloists and orchestra, composed in memory of his son, Michael, and completed in 1938. In the spirit of the *German Requiem* of Brahms, Howells did not confine himself to the standard liturgical texts when he composed the *Requiem* but incorporated additional scriptural and devotional texts. As a result, individual movements such as *Psalm 23* are suitable for liturgical performance outside of their original context. *Psalm 23* begins as a soprano solo in a chant-like simplicity to which alto and tenor voices are eventually added. The chant-like text declamation continues, first in unison and later in harmony, when the full chorus joins at “Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: thy rod and thy staff comfort me.”

Lennox Berkeley (1903–1989) was born in Oxford. He was one of the generation of composers who studied in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. While in Paris, Berkeley came to know a range of composers including Francis Poulenc, Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Albert Roussel and Maurice Ravel. Later he had long and close friendship with Benjamin Britten and collaborated with Britten on several compositions. Berkeley was Professor of Composition in the Royal Academy of Music from 1946 to 1968. His most well-known former student is the recently deceased John Tavener. Berkeley's compositions include operas, orchestral and chamber works, piano and other instrumental pieces as well as solo songs and choral music. His setting of Psalm 23 was composed for the 900th anniversary of Chichester Cathedral and dates from 1975. It is scored for solo soprano, choir of mixed voices and organ.

Howard Goodall (b. 1958) was born in Bromley, Kent, attended the New College School and was a chorister at New College, Oxford. A modern musician of great versatility and wide-ranging knowledge, he has composed, performed and produced many award-winning programs for television and radio dealing with a wide variety of musical subjects. These programs have been used widely in educational applications. Goodall's compositions include popular music, musical theater and considerable choral music. His setting of Psalm 23 is perhaps best known as the theme music for the BBC television program “The Vicar of Dibley,” and was originally recorded for broadcast by the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

Below are the texts and YouTube links to recordings of Psalm 23:

Psalm 23—Herbert Howells (1892–1983)

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 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.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2P0PvhEU9Uo>

The Lord is my shepherd, Op 91/1—Lennox Berkeley (1903–1989)

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his Name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lhu5FgwodX4>

The Lord is my shepherd—Howard Goodall (b. 1958)

(Same text as for Berkeley)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7O1nijBP7LE>