Edgy Rhythms and Sparkling, Jazzy Harmonies: Walton's Innovative Belshazzar's Feast

Although a century of jazz has accustomed the modern ear to the beat, melodies, and harmonies of William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, his dramatic and colourful choral and orchestral writing was something completely new in the early twentieth century. And, like the Fauré *Requiem*, which the Singers' will also perform in May, Walton's composition had its own initial struggles, even though audiences loved it immediately.

When the BBC commissioned Walton to write the piece in 1929, he had already acquired fame and even some notoriety because of his collaboration with British poet Edith Sitwell on *Façade*. (That work had Sitwell's eccentric poems recited through a megaphone from behind a screen to the accompaniment of Walton's sophisticated score. Some critics were not impressed, but admitted it was "naggingly memorable"!)

Cecil Beaton's Portrait of William Walton, 1926

To return to *Belshazzar's Feast*, Walton had difficulty composing the work and experienced many blocks. "Belshazzar has hardly moved at all," he wrote to a friend in November 1930. "In fact it is going damn badly." As he later explained, "I got landed on the word *gold*—I was there from May to December, perched, unable to move either to right or left or up or down."

The oratorio ran into further trouble when it came time to first perform it. That performance was scheduled for the Leeds Festival in the autumn of 1931. By March 1931, the Leeds Festival Chorus was sent its parts so the choir could begin learning the work. Five months later, the piece was unlearned, and some members of the choir were staging a revolt:

> The combination of complex intervals and unusual rhythms had proved too difficult to master. Initial excitement about performing the new work had dissipated into, first, hostility and then open rebellion. Influential members of the chorus, complaining that the work was unsingable, began to campaign for its removal . . . at the end of August 1931, the performance of *Belshazzar's Feast* faced catastrophe. —Richard Aldous, *Tunes of Glory*

Especially problematic were handling the jazzy rhythms and pitching the notes. The time signatures change rapidly from 3/4 to 2/4 and 4/4 with insertions of 3/8 bars, and the choir is treated as an instrument, coming in often on notes that have little relation to the orchestral parts.

In the remaining weeks, however, conductor Malcolm Sargent turned the situation around. Choir members, who once thought *Belshazzar's Feast* "a very strange piece" that they were not too sure about, became convinced that the new work would be the highlight of the festival.

Others were not as certain. Sir Thomas Beecham, who was the overall director of the Leeds Festival at the time, apparently casually remarked to Walton, "As you'll never hear the thing again, my boy, why not throw in a couple of brass bands?" So Walton did.

Belshazzar's Feast was a huge success at the Festival. The reviewer for *The Times* remarked that Walton "had a wild ovation, called six times and looking as white as a sheet." Ernest Newman, writing after the composition's first London performance, also gushed, saying that, compared to *Belshazzar's Feast*, Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* "is very anaemic stuff":

> Mr. Walton works constantly at a voltage that takes our breath away . . . .
> It is difficult to realize that so young a man has so complete a command of
> his subject, of his craftsmanship, and of himself.

Today, the work is still a crowd favourite, especially in Britain. Indeed, it has been performed 33 times at the BBC Proms since it was first introduced there in 1946, and, between 1961 and 1973, it was performed annually at that festival. Sir Simon Rattle is scheduled to conduct its 34th outing in August 2019:

> Walton's choral masterpiece *Belshazzar's Feast* gets the Proms treatment
> with a 300-strong choir and Canadian baritone Gerald Finley as soloist.

We sincerely hope you will come to hear Peterborough's own premiere performance of the work.