



Saint Nicolas, Bishop of Myra, 4th Century

On Sunday afternoon, 12 August, at 2:30 pm the Newcastle University Choir (NUC) will perform two very different choral works at the Christchurch Cathedral. The NUC will combine with the Cathedral Choir, the Waratah Girls Choir, the Hunter Singers, and Echology to form the Festival Choir for the Newcastle Music Festival. The choral works, with full support from the Festival Orchestra, will be Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem*, and Benjamin Britten's *Saint Nicholas*.



Gabriel Fauré in 1907 (courtesy Wikipedia)

Gabriel Fauré was born in 1845 in France, and was a writer, composer, organist and

pianist. He became one of the most accomplished European composers of his time, writing choral versions of many songs and larger works. He is known for his melodic, but sometimes complex, music.

Fauré's *Requiem* is an essential oratorio for any choir's repertoire. It is written for mixed choir, soprano and baritone soloists, orchestra and organ. Composed in 1887, Fauré was determined to express musically a gentler version of a Requiem Mass. Although the work was based on the Latin Catholic Mass of the Dead, he only included comment about damnation and judgement once (*Dies Irae*, *Calamatatis* in the *Libera Me*). Rather he focused on, eternal rest, consolation, and the beauty of gorgeous composition. Thus his *Requiem* has been described as a "lullaby of death" rather than "fear of death".

The oratorio is divided into seven sections: Introduction and Kyrie, Offertory, Sanctus, Pie Jesu, Angus Dei, Libera Me, and In Paradism. The Pie Jesu was written to substitute for the more standard *Dies Irae*, and is a prayer for everlasting rest. It is sung by a treble voice or a soprano. *Libera Me* begins with a wonderful baritone solo, pleading for liberation from eternal death, which is later sung by the whole choir. In Paradism means "may angels lead you to paradise". At the beginning, the Sopranos are challenged to maintain beautiful tone quality and exact pitch.

The first version of Fauré's *Requiem* was performed in Paris in 1888 for a funeral. The Newcastle Festival Chorus performance will be conducted by Kim Sutherland from the Hunter Singers.



Benjamin Britten in 1968 (courtesy Wikipedia)

Edward Benjamin Britten was born in 1913, and became one of the foremost English composers of the 20th Century. He wrote operas, such as *Peter Grimes*, and oratorios, such as the *War Requiem*, along with a wide variety of traditional songs and ballads.

Britten's *Saint Nicolas* was written in different century, and for a totally different purpose, than the Fauré *Requiem*. It tells musically the story of the legends of Saint Nicolas, the Bishop of Myra, who lived at the end of the third and into the fourth Century AD, in today's Asia Minor. Although from a wealthy background, this humble man became a true servant of God, and led his flock for 40 years through a very difficult period, both politically and environmentally.

Bishop Nicolas spent time in prison during the prosecution of the martyrs (303-311). He also rigorously defended his faith. At the Great Church Council at Nicaea, he became famous for boxing the ear of the founder of the Arian heresy, Arius.

His faith and his activities became the basis for many stories, many of which are included in the choral work (words by Eric Crozier). Throughout the work, there is continual exhortation by the chorus to "speak" and "throw off the robes of office to show the simple man beneath". After

the introduction, the work begins with the Birth of Nicolas, where innocent and joyful he shouts "God be Glorified". He then dedicates himself to God and poverty, and journeys to Palestine. Frustrated by the lack of faith by the sailors, he calls a great storm to strike the ship. The tenors and basses sing of the sailor's fear of destruction until all kneel in prayer, and the storm ceases. Nicolas is then chosen Bishop of Myra after a foretelling, and is encouraged to "serve the faith" and "spurn his enemies".

He prays from prison, and after release, religiously serves his flock for several decades. His exploits are detailed using several examples, the most disturbing of which is the resurrection of the "Pickled Boys", who have been killed by an inn keeper and served for food. At the end of the *Cantata*, Nicolas is ushered into heaven by choral prayers to "depart in peace". Nicolas was revered for his sacrifices, his giving and his goodness. He became the basis for the current Santa Claus.

Saint Nicolas will be conducted by Phillip Matthias from Echology. The Music Director and Conductor for the Newcastle University Choir, Dr Christopher Allan, will be the baritone soloist for the Fauré *Requiem*, and Brad Cooper the tenor soloist for the Britten. Both works will be accompanied by Christ Church Camerata, the Newcastle Strings, and the Cathedral Organ.

For further details and for tickets please go to www.newcastlemusicfestival.org.

Next for Newcastle University Choir

**Handel's *Messiah* with orchestra
and four soloists, Sunday December
9, 2:00 p.m. Great Hall, University
of Newcastle**

Howard Bridgman, Editor