

Halley's Comment

Paul Halley's letter to the audience in the program notes for the King's at the Cathedral Series: "For All The Saints" concert featuring Alfred Schnittke's "Requiem Mass".

The Chapel Choir of the University of King's College with Ensemble Regale
Cathedral of All Saints, Halifax, Nova Scotia - November 4, 2012 – 4:00 p.m.

Sunday, November 4th 2012 (The Octave of All Saints)

Dear Friends,

Thank you for joining us for the fourth annual presentation of "For All The Saints". In preparing for this concert and as a card-carrying member of the antiquated community at King's, I have been considering the notion of "contemporary church music". I know this phrase conjures up all kinds of ideas and images that can generate some highly-charged debate, which is why I am so pleased this afternoon to be able to offer another perspective to the discussion.

This concert could be subtitled "A Concert of Contemporary Church Music". I feel that with the two Howells pieces and the Schnittke *Requiem* we are offering two aspects of the best of current church music, and the Gregorian chant and the two Byrd pieces represent the tradition from which these contemporary pieces come. In fact, both Howells and Schnittke have been very clear in expressing their debt to the earlier masters. During his studies in Vienna, Schnittke wrote,

"I felt every moment there, to be a link of the historical chain: all was multi-dimensional; the past represented a world of ever-present ghosts, and I was not a barbarian without any connections, but the conscious bearer of the task in my life."

This is not only a fine expression of a composer's place within a living tradition, it is also a perfect articulation of what we are celebrating today – the timeless, ever-present communion of all the Saints, past, present and future, here, now, in multi-dimensional splendour, made plain if not precisely to the eyes then certainly to the ears. This afternoon's presentation could equally be subtitled "A Concert of Traditional Music" in the sense that all music with the ability to speak to us is 'traditional'. I think Schnittke would have appreciated this.

In his Address to the King's Convocation of 2007, Dr Robert Crouse spoke about tradition.

"The past is past, no doubt; yet, paradoxically, the past is also present and becomes more contemporary in our recollection of it. Indeed, it is that presence of the past which constitutes the basis of our very recognition of the present, and establishes the horizon of our expectation. Without recollection of the past, the present moment would be as abstract and dimensionless as the mathematical point, which has position, but no size. The concreteness and sanity of our understanding of the present, therefore, will depend quite radically upon, and will be in direct proportion to, the clarity and integrity of our awareness of the past."

Schnittke's *Requiem*, completed in 1977, comes from a time in his life when he was trying to counter the chatter and noise of the world around him with almost primal screams, using all the resources at hand – pop music, twelve-tone music, various national styles, rock and blues, electronic instruments – to create music that demanded our attention; that shouted down the innocuous and meaningless. After his conversion to Christianity and as he grew older, Schnittke withdrew more and more into a stark, mystical soundscape where his rejection of the tawdry and the third-hand and his increasing awareness of the 'ever-present ghosts' brought him clarity and integrity right up to his death. Once again, the person who has the deepest respect for tradition ends up being the person who writes the most provocative music.

I hope that you find this afternoon's contemporary and traditional concert both inspiring and challenging. I hope the 'ever-present ghosts' find you in full voice as you sing, "All are one in thee, for all are thine."

Yours,
Paul