



Virtual Choral Contemplations

Throughout lockdown, Chapel Choir have been curating a series of short concerts, featuring unreleased video and audio from our archive, and newly created 'virtual choir' recordings. All these online offerings are available to watch again at <http://www.chapelchoir.org/virtual-choir.html>.

The Wreck of the Hesperus, Hamish MacCunn

Programme note by Dr Jane Mallinson

In 1905 MacCunn received a commission from an unexpected quarter, from Oscar Stoll, theatrical impresario and owner of the London Coliseum Theatre of Varieties. When it opened on 1904, this theatre was the most innovative and luxurious in Britain, with a triple-revolving stage, lifts, a Royal entrance, and comfortable seats all of which could be booked in advance. Stoll wished to offer high-quality entertainment suitable for respectable suburban families, and his programmes were an eclectic mix of music hall, circus, drama, orchestral music and opera.

Many composers would have hesitated to write for Stoll, but he overcame their doubts by offering generous fees, particularly when it was known that the composer was in financial difficulty. Elgar, who was commissioned by Stoll to write *The Crown of India*, wrote to a friend: When I write a big serious work e.g. *Gerontius* we have had to starve & go without fires for twelve months as a reward: this small effort allows me to buy scientific works I have longed for. My labour will soon be over ... & God bless the Music Halls!

MacCunn's response to Stoll's commission was a setting of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's ballad 'The Wreck of the Hesperus', to be illustrated by lantern slides. In carrying out Stoll's commission, MacCunn was constrained both by aspects of production and by the clientele for which the Coliseum catered. Production considerations would have included the sequence of the lantern-slides and performance time, since the ballad was only a small part of a two-hour show. The audience, possibly not overenthusiastic about 'serious' music, would have expected continuous, fast action, emphasis on the story, not too much orchestral music (as opposed to accompaniment) and recognisable musical conventions.

Just as today's cinema-going audiences know the story of *Titanic* before they see the film, it is fair to assume that MacCunn's audience would have known the story of the *Hesperus*. At a time when rote learning and recitation in school were the norm, many of the audience would have been able to recite all or part of the ballad. MacCunn's main aim, therefore, would be not to tell the story, but to illustrate it musically, and to make his music accessible to the Coliseum audience, while providing an appropriate accompaniment to the pictorial background.

The Wreck of the Hesperus is the only choral piece written by MacCunn for a professional chorus. The Coliseum Auditorium Choir, thirty-two men, women and boy choristers, performed from memory in the darkened auditorium, accompanied by the theatre's orchestra. This choir gave multiple performances in the London Coliseum and in the theatres on the Stoll-Moss circuit. This, combined with aggressive marketing of the vocal score by the publisher Novello, resulted in the work reaching a large market and this is reflected in the number of early performances by amateur choirs. That there were few performances after the First World War is more a reflection on the libretto's lack of appeal to post-Edwardian audiences than on the quality of MacCunn's music.

It was the schooner Hesperus,
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughter,
To bear him company.

Blue were her eyes as the fairy-flax,
Her cheeks like the dawn of day,
And her bosom white as the hawthorn buds,
That ope in the month of May.

The skipper he stood beside the helm,
His pipe was in his mouth,
And he watched how the veering flaw did blow
The smoke now West, now South.

Then up and spake an old Sailòr,
Had sailed to the Spanish Main,
'I pray thee, put into yonder port,
For I fear a hurricane.

'Last night, the moon had a golden ring,
And to-night no moon we see!'
The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe,
And a scornful laugh laughed he.

Colder and louder blew the wind,
A gale from the Northeast,
The snow fell hissing in the brine,
And the billows frothed like yeast.

Down came the storm, and smote amain
The vessel in its strength;
She shuddered and paused, like a frightened steed,
Then leaped her cable's length.

'Come hither! come hither! my little daughtèr,
And do not tremble so;
For I can weather the roughest gale
That ever wind did blow.'

He wrapped her warm in his seaman's coat
Against the stinging blast;
He cut a rope from a broken spar,
And bound her to the mast.

'O father! I hear the church-bells ring,
Oh say, what may it be?'
'Tis a fog-bell on a rock-bound coast!'—
And he steered for the open sea.

'O father! I hear the sound of guns,
Oh say, what may it be?'
'Some ship in distress, that cannot live
In such an angry sea!'

'O father. I see a gleaming light,
Oh say, what may it be?'
But the father answered never a word,
A frozen corpse was he.

Lashed to the helm, all stiff and stark,
With his face turned to the skies,
The lantern gleamed through the gleaming snow
On his fixed and glassy eyes.

Then the maiden clasped her hands and prayed
That saved she might be;
And she thought of Christ, who stilled the wave,
On the Lake of Galilee.

And fast through the midnight dark and drear,
Through the whistling sleet and snow,
Like a sheeted ghost, the vessel swept
Tow'rds the reef of Norman's Woe.

And ever the fitful gusts between
A sound came from the land;
It was the sound of the trampling surf
On the rocks and the hard sea-sand.

The breakers were right beneath her bows,
She drifted a dreary wreck,
And a whooping billow swept the crew
Like icicles from her deck.

She struck where the white and fleecy waves
Looked soft as carded wool,
But the cruel rocks, they gored her side
Like the horns of an angry bull.

Her rattling shrouds, all sheathed in ice,
With the masts went by the board;
Like a vessel of glass, she stove and sank,
Ho! ho! the breakers roared!

At daybreak, on the bleak sea-beach,
A fisherman stood aghast,
To see the form of a maiden fair,
Lashed close to a drifting mast.

The salt sea was frozen on her breast,
The salt tears in her eyes;
And he saw her hair, like the brown seaweed,
On the billows fall and rise.

Such was the wreck of the Hesperus,
In the midnight and the snow!
Christ save us all from a death like this,