

# RONALD CENTER

## CANTATA: 'DONA NOBIS PACEM'

*For Soprano, Tenor and Baritone Soloists, Choir, Organ, Piano, Timpani and Side Drum*

### Introduction and Editorial Notes

**This Cantata** is an impassioned plea for peace in a world gone mad. Compared with Vaughan Williams, who set a similar compilation of texts, Center clearly views matters less optimistically, and equally clearly feels that his view is of great significance; thus his work has been found to make a profound impact on audiences. The cantata's spiritual pessimism leads from apprehension, fear, compassion, sarcasm, irony, and panic, to the desolate nuclear landscape of the pitying *Agnus Dei* which concludes the work.

The composer's message shows that he may well have been aware of that part of the UNESCO Constitution (1946) which states 'Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed'.

The resources required are deployed with superb effectiveness. The fact that they are relatively modest means the work is eminently suitable for a small choral society or competent church choir.

**Ronald Center** was born in Aberdeen on April 2, 1913 and died in Huntly, Aberdeenshire on April 18, 1973. His considerable skills as pianist and organist were developed by two eminent local teachers, Willan Swainson, whose pupil and assistant he was at the city's Queen's Cross Church, and Julian Rosetti. In 1943 he moved to Huntly where he taught at the Gordon Schools, was organist at the Parish Church, and conducted the local choral society. He also went on Arts Council Tours, and broadcast for the BBC with his wife Evelyn, then a professional soprano. In 1949 he resigned his school post and divided his time between private pupils and composition which was becoming more and more important to him. He was not an easy man to get on with - he compensated for a fundamental shyness by exhibiting a gritty and pugnacious manner and being seemingly incapable of suffering fools. Yet he commanded the loyalty of his best pupils who remember his kindness and absolute integrity as man and musician.

His music received sporadic professional performances especially early in his career, but later his efforts were met with indifference. His style - tonal, yet sometimes austere and uncompromising, was unlikely to appeal to the arbiters of taste in this period. And Huntly is a long way from centres seen to be of cultural importance. After his death, Evelyn worked endlessly in the cause of promoting her husband's music, and met with some success. Some of the piano works have been recorded (several times in the case of the Sonata) as has this Cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*; most of the worthwhile piano, songs, and choral music have now been published in accessible editions.

There are three string quartets, and works for violin and for cello. As far as orchestral works are concerned there was an early tone poem, *The Coming of Cuchulian*, which is now lost. A Divertimento for Strings received performances and a broadcast in the 1950s, but a substantial Symphony (which has been computer-set) and a Sinfonietta still await performance (2014).

**This Edition** is the culmination of a number of unusual processes. The cantata appears to have been composed movement by movement over a number of years from the late 1940's onwards. As is usual with Center the manuscripts are not dated, but circumstantially it appears the earliest

movements were 'Reconciliation' and the 'Gloria'. The only authentic source of *Dona Nobis Pacem* is a vocal score for voices and piano in the composer's hand. However, this score has a brown paper wrapper where the work is described as being 'for Soprano, Tenor and Baritone Soloists, Choir, Organ, Piano, Timpani and Side Drum'. Within this vocal score there are some clues as to the nature of the timpani part (as detailed below) but nothing else.

There are also sketches associated with the work that have been rejected and do not appear in the fair copy; we can be reasonably sure that the latter represents the composer's final thoughts since his pagination of this source is complete.

*It can be noted in passing that there seems to be no reason why the work should not be performed with just piano and choir and soloists. Indeed, the wrapping of the manuscript also bears the note 'Photograph 30 copies for the Huntly Choral Society', though there is no record of any performance during the composer's lifetime. With the exception of the piano part, which demands a strong and forceful technique, all other parts in the music are relatively undemanding. If using this edition the pianist, where silent, will sometimes have to play the organ part.*

As remarked above the composer's wife, Evelyn, made great efforts to promote her late husband's music. Around 1977, she approached the Aberdeen University 'Havergal Brian and British Music Society' for assistance with this work in realising the composer's stated vision. Thus it was that three members of that society, Derek Blyth, Gordon Tocher, and Ian Maxwell, made an instrumental version of the score, in keeping - so far as could be ascertained - with the composer's intentions, apportioning the keyboard parts to piano and/or organ (which generally only supports the choir) and creating percussion parts. This work was done with scrupulous attention to the spirit of the score, with no little imagination in the percussion parts, and with marked success since this version has stood the test of time with remarkably little emendation.

The present editor was present at the first performance of this version of the work on March 10, 1978, in King's College Chapel, University of Aberdeen, and can thus testify to its impact.

## Sources and Editorial Method

The list of sources for this present edition are as follows:

- 1 Composer's manuscript for voices and keyboard  
Timpani noted as follows:  
Movement 1 Bar 25 - 'Timp' is written against the bass of the keyboard part  
Movement 3 The accompaniment is described as being for 'Piano and Timpani'.  
Bars 51-59 - the Timpani rhythm is hinted at.  
Movement 4 Bars 102-108 - the Timpani part is notated.
- 2 Performing edition, 1977-8, hand-written, by Messrs Blyth, Tocher and Maxwell (BTM).
- 3 A professionally hand-written score published and copyrighted 1986 by Oecumuse (this firm no longer exists, and its copyrights were taken over in 2003 by Fagus-Music.com.)  
The work on this version was produced in full consultation with, and with the complete approval of the composer's widow, Evelyn.

The present editor's work builds on the pioneering efforts of BTM, and any further emendations are the consequence of personal involvement with live performances of the work, including a

professional recording on LP (Altarus AIR 2-9100) issued in 1985. The composer's manuscript, except as detailed below, and save for a few eccentricities, is clear and leaves little room for doubt as to the notes. Other editorial interventions, where significant, are indicated in the normal way - ( ).

The text and punctuation has been corrected back to Whitman's original. Where Whitman uses a dash (eg, in particular, in the *Dirge for Two Veterans*) this has been replaced by a comma in order to avoid confusion with a word extension line.

The composer has an idiosyncratic way of notating text where, in a vocal melisma, he places the final letters of a single word over the final note - eg in *Beat! beat! drums!* his underlay is be-at rather than beat\_\_ and whi-rr, rather than whirr\_\_. This has been followed in this movement simply to underline the vigour of the rhythm. Elsewhere the underlay has been restored to normal conventions.

The composer's use of slurs and melismas is inconsistent, so their use has been regularised. However, vocal slurs have been omitted in the interests of clarity.

### **Individual Notes on the movements**

#### **1**

Bar 23: The final G in the top line is inconsistent with the theme as in bar 5 and 13. However the composer's manuscript leaves no room for doubt. This may of course be an oversight, but his reading does provide an element of resolution or a release of tension.

Bar 34: The composer has 'through the windows, through the doors'; Whitman's text reads 'through the windows, through doors'.

5 The composer has no key signature. Some musicians, including BTM, prefer to have the text as 'The glory of THE latter house', rather than 'The glory of THIS latter house'. However all Biblical texts consulted are unequivocal about the word 'THIS'.

6 Bar 73. The '(Allegro)' indication is speculative as there is no such indication in the manuscript. However it undeniably makes sense in the context of the music.

7 Bar 3 The composer's manuscript specifically marks the A on the third beat as a natural.

It is to be hoped that this new edition represents the music as close to the original spirit and intention as possible. The present editor's work builds on the pioneering efforts of BTM and Mrs Center; any further emendations are the consequence of the editor's involvement with live performances of the work, including a professional recording on LP (Altarus AIR 2-9100) issued in 1985.

Geoffrey Atkinson, General Editor, July 2014 © Fagus-Music.com

*The composer's manuscript is lodged with the National Library of Scotland; copies can also be obtained from the Scottish Music Centre, City Halls, Candleriggs, Glasgow, G1 1NQ.  
Tel. 0141 552 5222, E-mail: [info@scottishmusiccentre.com](mailto:info@scottishmusiccentre.com)*

*In accordance with Mrs Center's wishes, royalties deriving from the performance of this work will be donated to the British Heart Foundation.*