

It is hard to think of a body of literature that contains a wider (or wilder) range of emotions than the biblical Psalms of David. One moment the psalmist is beside himself with joy, the next in a dark pit of despair. We may find a similarly volatile mix of moods in the modern pop song, but in the Psalms the relationship is not with an earthly beloved but with the dangerously short-fused God of the Old Testament.

A Ceremony of Psalms is a new work for chorus, brass ensemble, percussion and organ written in 2016 expressly for the St. Austell Choral Society. The title is a rather cheeky blend of two of my all-time favourite pieces, *The Symphony of Psalms* by Stravinsky and *A Ceremony of Carols* by Britten. Perhaps I was hoping that some of the magic of these two wonderful works would inspire me. It was daunting to think how often the psalms have been set to music over the years, and I approached the much-loved Psalm 23 with particular trepidation. I had to banish from my mind so many famous and popular versions, not least that catchy TV signature-tune to *The Vicar of Dibley* by the talented Howard Goodall, once a pupil of mine.

Which version of the text to use? For me it had to be the King James English translation, written in the 17th century. The occasional obsolete turn of phrase is more than compensated for by its poetic imagery. *I am like an owl of the desert, a pelican in the wilderness*, complains the psalmist. How better to evoke a feeling of desolation and melancholy? Such words are a gift for the composer. Some of the psalms dance with exaltation too, the final movement (Psalm 150) suggesting the kind of toe-tapping rhythm that might be found in Bernstein or Brubeck. The movements are as follows:

1. Like an owl of the desert (A Song of Solitude) Psalm 102
2. Thou shalt dash them in pieces (A Song of Strife) Psalm 2
3. Beside the still waters (A Song of Solace) Psalm 23
4. I will lift up mine eyes (A Song of Salvation) Psalm 121
5. With the sound of the trumpet (A Song of Celebration) Psalm 150