

From Henry's Desk

Michael's Tune

I have commented in previous articles how the event of polio in history has entered my life when I least expected it. Last October 30, the Rochester Cathedral Choir from Rochester England performed a concert at my church. An information sheet was provided regarding the various pieces performed and the composers. I scanned this information and noticed under the biographical sketch for Herbert Howells the following: "He was deeply affected by two events: hearing (with his friend, the composer Ivor Gurney) the first performance of Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Talis" in Gloucester Cathedral; and the death from polio, at the age of nine, of his son, Michael (after whom he named his tune for the hymn "All My Hope On God Is Founded")." The death of his son from polio jumped off the page at me. I began a little research into this event in the life of Herbert Howells (1892-1983).

English composer Herbert Howells was born in 1892 in Lydney in Gloucestershire, England. He was the youngest of eight children in a family that struggled to maintain a livelihood. His older sister taught him piano and in his youth he assisted his father at the organ at a local Baptist chapel. At age eleven, Herbert Howells joined the choir of the local Anglican Church. His musical talent was recognized and his career took off with great promise. In 1915 at the age of twenty-three, he developed a severe case of hyperthyroidism or Graves Disease. He had a resting pulse of 130. He was unable to walk and talk at the same time. He was given six months to live. With this death sentence, he agreed to try an untried new experiment with radium. He was given radium treatments twice a week for two years. The treatments proved to be effective as Howells lived to age ninety. During World War I, he felt some guilt that he was unable to serve in the British army as many of his musical peers did. In 1920, he married Dorothy Dawe, a young singer. In 1923, a daughter, Ursula, was born, and on April 12, 1926, a son, Michael, was born. Nine years later on September 3, 1935, Michael contracted polio. Howells kept a diary throughout most of his life. His entries for the onset of Michael's illness are as follows:

Wednesday 4 (September): Mick's coming to our room in early morning. Temperature. Bad Back. Dr. Nanda sent for. Herbert arrived with coat he thought Mick had lost. Dr. N at 2:30 (PM), Chill? To St. B (riavels) for medicine. At 9 o'clock in Taylor's car.

Thursday 5: Mick worse. Dr. N at 11:15. Orders for London. Ambulance and Cheltenham Flier - London - Dr. Dowling, Nursing Home, Dr. Hunt, Fearful anxiety.

Friday 6: Nursing Home at 8:45 (AM) – Dr. H at 9 AM. With M most of the morning – lunch with Scotts. M again at 2:30 (PM). Grave change. Mrs. Fisher came – Mick worse always. Dr. H 7 PM. Hope, then despair. Dr. Brunton. Dr. Fisher,,, Mick died at 10:10 PM +

These brief diary entries provide witness to the potential rapid nature of the polio virus' ability to invade the central nervous system resulting in death. On Tuesday, September 3, 1935, nine year old Michael had been busy mowing lawns. He began to feel unwell that evening and was sent to bed early. The next day he was clearly ill with fever, chills, and a "bad back." The next day his illness was grave and Dr. Nanda, his first doctor, ordered that Michael be transferred to London. He was taken by ambulance to the Gloucester railway station and rode the Cheltenham flier train to London. Michael arrived in London about twenty-four hours prior to his death. He was to be seen by four additional doctors during those twenty-four hours in London. Twelve year old sister Ursula recalled Michael's appearance as they drove him to the Gloucester railway station. She stated that he was turning 'bluey-black' as his lungs began to fail. This early observation would indicate that Michael had contracted a severe case of bulbar polio. In the mid 1930's available iron lungs were small in number. There was one iron lung in London, but it was on the other side of town. Sister Ursula stated in an interview years later: "It would have been possible to get it (the iron lung) to him, but the doctors felt that it might be kinder to let him die given that he would anyway be totally paralyzed for the rest of what would have been a much shortened life. So they had this awful decision to make, but fortunately he died while they were deliberating."

Had an iron lung been available to Michael, there is the possibility that he would have recovered to a significant extent as many survivors of iron lung bulbar polio were able to do. However, Michael's polio was in 1935 and not ten years later when the iron lung was more readily available. As survivors, we may tend to forget that many children and some adults succumbed to acute polio during the epidemic years. During the great polio epidemic in New York City in 1916, 2500 children died of acute polio. This occurred before the invention of the iron lung. Following the invention of the iron lung, there is no doubt that the negative pressure iron lung cylinder tank with bellows saved thousands of lives around the world. Today, positive pressure ventilators (the descendants of the iron lung) save lives on a daily basis as one has done for me since 1971.

Michael was buried on September 11 at Twigworth where his parents had been married. Sister Ursula remembers the time period following Michael's death. "Herbert (Michael's father) was an extremely emotional person. I don't know what he was like religiously before Michael's death, but afterwards, every weekend we went to Gloucester (from London to Twigworth). We used to live in

church. But that was an emotional thing as Michael was buried there. As far as religion goes I think he adored the music and the buildings – he adored cathedrals. Emotionally, he had a sort of spiritual sense. I know he said to me, about a year before he died when we were sitting one day in the dining room: ‘I don’t believe there’s anything’. I was very surprised that he said it as definitely as that. That was the only surprise I had. Not that he didn’t believe. It was the fact that he said it, and came out with it.”

Shortly after Michael’s death, it was twelve year old Ursula, who having observed her inconsolable and ever grieving father, suggested that he should write about Michael in music. Thus, *Hymnus Paradisi*, an English Mass, made its first stumbling steps toward the great achievement which a Gloucester audience witnessed for the first time fifteen years later. Also in memory of Michael, Howells wrote the music for the hymn “All My Hope On God Is Founded.” For many years thereafter, Howells wrote church music. His biographer, Paul Spicer, wrote that Howell’s music “marked him out as the greatest contributor to the music of the Anglican Church in this century.”

Despite Howell’s doubt about a merciful God, perhaps his son’s death allowed the love of God to be expressed through his music. I have had the opportunity of hearing “All My Hope On God is Founded” as performed by the Chancel Choir of River Road Church, Baptist during a Communion Service. The words and music of this hymn are inspiring to anyone who has suffered a personal loss or is in despair. The hymn consists of five verses. The first three verses were written by Jaachim Neander (1650-1680). The last two verses were apparently written by Robert Seymore Bridges (1844-1930). In memory of his son, Michael Howells, Howells set the five verses of this hymn to a new tune called “Michael.” If you have never had the opportunity of singing or hearing this hymn, I hope you might have the opportunity some day.

All My Hope On God Is Founded

All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance He guideth,
Only Good and only True,
God unknown,
He alone
Calls my heart to be His own.

Pride of man and earthly glory
Sword and crown betray his trust;
What with care and toil he buildeth
Tower and temple, fall to dust,

But God's power
Hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
Deep His wisdom passing thought:
Splendour, light and life attend Him,
Beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore,
From His store
New-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the Almighty Giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth,
Pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
At His hand,
Joy doth wait on His command.

Still from man to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising
For the gift of Christ His Son.
Christ doth call
One and all:
Ye who follow shall not fall.

If the reader would like to hear this hymn at a service in Westminster Abbey, the youtube link below should give you that chance.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2oYTtyBSxk>

References:

Spicer, Paul, *Herbert Howells*, Poetry Wales Press Ltd, Bridgend, Wales. 1998.

Information Bulletin, Rochester Cathedral Special Choir, Rochester, England, 1998.

Musical Information provided by Carl Freeman, Minister of Music of River Road Church, Baptist, Richmond, Virginia.

Additional information provided by Lynn Singleton of East Sussex, England and Hilary Hallam of Lincoln, England.

(This very moving article is a repeat of one published over a decade ago.)