**Stevie Wishart**

**June 2022**

**“Gold and Precious Silver”**

**an intermezzo for J.S.Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No.6***

**according to the Respond of the Feast of St Eanswythe,**

**by the choir mistress of West Malling Abbey and 13 blackbird songbursts**

For Tom Kemp

The starting point and title for this intermezzo is a chant from West Malling Abbey, which is dedicated to St Eanswythe, daughter of King Eadbald, King of Kent in the 7th Century AD. This 34-note chant, written by the Abbey’s Choir Mistress in 2007, can be adapted to thread between some of the tonalities of Brandenburg Concerto No. 6.

When I started composing at dawn (as is my habit) late this winter, the blackbirds were just starting to sing in the spring, and despite the chill through my open window I felt I heard a blackbird responding to my initial ideas and in Bb major. So despite my initial decision not to use birdsong (as it has rather dominated my work of late and is so very difficult),  I gave in, as the blackbirds were already part of the music. As the work developed thirteen blackbird songbursts were woven into the gold and silver, selected because they resonated with the chord progression implied by the elegantly simple melody of St Eanswythe’s respond. The songbursts are of course rapid and complex and I heard them immediately fitting the silvery tones of the harpsichord which can be played so very fast; and since I have always wanted to write for Steven Devine, the harpsichord became the intermezzo’s soloist as a voice for the blackbird.

I chose to work with *Brandenburg Concerto No. 6* because of its rare combination of bowed string timbres that hark back to the Renaissance while nonetheless being in the Baroque. I wanted to get under the surface of Bach’s mellow and unusual orchestration. In the first part of “Gold and precious silver” the strings play a sequence of 34 chords very slowly allowing the timbres to sustain our attention. The cello freely moves through each note of St Eanswythe’s melody using only natural harmonics, which I hope further draws attention to those mellow sound-colours of bowed strings without the brightness of the violin. Flying over the surface, the harpsichord plays 34 blackbird songbursts as close to bird-speed as possible.

In part 2 the same music is played out again - exactly repeated note for note but at double-speed and infused with Bach's pulsing rhythms leaving the harpsichord only an occasionally chance to play some of the blackbird songs. With the harmonies of part 1 now diffused rhythmically,  themes from Brandenburg 6 are buffeted against the repeated St Eanswythe's Respond: the exquisitely drawn-out theme of Bach’s slow movement is played on the viola and contrasts with the lighter themes of the outer movement which like the St Eanswythe’s melody are highlights of the harmonies rather than distinct melodies, and thus respond to how I have used the blackbird’s songs.

The title comes from the words in the Respond which then made me think of gold and silver shreds of sound inter-weaving the simplicity of the St Eanswythe melody and inherent harmonies with Bach’s themes in the Brandenburg Concerto. The harpsichord and the blackbird’s extraordinary song carves its way through all this like a blazing trail of gold and silver -  a liminal path that links time and place of this performance in West Malling Abbey with Bach’s time and of St Eanswythe long before.

