

# Stainer's resurrection cantata

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Roderic Dunnett on *The Daughter of Jairus*

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*Christ Resurrects the Daughter of Jairus* by Johann Friedrich Overbeck

SIR JOHN STAINER is remembered primarily for one work: his Passion “Meditation”, *The Crucifixion*. Yet he was one of the outstanding musicians of the 19th century. He composed some 30 anthems, so that although his “I saw the Lord” has been widely recorded, only one collection of some eight anthems (plus an Evening Service) exists, recorded by Benjamin Nicholas and the first-rate choir of Tewkesbury Abbey (Priory PRCD 833).

Yet there exists a smattering of larger works: an oratorio, *Gideon*, composed in 1865 for his doctorate; a cantata, *St. Mary Magdalen*, for the 1883 Gloucester Three Choirs; and the shamefully neglected *The Daughter of Jairus* (1878), also for the Three Choirs, which has now been recovered from oblivion at Welshpool Town Hall, Powys, by the captivating Guilsfield Singers.

This is not the first revival since the Leeds Festival performance in 1910: an enlarged St Bartholomew's Polyphony Choir, redubbed the Stainer Centenary Chorus, revived it with full orchestra at St Michael and All Angels, Croydon, in 2001, where it was also recorded.

We owe this mid-Wales initiative, however, to the Guilsfield choir's enterprising music director, Gerry Howe, who oversaw the necessary editing of (mainly) the non-string parts from the original 1878 score, held along with the Stainer archive by Durham University. Jeremy Dibble, at Durham, is [Stainer's biographer](#) (Boydell & Brewer).

And a staggeringly impressive cantata Howe's conducting revealed *Jairus* to be. He characterises it, without hyperbole, as “a neglected little masterpiece of English Church Music”; but it is, in fact, as this uplifting performance revealed, a weighty and striking setting of the biblical narrative, with some well-imagined supplementing of the story. The chorus contributed to this uplift: choir passages were robust and engaging, sung with complete assurance and a feel for the idiom.

The Overture is substantial, and extended, anticipating several points in the work: quite an achievement in itself. After a jaunty first chorus, "In that day shall the Lord of Hosts", in which upper voices yield to a more reflective passage for lower parts, the work moves straight to the soprano narration, as Jesus is approached by the deeply distressed father ("My little daughter . . ."), sung with feeling by the bass Michael Birchwood.

The crowd interferes (rather as at the anointing at Bethany), but the soprano assures him: "Fear not, and she shall be made whole." The soprano Sarah Garrett's contribution to the narrative was enchanting. Clearly the child's recovery will be dependent on the belief of the father.

A lovely tenor solo follows, "My hope is in the Everlasting", beautifully crafted, and alluringly sung by Christopher Barnes. But the female chorus is already lamenting the child's passing ("Sweet, tender flower") in gently rhymed half-lines and, perhaps surprisingly, not unduly cloying: "Sleep, gentle child, pure, undefiled: weeping to dust we yield thee." What might a few decades ago have seemed unduly sentimental does not so now: one is content to let the Victorian idiom stand, just as one makes similar allowances for, say, Elgar's *Caractacus*.

While the women mourn, the men, led first by the tenors, are sneering and cynical: "This man professeth to have knowledge of God, let us see if his words be true." But it is to the upper voices that the miracle is allotted: "And he entered in where the damsel was lying, and took her hand . . . and her spirit came again, and she arose and walked." In 1878, it is likely that Stainer had in mind his own loss, in 1874, of his infant son, "a sweet curly headed boy", in whose memory his touching anthem "They have taken away my Lord" was composed.

The orchestral harmonies here could almost be early Wagner. There follows the trumpeting chorus "Awake, thou that sleepest", in lively triple time, and the spurring to purity and innocence: "Be dead unto sin. . . Let not sin reign in your mortal body," encompassing a neat fugato passage.

The soprano and tenor duet "Love Divine, all loves excelling", lauding Christian perfection, is the most exquisite piece of music here, setting with utter freshness the celebrated hymn of Charles Wesley: operatic in character, its word-painting eclipses the better-known hymn tune that Stainer composed for those words.

It opens the way to a resplendent Finale, "To him who left his throne on high", in which Stainer builds a superbly vital double fugue; there are echoes of Handel here, but also of Bach's craftsmanship: Stainer was perhaps the supreme late-19th-century executant of Bach's organ music. The cantata's conclusion has, dare one venture it, all the flair of the "Hallelujah Chorus".

So, this was a huge success, enriched by the well-prepared Maldwyn Strings (and some exciting additional wind and brass): full of spirit and vitality, as well as tenderness, from the choir, and ingenuity from the conductor and soloists. Startlingly rewarding, *The Daughter of Jairus* deserves to be championed by more than a handful of England's more articulate choral societies.

*A performance of the work from the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, is on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). The St Bartholomew's choir's English CD recording is £7.50 (including p&p) from [www.polychoir.co.uk](http://www.polychoir.co.uk). Reprinted or secondhand vocal scores are readily available online.*