

## **ALEC ROTH: RECENT REVIEWS**

A TIME TO BE BORN & A TIME TO DIE, first performance, 9 February 2019 - two reviews

A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED, first performance, 24 September 2017 - one review

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### **A Time to be Born and a Time to Die - cantata for soloists, choir and orchestra**

Ex Cathedra / Jeffrey Skidmore, Elgar Concert Hall, University of Birmingham,  
9 February 2019

**BIRMINGHAM POST, 14 February 2019** *and also online at:*

**MIDLANDS MUSIC REVIEWS (Christopher Morley) \*\*\*\*\***

LINK: <https://www.midlandsmusicreviews.com/2019/02/ex-cathedra-alec-roth-premiere.html>

In Alec Roth Ex Cathedra have the most congenial of composers-in-residence, supplying the choir with music which is always well-crafted, rewarding in the listening, and with points of reference which we can all recognise.

His latest commission, A Time to be Born and a Time to Die, received a triumphant premiere under Jeffrey Skidmore in the comfortable Elgar Hall, a venue which allowed full scope for Ex Cathedra's trademark imaginative choreography. - not least Skidmore's picking up of the "hairy drum" and thudding a beat as everyone left the stage.

Written for a smoothly interwoven quartet of soloists - here Katie Trethewey, Martha McLorinan, Samuel Boden and Greg Skidmore - community choir (drawn from St Mary's Hospice, Birmingham Children's Hospital and Birmingham Women's Hospital), minimally cringeworthy audience participation, and main chorus, the cantata also calls for a period-instrument orchestral ensemble. The sound is lovely, but I wonder how many choral societies around the land will be able to summon up an oboe da caccia? \*

Amid the well-chosen array of poetic texts there is perhaps too much emphasis on the indignation of actually being born (coincidentally on the day I read of someone in India suing his parents for forcing him into the world), but there is also a sense of Finzi's intimations of immortality; and Tippett's ideal of communal involvement is never very far away too.

Ex Cathedra delivered this attractive piece with full tone, beautifully scaled to a range of dynamics, and telling clarity of diction. There were several points of reference (thank goodness not the ghastly "Turn, turn, turn"), chiefly the ancient French carol-tune "Noel Nouvelet", and a stunning recourse to Bach's Passion Chorale, a pointer towards Ex Cathedra's planned traversal of all 200-odd extant Bach cantatas, of which two completed this programme.

*\* [In fact, the cantata is designed to be performable on either modern instruments or "period" instruments, and so the score specifies either "Cor Anglais or Oboe da Caccia". This was later corrected in the Midlands Music Reviews version.]*

## THE CHURCH TIMES, 15 February 2019 (Roderic Dunnett)

LINK: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/15-february/books-arts/music/music-review-alec-roth>

Alec Roth has been the choir Ex Cathedra's adopted composer for some ten years. His contributions to its repertoire have been numerous and worth while: sometimes shorter pieces adapted well to the choir's needs, sometimes more extensive, such as his 40-part motet *Earthrise*. The thrust of his newest work, *A Time to be Born and a Time to Die* (after Ecclesiastes 3: "To everything there is a season. . ."), given its world première at the University of Birmingham's Bramall Concert Hall, is to a degree both religious — Christmas and Easter — and humanist, recalling, perhaps, Roth's close collaborations with the Indian-born writer Vikram Seth.

Commissioning new work may sometimes be a gamble, but a familiarity between composer and ensemble, as here in Roth's close relationship with Jeffrey Skidmore and Ex Cathedra, is always an advantage. This new cantata excelled in many respects: in its design and conception; in its contrasting moods and tempi; in its subtle colourings; and in its beautifully judged writing for choir and soloists. Avoiding the obvious, Roth cherishes the naïve and intimate in exploring, and polishing, his chosen texts.

One might have harboured doubts about the last. Can one weave a truly coherent whole from such sources as Blake, Traherne, Yeats, Kipling, the doomed young aristocrat Chidioc Tichborne, Longfellow, and more? Tichborne, writing the night before his execution, adjusting to the finite — or infinite? — offers a clue; for Roth has created not a patchwork, but an enticing floral eiderdown, rich in imagery and in musical finery (Bach is a great inspiration) which transits from the innocence of birth to an embracing of imminent death ("My glass is full, and now my glass is run, And now I live, and now my life is done").

Kipling's double-edged "A birth and a death" (reflecting love for his feared-dead soldier offspring) makes the link between lines that evoke the certainty of death or parallel the nativity story. This launches out with "Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors! Launch on the living world, and spring to light!", and — a surprise, perhaps — Thom Gunn's "Baby Song" ("Why don't they simply put me back Where it is warm and wet and black?").

The former lines (Anna Laetitia Barbauld), set for solo bass (Greg Skidmore), are lithe, elegant, and expressive. Gunn's (as usual, rhyming) poem, pleading and emotional, with fabulously crafted double-bass solo, was exquisitely delivered by the sensitive, gorgeously voiced tenor Samuel Boden.

The alto soloist, Martha McLorinan, with a richly glowing tone, had a touching Aztec cradle song — a moving interpolation; and nurtured finely the lilting setting of a tragic mini-ballad by Mary Coleridge. Enchanting hints of bassoon and flute tinge the Traherne verses, sung by the soprano Katie Trethewey.

Much of this rewarding work has an almost magical delicacy: time and again, Roth enhances rather than diminishes his poets. Skilled word-painting is an art at which Britten excelled (occasionally you sense a distant echo); and it is crucial here. There is Tippett, too, in the mix; for Yeats's "Cradle Song" enfolds patterns that have the flavour of blues or spirituals.

Yet nothing is overdone. It is the spareness of the writing (including, here, period strings) which gives Roth's work its innocent and intimate atmosphere. He succeeds in adjusting styles — the Kipling vision of Mary Magdalene comes close to opera — while maintaining a persuasively

coherent whole. Walt Whitman's "To one shortly to die", with some scintillating *a cappella* singing, feels, paradoxically, like a lullaby.

Entrancingly introduced by rippling viola, the choral setting of Longfellow revisits the spiritual or blues. The gently symbolic text bespeaks resignation ("the hostler calls. . . The day returns but nevermore returns the traveller, to the shore. . ."). The endless cycle of life completes its transition, and concludes: the promise of the title has indeed been fulfilled.

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### **A Road Less Travelled - solo cantata for tenor, guitar and/or string quartet**

Mark Padmore (tenor), Morgan Szymanski (guitar), Sacconi String Quartet  
Malvern Priory (Autumn in Malvern Festival), 24 September 2017

### **BIRMINGHAM POST, 14 February 2019 (Christopher Morley) \*\*\*\*\***

The Malvern-based composer Alec Roth never fails to provide absorbing premieres for Midlands organisations, most spectacularly for Ex Cathedra, and his latest, commissioned by the heroic Autumn in Malvern Festival, now in its 28<sup>th</sup> year, proved as instantly communicative as those in his previous worklist.

A Road Less Travelled sets selected texts from poems by Dymock's Edward Thomas – pungent, poignant and always with a glance over the shoulder at the Great War which would claim him. Its sequence in Roth's structure builds an irresistible sense of universality over and above such time-sensitive issues, and the language the composer speaks from an eloquent string quartet (the Sacconi) and a gentle guitar (Morgan Szymanski, sounding now Japanese koto-like, now lutenist) brings Balkan, oriental and indeed Arabic overtones in its modality and often dance-like rhythms.

Mark Padmore's tenor was often the discreet marshaller in all of this absorbing 35-minute work, while always finding a wonderful balance between narration and commentary. His voice was often eerily unaccompanied, and evoked ancient plainchant in his delivery – not far away from the Noh-play influences upon Britten's three Church Parables.