


The Way to Heaven



Choral music by
James Cook

Voces Oxonienses
director: Rufus Frowde
organ: Festyn Evans

The Way to Heaven

1.	When death cuts asunder	[1:26]
2.	That which we call death is not death	[3:28]
3.	The lap of eternity	[1:48]
4.	O lovely heaven!	[2:38]
5.	All loves excelling	[4:33]
6.	He was most lovely	[4:00]
7.	Christ's matchless love	[2:45]
8.	In the primrose of my days	[4:00]
9.	I give to thee eternal life	[3:46]
10.*	Christ's blood is heaven's key	[7:22]
11.	Run sweet babe	[1:57]
12.	If this be dying	[1:16]
13.	Death is my best friend	[1:45]
14.	We shall meet in comfort at our journey's end	[4:20]
15.*	The way to heaven	[6:31]
16.*	Beyond the movable heavens	[4:53]
17.	Heavenly death	[3:31]

Total playing time: [60:05]

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The way to heaven

In 1994, I made my first vocal settings from the King James bible of 1611, the *Seven Motets of Sacred Love*, and subsequently I decided to investigate the possibility of using other sacred texts written at approximately the same time as the venerable bible translation was made.

The Christian or Puritan authors who were responsible for a vast amount of theological literature written during this period (the 16th and 17th centuries) may have suffered the most persecution of any minority, despite the changing denominations of the various monarchs who reigned over them. Perhaps this is why they were so frequently preoccupied with the themes of suffering, death and the hoped-for heavenly consolation which followed.

Their love of word-play, alliteration and

assonance make their texts of particular fascination to the composer, and the fact that much verbal “cross-pollination” occurs between several writers allows passages by different authors to be combined in one text without any obvious joints.

These puritan writers loved the literary conceit of combining two or more similarly sounding words in one clause, such as John Trapp’s “Money mostly maketh mastery”. The rhythmic energy of this line is startling and material like this is a gift for any composer.

Often, writers picked up ideas from one another. Henry Smiths “Marriage doth signify merry-age” is repeated and further elaborated with John Trapp’s “Make marriage a merry-age which else will prove a mar-age”. At times, writers would directly quote one from another, apparently without realizing it, such was their familiarity with

make music he says “to sing with grace in your hearts is the best melody” for “the plainsong always makes the best music”. Perhaps it is not surprising that he should have such a wide academic knowledge, seeing that he was headmaster of the grammar school at Stratford upon Avon from 1623, the school which William Shakespeare attended, and to whom Trapp is reputed to be related, through the inter-marriage of their families.

Although John Trapp escaped persecution, most of the Puritans were not so fortunate and two more of them, whose writing I have used widely, suffered considerably. They were Richard Baxter (1615-1691) and John Bunyan (1628-1688). In 1684 Baxter was put on trial for sedition under the infamous Judge Jeffries, who called Baxter “a knave” and his words “Presbyterian cant... enough to load a cart” – such was Baxter's prolificity and Jeffries' partiality. Judge Jeffries

became the model for John Bunyan's Lord Hategood from the *Pilgrim's Progress* of 1678. Bunyan's own trials began in the restoration year of 1660 and both authors endured years of imprisonment as a result of this, although they could easily have faced the death penalty for expounding their views. Baxter only escaped it because he was near to death anyway.

No wonder then that the Puritans tackled the dark issues of suffering and death head on. Their attitude to death was not to sweep it under the carpet but to face up to it, especially as the salvation of the individual was dependent, in their view, on their state of grace at death.

In his *Treatise on comforting afflicted Consciences*, Robert Bolton (1572-1631) gives advice to the Christian on what to expect when death approaches. Bolton's spiritual mentor was Thomas Peacock,

whose three-week death-bed ordeal was described by Bolton in his *Last visitation, conflicts and death of Mr. Peacock* published in 1660. Mr. Peacock's tribulation and eventual joy was witnessed by several eminent Puritans and more than one account of his ordeal was written. These writings became a source of comfort to many who faced affliction in those troubled times.

Another whose death-bed ordeal became a source of comfort was John Janeway (1633-1657). One minister who attended him observed that he had the "largest share of divine communication", such that Janeway begged those around him not to pray for his recovery, such was his ecstasy. Some of Janeway's last words form the text of "If this be dying" [12]

Other reputed "last words" come from William Gouge (1578-1653): "Death is my

best friend" [13] and Charles Wesley (1619-1696): "O could I catch a smile from Thee a drop into eternity" which is used in "I give to thee eternal life" [9]

Their preoccupation with the subject of death meant likewise a delight in describing its corollary, the resurrection and the joy of heaven. In "Heavenly death" [17], both topics are combined in one text. So the contents of this recording alternate between dark and light and although the music is set out in the chronological order of composition, it still manages to follow the narrative structure of a journey from earthly sorrow to heavenly happiness. A journey made many times throughout each of the sets of sacred pieces I have written.

Bibliography:

A Treatise on comforting afflicted consciences (reprint of 1626 edition) pub.

Richard Baxter's Autobiography pub.
Christian Focus, 1998

1. When death cuts asunder comes from a collection of pieces called *Body of Divinity* (1996-7) in which the three incarnations of Christ are musically represented: his pre-existence before creation, his earthy ministry, and final resurrected state in heaven. The piece is a canon in which the four voices enter a major third apart, making an augmented triad harmony, which although bright and intense is also disorienting; an ideal way to depict the transition of the soul from body to heaven.

2. That which we call death is not death comes from the set of *Twelve Spheric Anthems* (2000) which take their name from the words "another hemisphere" contained in the text. The music is built up as a spiky fugue in which the principal theme or

subject is juxtaposed in various ways; sometimes quite violently. The music ends serenely enough, however, in the major mode.

3. The lap of eternity is from my collection of *Cantiones Ecclesiasticae* (2000-1). C major harmony radiates out from a central middle E until at its extremities the highest and lowest voices sing in gentle dialogue with each other. The piece is written using seven voices.

4. O lovely heaven! comes from a collection called *Cantiones Spiritualis* (2001). Here, a wispy strand of melody is overlapped and layered using the six voices. After taking some unusual twists and turns the music ends peacefully in unclouded C major.

5. All loves excelling comes from the 33-movement set of *Psalms, Hymns and*

Spiritual Songs (2001). This chorale-like movement has its main interest in the soprano line, with the lower voices filling out the harmony. However there is some subtle imitative writing between all four voices.

6-8. These three movements are from the set of 20 *Hymnsongs* (2001) in which a strenuous effort has been made to give each of the four voices (SATB) some solo melodic interest. **He was most lovely** is intensely lyrical but simply harmonised. **In the primrose of my days** has richer harmony and **Christ's matchless love** falls somewhat in between.

9. I give to thee eternal life comes from *Requiems and Placebo Songs* of 2001. It is set for double choir in which the two groups are divided according to gender, four female and four male singers, who both accompany and pursue each other throughout the course of this jauntily paced movement.

10. Christ's blood is heaven's key is the final part of the *Triptych* (2002). The previous two movements were included on the earlier CD "Heaven's Happiness " (Divine Art 25023). The music draws upon the imagery of Psalm 23's "Valley of the Shadow of Death" in which a combatant (such as John Bunyan's Pilgrim who fights Apollyon, or Joss Whedon's Buffy who fights the Master in his subterranean lair) journeys through a dark region to win ultimate victory in the light. The use of the organ in this set adds much to the drama and gravitas of the music.

11-12. These two pieces **Run sweet babe** and **If this be dying** come from the collection *Lachrymae* ("Tears") of 2003. The words "run sweet babe" are taken from John Bunyan's *Heavenly Footman* in which a newly (spiritually) born Christian (hence "babe") is encouraged to run the race of life to its heavenly end. In *If this be dying*

some of the poignant last words of John Janeway are set to the music in dignified simplicity.

13-14. These two pieces come from the collection *Gradualia, Book 3* (2003). , **Death is my best friend** sets some of the last words of William Gouge, an eminent Puritan author and Westminster Assembly member, in a grave and simple manner. However, in **We shall meet in comfort at our journey's end**, the music is light-hearted and optimistic with one main melody in triple time teased out in various guises between the four voices; the movement provides a happy conclusion to this set of *Gradualia*.

15-16. **The way to heaven** and **Beyond the movable heavens** are the first and last movements respectively of the *Diptych* (2003). In the first, the voices (SATB) are used sparingly, mostly with only two sounding at any one time. The organ follows

the voices high above in its ethereal upper register. In the second piece, the organ provides a chorded accompaniment of alternating C minor and F major triads. These two triads first blur into each other but finally resolve into C minor at the end. They provide a hypnotic backdrop to the vocal parts. In both movements the organ has an important melodic role, especially in the bass pedal notes.

17. Heavenly death is from a collection called *Enchiridion* (2004); the title simply means “book”. This is another double choir piece, in which only the top soprano and tenor of each group sing the tune; the other voices back them with a triad of C – sometimes major, sometimes minor. This acts as a pedal point building up to the final conclusion when the music for both groups of singers resolves into the major mode.

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JAMES COOK studied composition at Oxford University and was briefly employed at Eton College.

Voces Oxonienses is a choir of top British professional singers specifically founded to record Cook's music.

Their director Rufus Frowde was organ scholar at Merton College, Oxford and at Worcester Cathedral, and is currently assistant director of music at Hampton Court.

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An
Astounding Sounds recording

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TEXTS

1. When death cuts asunder the string of the body, the soul, as a dove, flies away and is at rest. When death has given the saints the wings of a dove, then they shall fly away to paradise and be at rest.

2. That which we call death is not death indeed to the saints of God; it is but the image of death, the shadow and metaphor of death.

3. Shut the doors upon me, and as in the lap of eternity, among those divine souls, employ myself in sweet contents, and pity the rich and great ones who know not this happiness in heaven.

4. O lovely heaven where love doth reign, where love doth live! In heaven is no futurity, all is present. In heaven there is eternity, but no old age.

5. Shall I dare to contend in love with Thee?

Or set my borrowed, languid spark against the element and Sun of love? Can I love as high, as deep, as broad, as long as love itself? As much as He that gave me all that I have? God dwells in the saints and the saints dwell in God; it was so here, "God is Love"; and he that dwelleth in love dwells in God, and God in him.

6. He was most lovely on the cross, because then He shewed most love to us. He bled love in every vein, His drops of blood were love drops. The more blood, the more lovely. Christ not only prayed for peace, but bled for it. It was nothing but pure love to lay out His blood. Christ comes forth and shews His love, His heart, His bowels, His blood. Looking on a bleeding Christ causes a soft bleeding heart. But let God's spirit like the sun return and shine on the heart, and now it has a gracious thaw and it melts in love. He was most lovely on the cross, because then He shewed most love to us. He shed tears for those that shed His blood. O yes! Most lovely on the cross, because then He

shewed most love to us.

7. As Christ's love is matchless, so it is endless. The flower of His love is sweet; and that which makes it sweeter is that it never dies. His love is eternised. Oh amazing astonishing love! "Behold what manner of love is this?" Oh the depth of the love of Christ! that Christ should love with transcendent love. The flower of his love is sweet; and that which makes it sweeter is that it never dies. His love is eternal love,

8. In the primrose of my days, I sweat for you, I wept for you; I bled for you; I hung upon the cross for you; I bore the wrath of God for you; and I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved. They shall be bound with chains of darkness who weren't drawn with cords of love. There is no love nor loveliness in us that should cause a beam of His love to shine upon us. When Christ bleeds for us, then may we

say "Behold how He loved us!" Who can see Christ die and not be "sick of love?" But for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. So for me to live is Christ, He is the joy of my life. In the primrose of His life, Christ died for me.

9. O, could I catch a smile from Thee and drop into eternity. For death is only my passage into a blessed eternity. Here shall I be encircled and come forth no more. The soul of man bears the image of God and is never quiet till it rest in God. Then the saints shall forget their solitary hours. They there rest from their labours but not from their delights. So draw Thou me, we will run after Thee. From all eternity "today have I begotten thee". You shall die but once and then live with God forever. I give to thee eternal life, a blossom of eternity.

10. Death poured out all its poison, and lost its sting in Christ when He became a curse for us. Death, ever since it walked to Mount Calvary, is turned to believers

into the gate to life. The child may walk in that dark entry without fear if he have but his Father by the hand: "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." Death indeed is strong, it overcometh principalities and powers but as strong as it is, it can not separate God and the godly person. For which way you fall when you die, that way you shall lie eternally. In one moment sick and sad, in the next well and glad, never to know more what groans and tears mean. The cross of Christ is the key of paradise, Christ's blood is the key that opens the gate of heaven, Christ's blood is heaven's key. So why shouldst thou be afraid to die, who hopest to live by dying? Is the apprentice afraid of the day when his time will be out? Death is all this to thee! Thy indenture expires, and thy jubilee is come; thy race is run, and the crown is won, and is sure to drop on thy head, for death is harmless to the people of God; its shafts leave no sting in them.

11. Run, sweet babe, until you are weary and then I'll pick you up and carry you. When you have run yourself weary then the Lord Jesus will pick you up and carry you. The greatest thing that we can desire, next to the glory of God, is our own salvation. So run, sweet babe, until you are weary, and then I'll pick you up and carry you in my arms.

12. If this be dying, it is sweet. Christ's arms and smiles, and love, surely would turn hell into heaven.

13. Death is my best friend, next to Jesus Christ. I am sure I shall be with Christ when I die. I must make haste now, for if the sun sets and I am not at my journey's end, I am a lost man. My life is gone. But death is my best friend, next to Jesus Christ and I am sure I shall be with Christ when I die.

14. There is a day coming, and it can't be far from us, in which we shall meet lovingly in heaven There is but one heaven; miss

that and where can you take up your lodging but in hell? The Christian, like a star in the heavens, wades through the cloud that for a time hides his comfort. Christ swam to the throne through a sea of sorrow; and so must the saints to the Kingdom of heaven. Heaven must needs be a glorious city which hath God for its builder and inhabitant. There is a day coming in which we'll meet in love in heaven.

15. What is the joy of the blessed, but to have a clear transparent sight of God, and to be in the sweet and soft embrace of His love forevermore. The way to heaven is but one way. The way to heaven is hard to find. Oh, what a brave day will that be, when I shall go to that council and company of happy souls. Happy is he that, after due preparation, is passed through the gates of death ere he be aware. This candidate of immortality, the highest graduate in glory.

16. Beyond the movable heavens there is

neither body nor time, place nor vacuum. This is the heaven of heaven that the soul shall be filled up with God. This thought puts lilies and roses into the ghastly face of death.

17. By death heaven advanceth forward that happy term when all my miseries shall end at once.

AUTHORS whose texts have been used: Richard Baxter, Thomas Brooks, John Bunyan, Jeremiah Burroughs, Joseph Caryl, Thomas Case, Thomas Doolittle, John Flavel, Thomas Gataker, William Gouge, William Gurnall, John Janeway, Thomas Jacob, Thomas Manton, George Swinnock, John Trapp, Thomas Watson, Charles Wesley.

Biblical extracts from Psalm 23, and The New Testament.

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