

COMPOSER'S NOTE

The King James Bible of 1611 is one of the cultural milestones of Western civilisation and its poetic phraseology, its narrative imagery, its ethical dilemmas and its uninhibited spirituality permeate the English language like no other document in history, with the exception of the first folio of William Shakespeare, published at more or less the same time. So how does one set about bringing it to life with music, and doing justice to its ancient Judeo-Christian truths?

My biggest hurdle was how to give the colourfully dense, early seventeenth-century prose a metrical shape that would lend itself to the balancing patterns of song. Whereas Tyndale, the KJB's mighty predecessor translation, has a more single-syllabled Anglo-Saxon rhythm to it, the team of writers who produced the KJB were learned scholars who introduced more compound Latinate words into it, and these have the effect of disrupting the natural flow of the language from the composer's perspective, even if it makes the KJB better to read out loud. I turned immediately to Handel's *Messiah*, a piece that solved the problem with beautiful simplicity: Jennens, his librettist, and Handel reduced the long prose passages of each excerpt to short, resounding phrases, then repeated them in each aria and chorus until metrical symmetry was established for each melody. This is perhaps obvious, but extraordinarily effective.

Knowing that my 2011 King James Bible oratorio was intended to reflect the themes of both Old and New Testaments, I set about selecting what I felt were the ten most memorable and powerful passages, then created ten movements from these, working chronologically through from Genesis to Revelation, with the exception of placing the opening verses of St John before Genesis, as part of the mystery of Creation. The commission was requested and sponsored by Sir Ewan Harper with the express aim that it should be anchored in the language of the King James Bible and be accessible and suitable for young singers. This would mean that a new generation, who might not perhaps have as easy a familiarity with the ringing phrases of the text as their parents and grandparents, might be introduced to it through the expressive power and unabashed sincerity of their own voices.

Howard Goodall

40 B. *mf*

For all the law is fulfilled in

45 + T.

one word, e-ven in this; Thou shalt

50 S. A. *mf*

thou shalt love thy

T. B. *mf*

love thy neigh - bour as thy - self, thou shalt love thy

55

neigh - bour as thy - self. —

mp

neigh - bour as thy - self. — For what is a man pro-fit-ed, if he shall

