

The Memorial Church of Harvard University
Music Notes for November 1, 2023

Herbert Howells was born in Gloucestershire, England, and studied with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford and Charles Wood at the Royal College of Music. He was the most important English composer of the generation to succeed Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and Holst, and his contribution to the renaissance of English choral music in the twentieth century is unparalleled. The sudden death of Howells's nine-year old son, Michael, from polio was long-suspected to have been the catalyst for the *Requiem*: Howells, in fact, had written the work three years earlier for Boris Ord and the choir of King's College, Cambridge, but subsequently kept it hidden away until 1980. A work of intense depth and spirituality, its hushed tones and modal harmonies create a haunting, impressionistic atmosphere.

Howells was also a brilliant organist and improviser, with a flair for exploiting the full coloristic potential of the twentieth-century organ. The first set of *Psalm-Preludes* was written between 1915 and 1916, each work offering a musical reflection on a particular psalm verse; the first prelude is based upon the sixth verse of Psalm 34 and is dedicated to Sir Walter Parratt, Professor of Music at Oxford University. Today's postlude is the *Rhapsody No. 1*, one of Howells's earliest published compositions, dating from 1915. The influence of his teacher, Stanford, is still clearly felt, but the ambiguous dissonance heard at the work's central climax would become a signature of Howells's personal harmonic language; it is performed by John Rogers III, a Ferris Choral Fellow in the Harvard University Choir.