

Hiawatha - The Famine **John Dawson**

Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) is probably better known through parodies of its repetitive metre than through reading the original. However, it is a work full of romance and joy, celebration and despair, sorrow and death. John was introduced to it by singing (aged 13) in a performance of the cantata *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898) by the English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912). When he read the whole poem again, he was particularly struck by the poignancy of section XX, called *The Famine*, which includes the death of Hiawatha's wife, Minnehaha ('Laughing Water'). Other characters mentioned in this are Hiawatha's grandmother Nokomis ('Daughter of the Moon'), and Gitche Manito, the 'Master of Life' (a creator figure), to whom Hiawatha cries in despair. Despite the gloomy subject, the work ends on a positive note.

John's composing stems from his more than sixty years' experience of choral singing (treble, alto, and bass), in the course of which he has sung all or part of Handel's *Messiah* almost every year for sixty-two years! He has composed a number of unaccompanied part-songs (a selection, called *Pied Beauty*, was published in 2016; the title poem is one of a number by Gerard Manley Hopkins in the booklet), and works specially written for Wolfson College, Cambridge.

Hiawatha - The Famine is his first longer composition. It is written for a large eight-part choir, accompanied by two flutes, and is very well suited to being performed by Choir 2000. It took him eighteen months to complete - not full time. His professional background is as an IT professional specializing in Digital Humanities (applying computers to the analysis of language, literature, and history).

Beatrix Bown worked with John for many years in Cambridge University Computing Service, and it was she who persuaded John to join Choir 2000 because he already knew the rapid Latin songs in *Carmina Burana* very well. Beatrix is one of very few people in the world who have read the whole (!) of Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (brief biographies of everyone associated with Cambridge University from 1100 to 1900), in order to turn it into a searchable database.

John's current work, together with colleagues in Chicago, Wolfson College, and Addenbrooke's Hospital, is the automatic indexing of medical documents by computer. Addenbrooke's alone has more than seven million patients' documents as yet unindexed.

His next musical project is ambitious: setting the Biblical book of *Jonah* to music. Initially conceived as a four-part male voice piece, he soon realised that a longish work for male voices only would sound very uniform, and has changed it to the usual four voices with piano accompaniment.