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## All Things New: An Analysis of Alfred Gaul's "A New Heaven and a New Earth"

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*All Things New:*

**An Analysis of Alfred Gaul’s “A New Heaven and a New Earth”**

**Historical Background**

English composer, organist, and conductor Alfred Robert Gaul was born in Norwich on April 30, 1837.<sup>1</sup> He held a variety of musical positions within churches in England, conducted the Walsall Philharmonic Society, and frequently taught singing classes at girls’ institutions before his death in 1913.<sup>2</sup> Gaul’s body of work comprises numerous sacred compositions, including one oratorio, a variety of cantatas and church anthems, and several operettas, secular songs, and various instrumental pieces. The aria “A New Heaven and a New Earth” is taken from his sacred work *The Holy City*, which scholars have labeled as both an oratorio and a cantata. While James Brown and Samuel Stratton regard only one of Gaul’s works (*Hezekiah*) as an oratorio, some music publishers (including Schirmer, as early as 1892) list *The Holy City* as such.<sup>3</sup> However, the earliest extant edition of the score, published by Novello & Co., classifies the work as a sacred cantata, making this the more appropriate categorization.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of its status as an oratorio or cantata, *The Holy City* was composed in 1882 for the Birmingham Musical Festival, an annual charitable event featuring commissioned works from well-known composers such as Gounod and Dvořák.<sup>5</sup> Lyrics for *The Holy City* include text settings from the book of Revelation, the book of Isaiah, and several extra-scriptural poetic verses. While the aria selected for this project was originally written for the bass voice, it has since been transcribed for soprano with minor adaptations to the choral “Sanctus” refrains, which are now assigned to either the solo voice or piano. The arrangement being performed today can be found in the book *Seventeen Sacred Songs for Church and General Use*, compiled by Walter Kirby.

Historical records indicate that Gaul’s cantata was performed with some frequency by church and university choral groups, but it does not enjoy the same popularity today. Indeed, recordings of this work are scarce. Only two recorded

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<sup>1</sup>*British Musical Biography: A Dictionary of Musical Artists, Authors, and Composers Born in Britain and its Colonies*, s.v. “Alfred Gaul.”

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Robert Gaul, *The Holy City* (New York, G. Schirmer, 1892).

<sup>4</sup>Alfred Robert Gaul, *The Holy City* (London: Novello, Ewer, & Co., 1882).

<sup>5</sup>The tradition of benefit performances of English oratorios dates back to Handel’s day, when contributions from the 1754 performance of *Messiah* were donated to London’s Foundling Hospital. See Gardner and DeSimone’s article “English Oratorio and Charity Benefits in Mid-Eighteenth Century London” (Cambridge University Press, 2019) for more detail on this practice.

performances of the aria “A New Heaven and a New Earth” exist on YouTube. One is an audio-only recording of the aria in Korean. Unfortunately, this recording does not provide information regarding the performer or performance location.<sup>6</sup> The second recording, produced in 2013, is of Eastern Mennonite University’s Jubilee Alumni Choir rehearsing “The Holy City” during a campus reunion.<sup>7</sup> In this version, the aria is divided between the men’s and women’s sections and is accompanied by piano. David Seitz, the director of this recording, explains that the reunion choir would typically perform a “chorus-only” version of the work, but since the recurring “*Holy, Holy*” theme is so predominant in “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” the performance would be lacking without it.<sup>8</sup>

### Performance Paradigm

Presenting a little-performed musical work provides the vocalist with several unique challenges. First, they must make a number of decisions regarding style, tempo, and expression. Existing performances usually influence these choices, but in this case, they will rely substantially on normative performance practice, text-driven expression, and appropriate vocal technique. As a late nineteenth-century cantata piece, the aria exhibits a heavier, more saccharine musicality than that of Baroque or Classical-era oratorios and cantatas.<sup>9</sup> Thus, a more emotionally-based presentation may be appropriate. While performances of church music generally include little gestural movement or dramatic facial expression, the intensely descriptive theme, later date of composition, and mode of performance (as a concert solo rather than as part of the work as a whole) may make judicious use of these stylistic characteristics acceptable. As with any performance, these decisions must result in tasteful expressive choices that suit the music's text and character.

The aria is punctuated by changes in tempo and dynamic level. Based on the two recordings available, the overall performance tempo of the piece seems to be faster than that indicated by score markings in the music. Thus, the general scheme of quick-slow-quicker-slow remains intact but is performed at a faster base tempo. As a lengthy piece with a relatively small tessitura, dynamic changes help to provide textually appropriate contrast and engage the listeners. For

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<sup>6</sup>GreatOratorium, “Oratorio Holy City, Op. 36 (A.R.Gaul) – No. 10: A New Heavens and a New Earth.” Accessed January 8, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UvWzSfcLO5I>.

<sup>7</sup>Eastern Mennonite University, “EMU Alumni Sing Gaul’s “The Holy City” Oratorio.” Accessed February 11, 2022, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUFzM6h8gYE>.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>John Hugo, interview by author, Lynchburg, VA, April 7, 2022.

example, the beginning recitative (*Thus saith the Lord...*) should be sung *forte* with a declamatory tone, while the later D Section (*And God shall wipe away all tears...*) will feature a gentler *mezzo piano* sound. While both phrases begin on the same starting pitch, a change in vocal timbre, volume, and phrasing will highlight both the musical contour and text found in each phrase.

### **Biblical Integration**

My worldview as a Christian musician and scholar has impacted my research design and communications process in several ways. First, my belief in a sovereign God who is the Ultimate Truth encourages me to conduct my research in a way that accurately represents my subject. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am called to pursue truth, both in my personal walk with the Lord and in academics. This understanding leads me to read my historical sources with an eye toward God's redemptive purpose for humanity. As I gather information from my sources and seek to discern the musical context of Gaul's aria, my job is to provide a true representation of facts in a way that will honor the Lord. The results of my research do not remain on paper; rather, as a creative arts project, they will be presented through a vocal performance.

When I give a performance, my prayer is that it will please my Savior and meet the needs of my audience. A vocal performance provides a unique opportunity for research application, as it marries melody, harmony, lyrics, emotional expressivity, and historical depiction of musical style. My research subject itself is largely rooted in my Christian worldview. I eagerly anticipate the joy of heaven, and this project provides a way of demonstrating that hope to my culture through musicological analysis and creative arts presentation. As a Christian, I am called to present my research subject in a respectful manner that will encourage my audience to experience the same hopeful emotions and desires as those held by the aria's original composer.

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