



# Jonathan Dove

## The Middleham Jewel

*Commissioned by the National Art Collections Fund for the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in celebration of the Art Fund Centenary.*

You might expect a piece of music celebrating the centenary of the National Art Collections Fund to attempt something like *Pictures at an Exhibition* (although the complete exhibition would have to include about 400,000 works of art, which would make for rather a long piece). Instead, it is about a single object. But the Middleham Jewel is really a complete exhibition in its own right: its tiny surface is covered with pictures of fifteen saints (including St George, St Barbara and St Catherine), a nativity, a 'Throne of Mercy' image of the crucifixion, latin (& X) inscriptions, a sapphire, and a secret compartment, to say nothing of its other mysteries. The composer is spoilt for choice in subject-matter.

*The Middleham Jewel* plays continuously, but is effectively in four short movements with a coda, each focussing on different aspects of the jewel. The first is its long burial and subsequent discovery (it was found in 1985 by a man with a metal-detector). The idea of unearthing a 500-year-old gem suggested a parallel musical 'unearthing': in the first movement, the instruments gradually 'discover' a Whitsun plainchant ('Apparuerunt apostolis').

In fact, the whole piece is made out of music associated with the jewel's Christian imagery and text, music that the lady who commissioned the jewel might conceivably have known, and even sung. (I am indebted to Robert Jones for finding me some of this source material.)

The second movement is based on 'Personent Hodie' (still sung as a Christmas carol today), and attempts to convey something of the jewel's intense energy, its uncanny vitality, in a kind of dance.

'Ther is no rose of swych vertu' frames the third movement, in which the theorbo meditates on an Easter plainchant ('Victimae paschali laudes'), whose refrain I associate with St Barbara's tower. This leads into a floating evocation of the magical aspect of the jewel, with a tender oboe solo associated with motherhood and the healing properties of the sapphire. (The accompaniment is made of fragments of an *Agnus Dei* from Fountains Abbey, not far from where the jewel was discovered.)

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Hinrichsen House

10-12 Baches Street London N1 6DN

Tel: 020 7553 4030 Fax: 020 7490 4921

e-mail: [newmusic@editionpeters.com](mailto:newmusic@editionpeters.com)

internet: [www.editionpeters.com](http://www.editionpeters.com)





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The bassoon remembers the Whitsun chant, which snakes up through the strings, provoking St George into (harpichord) stabbing chords. Above, the winds sing another medieval carol, 'Owt of your slepe aryse', as St Catherine's wheel spins. Finally, in the coda, all the instruments sing 'Angelus ad virginem', a musical picture of the annunciation, like a blessing for the mother-to-be whose jewel has worn smooth nestling in her breast.

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