

Ahoy! Sing for the Mary Rose

An introduction by the composer, Alexander L'Estrange

I was 8 years old when King Henry VIII's warship, the Mary Rose, was salvaged from the sea, in the presence of Prince Charles and a worldwide television audience, and I remember watching some of the extraordinary footage of this feat of maritime archeology on Blue Peter. So when Portsmouth Grammar School asked me in 2013 if I would write a piece to commemorate the state-of-the-art museum which has been built to house the ship and some of its artefacts, as part of the annual Portsmouth Festivities, I jumped at the chance.

Numerous choirs had already been asking me if I was working on a follow-up piece to *Zimbe!*, my choral work which fuses African songs with jazz; this commission presented the perfect opportunity to do just that. Adopting the same successful formula of combining adult choirs, children's choirs and a band, I set about composing the piece, this time fusing the music of Tudor times with sea shanties. Alongside the band's rhythm section (piano, double bass, drums) I brought in a nautical theme with a fiddle and a piano accordion. *Ahoy!* was beginning her voyage in no time!

Tudor music has long been a love of mine and I was delighted to find that many of the themes fit together wonderfully well with sea shanties. Both elements are an important part of our musical heritage in Britain and I feel passionately that our school children today should have the opportunity to perform these traditional songs within a modern context. I've included *Greensleeves* which, if not actually written by Henry VIII, certainly has very strong associations, and two other Tudor songs which probably were by the King. The sea shanties include the *Sailors' Hornpipe*, where the audience can join in by clapping and bobbing along with the singers, and one of my favourite folk songs, *O Waly Waly*, otherwise known as *The Water is Wide*. This beautiful song has particularly personal associations for me as I've sung it as a lullaby to my two young sons since they were babies. As well as writing arrangements of pre-existing songs, I was keen to include a new setting I've composed of *Full Fathom Five* from Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'. This movement is *a cappella*, that is to say without band accompaniment, and is a wonderful contrast of texture and mood in the middle of the work. It features a haunting soprano solo, performed on the CD recording by my wife, Joanna Forbes L'Estrange.

The piece begins with a brief narration spoken over a musical overture, which tells the story of the ship's rise, fall and rise. It describes her launch in 1511, her 34-year career fighting against the French, and her unexpected and unexplained sinking with the tragic loss of more than 400 lives on 19 July 1545. *Ahoy! Sing for the Mary Rose* celebrates the fact that after 450 years this infamous ship was raised from the seabed and now sits proudly in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard for visitors from across the globe to admire. The Mary Rose rose again; ultimately, it is an uplifting story and it is my intention with *Ahoy!* to reflect just that.

Ahoy! - List of songs

1. Overture
2. Sam's gone away
3. Greensleeves
4. Haul away!
5. Lowlands away
6. Pastime with drunken sailors
7. Full fathom five
8. The water is wide
9. Hornpipe medley
10. Up she rises!

The water is wide (traditional English folk song)

The water is wide, I cannot cross o'er
And neither have I the wings to fly,
Build me a boat that will carry two
And both shall row, my love and I.