



CHARLES WOOD

Ascension Hymn

SATB and Organ

COMMENTARY

Charles Wood's *Ascension Hymn*, composed in 1913, survives amongst the composer's music manuscripts in the library of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. It is a hymn-anthem like his earlier works written for use at commemoration services at Caius, *Heaven* (1898) and *Glorious and powerful God* (1910). The melody is presented with contrasted choral textures in each verse, underpinned by a continuous organ part. Wood based some of his hymn-anthems on pre-existent melodies, as in *O thou sweetest source of gladness* and *God omnipotent reigneth*, but the *Ascension Hymn* follows his earlier college works in being based on an original melody. For *Heaven* Wood had selected a text by Caian divine Jeremy Taylor, and for *Glorious and powerful God* he chose a text dating from around the time of the death of John Caius in 1610 that survives in an anthem by Orlando Gibbons, but for his *Ascension Hymn* Wood turned to his fellow Anglo-Irishman Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931), father of the poet and writer Robert Graves.

Wood had already composed a secular cantata to words by Graves as a teenager in 1885, and the two published a collection of *Irish Folk-songs* in 1897, dedicated to another of Graves's Anglo-Irish collaborators, Charles Stanford. It was during the period when Wood and Graves were working on their next Irish collection, the *Irish Country-side Songs* (1914), that Wood composed his anthem to Graves's poem 'The Ascension'. Wood omitted the fifth stanza in order to create a four-verse structure, including a verse in which the melody is placed in the tenor part, thus following the sixteenth-century practice with which he was familiar from his extensive work on early-modern hymns.

Graves's text appeared in his miscellaneous anthology *A Celtic Psalter* (1917), and contains several minor differences to the version found in Wood's autograph score, dated December 1913. The two versions can be compared below, with the changes shown in bold:

Graves, *A Celtic Psalter* (1917)

When Christ their Lord, to Heaven upraised,
Was wafted from the Apostles' sight,
And upwards wistfully they gazed
Into the far, blue Infinite,
Behold two men in white apparel dressed
Who thus bespake them on the mountain crest:

"Why stand ye, men of Galilee,
So sadly gazing on the skies?
For this same Jesus, whom ye see
Caught in the clouds to Paradise,
Shall in like manner from the starry height
Return again to greet your joyful sight."

Would, O Lord Jesus! thus to hear
Thy farewell words we too had met,
Among Thine own Disciples dear,
Upon the brow of Olivet!
Yet are we blest, though of that joy bereaved,
Who having seen Thee not, have yet believed.

O, then in each succeeding year
When Thine Ascension Day draws round,
With hearts so full of holy fear
May we within Thy Church be found,
That in the spirit we may see Thee rise
And bless us with pierced hands from out the skies!

Christ, if our gaze for ever thus
Is fixed upon Thy Heavenward way,
Death shall but bring to each of us
At last his soul's Ascension Day,
Till in Thy mercy Thou descend once more
And quick and dead to meet Thy coming soar.

The CMS edition of Wood's *Ascension Hymn* RS159 (2025) adopts Graves's published text since it presumably represents the poet's preferred version of the text, and fits comfortably within Wood's hymn-anthem format.

***Who through the desert vale* (1927)**

After Wood's death in 1926, his widow Charlotte, his former pupil Jack Meredith Tatton, and others, made great efforts to publish more of Charles Wood's music in all genres. Charlotte Wood and J. M. Tatton's work included the publication of an altered version of the *Ascension Hymn*, now with the text *Who through the desert vale*, in 1927. The new text was written by J. M. Tatton's brother Eric, who studied English at Oxford during the last years of Wood's life. The obituary for Eric Tatton in the Isle of Man Examiner of 1979 records that Wood gave him a manuscript copy of his arrangement, though it is not known whether this still exists. The poem speaks of the search for God in nature:

Who through the desert vale of discontent
Stumbling and faint his sad way ne'er hath trod,
Who on the mountains ne'er had pitched his tent,
'Mid rocks and thorny thickets seeking God;
Not his to see above the mountains' rim
The unveiled glory of the cherubim.

Yet he who cramped in dull mortality
Exults not with the exulting birds of Spring
And in the deep-toned anthem of the sea

Wood, *Ascension Hymn* (1913)

When Christ their Lord, to Heaven upraised,
Was wafted from the Apostles' sight,
And upwards **steadfastly** they gazed
Into the far, **faint** Infinite,
Behold two men in white apparel dressed
Who thus bespake them on the mountain crest:

"Why stand ye, men of Galilee,
So sadly gazing on the skies?
For this same Jesus, whom ye see
Caught **on** the clouds to Paradise,
Shall in like manner from **His** starry height
Return **at last to your rejoicing** sight."

Would, O Lord **Jesu** thus to hear
Thy farewell **message we** had met,
Among Thine own Disciples dear,
Upon the brow of Olivet!
Yet are we blest **by Thine own saving thought,**
Since we believe, though we have seen Thee not.

Then, Lord, on each succeeding year
When Thine Ascension Day draws round,
With hearts so full of holy fear
O may we in Thy Church be found;
That in **thy** spirit we may see Thee rise
And bless us with pierced hands from out the skies!
Amen.

Hears not the motion of an angel's wing,
 He ne'er shall hear, with birds and sea combined
 God's golden trumpets pealing down the wind.

Then teach us Lord thy glory still to seek
 With humbleness of heart but strength of aim,
 Till of thy truth the waving forests speak
 And night declare the magic of Thy name;
 Till all the streams Thy majesty confess,
 And all the little hills Thy holiness.

When compared to the poem by Graves for the *Ascension Hymn*, a problem is immediately apparent. The match was far from straightforward, as although the two texts comprised six-line stanzas with an ABABCC rhyming scheme, Graves's lines followed the syllabic pattern 8-8-8-8-10-10, whereas each of Tatton's lines had 10 syllables. In the following example (expression marks removed) one can see something of the nature of the changes made, with the loss of the simple, even flow of the original:

Wood 1913

T&B Unison

1927 version

Organ (1913)

'Why stand ye, men of Ga - li - lee, So sad - ly ga - zing on the skies; For

Yet he who cramped in dull mor - ta - li - ty Ex - ults not with the ex - ult - ing birds of spring, And

In his article 'The 'Hymn-Anthem': a new choral form' (*The Musical Times*, July 1930, p. 632) Charles Waters quotes lines from Wood's published anthem to show how the rhythm of a hymn-like melody can be manipulated to suit the changing stress patterns of the text, though in this case the changes were required because of the particular need to accommodate different numbers of syllables per line. Waters was probably unaware of the original version. Although the music is essentially the same in the two pieces, several differences (including a longer organ introduction and many rhythmic changes) mean that the two texts cannot be presented together in the same edition. Moreover, Tatton's poem has three verses, and so the musical textures of the last two verses of the original anthem are combined in the setting of Tatton's third verse.

There is no separate manuscript of 'Who through the desert vale' amongst the Wood manuscripts at Gonville & Caius. The alterations are added somewhat scruffily to the neat autograph score of Wood's *Ascension Hymn*, and a note on the title page reports that the new version was published in 1927. The work is mentioned in several of the surviving letters from Charlotte to Jack Tatton (known by Charlotte as John) which are found amongst Wood's music manuscripts at Caius, where she describes it as "your brother's anthem" or "the setting of your brother's words". They explain how the arrangement was rejected first by the Faith Press in October 1926 but then accepted by Stainer & Bell in February 1927, and performed in King's College Chapel in the summer.

Correction: in the printed score the author of the 'Who through the desert vale' should be named as 'E. Tatton', not 'E. H. Tatton'. I am grateful to Jeremy Dibble for pointing out this error, which has also resulted in this revised version of the Commentary (replacing that issued in March 2025).

Geoffrey Webber (July 2025)