

# ARTS

RICK JONES

## COMMON THREADS

Conversion to Judaism was decisive for the music of the composer Julian Dawes. He is marking his seventieth birthday with an oratorio drawing on the Book of Exodus and a new CD of chamber works

**L**ike many English musicians, the composer Julian Dawes is a product of the cathedral choir tradition. He learned his music as a chorister at Birmingham and Peterborough Cathedrals. At the Royal College of Music he studied under Herbert Howells, arguably the greatest of twentieth-century church music composers. Later, however, Dawes' career took a rather different turn. He continued to write religious music, but after a conversion experience in his forties it was for the Jewish faith that he composed his scores.

"I don't think it's any accident so many professional musicians start as cathedral choristers," Dawes tells me on the phone from Marseille, where he is taking a break after recently passing his seventieth birthday. "To sing to an absolute professional standard at that age – Byrd, Gibbons, Tallis, Palestrina, Stanford, Howells, such great music – it's a wonderful training."

The organ became his instrument and Howells the only person under whom he would study. "I was silly enough not to apply anywhere else," Dawes admits. "He was an enormously nice man, very self-critical, very strict in training and very much a disciplinarian when it came to learning counterpoint, yet at the same time he was generous in encouraging me to go in my own direction."

That direction led Dawes into theatre work. He took a job as musical director of a theatre troupe touring the United States with *The Beggar's Opera*. This brought him under the wing of the late John Blatchley, producer at English National Opera and head of the Drama Centre (now subsumed into Central Saint Martin's). Blatchley was impressed by Dawes' ability, first to get actors to sing and secondly by an instinctive teaching method that put drama first. "He took me on at the Drama Centre, where the teaching was based on the techniques of Stanislavsky and Laban, which coincided with the way I was doing things."

These were fruitful years. Dawes not only taught musical skills to a generation of actors, but also composed incidental music for a long list of productions in the West End, at the

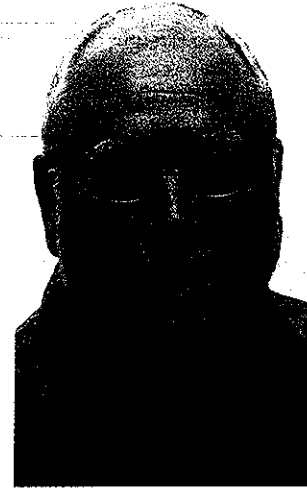
Bristol Old Vic and abroad. A recent Omnibus Classics CD (CC5004) of his chamber music reveals a composer of wide-ranging styles, able to summon appropriate solo voices for violin, cello, horn and clarinet, and adept at crafting Howells-like pathos in slow movements or dance-band vitality in finales. The *Elegie* for violin and piano is an essay in reflective sorrow through pleading repeat notes and bitter false relations.

Blatchley remained Dawes' mentor and, as a leading Brecht scholar, commissioned him to create a score for the English-language version of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, to which the Brecht estate in Berlin gave its solemn approval. "I had actors emerging from the band, which was very Brechtian," he says, "a device for stopping the audience becoming emotionally involved."

Significantly, the play, a political allegory about land rights, is based on the judgement of Solomon. It's the epitome of dispassionate logic as a judge has warring women play tug of war with a disputed baby. In his own life, Dawes felt cool reason draw him away from juvenile certainties. "I was conscious at that time of losing certain beliefs particular to the Christian faith. I doubted the Resurrection and the notion that Jesus was God incarnate. A teacher, yes, but not divine. I had no involvement with religion for 20 years, but I always kept a sense of spirituality. I don't think you can be a composer without that."

A crisis in his life led to divorce, but new love led him to Judaism. "My current wife took me to a Kol Nidrei service and, to use a rather Christian metaphor, it was like a road to Damascus for me. I felt an enormous familiarity, a really strong pull, and a tremendous sense that I could have the things I did believe without the things I didn't believe, if you understand me."

Much of Dawes' subsequent career has been devoted to writing music for his new faith. "Of course, the contemporary Jewish experience is about dealing with the Holocaust," he says. "My way of doing this was to write the song cycle *Songs of Ashes* to lyrics by the poet Jerzy Ficowski. It puts a human face on the Holocaust as each poem tells an individual



**Julian Dawes: "I always kept a sense of spirituality"**

tale. I am concerned with the Holocaust as a challenge to faith; a powerful image to me is of the Jews entering the gas chamber reciting the Kaddish, the song of praise. I try in a small way through my work to offer healing and hope."

*Songs of Ashes* is regularly broadcast on Israeli radio and has become one of Dawes' best-known works. Another is the song sequence *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, settings of 11 poems by children in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Although often performed by adults, Dawes set it for children to sing. The Finchley Children's Choir is pencilled to perform it at The Forge in Camden, north London, in November.

Dawes' large-scale works include two oratorios with a third currently in production, a commission from the Alyth Choral Society. It is a setting of the Song of the Sea from Exodus 15, the great hymn of thanksgiving ("Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea") which Handel set memorably in *Israel in Egypt*.

I wonder whether Dawes has ever been commissioned to write for Christian denominations, but he seems surprised by the idea, as if ecumenism had not occurred to him. Some of his psalm settings might suit, he thinks, although his Psalm 23 is set to Hebrew words just as it is in Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*. The faiths have so many texts in common. It is a surprise to me when Dawes refers to the familiar words "The Lord bless you and keep you", which he has set, as the Priest's or Cohanims' Prayer. There is a symmetry in the fact that at the end of his faith journey, Dawes finds himself returning to the selfsame texts with which he began it.