

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! - About the composer

“If you had to create from scratch the perfect 21st century musician, Alexander L’Estrange would be your template.” Howard Goodall

Alexander L’Estrange (b.1974) is an award-winning British composer, arranger, jazz musician and choral animateur of international acclaim. A Master of Arts graduate of Oxford University, he has been dubbed “the added 9th of choral music” due to his consummate fusion of the English choral tradition with jazz.

L’Estrange is best known for his popular series of 40-minute choral works for SATB choir, unison children and jazz quintet which began with *Zimbe! Come, sing the songs of Africa!*. The piece took the choral world by storm, firmly establishing L’Estrange as one of the most popular choral composers of our age; *Zimbe!*’s 10th anniversary concert, conducted by the composer, took place at New York’s Carnegie Hall.

The most recent work in the series, *Freedom! The Power of Song*, was written in collaboration with his wife, composer and lyricist Joanna Forbes L’Estrange. L’Estrange’s sacred anthems are recorded by the award-winning chamber choir Tenebrae on their *On Eagles’ Wings* album. His secular songs include Love’s Philosophy, setting Shelley, Tennyson and Byron, and Winter Songs, another collaboration Joanna. Alexander L’Estrange is the go-to arranger for world-class vocal groups including The King’s Singers and has written hundreds of arrangements of songs from across the musical spectrum for Faber Music’s *Choral Basics* series.

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.