On May 11 and 13, the Cantata Singers and conductor David Hoose offer a sublime glimpse of the hereafter: “Faire Is the Heaven,” the masterpiece of English composer, conductor, and organist William Henry Harris (1883-1973). Harris’s church-music career was long, starting as a boy chorister, finishing as music director at St. George’s Chapel, in Windsor Castle (where his duties included teaching piano to the future Queen Elizabeth). His 1925 double-
choir motet is suffused with the lush reticence of the Anglican choral tradition. But the subject matter and Harris’s technical control hint at another, lingering influence: the cataclysm of World War I.

The Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser provided Harris with his text: three stanzas from Spenser’s much longer “Hymn of Heavenly Beauty,” portraying heaven, “where happy souls have place,” but where “far more fair” are the angels serving God; fairest of all is the vision of that God, “the image of such endless perfectness.” But Harris sidestepped much of Spenser’s more complicated hierarchical cosmology — including, in one intervening stanza, “sovereign Powers and mighty Potentates.”

The Great War similarly altered English notions of paradise. Traditional Anglican theology rejected the Catholic concept of purgatory and eschewed prayers for the dead. The doctrinal 16th-century “Homily on Prayer” (attributed to John Jewel) explained that souls of the newly deceased immediately enter either heaven or hell: “the one needeth no prayer, and the other is without redemption.” But, as traced in scholar Alan Wilkinson’s study “The Church of England and the First World War,” the scale of the war’s slaughter overrode theological niceties regarding heavenly admittance. Despite conservative resistance, prayers for the dead became common, with Arthur Winnington-Ingram, the bishop of London, reassuring his flock that fallen soldiers “were never more alive than five minutes after death.”
Such prompt absolution, perhaps, can be heard in “Faire Is the Heaven.” For a while, the music remains sumptuously but strictly within the D-flat major scale; however, the angels’ entrance unleashes a series of startling, sleight-of-hand shifts between distant key centers. Even more beguiling is Harris’s use of enharmonic tones — exploiting how the same pitch can be notated as, say, G-flat or F-sharp, with different harmonic implications for each. Such enharmonic transfers often are incorporated into dominant-seventh chords, among the more unstable harmonies in traditional tonal practice. Aural anticipation of solid resolution instead opens out as the grammar reorients around the enharmonic change of perspective.

The parallel with changing attitudes toward death and the afterlife is provocative: the point of greatest uncertainty suddenly transformed into supernal glory. Harris’s swiftly tilting harmonies echo the era’s theological adjustment — when passage from this world to the next acquired psychological insistence simply because it had become so unspeakably abrupt.

*The Cantata Singers perform music of Tomás Luis de Victoria, Arvo Pärt, and William Harris, May 11 at 8 p.m. First Church, Cambridge, and May 13 at 3 p.m. at the Church of the Covenant (tickets $25-$75; 617-868-5885; [www.cantatasingers.org](http://www.cantatasingers.org)).*

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