

Jeremiah Clarke

Jeremiah Clarke, was born in 1670, and he is considered a composer in the Baroque tradition. The first thing I discovered in researching him is that his name is misspelled in our Hymnal: it lacks the final “e” on Clarke, that all other sources show. You can imagine how that made researching him difficult at first. He lived a fairly short life, and there is not a lot to say about him, so let’s get right into singing one of his hymns. Hymn 142 is described in the Hymnal Notes as “a fluent, graceful tune.”

Hymn 142 – 1st & 4th

According to the Hymnal Notes, “Clark[e] was almoner and master of the choristers at St. Paul’s Cathedral, and then organist.” Another source clarified that he was organist at St. Paul’s from 1699 until his death. So what’s an “almoner”? It’s a church officer whose job is to distribute alms to the poor or, more generally, to represent the church in meeting the needs of the poor.

Hymn 328 – all

Clarke is best remembered for a piece commonly called the “Trumpet Voluntary.” For nearly a century, it was attributed to Henry Purcell. Then starting in the 1940s the realization spread that it was composed by Clarke under the title, “The Prince of Denmark’s March.” Clarke’s piece is a popular choice for wedding music, and has been used in royal weddings, including that of Prince Charles and Princess Diana in 1981. Would you like to hear some of it? Interestingly this piece, like most of Clarke’s work was originally composed for the harpsichord.

Hymn 187 – all

Some of Clarke’s other most famous compositions are: March and Aire in C Major, King’s March, The Emperour of Germany March, and The Duke of Glocester’s March. Even though he was a prolific composer of marches, he obviously was adept at other forms of music. The Hymnal Notes describe Hymn 235 as “a simple tune, with his usual melodic charm.”

Hymn 235 – 1st & 2nd

I got to wondering why so many of his tunes were included in our Hymnal, which was published in 1932. Maybe there is an answer in this quotation from the Hymnal Notes: ““Robert Bridges, poet laureate of England from 1913 to 1930, gave high praise to the music of Jeremiah Clark[e], the neglect of which he deplored. Clark[e] is the inventor of the modern English hymn tune. His tunes have clear beauty, with the plaintive grace that characterized him.”

Hymn 94 – all

I’m afraid this story doesn’t have a happy ending. In 1707, Clarke developed what was described as “a violent and hopeless passion for a very beautiful lady of a rank superior to his own.” When she rejected him, he committed suicide. Too bad he could not have been deterred from this act by some of the inspiring words we have sung that were eventually bonded to his music.

Hymn 388 – all