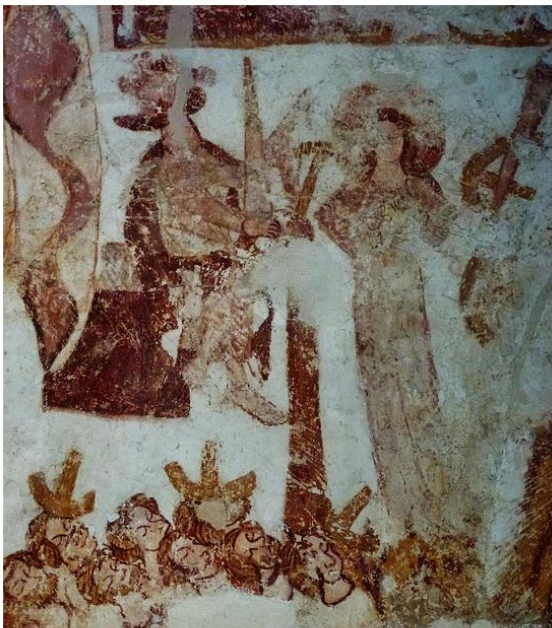




Mark Bowden

Mark is one of Britain's most celebrated and exciting young composers. His recent work *Five Memos* received a British Composer Award last December. He is currently Professor of Composition at Royal Holloway, University of London and Chair of the British section of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Of his Festival commission he says:



The Emperor Maxentius looks on as the wheel breaks and parts of the wheel hit the heads of his followers. St Catherine remains unscathed. The sword of justice and the arm of the angel can just be seen on the right.

“My new work for clarinet and piano draws inspiration from the 13th-century wall paintings discovered in 1931 at Little Missenden Church. The paintings, in red and yellow ochre, allude to a different world. One of the most striking features is a series depicting the Life of St Catherine of Alexandria. Catherine was one of the most important saints in the religious culture of the late Middle Ages. The development of her medieval cult was spurred by the reported rediscovery of her body at Mount Sinai around the year 800; the story goes that a stream of healing oil poured from her body. At Little Missenden, Catherine is first illustrated before the Emperor Maxentius as a noble, serene figure, in a long red tunic and white mantle, crowned and veiled with a red nimbus. The series goes on to portray St Catherine debating with the Emperor’s philosophers.”

Maxentius hoped that they would refute her pro-Christian arguments, but Catherine wins the debate. As punishment, Maxenitus orders the scourging of Catherine. The image is difficult to make out but delicate traces of Catherine's torturers wielding whips place its meaning beyond doubt. Other images are too indistinct to be identified – perhaps one shows Catherine being imprisoned, whilst another may describe her visit from the Empress. A later image is unmistakable – Catherine's sentencing to death on the spiked breaking wheel. Catherine is uncrowned, her hair falling on her shoulders, bearing a deep, red nimbus. Legend has it that the breaking wheel shattered at Catherine's touch; the painting shows the wheel smashed into pieces, fragments scattered around the composition. The figure of a destroying angel wielding a sword can be seen, as can the heads and shoulders of Catherine's tormentors, killed by the flying shards. The furious Maxentius ordered that Catherine be beheaded; her martyrdom is hard to make out, but the hand of God emerging from above the composition can still be seen. The final image, now almost completely faded, depicts Catherine's burial on Mount Sinai.



Part of the St. Catherine cycle, this mural shows the Emperor Maxenitus with the Saint and the tonsured philosophers

*This series inspired me to create a work in three short movements exploring the cult of St Catherine. Drawing upon two 13th-century pieces of English music composed in honour of St Catherine – the first is a motet called *Virgo regalis fidei* and the second, a three-part conductus or devotional song called *O laudanda virginitas* – I have used techniques of layering, transformation and fragmentation to create a musical response to the beautiful, mysterious paintings at Little Missenden. The work doesn't aim to represent the narrative of the St Catherine legend, but rather explores the idea that we might create connections between the storytelling, the art and the music of the distant past and our own, living culture today."*