

## Music Notes 2016/2017 – Advent II

Choosing the right music for the liturgy each week may appear to be a straightforward matter. What's the season? Choose a piece of music written for the season! However, there is much more to it than that. The music can either act as a mirror to themes found in textual aspects of the service – perhaps most obviously, the readings – or it can be a way of extending the references in the service by dealing with aspects that are not contained within the specific readings or other material used in the service. This is one of those Sundays. The parable of the foolish and wise virgins from Matthew's Gospel does not in fact appear as a reading in Advent at all in our cycle, and, indeed, the Lutherans are the only main denomination to assign it to this season. In our Year A, it turns up in early November – so, some distance away from now. Nevertheless, with the virgins falling asleep as they wait for the coming of the bridegroom, it is not hard to see the applicability of the story to Advent. Wisdom is also a theme for the season, referred to specifically in one of the *O Antiphons* that form the basis of next Sunday evening's Mid-Advent Carol Service. So, this Sunday Rupert has given us a number of references to the importance of being, if not earnest, at least wise.

The first comes at the Solemn Eucharist, when the setting is the *Missa Prudentes virgines – the Mass of the Wise Virgins* – by the Spanish composer, Alonso Lobo (1555–1617). He was especially associated with Seville Cathedral, and, more briefly, Toledo Cathedral. He was a choir boy at Seville, where the music was directed by the highly influential composer Francisco Guerrero (1528–1599), whose assistant he later became. In fact, Lobo came to be considered by his contemporaries to be as significant a composer as the great Tomás Luis de Victoria, but history has remembered them rather differently, with Victoria considered now one of the trio of top Renaissance composers alongside Lassus and Palestrina. Alonso meantime is remembered – unfairly – for relatively few pieces; we should not overlook the especially gorgeous motet *Versa est in luctum*.

Lobo's respect for the director of the choir in which he served is shown in his quotations from Guerrero in several works, and this mass is an example of this, being a parody mass (i.e. one that quotes from another work as a kind of "jumping off point" for the rest of the composition), based on a motet by the elder composer. The setting is for five voices throughout. Our late Director of Music, David Trendell (1964–2014), wrote fascinatingly about it in the *Musical Times* in 1996, pointing out that the extremely rich and successful counterpoint used by the composer is doubtless a reference to the title: he wants to be counted as among the wise, not the foolish, and he is determined therefore to show off his skill. In the secular world, boasting of one's own skills and abilities may be unattractive but perhaps understandable for want of a reason to give the glory to anybody else. In the church – where one should say with Paul *of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities* – less

so. Perhaps, then, Lobo was just glorying in what God had accomplished within him.

One of the greatest ways to demonstrate your musical technical prowess in Lobo's time was by the use of canon (i.e. something like *Frère Jacques*), and there are four substantial examples in the setting. The first of these we shall miss, because it is in the *Credo*, which we instead sing together in a plainchant setting. However, the sharp-eared might pick up the second canon in the *Osanna* to the *Sanctus*. These days, we write out all of our music so that you can pretty much see it as it will be performed. In this case, Lobo gives a written instruction telling the second Cantus part to take the notes of the first Cantus part (but only the ones that are long notes), and sing them while the tenor sings the same thing, but backwards. Then they are to change places, and the tenor must sing it the right way round, with Cantus II singing it backwards. At the end of the *Benedictus*, its *Osanna* is also given a complex written instruction: the tenor and bass have to sing from the same music, but the tenor sings all the notes twice as long as the bass and a fifth higher in pitch. You had to have your musical wits about you to perform this music!

At the start of the *Agnus Dei*, the tenor sets off with the words *Prudentes virgines* rather than *Agnus Dei*. Putting in the words of the plainchant or motet on which the setting was based had been quite common a generation earlier. In the case of Lobo it was really an archaic practice that had already died out elsewhere. Nevertheless, Lobo was evidently comfortable with this, from which we can deduce that composers in his – Iberian – part of the world were happy to retain elements from the past (there are others in his music) alongside “modern” counterpoint. David Trendell describes this in his very readable article as Lobo having his cake *and* eating it – an interesting image just now in the UK.

The motet at the Offertory is *Jerusalem Surge* by the Flemish composer, Heinrich Isaac (1450–1517). He was a contemporary of Josquin des Prez (1450–1521), and while he is not thought of in quite the same breath as the better-known Franco-Flemish composer, he was a very important figure and extremely influential, especially in Germany, where he had extensive links with the Hapsburg court. He wrote a very considerable number of works in all (at that time) possible forms, and is really only surpassed in terms of output by the quite extraordinarily prolific Lassus, who beats everybody else in terms of output. The text of this motet is derived from the Communion Proper for the Second Sunday of Advent, which is itself taken from two verses in the book of Baruch: *Arise, O Jerusalem, and stand on high, and behold the joy that comes to thee from thy God*. Isaac sets the text partly in block chords (especially at the beginning), but loosens up into a more contrapuntal texture as the piece proceeds.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong is the *First Service* by Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656). He was a prolific and very successful composer, known to us as much for his madrigals and other secular music as for his church compositions. He was in his day a force to be reckoned with on the ecclesiastical music scene, and managed to be in the right place at the right time when his superior and friend, Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), died suddenly under the strain of arranging the music for the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles I. Tomkins stepped up and, with the help of some useful re-scheduling of events, accomplished superbly all that was asked of him. Nevertheless, the end of his life was not easy. If composers of the preceding generation had to struggle with the chopping and changing ecclesiastical politics of their time, Tomkins found himself badly hit by the Civil War, which effectively deprived him of his living when Worcester Cathedral – where he had become Director of Music many years beforehand – was closed as a result of the hostilities.

Tomkins contributed seven services to the English church. As suited the times, his earliest essays in this field are relatively simple and straightforward, serving the purposes of the English church as it then was. He links the various items together by use of shared material that creates a sense of unity between the different parts. As one would expect from a master madrigalist, he also introduces a great deal of effective but subtle word painting to bring the text to life.

Returning to the theme of being wise, the anthem this evening is *Prepare ye the way* by Michael Wise (1648–1687). The mere 39 years of his life were not the result of illness, but rather of an unfortunate encounter with the Night Watchman in Salisbury, where he (Wise) was organist at the Cathedral. The story has been told in these notes before, but it is a good one, so let's have it again.

Wise spent the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> August 1687 – our Patronal festival as it so happens – drinking with chums in a hostel, after which he went home, it by then being the 25<sup>th</sup>, doubtless anticipating a warm welcome from Mrs Wise. Unfortunately, this was not the first time he had come home in a less than ideal condition, and the charm of dealing with him at the wrong end of such frequent evenings had long since begun to pall for her. She expressed herself somewhat forthrightly, he replied more hotly than was strictly warranted under the circumstances, he said, she said, and then suddenly he was off down the street, threatening loudly to kill the first person to get in his way. Unfortunately, this proved to be the Night Watchman, who was evidently not in the best of tempers himself. More bruising and unkind words were exchanged, Wise perhaps questioning some detail of the other's ancestry, at which point the Night Watchman hit the inappropriately named Wise on the head with his staff, killing him outright. Of course, afterwards everyone was sorry, but it was much too late.

This story, which you may feel is recounted in somewhat preternatural detail, is preserved for us thanks to research by the composer Francis Pott (b. 1957), born felicitously on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1957 exactly 270 years after Michael Wise was shuffled off into the hereafter. Thirty years later, when searching around for a subject for a commission, he came upon this history and used it as the basis for a short, comical music theatre piece, *Wise after the Event*, for baritone and soprano soloists, with two trumpeters who double as chorus, and a pianist who is also narrator – alas, seemingly performed as rarely as Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* was between 1734 and 1857.

Michael Wise’s death has served as an object lesson for church musicians, who have reacted to his bad example ever since by ruthlessly eschewing all forms of alcoholic intoxication.

The text of the anthem – this is about the anthem, you may recall – will be rather familiar to you if you know Handel’s *Messiah* at all well. As you listen to the music, you may also feel that it too is familiar, and for the same reason. Although Wise died soon after Handel’s birth in 1685, this anthem remained in use, and Handel obviously came to know it. Although some people have gone so far as to say that he parodied sections of Wise’s anthem in *Messiah*, it seems safer to say that there are flashes of recognition that may occur as we hear the piece sung.

At Benediction, *O salutaris* is by the English recusant composer, William Byrd (c. 1539–1623), a regular contributor to our services, and surely a visitor to our church on more than one occasion. Thomas East, his printer (rather than publisher – *Byrd* was the one with the monopoly on music publishing in England) was just around the corner from us, after all. *Tantum ergo* is set by his contemporary, the Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (c. 1548–1611). Of course, the musical language is very different, even if it seems superficially similar to modern ears. Victoria brings a warm passion to his settings, while Byrd is a little drier. There is another important difference: Victoria was writing for a Catholic community completely comfortable in its own skin, unflustered by official disapproval. Byrd, on the other hand, was a Catholic who had to work in the Protestant Church of England for his daily bread, while writing works like this for the secretive Catholic community of which he was a more or less covert member. The only way to survive such circumstances in his day was to be a very “wise virgin” indeed.