

## Music Notes 2016/2017 – Advent III: Gaudete Sunday

The nickname attached to this Sunday comes from the opening of the Introit for the day: *Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete – Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!* While Advent and Lent are not strictly comparable seasons, there are parallels between this Sunday and Mid-Lent, Refreshment, or Mothering Sunday, as the Fourth Sunday of Lent is known. In both cases, rose (let it *not* be called pink!) is the liturgical colour. We see it on vestments, altar frontals, the colour of one of the advent candles in the Sanctuary, and so on. Indeed, these are the only two Sundays in the year for which this colour is prescribed. In the case of Mid-Lent, the mood is perceptibly lifted, not least because of the association, wonky though it may be historically, between Mothering Sunday and “Mothers Day”. It is just one of the confusing things about this connection that there is simply no definitive place for an apostrophe in the latter... In the case of Gaudete Sunday, we are more immediately conscious of the approaching festive season, so it is more up to the participants at our services to set the mood for this day. Yet, we are still only halfway through Advent, an especially relevant point in the evening.

But first the Solemn Eucharist, at which we will hear the remarkable *Mass for Double Choir*, op. 44, by Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988). Leighton was a Yorkshireman through and through. He wrote of himself: *Any natural composer is a product of his background, experience and training, and I like to think that my music has the characteristic qualities which have been described as vigour, forthrightness, and emotionalism tempered with common sense.* Leighton used slightly different musical languages according to the context for which he was writing, but never tips over into leaving his audience unable to cope with his musical language.

This mass setting was written in 1964, and was dedicated to Herrick Bunney (1915–1997) and the Edinburgh University Singers and first performed by them at a university chamber concert in St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, in February that year. For a good while, Bunney was the organist and choir master at the Cathedral, and a conductor for the Singers. The mass is set for *a capella* double choir throughout, apart from in the *Credo*, in which the organ makes a very distinctive contribution – although not in our service, since we sing the Creed congregationally to chant. In addition to the two choirs, there are four soloists. Leighton has made my job easier, because he has provided a very useful programme note of his own, and here it is:

*Kyrie: the first Kyrie are sung by women’s voices (both choirs); the Christes begin on men’s voices but soon the full choirs join to build up a central climax. The final Kyries are for both choirs, this time with a single unison melody in first choir and a chordal accompaniment in second choir.*

*Gloria: The opening paragraph uses an antiphonal treatment of the two choirs, but they come together on Laudamus te. Benedicimus te starts a new section, with three of the soloists singing a very simple melody against a soft choral accompaniment. Gratias agimus tibi is for both choirs, partly antiphonal and partly imitative. The quieter middle section (Domine fili) employs all four soloists, and predominantly the soprano solo in the Misereres. Quoniam tu solus sanctus marks a return of the previous material and texture, but there is also a final paragraph in slower tempo starting with Cum sancto spiritu. Here soprano and alto soloists sing above the 'processional' choral accompaniment.*

*Sanctus: A soft interweaving texture first on women's then on men's voices. In the third paragraph the interweaving texture is joined by a sustained chorale-like theme (Sanctus Dominus) rising up from the bass and gradually dominating. Pleni sunt coeli is a fast seven-part fugue, and the Hosannas a kind of quiet dance in irregular rhythm.*

*Benedictus: Soprano, alto, and tenor soloists sing the melody above a slow-moving choral accompaniment.*

*Agnus Dei: Here the melody is closely related to that of the Kyries. The first Agnus dei is given to the four soloists alone, rising from the bass and culminating in a choral outburst of Miserere. The second Agnus is for full choirs - a more extended version of the first Agnus and ending with second cry of Miserere at a higher pitch. The third Agnus is very short and for soprano solo; below this the choirs sing Dona nobis to a simple rising motive distributed in eight parts, and culminating in the word pacem, which is repeated four times in soft chords.*

The motet at the Offertory is a setting of *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, a text from the United States, found in *Divine Hymns or Spiritual Songs* compiled by Joshua Smith (1760–1795), a Baptist lay minister and hymn compiler, in New Hampshire in 1784. Several of the poems included in this volume were set by the New England composer Jeremiah Ingalls (1764–1838), including this one, but the text became famous in modern times through the beautifully elegant setting by the British composer Elizabeth Poston (1905–1987). She was a remarkable figure, active not only in composition, but as a performer, academic and writer. She was also one of the crucial people behind the creation of *The Third Programme* – now known to us as Radio 3 – and worked extensively at the BBC as both a composer for programmes on the radio and television and as a producer. From 1914 onwards, she and her family lived in Rooks Nest House, formerly the home of E.M. Forster, and immortalized by him later as *Howards End*.

Unfortunately, a great deal of Poston's delightful music has largely disappeared from our collective consciousness apart from this carol, which is firmly in "the Canon". The slightly curious thing is that the poem, which is a gentle hymn of praise using, obviously, the metaphor of Jesus Christ as an apple tree, has nothing specifically Adventish or Christmassy about it, and there is in fact no reason why it

should be more often performed in this season than in others, and yet it tends to be so.

The evening brings our Mid-Advent Carol Service, which has the subtitle *Tomorrow I will come*. This links Advent to Christmas using the Antiphons that are part of the office of Vespers on the seven days prior to Christmas Eve. Each of them starts with the vocative *O*, followed by a synonym for the coming Messiah, and so they are known collectively as the *O Antiphons*. Each synonym adds a dimension to the overall picture. In this service, each Antiphon is followed by a reading and at least one piece of music that amplifies the relevant theme.

The first is *O Sapientia – O Wisdom*, answered by Vaughan Williams's arrangement of the old English advent carol *This is the truth sent from above*, which recounts the story of Adam and Eve's sin in which they eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This was, of course, an act of non-wisdom, but thereby makes the contrast with the Lord of true Wisdom who comes to show the way that we must now be saved. Vaughan Williams was a great collector of genuine folk tunes, but was also capable of writing a melody that sounded as though it must have been around for years, even when that was far from the case. This one is genuinely old, however, and was collected by Vaughan Williams from a Mr W. Jenkins of King's Pyon in Herefordshire, for which reason this is often referred to as *The Herefordshire Carol*.

The second Antiphon, *O Adonai – O Lord* is answered by Psalm 136 to an Anglican chant. The third is *O Radix Jesse – O Root of Jesse*, which is sung to chant. In fact, the fourth antiphon, *O Clavis David – O Key of David* is combined with the next choir piece, being sung in a setting by the Lithuanian composer Vytautas Miškinis (b. 1954). He is an extremely active choral director and composer, with more than 700 works in both secular and sacred genres, published across numerous countries of the world. Among these are his *Seven Antiphons* – precisely the seven texts on which this service is based. Rupert Gough recorded them all with the Royal Holloway Choir in 2010. The pieces were composed over eight years starting in 1995, and this one dates from December 2003. This is a piece for double choir – and as it so happens, this is what have available.

The musical response to the next reading from Revelation is the seventeenth-century setting of *Remember O thou man* by the English composer Thomas Ravenscroft (c. 1582–1635), who also wrote the words. His main claim to fame is as an early collector of folk music (somewhat like the much later Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp), of which the most famous is *Three Blind Mice*. He didn't write a great deal of liturgical music, keeping himself mainly to rounds and catches, but the salutary admonition of this setting has become very well-known.

The fifth *O Antiphon* is *O Oriens – O Daystar*, and the choral response to this is Thomas Tallis's small-scale, but powerful masterpiece, *O Nata Lux*. This is a setting of two verses from the hymn at Lauds on the Feast of the Transfiguration. As befits the ecstatic nature of the feast, the music is vibrant and powerful, full of surprising harmonically confusing sounds that continually transfigure the music itself.

The sixth *O Antiphon* is *O Rex gentium – O King of the Peoples*. This is followed by a reading comprising the first six verses of Psalm 24, which begins in the psalter: *The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is*. Verse 7 brings us to *Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in*. It is at those words that the choir takes over, singing the setting of those words from *Messiah* by George Frideric Handel (1685–1759). This is an assertive piece in the middle of the second part of the oratorio, immediately after the solo *But thou didst not leave his soul in hell*.

The seventh and last of the *O Antiphons* is the culmination of the sequence: *O Emmanuel*, the greeting to the incarnate Word of God or *God-With-Us*. The choral response to this brings us to our first real Christmas carol, *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day* in the arrangement by the great David Willcocks (1919–2011), the legendary Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge. The emphasis for us is, of course, on the *Tomorrow* aspect that fits the title of the service. However, the carol takes us as far as the Baptism of Jesus, glancing forward to the Nativity and beyond, so in fact this is the first real carol of Christmas. Much more of that, however, next week! This is merely a teaser for now – a trailer along the lines of *next week on this channel...* The full poem goes all the way to the Resurrection, but Willcocks gets us as far as the manger, then repeats the first verse once more and leaves it there.

We then sing together the well-known hymn that is based on the *O Antiphons*, and that is *O Come, O come, Emmanuel*. We have tinkered with the order of the verses because the one we know as the first verse is actually the one derived from the last Antiphon. So, we're going to sing this once at the start and once again at the end, while the intervening verses are on this occasion sung in the order that they occur during the days before Christmas.

If you take the first words of each *O Antiphon* and line them up in the order they occur, you get the following:

O Sapientia  
O Adonai  
O Radix  
O Clavis  
O Oriens  
O Rex  
O Emmanuel

If you read the first letters of each noun in upward order, you get EROCRAS or *ero cras*, which is the Latin for *Tomorrow I will come*, the title of this service.

One final item from the choir: the *Vesper Responsory for Advent Sunday* by Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962), which we also heard at the end of our Advent Carol Service. It is, in effect, a companion piece to the *Matin Respond* by the same composer that we used at the start of the Advent Carol Service, but which was written for Christ Church, Oxford. This piece, however, was commissioned by the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral for its Director of Music, Michael Nicholas, and the Cathedral Choir. The text reminds us three times: *Tomorrow go ye forth, and the Lord, he shall be with you*, as good a Mid-Advent admonition as you could possibly want.