

## Music Notes 2016 – Advent Sunday

This Sunday's Mass setting is *Missa Conditore Alme Siderum* by the Italian composer Giovanni Animuccia (1520–1571). He was a slightly older contemporary of Palestrina, Victoria and Lassus, and so brushed shoulders with the very greatest of the period. Nevertheless, he is not spoken of in quite the same breath, although that should not prepare you for the worst! He was, perhaps, somewhat less revolutionary than they were in breaking new ground, and he was more of a trend follower than setter. It seems notable, for example, that when he published a set of masses, he went out of his way to draw attention to the fact that they conformed to the principles of the Tridentine Council, something which Palestrina, perhaps, would have thought unnecessary to articulate.

His main claim to fame is as S. Philip Neri's music director. Neri was an extremely interesting character, ministering in Rome during the great upheaval caused by the Reformation. Although attracted to the new religious orders – he met Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits in 1544 – he founded instead a religious organization for secular clergy (i.e. those not members of a monastery or similar religious house) called the *Congregation of the Oratory*. Cardinal Newman's Oratory in Birmingham and the Brompton Oratory in South Kensington are modern descendants of Neri's initiative. His Oratory, at the *Chiesa Nuova* in Rome, began rather low key, but then grew rapidly into a sizable body. Animuccia became involved quite early on and was duly appointed *Maestro di Capella*, composing music for the meetings and services and directing its performance. So successful was the entire venture that, as Neri was able to attract the great and the good to the Oratory, so Animuccia was able to induce the great composers such as Palestrina and Victoria to write for it. It is notable that the first set of music for use at Oratory meetings that he published is relatively simple, and appears to have been intended to be sung either by amateur contributors or the assembled congregation. By the time the second book came out, things are rather different, and the music is clearly intended for the competent and probably professional singer, so one can trace the development of the organization itself in this way over the seven years between the books' respective appearances.

It is a rather nice detail that the composer Victoria lived in S. Philip Neri's house for some five years, which makes one wonder what it was like to cohabit with a living saint and it is certainly interesting to consider how the experience of being so close to someone like S. Philip will have affected Victoria, who was himself ordained to the priesthood in 1574.

The mass we are to hear is, as Animuccia's works tended to be, a *cantus firmus* mass, based firmly on the relevant plainchant. The text for the chant is from a 7<sup>th</sup>-century hymn used at Vespers during Advent. We know it in translation as *Creator of the stars of night, Thy people's everlasting light, Jesu, Redeemer, save us all, and hear Thy servants*

*when they call.* Animuccia was, as already mentioned, concerned to follow Tridentine principles. However, seen from the enormously pompous heights of hindsight, one wonders how much he really managed to do this compared with, say, Palestrina. He wanted the words to be clear, and yet he knew that the greatest beauty in music at the time could only be provided by polyphony. His solution was to alternate the approaches, with blocks of homophony (like a hymn) followed by sections of interleaved polyphonic (interwoven voices) writing. Actually, it all seems very clear when the words are as familiar as is the case with the liturgy. Still, one can see that he couldn't quite work out how to square the circle, and perhaps that is what makes Palestrina, Victoria, and Lassus the great composers that they were, because this is exactly what they did with such great success. Still, Animuccia's music *is* beautiful and highly effective, and this is, anyway, such a great setting for Advent.

The motet at the Offertory is a setting of the text *Conditore alme Siderum* by an anonymous composer from around 1400. It is structured as a presentation of plainchant in alternation with a three-voice free setting. So, the first verse is sung to a chant (familiar to us from our hymn books as the Advent hymn *Creator of the starry height*), and then the second to the setting, and so on. The setting has the familiar rather "bouncy" triple metre quality that is familiar to us from music of this period. We tend to consider rhythm to be a fairly flexible matter, chosen relatively freely by the composer to suit whatever he or she wants the music to do in relation to the text. But in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century, rhythm was still subject to quite strict rules, to which this setting fully conforms.

The evening brings us to the first of the nine carol services organized this year by Great St Bartholomew, and which take place between the start of Advent and the Epiphany. For the first time in the past two decades at least, we are holding this on Advent Sunday itself.

We begin with the Advent Prose: *Pour down, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness.* This text – known also by its Latin incipit *Rorate Caeli* – has various possible liturgical uses in Advent on various days and festivals, and sums up the themes of the season as an introduction to this service.

The first lesson concerns the prophet's vision in the Temple, which is filled with smoke, and in which the voice of the Lord is heard saying *Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?* To which the prophet replies *Then said I, Here am I; send me* – surely one of the most thought-provoking and challenging passages in the Old Testament. The choir immediately sings the Matin Responsory, well-known through its use at King's College, Cambridge on the First Sunday of Advent. The text comprises the first Responsory for Matins of the day, but the music, which would normally have been a straightforward chant, is here an adaptation of a *Magnificat* by Palestrina. Since 1970, many churches have used a version put together by the editors of the second volume

of Oxford University Press's *Carols for Choirs*, David Willcocks (at that time Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge) and John Rutter. It became well-known through its annual use in the King's Advent Carol Service and through being disseminated in the most successful series of carol books ever sold. Stephen Cleobury, the *present* Director of Music at King's, has tidied up some of the rhythmic presentation of this piece for a more recent Oxford University Press publication, and this is the version we will be hearing.

A reading from Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will conceive a son whose name shall be Immanuel – which means *God is with us*. This is a crucial stage in the undoing of the sin of Adam which, in the narrative of salvation, kicked off the whole thing in the first place. The choir therefore answers with a setting of *Adam lay y-bounden*, in its most famous setting by Boris Ord (1897–1961), who was Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge during which time this setting was composed, the inspiration coming to him in the bath, as it so happens. It is a setting of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century English macaronic text. This just means that the text is a mixture of languages – in this case English and Latin. Another good example would be *In dulci jubilo*, which goes so far as to alternate the languages line by line, while *Adam lay y-bounden* waits until its final declamation, *Deo gracias!*, to go into Latin. Ord was succeeded by the great David Willcocks, who sadly died last year, bringing to the end an extraordinarily influential career that played a large part in reimagining the Advent and Christmas musical traditions on both sides of the Atlantic.

More prophecy from Isaiah, in this case using the words that later will be quoted by John the Baptist in the seventh reading of the service: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God*. The cumulative effect of these readings is to increase the longing for the Advent of the Lord to take place. This is reflected in the next choral item, *E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come* (also known as *Peace be to you*) by the American composer Paul Manz (1919–2009). He was a Lutheran, serving as organist and director of a number of churches of that denomination, especially in Chicago and Minneapolis. A student of Helmut Walcha in Germany and Flor Peeters in Belgium as a young man, he developed a highly successful career alongside his church positions as a recitalist. He was also a much sought-after teacher in the field of church music, including at university level – a type of course that we do not really manage to replicate in this country, alas. This motet has become known here through broadcasts from St John's College and King's College in Cambridge and is undoubtedly Manz's best-known work on this side of the Atlantic. It shows a certain fearlessness about top notes.

A reading now from Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, in which the prophet foresees the forerunner of Christ. This is followed by the carol *There is no rose* by the great organist and composer, Simon Preston (b. 1938). A former organ scholar at King's College, Cambridge under David Willcocks, he then became Sub-

Organist at Westminster and then Organist at Christ Church, Oxford, for a period of eleven years, of which some of us speak only in tones of the greatest awe. Then in 1981, back he went to Westminster Abbey as Organist and Master of the Choristers, eventually quitting all cathedral posts and concentrating on his performing career. Many people considered him to be the finest organist in the world when at the height of his powers. Alongside this, he has produced a steady – if modest in terms of quantity – stream of very attractive compositions, including a wonderful setting of *I saw three ships*, and this beautiful original composition, *There is no rose*.

We hear the story of the Annunciation in the fifth reading, and this is answered by *Gabriel's Message*, by the very talented Jim Clements (b. 1983). This is an arrangement of the well-known ancient Basque tune, here reinvented originally for the talented *a capella* group, *Voces8*, which whom he has worked extensively.

The Advent narrative generally focuses on the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, and the early fulfilment of those prophecies in the person of John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary. Oh, and there is Joseph, her *most chaste spouse*, as we say in the Divine Praises at Benediction. His part in the story of our redemption is largely restricted to the early stages of the New Testament story, and, of course, he is also there when Jesus goes missing and is only found three days later disputing with the elders in the temple. There is a crucial question for Joseph early on in the story leading up to the birth in Bethlehem. Can he really trust Mary, when she is suddenly and mysteriously pregnant? God seems to realize that this is quite a big “ask”, and in the next lesson, we hear of the assurance given to Joseph in a dream.

*The Hymn to the Virgin* by Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) is one of the pieces that first drew attention to what a remarkable composer had been born to the seemingly unlikely family of a Suffolk dentist. The piece is for unaccompanied chorus with an echo choir, which is usually located some distance away from the main singers to give a truly antiphonal effect. It was first performed at a concert given by the Lowestoft Musical Society in St. John's Church, Lowestoft on January 5, 1931. Britten found the text, which is by that prolific author Anonymous, in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Its grace and elegance is considerable, and it seemed extremely appropriate when this was the anthem chosen to be sung at the funerals of both Benjamin Britten and his partner and muse of some 35 years, Peter Pears.

In the seventh lesson, John the Baptist finally comes to the fore, and the Advent process moves decisively forward. This involves a little dislocation of the timeline, because in fact this takes place after the events of Christmas – but forming theological structures sometimes does that to your sense of time. John's message is undoubtedly an Advent theme: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord*. Our musicians respond to this with the great verse anthem *This is the record of John* by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). The story is recounted in the first instance by a soloist, with the main

force of the final part of each section repeated and reinforced by the five-voice choir. The copy of the manuscript that is now held at Christ Church in Oxford includes the text: *This Anthem was made for Dr. Laud, President of Saint John's Oxford, for St. John Baptist's day*, and one imagines that it was therefore first performed there in the chapel. Gibbons achieves here one of the most elegant works in the whole Anglican choral tradition, with disarming apparent simplicity that conceals a wealth of subtleties that show that Protestantism struggled to suppress a great composer's creativity. For example, at the point that John laments that he is *the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness*, the harmony shifts unexpectedly into a (for the times) remote minor key, and yet at the words *make straight the way of the Lord* the harmony instantly returns to the home key. It is just one example of wonderful word-painting.

A final reading from Thessalonians sums up the themes of this service, and the choir answers with words of the Vesper Responsory, set by Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962). *Tomorrow go ye forth, and the Lord, he will be with you. Stand ye still, and ye shall see the salvation of the Lord.*

The service ends with the Marian Antiphon *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, one of the four that we sing at Evensong throughout the year according to the season. Their proper role is to be used at the end of Compline, if Compline there be. Hermannus Contractus (1013–1054) is generally believed to have written the text, drawing on a variety of earlier sources among the saints. It is sung in the Priory Church from the First Sunday in Advent until the Feast of the Purification, or Candlemas, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, and so delineates the entire span of the narrative that dominates our December and January each year.

The setting is by the Italian composer, Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676). In fact, Cavalli wasn't his name at all. He was actually born Pietro Francesco Caletti-Bruni. In the earlier seasons of *Downton Abbey*, we saw the old below-stairs tradition of referring to the personal servants of visiting house guests by the name of the house guest, not the servant's own name. "Cavalli" is an example of this, because the name by which we know this composer is actually the name of his employer, Federico Cavalli. Apart from his progressive ascent through the many hierarchical layers of the music department of San Marco in Venice until he achieved *Maestro di Capella*, "Cavalli's" main claim to fame is as one of the first composers of opera, a new art form that was about to explode across the whole of Europe. In the end, he wrote more than forty operas, although about a third of these are lost to us. However, his role at San Marco also led to his writing a significant number of church works. These included settings of the Marian Antiphons, scored for choir and continuo. This one is delightful, with the text split up into contrasting sections unified by a repeating harmonic pattern. This involves a falling bass line that comes back again and again and becomes a kind of fingerprint in the piece.