

## Music Notes 2017 – Advent III: Gaudete Sunday

The name 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 for the vestments, altar frontals, other pieces of liturgical material, and the third candle we light during the *Introit*. 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”. (Indeed, it is just one of the confusing aspects of this connection that there is simply no definitive place for an apostrophe in the latter.) In the case of Gaudete Sunday, the rose also implies a purposeful lightening of the mood, as well, although some of us, being immediately conscious of, and already busy with, the approaching festive season, are feeling slightly fraught. Hopefully, the participants at our services will endeavour to set a light hearted mood for this day. Nevertheless, we are still only part way through Advent.

But first the Solemn Eucharist, which gives us a chance to meet a remarkable and great contributor to the Anglican choral tradition, Stanley Vann (1910–2010). Alas, he died after a fall some forty days after his hundredth birthday; and this marked an enviable innings at the musical crease.

Vann might be described as a very important and yet surprisingly unrecognized figure. One would write a great deal about him, were these notes not having to cover rather a lot of territory this week. Suffice it for now to say that he was at Peterborough Cathedral from 1953 until his retirement in 1977. While there, he earned enormous respect for three achievements: a robust discipline within the choir that nevertheless was combined with being held in highest affection by its members; an extraordinary commitment to excellence in singing psalms that has rarely been exceeded; and, for treating the start of choir practice as the true beginning of the service. He was also, as you will hear, an outstandingly inventive composer of very beautiful works. His sense of harmony, deeply rooted in the English tradition, is highly distinctive. He never really ventured into the more discordant areas of modern musical language, and yet he manages to set his performers quite significant challenges. We shall hear his *Missa Brevis in E*, one of two *Missae brevis* written for Peterborough that therefore bear the additional descriptor *Petriburgiensis* – in this case *Petriburgiensis I*, number II being for three upper voices, while number I is for the usual four-part choir.

The Offertory at the motet is also by Stanley Vann – so you should have a handle on his style by the end of the Solemn Eucharist. The text is by one of the few poets from the fifteenth century – he is thought to have died around 1426 – who is still known today, John Audelay, a priest-poet. You may be delighted to know that in an earlier part of his career he worked in the household of Richard, 7th Baron Strange of Knockin, about whom one feels we should know more. In his retirement, Audelay was chantry priest at Haughmond Abbey in Shropshire, alas, now in ruins.

This poem, *There is a flow'r sprung of a tree*, has been somewhat 'cleaned up' in terms of language – by which is merely meant that the original was in Middle English, but is now rendered in a semi-Elizabethan modernization. In fact, the text has become well-known in choral circles because it evoked from John Rutter (b.1945) one of his most beautiful settings. But Stanley Vann's version is also gorgeous, and responds in a not dissimilar fashion to the elegant and poignant poem. In fact, the story it contains runs all the way from the prophecy concerning a shoot from Jesse's stem to the Three Kings' visit to the baby Jesus, but Vann's setting allows one to stop at a suitable point while still within the Advent verses.

The evening brings us to the first of our own Christmas carol services, in this case the traditional format of the Nine Lessons and Carols, made famous around the world through the broadcasts each Christmas Eve from King's College, Cambridge. The service was originally introduced by Bishop Benson of Truro (later Archbishop of Canterbury) in 1880 in the temporary Cathedral there, while the present permanent cathedral was still under construction. Eric Milner-White, at the time Dean of King's College, decided to import it to the college chapel in 1918 more or less lock, stock and barrel, and revised the choice of readings the following year to establish the format that has been used ever since. Those with a good sense of arithmetic will realize, therefore, that this year's service will be the 100<sup>th</sup> time that King's has presented the service – the tradition was unbroken during the Second World War. Slightly frustratingly for those of us who like these to be kept tidy, it will be the 89<sup>th</sup> time that the BBC has broadcast it. Having started to do this in 1928, they decided to skip it in 1930, but have stuck with it since every year since 1931. It is the largest single music broadcast anywhere in the world by far, being broadcast simultaneously on the BBC World Service, and picked up also by National Public Radio in the USA as well as numerous other channels there and elsewhere in the world. Moreover, there are repeats (for example, on Radio 3 on Christmas Day) in many countries.

One of the effects of this Christmas phenomenon is that the tradition of presenting a Service of Nine Lessons and Carols has spread across at least the Anglican world, not to mention into certain other places, such as certain Lutheran churches in Germany. A strong partner in furthering this spread to choirs everywhere has been the *Carols for Choirs* series of books published (only slightly ironically) by Oxford

University Press, which contained many of the arrangements and carols that were developed for use in the King's services. The first four volumes (out of five) were edited by David Willcocks (1919–2015), the impressive Director of Music at King's, who inspired a whole generation of choir directors everywhere. Providing this access to the repertoire, while holding the ideal format of the service before everyone's eyes and ears every Christmas Eve, generated a "viral marketing" effect a long time before the concept was ever formulated by the digital world. We happily follow this tradition every year in at least two of our carol services, and have developed a whole series of other carol services that depart somewhat from the model. Yet, you can see that our German, American, and Dickensian services still at root use the underlying structure first presented in Truro 147 years ago.

As is the custom at King's, the choir's first carol at our service is always a setting of *Adam lay y-bounden*. We always sing the setting by Boris Ord (1897–1961) at our Advent Carol Service; Ord was the Director of Music at King's immediately prior to David Willcocks, and his setting has in recent times been joined by a rapidly growing number of alternative settings of these words. This year we sing the setting by Philip Ledger (1937–2012), who was David Willcocks's successor. Willcocks was a hard act to follow, and Ledger was not immune from the temptation to write new descants for *O come all ye faithful* and *Hark the Herald Angels*, although neither his nor any other attempt has yet made any real dent in the utter hegemony enjoyed by the Willcocks versions. However, Ledger did write a very successful new setting of *Adam lay y-bounden* to compete with that of his predecessor but one, and this is what we will be hearing this Sunday evening.

The next carol is by the British composer, Richard Rodney Bennett (1936–2012), who lived in New York for the latter part of his life. *Out of your sleep* comes from a set called *Five Carols*, written for the then organist and choirmaster, Michael Nicholas, at the Choir of St Matthew's Church, Northampton. The church has been a generous commissioner of artworks of all genres, due to the guiding light of its second vicar, Walter Hussey. For example, Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) wrote *Rejoice in the Lamb*, which we heard at Evensong on the Feast of Christ the King, at Hussey's request. The carols were premiered on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1967 at St. Matthew's, and then sung at Wigmore Hall in London by the John Alldis Choir the next day, with two of them then performed at the King's Carol Service on Christmas Eve the same year. They have continued to be in the Christmas repertoire ever since.

Next we hear *A Spotless Rose* by Herbert Howells (1892–1983). This is one of a set of three carols published together, of which the others are *Sing lullaby*, and *Here is the little door*. Howells himself wrote: *This one I set down and wrote after idly watching some shunting from the window of a cottage which overlooked the Midland Railway. In an upstairs room I looked out on iron railings and the main Bristol to Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging. I wrote it and dedicated it to my mother – it*

*always moves me when I hear it, just as if it were written by someone else.* Somehow Howells managed to exclude the bumping and banging of the railway entirely from this mellifluous and beautiful carol...

This is followed by *Bethlehem Down* by Peter Warlock (1894–1930), whose real name was Philip Heseltine, a somewhat rum character who worked mainly as a music critic and author. The “Warlock” of his chosen pseudonym undoubtedly was a direct reference to his interest in the occult. He became a good friend of the composer Frederick Delius (1862–1934), and indeed wrote an early biography of him, which was published in 1923. In his persona of Peter Warlock, he was a prolific composer of carols, with some of the best in the repertoire coming from his pen. The text is by Bruce Blunt, who was a poet and journalist alongside his work as a wine merchant. Warlock/Heseltine had a substantial appetite for alcohol, yet was always short of money, which got in the way of fuelling this appetite. I hope it will not shock you too much to learn that he and Blunt – who were close friends – created this carol in an attempt – successful, as it turned out – to finance what they called an *immortal carouse*, by which they meant an extended bout of heavy drinking that was planned for Christmas Eve 1927. *The Daily Telegraph* ran an annual competition for a new carol, and they submitted *Bethlehem Down*, which won handsomely, and went on to be a rip-roaring success, thereby providing the requisite funds for the carouse. I am not making this up.

The next carol is *Nova! Nova!* By Bob Chilcott (b.1955), who long since joined the ranks of prolific composers and arrangers of Christmas carols in the tradition of David Willcocks and John Rutter. It would be difficult to better the description of this carol on the Oxford University Press website: *This gutsy folk-inspired Advent carol is original and contemporary without losing the raw fervour of its medieval model. With its rhythm punchy and driven, and its harmony strong and bare, the piece demands great energy from the performers.*

*The Hymn to the Virgin* by Benjamin Britten 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 (1910–1986).

*The Shepherd's Pipe Carol* by John Rutter is one of the pieces he created while still an undergraduate at Cambridge at Clare College – he was eventually to become its

Director of Music for many years). This carol was written when he was 18, in fact. In many cases, he simply arranged existing carols, but this one is completely original, both in terms of music and text. It was created for an orchestral concert at Clare. An immediate success, Rutter quickly created an organ accompaniment to give the carol wider potential for performance, and it was published in volume 2 of *Carols for Choirs*. Rutter has said that he thinks that the inspiration might have come from the Christmas television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* by Menotti (1911–2007), although the subject matter in that case is the Wise Men, rather than the shepherds. He wrote *I think the piping heard as Amahl heads for Bethelhem with the Wise Men may have stuck in my mind*. This carol used to be a staple of our Nine Lessons and Carols in David Trendell's day, being programmed by him almost every year for a long time. After a while, Trendell decided to "retire" it, and it has remained retired ever since, so it is high time we heard it again.

*My Lord has come* is by Will Todd (b.1970), a composer from Durham. He is very involved with jazz, and many of his works reveal its influence upon him. One of Todd's highest-profile commissions was for a piece in the Diamond Jubilee Thanksgiving Service at St Paul's, subsequently recorded by Nigel Short with *Tenebrae* and the English Chamber Orchestra. This carol is a setting of the composer's own words, which refer us to the Christmas story, the shepherds, the sages, all drawn to the stable, and asking them to lead us also thither, the site of the incarnation described by S. John.

The final carol in this service is *Make we joy now in this fest* by Sir William Walton (1902–1983). He was a chorister and later an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford. The choral environment was a very familiar one to him. In his mid-life, he and his wife moved to the Italian island of Ischia. Walton was reputedly self-critical and slow to work, and there are endearing stories of how he would go to his composing shed at the bottom of the garden in the morning, write until lunchtime, enjoy a siesta, and then return to the shed later in the afternoon to tear up what he had written that morning. Written in 1931, this carol mixes his harmonic language with a deliberately archaic structure and even some quasi-Renaissance polyphony, giving it an unusual character, but still positioning it fair and square in the English choral tradition. The text is macaronic – i.e. mixing languages, in this case Latin and English – and is a modernized version of a fifteenth century text.

Many carol services are yet to come! On Monday, there will be the whole of Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*, followed by a concert of Anthony Bolton's *A Garland of Carols*, which was written both as a companion piece to Britten's work and as a homage to Britten. (Don't miss this: it will be a great experience, with mulled wine or soft refreshments in between the events, if you wish); another Nine Lessons and Carols, with a slightly different selection of carols will be presented on Tuesday; *A Star-Spangled Christmas* – a carol service with music and readings from America

enlightens us on Wednesday evening; another joy to come is *Stille Nacht* – carols from the Germanic tradition - on Thursday evening; and, finally, to top it all we are treated to *A Christmas Carol*, with readings exclusively from the writings of Charles Dickens, and only music that the great man himself is likely to have known. It will be a particular pleasure at the latter service to have two readings given by two great-great-great-granddaughters of Dickens, the travel writer, biographer and lecturer, Lucinda Hawksley, and her sister Ginny Hawksley-Lennard, Managing Consultant to the British Virgin Islands Tourist Board, who has been much involved in the aftermath of the terrible hurricane there.