

Music Notes 8th October 2017 – The Appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Priory Church of St Bartholomew the Great

This Sunday we mark a special part of the Priory Church's history, something about which we make an astonishingly modest fuss, given what it concerns. As well as being the oldest surviving church in the City (*never burned, never bombed*) we are also the only church in London for which a personal appearance by the Blessed Virgin Mary is recorded. In other places, substantial shrines and even an international airport have been created to mark such a visit, while we remain rather tight-lipped and soberly Anglican in comparison. Not that it was always so: before the Reformation, England in particular exhibited such devotion to the Virgin that it earned the description of "Dowry of Mary". All of this came to an end as reformatory zeal swept it all away and much of the English population turned away from Mary with the contrary zeal exhibited by ex-smokers. The Oxford Movement began the process of restoration, and this weekend we play our part in its furtherance.

The mass setting this Sunday is Britten's *Missa Brevis*. Were he still with us, it would be his 104th birthday on 22nd November, the Feast of S. Cecilia, patroness of music, who is celebrated on this date. Britten and Purcell (1659–1695) – and, indeed, Hoagy Carmichael (1899–1981) – shared the distinction of having managed to be born on this most ideal of all days for a musician.

One of Britten's very good friends was George Malcolm (1917–1997), composer, harpsichordist and organist, who was Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral between 1947 and 1959. Britten attended a carol service in the cathedral in 1958, when his *Ceremony of Carols* was performed. (We will have another opportunity to hear this delightful sequence at the Priory Church in our now annual *Ceremony of Carols* carol service, which this year takes place on Monday 18th December. The work's brief but highly effective movements, accompanied by harp, are dispersed among the readings and hymns of the service.) *Tired of struggling with administration and administrators*, as John Amis, the writer of his obituary in the *Independent* wrote, George Malcolm decided to quit the cathedral in 1959, and Britten wanted to write a work for him before he left. First they discussed what the work might entail in Aldeburgh, and Britten then very quickly sketched out the *Missa Brevis* more or less as we have it today. It was performed on 22nd July the same year, shortly before Malcolm stood down. Just as with the *Ceremony of Carols*, it is set for three upper voices only, accompanied in this case by organ rather than harp.

Britten's religious background was low church Anglican, so his understanding of Catholic liturgy and theology needed a little updating before he could write a *Missa Brevis*, a task that George Malcolm readily undertook for him. The result is a work that consciously builds into the music the concepts of eucharistic theology. Britten was not a composer who simply created pretty or even elegant music passages as his

imagination took him. Every note and phrase, every use of key, or manipulation of melody, has a purpose and a meaning. He picked up on the way that Catholic music through the ages has incorporated the language of chant. Readers of these notes will be used to being told that a Renaissance mass is based on a particular bit of chant (a *cantus firmus* mass) or on a motet (a parody mass). Well, Britten knew about this approach to composition, and the *Missa Brevis* takes its basic thematic material from Mass XV in the *Graduale Romanum*, which bears the title *Dominator Deus (Sovereign Lord)*. This thematic material is then reworked through the magic of Britten's compositional process into highly imaginative textures and phrases.

The setting throughout is concise: a series of impassioned pleas for mercy in the *Kyrie* that cascade from the top of the vocal range to the bottom and then, in the *Christe* section, climb back up. For the final *Kyrie*, they once again descend the same path, but this time more reflectively and gently. The *Gloria* builds a series of arch shapes in a series of contrasting keys. Throughout, a tremendous rhythmic intensity pushes the music forward. A brief pause for a calmer central section *Qui tollis peccata mundi* nevertheless is constantly commented upon by urgent voices answering each phrase, which burst back in to drive the movement to its quiet but very effective conclusion. Throughout, the impression is given that we are engaged in an activity imbued with a sense of urgency, of great importance, able to evoke an almost breathless intensity.

The *Sanctus* manipulates the chant motif into a series of unmistakable imitations of a peal of bells – obviously a reference to the bells used in the sanctuary during the liturgy. Moreover, each of these phrases passes through every available pitch – a procedure borrowed from the principles of musical serialism, which Britten occasionally used for certain special effects, although absolute serialism was never his thing. In this case, he uses all twelve pitches in the octave to build a picture of the heavenly and earthly hosts, from all corners of creation, to sing the praises of God in the words of the *Sanctus*. It is a vivid and exciting image. The *Benedictus* is a delightful duet between two solo voices, which ultimately intertwine before the *Hosanna* reappears. The *Agnus Dei* is unusual in that Britten uses short stabbing notes over a wandering pedal figure to give a sense of tension in the music. He picks up in this way on the fact that a Mass begins and ends with urgent pleas for mercy. The *Kyrie* obviously is all about this, but even after we have gone through the whole liturgy and the Sacrament is on the altar, we have not yet reached a point of peace or respite according to his vision: in his hands, the *Agnus Dei* is an urgently renewed request for mercy and peace. The voices and organ combine to give a truly uneasy, unsettling and anxiety-inducing quality to the setting of the text, reminding us of our weaknesses and unworthiness as we approach the altar.

The motet is by the British composer, Cecilia McDowall (b.1951). It is the second of her *Three Latin Motets*, and displays a remarkable intimacy and tenderness. As with

the Britten, it is written for upper voices – two soprano lines and one alto line, but in this case unaccompanied.

The magazine, *Choir & Organ*, reviewed these pieces in 2006 after their publication, as follows: *Writing for SSA only, McDowall makes a virtue of carefully placed repetitions. In the Ave Regina it is the appoggiaturas that recur; here it is a pair of laddering motifs, the one rising in close harmony quavers, the other cascading down in chains of suspensions. Once again, sensitivity to the words - their passion, their dignity, and their metrical quantities - is faultless.*

Meantime, the periodical, *Music Teacher*, said in its edition for November of that year: *In her Ave Maria Cecilia McDowall reminds us that the text is that of The Angelic Salutation, but the note is rendered unnecessary by the beautiful and haunting three-part writing . . . The overall effect is magical, though - a good, echoing stone venue is required.*

Well, we can certainly provide the stone venue, if not, perhaps, the extent of echo the reviewer seems to think ideal.

The canticles at Evensong are *The Norwich Service* by the Bermuda-born British composer Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962). He is particularly well-known for writing wonderful choral music, and his skill in this genre is obviously partly the result of his time as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, after which he attended the Royal Academy of Music in London. Nevertheless, his first ambition had in fact been to become an architect. There is some correlation between architecture and composers, rather as there is between mathematics and music. It goes without saying that composers have to think of writing their music as involving elements of “construction” – as they are in a sense three-dimensional works. If we were able actually to *see* air with our eyes, we would also (assuming good enough eyesight) we able to see the waveforms of sound passing through it to our ears, and might better recognize the physical nature and structure of music – and, indeed, of all sound. In any case, architecture did not in fact win against music in the battle for Gabriel Jackson’s future. During the time that he was at Canterbury, Alan Wicks was Organist and Master of the Choristers, a post he held for some 27 years, and he proved to be a strong influence in Jackson’s musical development.

Nevertheless, in spite of the cathedral background, Jackson’s time at the Royal College in the early 1980s was not in fact focused on choral music but rather on instrumental music, and most of his early works are therefore not for voices. Jackson has said, however, that this all started to change towards the end of the 1980s: *I realized that I still wanted to be involved in the cathedral music that had meant so much to me, and the only way I could contribute (I was a terrible adult singer!) was to compose liturgical music. [The then Organist and Master of Choristers] Michael Nicholas [b.1938], another great pioneer of contemporary church music at Norwich Cathedral, was*

very supportive and commissioned and performed several pieces in the early 1990s. One of these was this set of canticles, first performed by the cathedral choir under Michael Nicholas on 13 June 1993. It was then revised slightly by the composer in 1998.

The anthem, *Ave Maria II*, is by the Lithuanian composer Vytautas Miškinis (b. 1954). A highly respected university professor and choral director, he has been Choir Director of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre conservatory since 1985. He has also been active all over the world, lecturing, teaching, training, and of course, composing. Our Director of Music, Rupert Gough, explored Miškinis's choral repertoire in the second CD that he and the choir of Royal Holloway recorded for Hyperion, *Time is Endless*. Rupert writes about the composer and the works on the CD in the booklet, and you can read this here: <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/67818-B.pdf>. His key sentences for us concerning this anthem: *Miškinis has written no fewer than seven settings of the Ave Maria, each quite different in mood. The second setting, in E major, focusses on simplicity, and there is a reassuring warmth and optimism to this tonality. The music is carried forward by rhythmic embellishments in both melody and accompaniment.*

The parish profile that the PCC approved earlier this year for use in recruiting a new Rector has the following to say about the Parish of Great St Bartholomew and the Blessed Virgin Mary: *Our Lady features extensively in the liturgical life of the church's year. Apart from Marian festivals, this includes, for example, the Angelus that is said (or the Regina cæli that is sung in Easter) at the end of the Solemn Eucharist every Sunday. The Great is the only church in London in which Our Lady is said to have made a personal appearance (to Canon Hubert, in the medieval monastery), an event that is celebrated by a special Sunday each October, and we take this very seriously. Indeed, if anything, many wonder why more is not made of this. Since the 1950s, there has been a steady movement across the Church of England in the direction of being more Eucharist-centred. This was obviously already the case for Anglo-Catholic parishes, but the movement has now significantly influenced evangelicals and "middle-of-the-road" churches. In more recent times, these parts of the church have also started to rediscover Mary, the mother of Jesus. While it will doubtless take some time for this to develop, it is interesting in this year of celebrating 500 years of the Reformation (and we must remember that Luther personally held a strong Marian theology that might surprise many protestants today, as would his eucharistic theology), that so much of the "reformed world" is starting to build back into its understanding of Christianity a relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, something that was of such central and universal importance for 1500 years of Christendom, and especially in England. It is, perhaps, the very long swing of a theological pendulum that is tending back towards equilibrium. Our festival this Sunday is just a part of the overall jigsaw of Mary's relationship with the Church, but if we wonder why more is not made of this in Great St Bartholomew, we have an opportunity this weekend to help our parish to do something about this.*