

Music Notes 2017 – Feast of Christ the Universal King: Last Sunday after Trinity

There is a close connection between the Ascension and the Feast of Christ the King. Of course, we would want to say that Christ's Kingship over Creation has existed for as long as there has been Creation, but there is also a sense in which the Creed's statement *He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty* conveys a special sense of exaltation and even of a regaining of the throne of heaven. Emily Elliott, daughter of the Rector of St Mark's Church in Brighton, captured this in a hymn that she wrote in 1864 at the age of 28:

*Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.*

*O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for thee.*

The hymn was first sung at St Mark's and eventually published in 1870 in the *Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor*, of which Elliott was the editor. One cannot help feeling that it is a pity that this publication is no longer produced.

The first verse of the hymn quoted above also makes a tidy link for us between this Sunday, which is the last Sunday in the church's year, and the subject that will start to profoundly inspire us for the following four weeks, as we travel from Advent Sunday (the church's New Year's Day) to the stable crib in Bethlehem at the Midnight Mass, not to mention the many carol services that accompany that journey. But first Kingship, and with it, the Ascension that reaffirms it.

The mass setting this week, the *Missa O Rex gloriae* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), appropriately emphasises the spirit of Ascension in a musical context. It is a so-called "parody mass", which is one that takes a chunk or chunks of an existing work and uses it as a jumping-off point for the rest of the work. The setting is, as it were, imbued with the significance and musical language of the original piece. In this case, Palestrina uses his own motet, *O Rex gloriae*, an Ascensiontide motet originally published in 1563 in *Motecta festorum totius anni* – as the name suggests, a collection of motets for all the feasts of the church's year. The complete collection was distributed across several volumes, and unfortunately, no copy of the volume that contains this motet appears to have survived. Fortunately, the piece was good enough to merit republishing elsewhere, so we do have the source material that Palestrina used to use as inspiration for the mass setting. In fact, the setting was not published until 1601 in Venice, in an edition put together posthumously by Palestrina's somewhat wayward son, Ignio, who did nevertheless

ensure that as many as possible of his father's unpublished works were made available in this way.

The motet is, as one would expect with an Ascensiontide theme, a joyful work, and this sense is carried over into the positivity we find in the mass setting. Each of the movements begins with a quotation from the opening of the motet, and then from time to time, other snippets of particularly distinctive material inveigle themselves into the harmony and melodic content of the music. As is often the case with Palestrina, he makes particular use of contrasting textures, so that a passage of homophonic music (in which all the singers more or less move together, as in a hymn) will 'burst' into an explosion of counterpoint in which each voice pursues its own line, weaving in and out of the others. It is a very exciting setting, befitting its themes of exaltation and Kingship, and just right for this feast day.

The motet at the *Offertory* is *King of Glory, King of Peace*, a setting of a George Herbert (1593–1633) poem that we also sing as a hymn. This setting is by the British composer Sir Henry Walford Davies (1869–1941), who was Master of the King's Music from 1934 until his death. One of his great claims to fame is to have been the composer of the RAF's signature tune known as the *Royal Air Force March Past*, but we might know him just as well for his much-loved choral piece *God be in my head*. Of course, were we to be living a century ago, we might very well think of him primarily as the composer of a work called *Everyman*, a chunky cantata first performed in 1904, and based on the morality play of the same name from the 15th century. Alas, whereas this was at one time sung regularly up and down the country, it has completely disappeared from today's performance schedules. Perhaps the time is ripe for a reappearance.

Walford Davies's music is always elegantly constructed, appropriately dramatic, and with a flair for interesting word painting, as you will hear in this motet. For a long time, he was seen, along with most of the other successful composers of his day, as being redolent of soupy Victorian and Edwardian over-romanticized musical language. But we are growing away from this unjust perspective now, and starting to reassess this period more affectionately and open-mindedly.

The Evensong canticles this week are known as *Rubbra in A flat*, which choristers delight in reading either of two ways. Edmund Rubbra (1901–1986) was a British composer whom many feel is also currently undervalued. Although he grew up and trained in his craft during a time when many composers were being swayed by modernism and serialism and generally working in atonal language, he developed a harmonic language and a style all his own and simply stuck to them steadfastly and determinedly. He wrote extensively, including eleven full-scale orchestral symphonies. He was well-connected and well-liked, hugely influential on a whole host of people, and his music was regularly performed during his lifetime, though

significantly less often now. Having his own musical language, which is firmly tonal, makes him in some respects akin to Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), who also generally eschewed the musical language derived from the so-called Second Viennese School, i.e. serialists like Schoenberg (1874–1951), Berg (1909–1989), or Webern (1786–1826) and had his own distinctive musical language. However, Rubbra’s music is totally unlike Britten’s – and, indeed, unlike anybody else’s. This setting of the Evensong canticles, which has bucked the trend by remaining firmly in the repertoire of cathedrals and major musical churches, is forthright, exciting, and yet lyrical. The *Gloria*, which is the same for both canticles, is especially invigorating, the organist running up and down the pedal board playing scales in triplets from bottom to top and back while his hands are playing duplets in contrary motion to the pedals. Meantime, the choir soars through and over this exuberant sound.

The comparison with the music of Benjamin Britten can be made at this service, because for the anthem, we will be hearing his so-called festival cantata, *Rejoice in the Lamb*, first performed in 1943. This is, in fact, a cantata in a somewhat Bachian sense, albeit without a break point for a sermon. Nevertheless, it has sections for four soloists as well as highly differentiated choruses and a narrative, although perhaps not a linear or clear one. Our own Director of Music, Rupert Gough, will be introducing this piece before it is performed, and introduction and cantata will be sufficient to replace both anthem and sermon on this occasion. So, if you want to know the detail, you had better come along to hear Rupert – these notes will, in comparison, be just an outline about the piece and its circumstances.

Prior to becoming Dean of Chichester, the Very Revd Walter Hussey had been Vicar of the late Victorian church of St Matthew’s Northampton (where our former Sub-Organist, Ben Hordern, was organist 2009–2010), built in the closing years of the old Queen’s reign. When it came to the fiftieth anniversary of its consecration, Walter Hussey wanted to commission a major choral work to mark the occasion – he was a great lover and commissioner of the fine arts both personally and in his ecclesiastical life. He first tried to get William Walton (1902–1983) to write a work, but when this was rejected, he turned instead to Benjamin Britten, then still in his late twenties. Britten decided to set words from a fragmentary manuscript penned by the eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart, which had only recently come to light. Smart suffered from a number of mental breakdowns, and mental healthcare being what it was in his day, he was committed to an asylum, and it was there that he wrote *Jubilate Agno*.

In fact, mental health problems were not his only difficulties. He was also very bad with money, the result of which was several stretches in a debtor’s prison. Indeed, it was in one of these that he eventually died in 1771, writing on his arrival there: *After being six times arrested: nine times in a spunging house: and three times in the Fleet-Prison I am at last happily arrived at the King’s Bench.*

The most moving moment in the whole work, which also underlines that this was not a work of whimsy for Britten – after all, the solos include praise of flowers, the poet’s cat, and a somewhat over-ambitious male mouse defending its mate – and perhaps also not just a work of religious piety, comes in a section of choral recitative in which Smart speaks to us directly and poignantly: *For I am under the same accusation as my Saviour...* When he comes to express the accusation succinctly, he says: *...for “Silly fellow! Silly fellow!” is against me, and belongeth neither to me nor to my family.* The words *silly fellow* are set to a particular melodic fragment made up of the notes D Eb C B, which immediately tells us this is about the composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), who was a great friend of Britten’s. In German, these notes are actually written out as D Es C H – the last letter in the German system also having allowed Bach’s name to be transformed into music by a similar procedure. Although by the time Britten wrote this work, Shostakovich’s reputation in the Soviet Union was turning once more to favourable with his *Symphony No 7 (The Leningrad)*, some years before, he had suffered a terrible reverse in fortunes when Stalin had attended a performance of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and hated it. His fall from grace was severe and potentially personally dangerous, because this was the era of Stalin’s Great Terror. He had therefore been forced into a humiliating and very public climb down in his *Symphony No 5*, which he described apologetically and publicly as *A Soviet artist’s creative response to just criticism.* Britten’s gesture of support for his friend, relating his plight to the unjustified criticisms suffered by Christopher Smart, is moving, and reminds us that religion is in the end about loving God with all our hearts and minds, but also genuinely, truly, practically, and against all the odds loving our neighbours as if they were ourselves.