

Music Notes 2017 – Easter III

Nicolas Gombert (1495–1560) was a Franco-Flemish Renaissance composer who was described in 1556 by the German theorist and composer Hermann Finck (1527–1558) as someone *who shows all musicians the way, nay more, the exact path to the desired imitative manner and to refinement; and he composes music entirely different from the past* (trans. Hyperion Records). Finck also maintains that Gombert was a pupil of the French Renaissance composer Josquin des Prez (1450–1521), and, indeed, while this may have been the case, Gombert then took the style of his teacher and developed it in quite a different direction (see below for more discussion of this progression). Indeed, some see him as being the crucial link between the styles of Josquin and Palestrina (1525–1594). However, Gombert's use of dissonance is much more adventurous than Palestrina's, and he often creates thrilling clashes to illustrate crucial moments in the text. Look out for the way the *Gloria* ends in this Sunday's setting by Gombert, *Missa Tempore paschali* (*Mass in the time of Easter*), as a good example of this.

Unfortunately, while we can appreciate Gombert's compositional achievements, his personal biography is another matter, if the story we have received about him is indeed true. We are particularly sensitive to this subject in light of the historic cases of child abuse scandals within the church. To explain: around 1538, all references to Gombert in the records of the court chapel of Emperor Charles V, where Gombert was Master of the Children of the Chapel, disappear abruptly. The humanist philosopher, mathematician, astrologer, gambler and physician – quite an Italian polymath! – Gerolamo Cardano or, if you prefer, Hieronymus Cardanus, maintained that Gombert was sentenced to hard labour in the galleys for some six years for, as he put it, *violating a choirboy*. He does not go into any detail about this, and, indeed, at this distance one really cannot know absolutely whether he got this story right or not. Some scholars have thought that this could have been a trumped-up charge made to remove Gombert from office by someone hostile to his musical genius. On the other hand, suppose the story is in fact true, should this make any difference to our appreciation of his music? We seem to be able to accept the music of the Italian Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613), who murdered his wife and her lover after catching them *in flagrante*. While Gesualdo may have felt provoked, murder is still murder, and do we – or should we – refrain from listening to Gesualdo's music because of his abhorrent behaviour? How many human achievements would have to be binned fastidiously if the full details of the lives of all their begetters were to be the decision-making factor?

In fact, Gombert got off comparatively lightly: he could have been executed, after all, and the comparative lightness of the sentence could conceivably be a clue to the offence having either been less than Cardano suggests, or possibly something different altogether. Either way, Gombert found time while in the galleys to

compose some works he described as “swan-songs”, which he then sent to the Emperor, who was so moved by them that he not only pardoned him, but also appointed him Prebendary to the cathedral in Tournai. Usually, these “swan-songs” have been identified as being a remarkable set of eight *Magnificats* that Gombert undoubtedly did compose, but there are some reasons to think that these were written at Tournai. If so, then we just don’t know what music so moved the Emperor to forgiveness. At any rate, this whole story recalls an episode of the TV show *Rev* regarding forgiveness, which dealt with a very similar subject. “But aren’t we supposed to forgive?” asks the Revd Adam Smallbone of his PCC. “That’s God’s job, not ours,” retorts lay reader Nigel, who appears not to have explored the complementarity implied in the words of the Lord’s Prayer that mentions forgiveness: *And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those that trespass against us.*

So, what about the music? Gombert’s style mixes together two musical constructions that were inspired by two earlier composers. The first was the Franco-Flemish Johannes Ockeghem (1410–1497), who died two years after Gombert’s birth; he wrote music that was in continuous blocks. The second was Josquin des Prez, Gombert’s teacher, who was considerably more interested in highly varied, not to say fractured textures, but laid much store by imitation between the voices. Gombert shared Josquin’s love of imitation (perhaps an indication that he was his pupil), but his textural approach is more like that of Ockeghem. Indeed, we must continue the earlier quotation from Finck, who goes on to say *he avoids rests, and his composition abounds in both full harmonies and imitation.* This is quite true, as you will hear. The voices are given no break: there are more or less no rests. He is a full exponent of the kind of seamless music that we associate with the next generation of composers such as Palestrina, Lassus (1532–1594) and Victoria (1548–1611), and, indeed, may well be the one who inspired them as to how to do it.

Gombert worked before the Counter-Reformation principles regarding clarity of text became general. As a result, the *Missa Tempore paschali* gives us an excellent example of a pre-Tridentine mass setting. The incredibly rich, exciting, and, indeed, relentless textures are thrilling, but there is no doubt that the words are comparatively difficult to make out. If you are personally “inclined” to bow at the relevant points in the *Gloria*, good luck with deciding when to do so!

Gombert takes his starting point for the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* from the plainsong for the Easter Mass *Lux et origo*. The *Sanctus*, on the other hand, takes other composed melodic material from the *Gloria* and uses that as its basis. The *Agnus Dei* is in turn related melodically to the *Sanctus*. In its full version, the latter concludes with an especially rich passage in 12 parts – alas, it is not practical for us to hire the extra voices just for this passage!

Jean L'Héritier (1480–1552), a French composer active at about the same time as Gombert, is the composer of our offertory motet *Surrexit pastor bonus*. The currently definitive edition of this work, published by Cantiones Press, was edited by our former Director of Music, David Trendell (1964–2014), whose memorial plaque has recently appeared on the Cloister wall. David had a particular affinity for this repertoire, and, indeed, for this piece, which he described in 1996 in *The Musical Times* as having achieved cult status at the *Edington Festival of Music within the Liturgy*, where he was Festival Director a few years before. David believed that L'Héritier was possibly a pupil of Jean Mouton (1459–1522), a composer whose music also features in our services from time to time. He went to work at the church of St Louis des Français in Rome in 1521, and appears to have been a popular and successful figure there to judge by the way that his compositions turn up in manuscript collections in Rome. The source for the motet is in fact a choir book for the choir of the Julian Chapel in the Vatican, where several of his motets are also to be found alongside those of just about every significant composer of the early 16th century. His music was well published and widely distributed; and it is remarkable that Palestrina used two of L'Héritier's motets as models for mass settings. How could one better this as a mark of distinction?

The text of this motet is taken from an Easter Respond. David's edition provides the following translation: *The good shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, has risen, alleluia. And he did not disdain to die for his flock, alleluia. For truly was Christ the paschal lamb sacrificed for us. Alleluia.*

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in G* by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). He wrote several settings, conveniently using different keys each time – apart from one duplication prompted by an eight-part *Magnificat* in Bb written in memory of Hubert Parry (1848–1918), which allows church musicians an easy way to catalogue them mentally. Each of the settings demonstrates a completely different way of setting the text with remarkable inventiveness. This setting dates from 1904. The characteristic feature of the *Magnificat* is a rapid staccato right hand pattern chattering its way up and down the keyboard, while a soprano solo takes the main burden of communicating the text of the *Magnificat*. It is undoubtedly one of the prettiest settings there is. It is also a good source of laboriously studious discussion between organists as to whether one “hops” between the patterns of the right-hand accompaniment or attempts to create a smooth and more “politically correct” fingering pattern.

The *Nunc Dimittis* gives us the darker colouring of an extensive baritone solo with the rest of the choir answering him. It is in fact a very demanding sing for the soloist – one of the times a church baritone comes nearest to a “Pavarotti moment”. Stanford's settings could be conceived of as highly refined and bottled Anglican choral essences, an entirely indispensable part of the repertoire. Even in his lifetime,

he was viewed as old-fashioned, perhaps even rather stuffy, but that's just plain wrong, as any comparison of his vividly imaginative settings of these familiar texts readily demonstrates. And, of course, when you hear any of his now more available and performed secular music, you realize what a very substantial gift he possessed as a composer.

The anthem is *Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem*, also by Stanford, composed in December 1910. It plays a small part in the history of British music publishing. Stanford had allowed his new works to be published by Stainer & Bell, a firm that had opened its doors in 1907. There was, in fact, no Stainer and no Bell: the six partners who originally founded the business chose the name simply because it sounded credit-worthy. This is somewhat akin to other brand names that have been created to sound solid, reliable, and old school. For example, Hendrick's Gin, first distilled in Scotland as recently as 1999, is widely believed to be some ancient, über-English brand, especially in countries susceptible to such a myth. Anyhow, the firm – that is, the music publisher, not the gin distillery – was struggling financially, as is so often the case in the early years of a business, and the partners were to a large extent already tapped out. They managed to publish Stanford's Op. 117, *Songs of the Fleet*, and were exceedingly gratified when it sold like hot cakes. *Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem* was published the following year in 1911, and, lo and behold, lightning struck twice. Sales proved so good that the firm was able to regard itself as financially safe. Indeed, Stainer & Bell is still with us today, with descendants of the original management running the firm. It is one of the very few examples of an unbroken serious music publishing lineage in the United Kingdom.

The text of the anthem is a translation of a text originally by Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, who was writing about 140 years before the founding of St Bartholomew the Great. He saw to it that the Blessed Virgin Mary's nativity came to be celebrated on September 8th in our calendar. Alongside this, he also had his own Great Project – as we do at St Bartholomew – for developing and enhancing his church, which was triggered by his cathedral burning down; but, alas, his replacement cathedral later burned down again. Bishop Fulbert was also a great hymn writer; his work is mainly about the Virgin, his main theological preoccupation, but also includes *Chorus Novae Jerusalem*, which is presented in English as the text of this anthem. This is primarily about Easter, which is, of course, still the season. One hopes your home is still decorated with rabbits, chicks, eggs, and other paraphernalia associated with the season, which in the western tradition continues until Pentecost on 4th June 2017, after which date, this symbolical ornamentation may be safely tidied away until 1st April 2018 – no fooling about this, you may be assured.