Music Notes 2017 – The Fourth Sunday after Easter

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the *Mass in G minor* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). This was written in 1921 and first performed the following year in Birmingham Town Hall. Its first liturgical performance was at Westminster Cathedral in 1923; it was dedicated to "Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers". Holst (1874–1934) was the founder of a series of Whitsun music festivals, which take place in Thaxted, Essex.

The death of Henry Purcell (1659–1695) signified almost an end to a line of innovative and extremely interesting musical development in this country, one which stretches back well before the great Tudor composers. Purcell's successors tended to be comparatively less inspiring. The intervention of the humourless and musically attenuated Commonwealth and the Puritans suppressed a promising strand of development substantially. The brightest period was occasioned by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) – and, as we all know, he was German. The chronological list of English Classical composers for this period on Wikipedia makes rather depressing reading. For nearly two centuries British music was largely – with some heart-warming but comparatively minor exceptions – in the doldrums and, to the extent that it had any enriching voice, this was in pale imitation of mainland European composers. Edward Elgar (1857–1934) prompted the tide to turn decisively. His musical language was also fundamentally derived from the great mainland tradition, especially from Germany. Elgar was very sensitive to the influences of Brahms and Wagner, but still he developed his own style on this foundation, and he did it superbly well.

Vaughan Williams, only fifteen years younger, went a different way. For him, it was the partially occluded tradition of British folksong, preserving influences that ran back *before* it all went dull, together with the great English Tudor tradition, that floated his boat. He wove characteristics from all this music into his own harmonic language, modifying it in his own way to create a style of British music that is often called "pastoral" – sometimes referred to unkindly as the School of Cowpat.

All this illustrates the tendency for an island nation to want to do things its own way and eschew influences from the nearest mainland. We don't have to study our national politics too intently to perceive this dichotomy: should we be plucky little independent Britain doing our own thing, solely responsible for our own destiny, allowing in only the people we find *sympatico* and useful? Or should we see ourselves as a vital part of the largest economic block in the world, able to punch collectively with greater impact on the world stage? This same dichotomy arises in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British music: to put it crudely, Elgar is on one side, and Vaughan Williams is on the other – one could conceive of this as *Remainers* music versus *Brexit* music.

A similar phenomenon is also reflected in British church history. The English Church up to the Reformation had its own distinctive liturgical tradition: the Use of Salisbury, often referred to as the Sarum Rite. This differed quite markedly from the mainland tradition, and had its own practices and chant tradition. Many aspects of Renaissance British music also diverged subtly from what was available on the mainland. English composers in the fifteenth century were more disposed to what we would now call major keys, attracted by their brighter-sounding character. They did not stick rigorously to the system of modes; and they were more likely to write in block chordal textures than full polyphony, creating a fuller sound, mainly through the unconstrained use of thirds and sixths in chords, which were still relatively *infra dig* over the water. Ironically, what has now come to be *heard* as music of the English pastoral tradition is actually distinguished by a *more* modal approach to harmony, making it sound softer, less hard-edged, and somewhat folksier.

For recusant composers, such as Byrd (1543–1623) and Tallis (1505–1585), religious salvation seemed to lie in the parts of Europe that still followed the "One True Church" based in Rome, and their music veered markedly towards the mainland model as they sought to provide music for masses and offices that were often held by priests imported from the mainland. Nevertheless, this had rather more to do with structure – adding a polyphonic *Kyrie*, for example, where the Use of Salisbury had none – rather than the character of the music itself.

As it so happens, the *Brexit* style of some British music is still not generally well thought of outside these isles, rather like Brexit politics. Our mainland neighbours tend to regard it as poor in quality, hopelessly whimsical, obsessed with a kitschy romanticized past, and culturally naff. At best, it is considered like musical marmite: if you grow up with it, then you love it, otherwise you run, screaming, from the proffered pot. Anglicans in the United States and Canada "get it", perhaps because there is a residual affection for "Englishness" implied just in being Episcopalian; and the same applies in countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Otherwise, the very "English" Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells (1892–1983) tend not to travel well, like a sensitive vintage, whereas *Remainer* composers such as Elgar and Britten (1913–1976) – especially Britten, ironically – do quite well abroad.

The harmony of the *Mass in G minor* is very much in the semi-modal tradition. Although the *Kyrie* does indeed start in G minor, every other movement has a key signature of G major at its start. That might lead you to expect lots of F sharps, especially at cadences (the chords at the end of musical phrases). Instead, there are fistfuls of F naturals, constantly subverting the music from a diatonic key into modal territory. This gives the harmony a softer, unassertive quality, less forceful in its delineation of key, and tending to play with major/minor effects. The setting is for double choir and an additional group of four soloists. It is texturally rich, and the

music is exciting – that is always supposing that you have a taste for musical marmite.

More from this school at the Offertory: Vaughan Williams's much-loved micro-anthem *O taste and see*, which he was commissioned to write for the present Queen's coronation in 1953. The text comes from verse 8 of Psalm 34, although the text he uses is subtly modified to make it flow more pleasingly. It is a very good example of what *deceptively simple* means, because its delicate and seemingly straightforward lines beguile very effectively. We begin with a soprano soloist, who sings a pleasing melody, which is all the more moving because it is *pentatonic*. What this means, simply, is that you can play it all on just the black notes on the piano, so that each octave of the scale has just five (that's the *penta* bit – the same root as in *Pentecost*) notes in it. There are several interesting examples of how powerful this can be. The best example of all is the slow movement of Dvořák's *Symphony No. 9 – From the New World*. You may associate its tune with Hovis bread or with the song *Going home*. His first stab at the melody used a conventional scale, but the final version is fully pentatonic. If you play each version, you quickly realize how emotionally powerful melodies formed from a pentatonic scale can be; and this is the case with this motet as well.

More British music in the evening. The canticles are from the complete *Service in F* (i.e. the music for all of Matins, Communion, and Evensong in one set) by Harold Darke (1888–1876). We last heard from him on Palm Sunday in the Solemn Eucharist, in his *Communion Service in E*, written for King's College, Cambridge. The complete setting in F was written much earlier, and in a manner more appropriate for parish choirs, although the settings for Evensong are more adventurous than the sections for the Communion. Apart from a period spent at King's during the war, deputizing for Boris Ord during Ord's war service, Darke's entire career as an organist from 1916 onwards was at St Michael's, Cornhill. He served a total of 50 years in post – and, indeed, there have only been two organists there from his retirement to the present day. Upon arriving, Darke founded a series of organ recitals at St Michael's that still continues; and this is famously the longest continuous series of organ recitals in the world. Darke is perhaps most widely known for his setting of the Christmas carol by Christina Rossetti *In the bleak mid-winter*, which the *BBC Music Magazine* found in a 2008 poll of readers to be the most popular Christmas carol ever, at least at the time of the survey.

The complete *Service in F* was composed over several years between 1910 and 1913 – so, before Darke's appointment to St Michael's, although it was first published in 1923. Both canticles have much to offer. The *Magnificat* is characterized by a wide range of textures to illustrate each of the many ideas contained in the text. Indeed, the structure is never structurally stable as it switches around to match the variety of the Virgin's ecstatic utterances. In the meantime, the *Nunc Dimittis* begins with a

particularly calm bass solo, yet builds and builds towards the *Gloria*, which is expressed in an excitingly dramatic fashion.

The anthem is from some 80 years earlier. Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876) was a grandson of Charles Wesley, a leader of the English Methodist movement. Samuel Sebastian was also the (technically illegitimate) son of Samuel Wesley, himself a well-known musician referred to at the time as "the English Mozart". Fortunately, we can distinguish between father and son by the middle name "Sebastian", awarded by the father as a sign of respect for Johann Sebastian Bach, although it has allowed generations of church musicians to refer to the son as "Steamship Wesley" (i.e. S.S. Wesley). Tonight's anthem, *Blessed be the God and Father* is one of his best-known works. It was written to be sung at Evensong on Easter Sunday, 1834 in Hereford Cathedral, where S.S. Wesley was organist for three years from 1832, before moving on to – successively – Exeter Cathedral, Leeds Parish Church, Winchester Cathedral, and finally, Gloucester Cathedral. So, this was written after some two years of service at Hereford by its 24-year old organist. Somewhat bizarrely, most of the adult singers were engaged at other churches, and the only one still available was the Dean's butler, who was a bass. Consequently, the anthem was composed for him and the boys of the cathedral choir. It has come down to us in a published version that includes a full four-voice choir. Nevertheless, it is made up predominantly of solo sections, either for the hapless butler, or for the complete set of boys (including in two parts), or for a combination of both. Where the voices are solo, there is a fully independent organ part. Where the music now provides music for a full choir, however, it is nevertheless noticeable that the organ accompaniment switches to matching exactly the chordal texture of the voices.

First comes a chordal section that rises to a climax as it proclaims the Resurrection. This would have been accompanied throughout in the original version, but it is now performed unaccompanied, until the organ bursts in dramatically at the end of the section. This is followed by a "solo" section for unison men – or rather, the butler – answered by a soprano soloist. This leads into an exhortation to *see that ye love one another* in an exchange between a soprano soloist and the full soprano line. This is interrupted by the full men – we must suppose this is a description also of the butler – reminding us in recitative of our mortality, before the organ explodes abruptly with a chord that must surely have been designed to wake up the congregation lest they had dozed off from the effects of their Easter Day lamb. At this, the full choir bursts out with the declaration *But the word of the Lord endureth for ever* – and rarely has *But* been set to more powerful effect!

No doubt, the boys sang delightfully; and Wesley undoubtedly made sure they gave of their best. But when push came to shove, there is no doubt that the butler dunnit.