

Music Notes 2017 – The Sixth Sunday after Easter

The setting of the Mass at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the *Missa de Beata Virgine* by the Franco-Flemish composer Josquin des Prez (1450–1521). He pre-dates Palestrina (1525–1594) by some 75 years, and was well and truly prior to any of the strictures of the Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563) concerning the understandability of the words in sacred musical works. More than 500 years later, one can struggle to separate his musical language in our minds from that of his fellow Renaissance composers. Nevertheless, in a remarkable compositional career, Josquin became the best example of a new approach to composition that inspired the kind of compositions written by Palestrina, Lassus (1532–1592) and Victoria (1548–1611).

Although it was a very long time ago, the significance of the composer might mean that that we would expect to know a great deal about him. The fact is, Josquin des Prez's biography is a mystery. Many admiring accolades were expressed regarding his music, but there is no substantial information about his life or personality. Moreover, he is really the Rembrandt of Renaissance music: Josquin was so highly regarded in his day that numerous other works by lesser mortals were attributed to him incorrectly, perhaps because it was good for sales. Just as the great Dutch painter's surviving catalogue has been reduced from some 90 works to a little over 40, so Josquin's works have been reduced by current scholarship from over 370 to perhaps 150 authentic pieces. What we do know about him is that he was probably the sort of person who would enjoy *The Times* Crossword. He was very fond of knitting little gimmicks into his works, the most famous of which establishes his preferred version of his name as JOSQUIN DES PREZ. We are sure of this because his motet *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix* contains an acrostic that spells it out this way. So, not Josquin Lebloitte dit Desprez, nor Josquinus or Jodocus Pratensis, not even Josquin Desprez, although you will find plenty of these in print.

To get the hang of this mass setting, we need to delve a little into the technicalities of earlier forms of church music. Here is a very crude rush through the story.

We all know about plainchant. For various reasons, after singing chant in unison for generations, singers started to divide into two groups, one singing the chant at normal pitch, the other singing the same melody a fourth or fifth higher or lower. There are some interesting theories about the idea behind this coming from the resonant architecture of large churches of the period, which can emphasise the second harmonic of a sound, which is, in effect, a fifth away from the basic note. Whatever the reason, this rather curious effect – much imitated in Hollywood medievalism – usually had everyone nevertheless start and stop on the same note, meaning that, at the start and end of each chant, the voices moved in different directions rather than in parallel. Once the idea of independent movement was

conceivable, it soon became the custom for the voices to move *very* independently of one another. Then, of course, some wise guy said *if we can do it with two voices, why not with three?*, and off musical history headed towards polyphony, counterpoint, and – eventually – Wagner, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Birtwistle.

In the period preceding Josquin, composers were obsessed with plainchant providing what was called a *cantus firmus* (literally: *fixed chant*). This started out with the melody – the plainchant – in the top voice, with accompanying voices underneath singing their own material, which was often rhythmically quite dramatic. Then in a P2C2E (a Process Too Complicated To Explain – Josquin would have *loved* acronyms!), the plainchant became the lowest voice, with the accompaniment sitting on top. Composers eventually tired of that as well, and the *cantus firmus* was instead given to a voice in the middle, which became known as the “tenor” because it was the voice that “held” the melodic line – *teneo* is the Latin for *I hold*, from which we also derive words such as *tension* and *tenterhooks*. The accompanying voices then wound around the voices in the middle creating a kind of pincer movement of decorative accompaniment. These developments were actually very useful pointers for what was to happen next: having tried out the tune in several different places, why not try using it in all those places?

At each stage, one aspect had been clear: the *cantus firmus* was bossily in charge, and the other voices served its needs. As with all dictators, it only managed to stay in power for a certain amount of time. Flemish composers, such as Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474), and the marvellously named Jan de Ockeghem (1410–1497) – just saying his name forcefully makes you sound at one with the Flem – had already broken with this dictatorship. However, it is in Josquin that we finally find the voices of the choir appearing as definitively co-equal partners. The *Missa de Beata Virgine* is the perfect example of this among his (authentic) output. *All* the voices share the melodies, as they do their rhythm, although some of the decorative angular rhythms of the old style of composition still lurk attractively in the background.

For reasons lost to us, both the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are written for four voices, while the *Sanctus*, *Credo* and *Agnus Dei* are for five – Josquin may have written the two blocks for different purposes and then stitched them together. Each movement is based on a different chant, each concerned with the Virgin Mary. There being therefore no single melodic influence throughout the whole setting, it is the theme of the Virgin herself that knits the work together. Time now for another piece of musicological jargon: this kind of work is known as a “Paraphrase Mass” – which just means that the chant is broken up and distributed throughout the music, with each separate piece given a good run for its money.

Interestingly, although the Council of Trent and the insistence on audible, comprehensible texts was still a long way in the future, Josquin clearly strives here

not to occlude the text, especially compared with the treatment in his own earlier masses – yet another piece of evidence that it was neither the Council nor Palestrina's *Papae Marcelli* mass setting (which we heard last Sunday) that effected the change away from dense textures with impenetrable texts, but was, rather, a change already being implemented many years previously by composers on their own account. The Council simply codified a change that had already taken place, probably for devotional reasons.

At the *Offertory*, we will hear a motet by Hans Leo Haßler (1564–1612). The ß in his name, which is intended to indicate a longer vowel beforehand, stands in effect for a double-s for English readers, and, indeed, is generally written out as “ss” by German speakers in Switzerland, who love not the ß. Haßler came from a musical family, and his father was also a church musician. When he was 24, he decided to go to Italy, and in particular to Venice, where he met and befriended Giovanni Gabrieli (1557–1612), whose *Cantate Domino* we heard last Sunday morning, leading to a period of study with the famous Andrea Gabrieli (1532–1585), Giovanni's uncle. This exposure to the Italian/Venetian school was substantially to affect his own compositional style after his return to the Germanic states a year later. The synthesis proved successful, and as a prolific composer and a much-respected organist, his reputation rose steadily. Ultimately, he moved to Dresden, where he worked at the court of the Elector Christian II. The cross-fertilization of the German and Italian schools – which continued apace, since many German composers followed Haßler's example and visited Italy to study there – was not insignificant. These notes have often referred to the procession of Flemish and Spanish composers who were drawn especially to Rome in the mature Renaissance period. Once back home, their musical experiences inspired them to develop a distinctive language inflected by what they had learnt from the great Italian composers. This trend is also extremely pronounced when we come to the German states' composers from Haßler onwards. We see the outworking of this when Johann Sebastian Bach (1585–1650) arranged the Italian master Vivaldi's (1678–1741) *Concerti* for organ. Because of its dominance from the Baroque period onwards, it is easy for us to think of Germany as the capital country of classical music. Nevertheless, one sees all over Europe the magnetic effect that Rome and other great centres such as Venice exerted on composers. Without this influence, would music have developed in Germany in the way it did? It seems unlikely.

Haßler, who was a Lutheran, spent some time working for a nobleman in Augsburg, even though it was a strongly Catholic area. Rather as with Byrd (1539–1623) and Tallis (1505–1585) in England, he made the usual musician's compromise with context, and duly wrote much Catholic music, as evidenced by his collection, *Cantiones sacrae de festis praecipuis totius anni* – *Sacred songs for the principal feasts of the whole year*, published in Augsburg in 1591. The motet is his *Cantate Domino*, published in the *Cantiones sacrae*. It is a very colourful work, with many changes of

texture and metre (that is, switching between two-beat rhythms and three-beat rhythms), keeping it vibrant and exciting.

The anthem is the beautiful setting of *Let all mortal flesh keep silence* by Edward Bairstow (1874–1946). He was a Huddersfield boy who went south for a time but ultimately ended up back in Yorkshire, where he was the proud Organist of York Minster from 1913 until his death in 1946. He was succeeded by Francis Jackson, also a composer, born four years later, who remained in post until 1982. Jackson will, incidentally, celebrate his 100th birthday on 2nd October this year. Between them, the two organists covered 70 years at the Minster.

Bairstow was a slightly larger than life character, and very charismatic. There are numerous stories about him, not all entirely politically correct by modern standards. It was entirely typical of him that he said at a festival in Yorkshire, where he was an adjudicator: *When God gave man a tenor voice, he took away his brains* – and that is one of his more acceptable pronouncements. Nevertheless, his focus was on achieving a very high quality result, and *Only the best is good enough* was one of his most frequent declarations. Trevor Beeson (who was the Dean of Winchester from 1987 – 1996), in his very interesting book about church musicians, *In Tuneful Accord: The Church Musicians*, notes that, irascible though Bairstow could be, and blunt-speaking to a fault, he could nevertheless be reduced to tears at the organ console while accompanying psalms. He belongs to a group of professionals who collectively began to pull up the standards in British music in general, and in church music in particular, and who are the seedbed of today's tremendously high standards in many areas of our musical life.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence was written in 1906, the same year as Bairstow's ebullient *Evening Service in D*, but in a remarkably different mood. Unusually for the works he wrote in those years, it is unaccompanied, but all the more powerful for it. The text is a Cherubic Hymn for the Offertory of the Divine Liturgy of St James, and probably first appeared in the fourth century. Its original springboard is a text from the book of Habakkuk. We are used to singing this congregationally to the majestic hymn tune "Picardy", which is based on a French carol, but Bairstow gives us here an entirely original setting of great power, beauty and intensity. He begins with another of his powerful melodic ideas, but sung *sotto voce* in simple octaves. His powers of illustration are strongly in evidence: at the words *above all earthly thought*, for example, the upper voices convey us upwards. The music builds constantly, until *the Cherubim with many eyes, and winged seraphim* are declaimed by the top three sections of the choir, while the basses stride around in double time in a dramatically expansive line. Then there are powerful block chords that set the repeated *Alleluias* at the end of the text. Finally, everything subsides once more, and the opening melody and text are repeated, but underpinned by a rich harmonic structure from the lower voices to bring us to an atmospheric ending.