Music Notes 2017 – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this Sunday is by that paragon of decent German domestic and artistic standards, Josef Gabriel Rheinberger (1839-1901). Yet, there is a small personal and professional drama hidden behind this elegant and well-crafted work, because it was composed in the wake of Rheinberger's decision finally, after some wrestling with the issues, to reject the tenets of what was known as the Cecilian movement. This sprang up in the nineteenth century. It espoused a conservative approach to the music of the liturgy and wanted to return it to a form that eschewed individuality and drama in favour of a kind of neutral and comparative passionless quality. This, they thought, characterized both plainchant and *a capella* music of the Counter-Reformation period, which they fondly imagined to have been unemotional and passionless church music, although this is now recognized as spurious nonsense. Word-painting, except in the most basic sense, was to be avoided, and a serene and non-intrusive approach was preferred in every sense.

One of the chief movers and shakers – if that isn't too colourful a description – in this movement was Franz Xaver Haberl (1849–1910) in Regensburg, whom we have met before in previous music notes as the editor of the first proper "modern" edition of Palestrina's complete extant works. He was Regensburg's Domkapellmeister – in other words, he ran the music at the Cathedral, a task much later taken on by Georg Ratzinger, the brother of Pope Emeritus Benedict. Haberl was very keen to promote the Cecilian cause and, in pursuit of this, republished the old version of the *Graduale*, a book of plainchants for almost every service of the church's year. He claimed that it was the work of Palestrina, which made it a commercial success. This was not in fact true, although there may be the odd bit of chant in which Palestrina had played some part, but even then, not much. A decree in 1904 from the Vatican essentially nixed this whole project by restoring the version of the *Graduale* that had preceded Haberl's efforts, and in any case, the conservatism of the Cecilian movements had begun to exceed the tolerance of many of its would-be adherents before that.

Thgis is not as abstruse as it might seem. The Priory Church spans a repertoire that *includes* a Cecilian aesthetic – represented by our own use of the *Graduale* and adherence to certain principles in our choice of liturgically appropriate repertoire – but at the same time embraces the most sentimental and emotionally-loaded musical language of Anglo-Catholicism since the Oxford Movement, all combined with the warmth of the broad Anglican choral tradition. The current equivalent of the Cecilians can be found in Facebook pages with titles such as *I hate bad church music*, in which predominantly Roman Catholic musicians complain bitterly about the poor-quality music they are currently required to perform. There is a huge thread of comments from people hoping they will never again have to sing *Shine, Jesus, shine* – to which it is not necessary to contribute.

By the end of 1877, Rheinberger had come to the conclusion that the Cecilians represented a dead-end with an unnecessary restriction on musical expression in liturgy. The next year, he composed this *Cantus Missae* in E flat for double choir. He dedicated it to Pope Leo XIII, who was sufficiently impressed with it to award him the Knight's Cross of the Order of St Gregory in exchange. In contradiction of the perceived "coolness" of composers such as Palestrina, Rheinberger demonstrated his freedom from the backward-looking trends with which he had been somewhat identified and instead made specific reference to the Venetian school that had carried liturgical music over the borders between the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods. So, the Mass makes much of the fact that it is for double choir, with the kind of antiphonal writing (known as *cori spezzati* or *spaced* choirs) in which Venetians such as the Gabrielis and Monteverdi delighted.

The reliable thing about Rheinberger is that he does not in any sense go wild with his new-found freedoms, aiming rather to combine a degree of conservative restraint with a much more adventurous musical language nearer the cutting edge of his day. You could say that Rheinberger shows his greatest genius in managing to use the polyphonic procedures of the past while bending them to the service of expressive word painting and illustration. The writer Otto Ursprung – whose surname rather delightfully means *original source:* quite a claim to advance when introducing yourself – opines that this is the *most beautiful, pure vocal music of the 19th century*, and while there are a lot of other possible contenders, you can see right from the flowing melodic lines of the *Kyrie* what he means. In fact, this movement is only a matter of seconds shorter than the entire *Gloria*, which is delivered with an impressive *Missa Brevis* efficiency, that, however, does not sacrifice any colour along the way. Because we sing the Creed from the *Graduale Romanum*, we will miss the inventive word painting of the *Credo* movement. Jeremy Summerly, now Director of Music at St Peter's College, Oxford, but formerly a regular deputy conductor at the Priory Church, describes the *Sanctus* as *ethereal* in his notes for a Hyperion recording of the piece by Westminster Cathedral Choir under Martin Baker's direction. He also draws attention to *a gently dancing Benedictus, and an Agnus Dei whose carefully notated dynamic contrasts and elliptical modulations lead into an extended 'dona nobis pacem' section whose instrumentally conceived textures create a symphonic conclusion to this remarkable piece.*

The motet at the Offertory is *Jesu, the very thought of thee* by Edward Bairstow (1874–1946), Organist of York Minster from 1913 until his death. 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 to have said at a festival 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 main 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, 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 find himself reduced to tears at the organ console while accompanying psalms. He belongs to a group of professionals who collectively began to raise 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.

This motet comes from a group of three unaccompanied anthems which Bairstow wrote in 1925. As with the Rheinberger, this is *a capella* music of conscious expressiveness. *Jesu, the very thought of thee With sweetness fills my breast; But sweeter far thy face to see, And in thy presence rest.* Now, it may be fanciful to imagine this, but there does appear to be a kind of visual and audible pun in the way that the setting of the last line is adorned with musical rests.

The two Canticles at Evensong are – unusually – by different composers. The *Magnificat* purports to be by Dieterich Buxtehude (1637–1707), a great hero to Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) in Bach's early years. This is where one risks being a spoilsport by mentioning that there is a certain amount of doubt about this attribution. There is, in fact, only one manuscript source for the piece, a set of parts copied out by Gustav Düben (1628–1690), who was, as well as being a composer himself, Director of Music at the German Church in Stockholm in the late seventeenth century. He certainly knew Buxtehude very well, so the link is plausible. However, when he wrote out the work, he omitted to mention Buxtehude's name on it, and someone else wrote it on subsequently. Nevertheless, this scant evidence was good enough for the music publishing house of Bärenreiter in the 1930s, which included it in its Buxtehude edition. Nowadays, they are real sticklers over this kind of issue, and note that the work is simply *attributed*.

The problem is that there is just nothing about the music that suggests Buxtehude. Rather it is redolent of the French and Italian schools, especially in its dancing melodies and rhythms and the way that it interrupts the flow at cadences to create a kind of swing of the hips. Buxtehude wasn't really into hip swinging in the same way, and there are no examples of works in which he imitated this kind of style. It is also mildly eyebrow raising to think that he would have set a Latin text of this kind, rather than a good solid Lutheran German text, but one cannot absolutely rule out that he might have done so. Nevertheless, this *Magnificat* has found a real place in the repertoire in Germany, and if you can make it there with this kind of work, you can make it anywhere. It is in any case a delightful and wonderful work, and if you are a regular reader of these notes, you may have picked up a personal view that it shouldn't matter when much admired works have their attribution questioned. If it was good when you thought it was by Buxtehude, it is still good now that we are not

sure this is the case. You certainly won't be disappointed by its good-humoured energy as it bowls along cheerfully.

The *Nunc Dimittis* or *Herr nun lässt Du deinen Diener* is sung to a setting by Andreas Hammerschmidt (1611–1675), another important Bach precursor. In his case, he died ten years before Bach was born. The crucial thing about this is to realize that the developed Baroque school of music was well established before Bach was even born. By the time he was in his most mature period, Bach was, therefore, really quite old-fashioned, and the rest of the world was moving ahead without him. Usually when this happens, the composer in question is quickly ignored. Of course, in Bach's case, this proved simply impossible to do. But back to Hammerschmidt… He might be familiar to you from the occasions on which his Christmas piece *Alleluja, Freuet euch* has been sung at carol services and around the Christmas season – a piece sometimes known as *The Hammerschmidt Flyover*. He was born in the tiny town of Brüx – a place of which you may well never have heard – but for various reasons by the age of 15 was living in Freiberg in Saxony.

We don't in fact know a great deal about Hammerschmidt's musical education, but whoever taught him did a fine job, because he was to become one of the most influential composers of his generation, with considerable mastery of what is referred to as the *concertato* style, which simply means that groups of voices are pitched against each other in contrasting sections, much as we have seen was the case in the Venetian School. The interesting thing is that, while Hans Leo Haßler (1564–1612) and Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) had direct experience of this in Venice, there is no indication of Hammerschmidt's learning his craft anywhere near there. But whoever taught and influenced him must surely have had some kind of connection with this, because Hammerschmidt shares this general approach with Schütz.

This setting is for six voices with continuo, and although it is for a single choir, rather than contrasting forces, Hammerschmidt splits the texture up repeatedly into little units of voices who play off against one another in a manner that will be familiar to us from today's music. By the standards of most settings of this text it is surprisingly chunky – 127 bars, and that is, moreover, without a *Gloria*: there is no point in listening out this; he didn't compose one.

The anthem is *Lobet den Herrn* by the great Johann Sebastian Bach – or at least is most likely by him. There are some slightly tiresome scholars around who have cast doubt on this, because it is a work of great lightness, which they find strangely surprising, and because its first publication was not until 1821. This was by the (originally – they are now based in Wiesbaden)) Leipzig music publishers, Breitkopf & Härtel, who claimed to have seen the manuscript, something quite likely to happen given that they were working in the same city in which Bach last worked. Unlike the case of the

"Buxtehude" mentioned above, this just makes one wonder whether these scholars have listened to the motet properly. It doesn't seem to occur to them that all kinds of factors can lead to a composer – especially one as practically minded as Bach – writing a particular piece in one way rather than another. This can, for example, include just trying out something new. It certainly seems to me to sound extremely likely to have come from Bach and there seems no reason to think that Breitkopf was just conning the musical public when the firm attributed it to him.

The text is drawn from the two verses of Psalm 117, the shortest psalm in the book: *O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise ye the Lord.* Bach manages to get a great deal of musical value from this unreservedly positive text and writes three sections in the pattern fast–slow–fast, with the fast sections being forms of fugue, and the slower, central section a more steady, homophonic (that means something like a standard hymn texture) block of music. It is suffused in its buoyant first and last sections with energy and excitement, and demonstrates highly effectively one very vibrant way to express praise.