Music Notes 2017 – The Third Sunday of Lent

It is interesting to consider how much of the music composed several hundred years ago, when printing technology did not exist, is still extant. If one goes back far enough, one finds oneself for the most part dependent upon well-preserved manuscript collections that were put together either in religious or court institutions. A collection may be the sole source for a work that otherwise would have disappeared altogether. After a time, however, the advent of printing technology opened up a new possibility: the commercial printing and selling of musical materials. In the UK, we find William Byrd (1539–1623) and Thomas Tallis (1505–1585) being given a monopoly on music publishing. Even so, they used commercial printers to create the required inventory that would then be sold – in their case, either by the printer's own outlets, or else by other shops, which included printed music among their wares.

However, the story of how this happened on this side of the channel – an important part of it just around the corner from the Priory Church, as it so happens – is small-scale compared with the enormous flourishing of the business in sixteenth-century Italy. It was a trade that grew extremely quickly, spreading from city to city, incorporating a network of printing companies and music shops that were vital to the dissemination of music throughout that part of the world. Music publishing and printing was still a somewhat specialist area. The technology was relatively primitive, both labour and time-intensive, and so the resulting copies were very expensive, and generally beyond the means of ordinary people. That was a problem that was not solved until 1867 in Leipzig, when printed music began to be produced at a price that could be generally afforded. (That, however, is another story.) It is, however, no accident that, from the early sixteenth century onwards, we have far more examples of surviving music with a clearly identified composer. The most obvious result of this was that composers who published and sold through this network of printers and music shops began to establish reputations that in many cases have lasted to this day.

The mass setting that we will hear this Sunday morning is an example of a work that we have today only because of the preserving effects of this business. It was first printed and published by *Apud Ricciardum Amadinum* in Venice in 1588. It would undoubtedly have been purchased by booksellers in many other cities. Florence is a good example. It struggled to establish its own music printing activity, but nevertheless had a thriving group of book shops that also stocked music, buying in many books from Venice, especially, as well as from elsewhere. The composer is Bartolomeo Spontone (1530–1592), and the title of the work is *Missa Cosi estrema la doglia*.

Spontone came from Bologna, but studied with Giaches de Ponte (?? – at least 1545) and Morales (1500–1553) in Rome. He held a variety of posts in his career, the most important being *Maestro di Capella* in Verona cathedral, and then later in Treviso cathedral. He was well-regarded as a madrigalist. This is always something encouraging to know about a composer, because the skills involved in this kind of composition often then also burst out in the same composer's religious music. This six-part mass is a clear example of this happening, facilitated by particularly strong harmonic writing, and considerable contrapuntal mastery. For us, it is an interesting opportunity to hear a work composed when Palestrina (1525–1594) was at the height of his powers, while the Counter-Reformation, with its rules about clarity of expression and intelligibility of text, was in full swing, yet which does not come from one of the "usual suspect" composers.

The motet at the Offertory is by Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). He is one of the most important figures in the story of the development of western music, and appears to us today to form the key link between the style of the Renaissance composers and what we are pleased to refer to as "baroque music" – a misleading term if ever there was one. (It is one of the problems of writing about "classical music" – another misleading description – that we are saddled with these rather unhelpful genre names.) This is undoubtedly not one of Monteverdi's most innovative works – the musical language is drawn more from Renaissance style. Nevertheless, this is a thrilling piece. The text is from the first verses of Psalm 6: *O Lord, rebuke me not in thine indignation: neither chasten me in thy displeasure. Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weak: O Lord, heal me, for my bones are vexed. My soul also is sore troubled: but, Lord, how long wilt thou punish me?*

Publishing plays an important part in this work as well. Monteverdi had taught composition to a cornettist called Giulio Cesare Bianchi (1577–1637), who also created collections of motets and other works for publication. In 1620, he produced two volumes in the same year, the first in praise of God, and the second in praise of the Blessed Virgin. Monteverdi graciously allowed no fewer than four of his motets to be included in the first of these. Bianchi's collection has preserved for us a work that is richly scored for six voices and continuo. Nevertheless, despite the full texture, the music is surprisingly undemanding for its performers, almost as though the composer had been creating it for a choir that managed a decent sound, but was not in fact technically so very accomplished. Still, there is a difference between knowing this intellectually yet listening to a remarkably attractive work, in which the composer successfully conceals the relatively easy ride he is giving to his singers. The result is in fact very satisfying. As with Spontone, Monteverdi was a highly accomplished madrigalist, and the necessary skill in this is evident in vivid word painting, which he employs most effectively here.

The canticles at Evensong are known as *Collegium Regale in F* by Charles Wood (1866–1926). Wood is something of a problem for anyone writing regular music notes for a church, because he is so thoroughly urbane, elegant and in every sense charming, rather like a guest who is very well-mannered and perfectly turned out, that it is difficult to latch onto the human reality that should make the person interesting. Well, he is not in fact such a blank page. He is quite a core figure of the Anglican choral tradition, and seems to have captured the core Englishness of that tradition so well, that it comes as a slight surprise to realize that he hailed from Armagh in Ireland. But he is not unique: that absolute pillar of the Anglican tradition, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), came from Dublin. The fact is that two absolute giants of the Anglican choral tradition, profoundly respected and seen as having produced the musical distilled essence of the Church of England, were not from England at all. Of course, this is no different from other aspects of the richness of English culture, which is such a promiscuous mix of influences from *everywhere*, a fact that seems to be entirely forgotten as we undergo one of our periodic and unattractive bouts of national xenophobia. The music contributed by the non-English Stanford and Wood contributes significantly to making the Church of England what it is. Of course, this principle applies *mutatis mutandis* to more than just the church.

This setting of the canticles is just such distilled Anglicanism. The title gives away the fact that the setting was written for King's College, Cambridge. How marvellous it must be if every piece of music written for your institution carries a unique name that identifies it absolutely in this way. In this case, the setting was written in 1920, one of a sequence of astonishing works that the college has inspired. Written for two four-part choirs, it plays heavily on the antiphonal possibilities of this structure.

What makes an apple fall far or near to the tree? Samuel Wesley (1662–1735), Anglican cleric and poet, produced John (1703–1791) and Charles Wesley (1707–1788), the former of whom established the principles of Methodism (while remaining an Anglican), the latter of whom wrote some of the greatest hymns in the book. Charles produced the highly alternative Samuel (1766–1837), who first cohabited brazenly with his girlfriend, Charlotte, produced several children with her, then married her, then took up with the teenage maid, Sarah Suter, and produced more children with her. In between all this, he was an outstanding organist and composer, was referred to as "the English Mozart", and did much to introduce the British to Bach.

The anthem, *Wash me thoroughly*, is by the surprisingly straight-laced son of Samuel and Sarah Suter, Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876). In his case, the apple fell very far from the tree, and in a productive life, he held successive organist posts at Hereford Cathedral (where he married the Dean's sister, rather against the Dean's will), Exeter Cathedral, Leeds Parish Church, Winchester Cathedral and Gloucester Cathedral (where he died in harness).

This piece is a good example of a more highly coloured and emotive approach to word setting than had been prevalent in English church music circles before Wesley's day. It is very chromatic – that is, there are many harmonically enriched chords that take the music in unexpected directions. For example, in the first few bars of this anthem, we hear such a chord for *throughly* and another for *wickedness*. At *and forgive me* we seem to veer abruptly into a neighbouring key, and then to shift abruptly into an adjacent discordant chord for *all my sins*, by which time we are back at the home key. It doesn't sound "odd" to us, because we are used to this kind of vivid harmonic language, but it was experienced as a rich and exciting "diet" in its day.

Interestingly, Samuel Sebastian Wesley had a "run-in" with the press about another of his works, the dramatic and thrilling *Service in E*, which he had taken some time to complete, writing at first just the morning canticles and communion service, and only composing the evening canticles some time later, attracting criticism for this tardiness. It is extremely difficult to imagine this even getting a mention in a newspaper today, both for want of interest in such music, and a general unwillingness to write about anything to do with the church unless it is thoroughly sensational. Even in those days, the interest in such matters was class-bound and admittedly esoteric, but at least someone thought it worth mentioning, if only to be beastly. Criticism of composers and their works is as old as the technology that first put them into the hands of people – composers metaphorically, works in the form of paper. Nevertheless, without the work done down the centuries by publishers, printers, and distributors, how much poorer would our lives be!