

Music Notes 2017 – Lent V: Passion Sunday

Passion Sunday marks the start of the two-week period known as *Passiontide*, which leads us through the forthcoming week to Palm Sunday, and then into Holy Week and the wonderful intensities of the *Triduum*, the three-day period from the evening of Maundy Thursday to the evening of Easter Day. The thread of the narrative, and the growing potency of experience that runs from the Palm Procession on Palm Sunday morning, through the singing of the Passion, the Mass of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the Good Friday Solemn Liturgy, and on to the kindling of the new fire and light of Easter on Holy Saturday evening, and, of course, the wondrous joys of Easter Day itself, are all powerfully moving. I wonder if those that can only attend part of this sequence miss out terribly? Is it as though one had to miss the middle acts of a Shakespeare play and never experience the build-up that leads to the final resolution?

In his book *Palestrina: Nella vita, nelle opere, nel suo tempo* (*Palestrina: his life, his works, his time*), the Italian musicologist Lino Bianchi argues strongly that the works composed by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594) must be understood as the product of both deep faith and great emotion. It seems to me, however, that we struggle to experience this as such today, in part because the performing tradition of this period of music for the past several decades has been one of cool, refined and indeed highly accurate performances that can feel strikingly unemotional. But this should just be seen as a “performing practice” tradition like any other, owing more to the inclinations of its proponents than to history or to the composer’s intentions.

A few years ago, the BBC made a television programme about the choir of Westminster Abbey going to sing at the then Pope’s invitation in St Peter’s Basilica alongside the Sistine Chapel Choir. The sound and approach of the Roman choir was significantly different from that of the English choir, somehow earthier and fuller, less fastidious in many ways and seemingly much more evocative. Why do we behave as if we think that composers from the Renaissance and Baroque periods had such stiff musical upper lips and were not seething bundles of emotions that leaked into all their music in the same way as happened in the nineteenth century? After all, life in those days was pretty red in tooth and claw and must have been accompanied by strong feelings. There is no reason not to think that the circumstances of their lives radically affected how they composed and directed what they wanted to communicate in their music.

If we follow Bianchi – and he knows more about Palestrina than most people on this planet – we should try to experience the setting at the Solemn Eucharist this Sunday, *Missa in te Domine speravi* (*O Lord in thee have I hoped*), as a work expressing profound faith, a belief in and excitement about the literal immanence of the spiritual world around us, and a profound sense of needing God’s help just to get through the

obligations of everyday life. The setting, one of two by Palestrina with this name, is for six voices, and based on a section of the *Te Deum*, also known as “the Ambrosian Hymn”, being the penultimate statement before “let me never be confounded”. (Ambrosian chant is a collection of chants, attributed, some questionably so, to St Ambrose, which originated in the fourth century and are associated with the Archdiocese of Milan. The more familiar Gregorian chant, named after Gregory the Great, originated in the ninth century from Rome.) Palestrina also wrote a six-part motet based on this section of the Hymn, and the mass also uses material from this motet.

The setting is rhythmically very strong, with a constant off-beat quality and a thread of buoyant energy. This underpins it even when the mood is quieter and more sombre – it always seems ready to burst gratefully back into energetic movement. In other words, it is relatively easy to hear the emotion and faith that Bianchi describes as imbuing Palestrina’s music.

The motet at the Offertory is *Ecce nunc tempus* by the Spanish composer Francisco Guerrero (1528–1599). He was clearly a very bright boy, because he was appointed *Maestro de Capilla* at Jaén Cathedral in Andalusia when he was only 17 years old, and several years later he became the ‘musical director’ at Seville Cathedral. Unusually for musicians of his historical stature, Guerrero did not travel as much as many of his contemporaries did, and most of his career was spent within the area of Seville. As a result, we get a rather clearer picture of the local style than we do from composers who studied and worked elsewhere, especially in Italy, where they absorbed the prevailing style of the Italian and Flemish composers alongside their own indigenous influences. Nevertheless, Guerrero did go abroad and visited Italy for a year and later the Holy Land. Unfortunately, upon his return, he and his fellow travellers sustained two attacks by pirates, who made off with his money and possessions. Impoverished, he ended up in debtor’s prison before being rescued by his former employers at Seville Cathedral, who put him back to work on their behalf. Wisely, he turned these calamitous adventures to his advantage by writing a rather thrilling account of his trip to the Holy Land, which proved to be a commercial success. Almost a decade later, he planned a return trip, but was sadly felled by an outbreak of plague. The text of this motet is from the St Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: *Behold, now is the acceptable time; Behold, now is the day of salvation. Let us conduct ourselves with the utmost patience!*

Evensong takes us to the very different world of Protestant England in the post-Reformation period. The first composer whose work we will hear is Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). He was a member of the choir of King’s College, Cambridge, and later served as an organist in the Chapel Royal and as an organist of Westminster Abbey. He died aged 41 of the then fashionable apoplexy. There is rather gruesome description of an autopsy that was performed on his body

expressly to exclude the plague as a fateful cause, and to blame his death instead on a massive stroke. Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that plague is actually a more likely explanation.

By the time Gibbons came onto the professional musical scene, Elizabeth I was coming towards the end of her reign, and most of his working life was therefore spent with James I on the throne. As Gibbons's family had been perfectly content to switch to the English church, it is no surprise that his church music is made up of settings of English texts.

For Evensong, he wrote two settings of the Canticles: the *Short Service* we shall be hearing this Sunday, which is self-descriptive, and the more extensive *Second Service*. *The Short Service* presents the text in a more or less straightforward chordal texture throughout, although Gibbons uses every trick he can find to maintain interest and to illuminate the words. There is a real element of showing off here. On the one hand, nothing risks being dull more than a simple four-part texture moving more or less in blocks. Yet Gibbons seems to treat this as a musical gauntlet that has been thrown down, and crafts beautiful and affecting music from such economical means. He certainly succeeds in the challenge, and the *Nunc Dimittis* is a real gem.

The anthem is one of the extant settings of the text that begins *When David heard that Absalom was slain*, in this case by Thomas Weelkes (1576–1623). We have only heard the setting by Tomkins over the past four years, so this Sunday presents an opportunity to hear a different treatment. The story behind the piece concerns Absalom, the third son of King David, reportedly the most handsome man in the Kingdom. Popularity and ambition turned his head, and he raised a revolt against his father. In the battle of Ephraim Wood, he was accidentally caught by his head in the branches of a tree and slain when he was discovered by one of his father's commanders. (King David had warned his men to be gentle with Absalom.) The text of the motet takes up the story: *When David heard that Absalom was slain, he went up to his chamber over the gate, and wept: and thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!*

Weelkes sets these words most emotively, and, of course, it is not difficult to sympathize with King David, who evidently wanted to put down the rebellion, but had not counted on this meaning the death of the son he loved dearly in spite of everything. But indeed there is more to say about the historical background to this composition than one might realise. Robert Quinney, formerly an organist at the Priory Church and now Organist and Tutorial Fellow of New College, Oxford, has noted that, this setting, together with 21 other extant settings from the same period by various composers of this text or its parallel account of David mourning Jonathan, had no obvious liturgical purpose in the early seventeenth-century English church. They were written as a response to the death in November 1612 from typhoid fever

of the eighteen-year old Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, heir to King James I of England & VI of Scotland. As the King was a spectacularly popular figure, in spite of his austere outlook on matters of conduct and religion, his son's death was regarded as a national tragedy as well as a massive personal tragedy for the King and his family. In fact, the King was a considerable patron of the arts, and particularly of musicians, which obviously explained why so many composers took up their pens on hearing of his son's demise. Right at the outset of *Passiontide*, our sympathies are engaged by a motet about a father mourning the death of his son, written as a sign of respect for a father mourning his son.

This is what is known as a "full anthem" – that is to say, not a verse anthem that alternates sections of solo with material for the choir, but rather one in which the choir sings throughout. This helps to give this the character of a sacred madrigal, and Weelkes, who was a fine secular madrigalist as well, seems to have taken his cue from this genre. He imbues the setting both with a degree of emotion unusual in sacred music, and with many illustrative musical gestures. For example, right at the start, David hearing the tragic news is illustrated by four of the six voices singing the phrase *When David heard*, followed by a different grouping of four voices out of the six answering with a hushed echo: *when David heard*. As the news of Absalom's death is described, the harmony becomes ever more tormented. When David goes up to his room above the gate, two music illustrations are provided: an upwards leap on the word "up", and an overall arch shape to the line, rising and falling, describing the arch of the gate.

The music comes to a brief rest, and then we hear David's words, at first haltingly, as though he can barely speak between sobs. The first soprano begins alone with the word *O*, and after a momentary hesitation, the rest of the choir joins in with a chord also setting the single syllable *O*, and then it all seems to break down and comes to a momentary halt. The second soprano tries to get it started again with another *O*, and the rest of the choir joins in after another hesitation and they try to get through the entire text of the section. Again, it seems to judder to a stop, to be restarted by the tenor, and then by the bass, in a painfully faltering progress. The tenor leads off an imitative section of painful cries that prompts the choir with the words *Would God I had died for thee*. The end of this section leads to a final series of almost inarticulate phrases from the choir gradually repeating the King's words: *O Absalom, my son, my son, my son*.

There are some rather annoying recordings of this piece that smooth over the tension, aiming to make the music sound languorously beautiful. While they certainly make the agony in the harmony audible, by aiming for beauty and "flow", they fail to "grasp" the drama of the setting. The great conductor and pioneer of the "early music" movement Nikolaus Harnoncourt, once said in an interview: *For me, security and beauty are not compatible. When you seek beauty, you have to forget security*,

and you have to go to the rim of catastrophe. There you find the beauty. If a musician makes a mistake, a crack, because he risks everything to get the most beautiful thing and he fails, then I thank him for this failure because it is only with this risk you can get the beauty, the real beauty.... If you seek security, you should make another profession.

The world is treated to rather a lot of choral music these days that sets out simply to be beautiful, and by doing so fails to convey the drama that its composers endeavoured so diligently to create. Beauty is forced upon music that was designed deliberately and knowingly to illustrate ugliness and suffering. Weelkes never expected his music to be sung with the burnished elegance certain professional ensembles employ as a substitute for real engagement with the music, and, equally important, with the underlying meaning of his work. Perhaps this reflects the fact that we live in a society that is largely alienated from the meaning of what will occupy us over the next two weeks. Is this tantamount to saying that you cannot successfully perform sacred music without believing the faith it is intended to illuminate? This might be going a too far, but you have at least to be able to “act” faith convincingly, including to yourself. The danger otherwise is that you concentrate on creating a beautiful sound, a musical flow, and in doing so miss the whole point of what the composer was trying to do. That’s what has happened too often in the world of recorded sacred music. Sacred music is not trying just to do the same thing as secular music: there is an entire extra layer to it that kills the music stone dead if that layer is missing.

Passiontide and Holy Week are not about beauty: they are about facing up to the price of our salvation and our own role in this eternal drama, compelling us to respond to it as it is laid out in all its painful reality. Over the next two weeks, we will have the opportunity to experience the eternal story of salvation against a powerful musical landscape that carries us through Passiontide to Easter.