

Music Notes 2017 – Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost is often referred to as “the Birthday of the Church”. The story that begins with the seeming hopelessness and disaster of the Passion and Crucifixion rebounds strongly with the Resurrection. We spend forty days marking this period, until we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. This period mirrors the seasons of Advent and Christmas that trigger the whole sequence. In Advent, we prepare for the entry of Jesus into the world, as the divine unites with the human. The period after Resurrection and leading to the Ascension is its obverse. During this time, we prepare for Jesus to depart, taking the human into the very Godhead. The disciples, much the richer for experience, but now deprived for the second time of the physical presence of their Lord and teacher, must have wondered what to do next.

It takes a further ten days of the calendar to journey from the Ascension to the fiftieth day of Easter, a number that gives us the word: Pentecost. On this day, God explodes back into our world in the form of the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost in the old money), firing the disciples with a new energy and mission. That they can now speak in multiple languages, undoing the image of the Tower of Babel, shows that the message of this mission is for the whole world, not just the select few. From this point on, they are forged into a new Spirit-infused entity: the Church, or – as S. Paul will later refer to it – the Body of Christ. So, this indeed is the birthday of the Church.

The narrative behind the period from Palm Sunday all the way to the Sunday of Corpus Christi is, therefore, extraordinarily rich, involved, busy, and – as the current President of the USA so often says – “big league”. One major, cosmically significant event follows another relentlessly, and next week we are going for the most challenging subject of all: the Holy Trinity. Time enough for that then. In the meantime, the challenge is to find a musical landscape that lives up to the sheer scale of the story that we re-live in this pattern each year. No wonder the creators of the calendar give us fully half a year of comparative calm in the seemingly endless Sundays after Trinity. But now we are really getting ahead of ourselves.

The *Messe Solennelle* by the French composer Jean Langlais (1907–1991) is the setting for our Pentecostal Solemn Eucharist. We used to hear this each year at a Sunday evening Solemn Eucharist in the autumn, and the effect then was rather different, with the church’s dark corners looming, and incense writhing through the atmospheric lighting. Some years ago, French church music of late nineteenth and twentieth centuries used to be referred to by some denizens of the Priory Church as “spooky music”, and this mass certainly lives up to this imagery. In fact, the “spooky music” label seems to catch an element of important truth. On the whole, the image of God that we hear most about at our church is one of love, mercy, forgiveness, friendship even – all positive and encouraging images. Yet, you cannot encounter the Almighty Creator without, surely, being driven to at least some degree of awe, feeling

overwhelmed, knocked sideways. This mass taps into this element directly. It sparks a sense of the majestic, powerful, daunting God, the one who sends His Spirit to appear as tongues of fire, as well as in the form of a dove.

The fascinating truth about “modern music” is that most people listen to it perfectly contentedly if the context is right. In a tense science fiction or horror film, the chances are that the sound track will include music made up of strong dissonance and weird sounds. Yet, in this context, the music seems completely acceptable and even enjoyable. The association with otherworldliness, something so far outside normal human experience, justifies the strange sounds accompanying it. We tend to associate classical music prior to the twentieth century with a relatively stable social structure and a culture of predominantly elegant high art. The twentieth century, however, spawned much music that speaks instead of unsettling change, a brutality that was certainly reflected in wars, aggressive and cruel political systems, and insecurity about where the human race is headed. Given the politics of our twenty-first century world so far, perhaps such concern is once again justified.

Church buildings in the Western tradition have been deliberately created to have a certain “shock and awe” effect, setting in stone an image of the majesty of God, and aiming deliberately to generate a distinctive emotional response in us. The architecture is intended to put us into a particular frame of mind. By the twentieth century, French church composers had been for some time responding to the Gothic architecture in which they worked, which emphasizes verticality and the interplay of light, such that the buildings appear as stone skeletons draped with wild pointed arches and almost fluidic structural elements. Many wrote a music that emphasized the otherworldliness built into the liturgy. While Romanesque architecture bespeaks solidity, permanence, and reliability, the Gothic points up the evocative, fantastical, and supernatural, with imaginative, soaring elements abounding everywhere, looking as if they are really trying to reach the heavens.

Born in Brittany, Langlais became blind at the age of two, but overcame his disability to become one of the outstanding composers and organists of his generation. Coming from a more or less unbroken Catholic tradition in France (*pace* the Revolution), Langlais wrote music that remains soaked in plainchant. His musical language, while rooted firmly in the traditional and tonal, also responds to the divine by using extraordinary harmonies and melodic lines to stress otherworldliness, mystery, and the extraordinary. We should unashamedly think of this as the soundtrack to a glimpse caught through the lens of the Eucharistic liturgy into the supernatural realm, unfamiliar to the earth-bound, terrifying in some senses, yet suffused with vivid light, bringing us awestruck to our knees. In our Priory Church, Romanesque though it may be, rather than Gothic, this music is very effective, as the shadows bring our solid stone unexpectedly to life, and the building is infused with a mysterious atmosphere. We sense the space between heaven and earth narrowing as we listen.

The motet at the Offertory, *Holy Spirit, ever dwelling* is derived from a hymn tune by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), one of a number that he wrote that were intended to be used in independent school chapels. Howells was himself Director of Music at St. Paul's Girls' School from 1936–1962. This one was published in *The Clarendon Hymn Book* – a collection of hymns compiled by a committee of public school masters – with words by Timothy Rees (1874–1939), formerly a monk at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire, and later Bishop of Llandaff. Howells called the tune *Salisbury*, and this may well be a reference to the time that he spent in 1917 as sub-organist of Salisbury Cathedral. After this brief skirmish with the possibility of being a cathedral musician, he was to spend the rest of his life engaged either in composition or in teaching. The notes for the CD point out that this is not the easiest hymn tune to grasp, surmising that Howells had depended for its acceptability on the public school penchant for congregational rehearsals to get the pupils up to speed with the trickier corners of repertoire. You could not really accuse it of being easy to sing, although it is not as hard as it sounds, and carries you through with its energy. It is absolutely glorious, with a harmonic language that could only come from Howells. It was recorded for a CD called *Christ Triumphant, Great Hymns of the Twentieth Century* by the Choir of Wells Cathedral, directed by Malcolm Archer, and accompanied on the organ by a certain Rupert Gough, now Director of Music of the Priory Church. Perhaps recognizing that this music might need a different context in which to flourish, Malcolm Archer worked up the hymn into an anthem for choir, published by Oxford University Press; and it is in this form that we will hear it.

More Howells at Evensong, when the canticles will be from his Service known as *Collegium Regale*. The genesis of the service lies in the wartime bet by the then Dean of King's College, Eric Milner-White (through whom we now have the Nine Lessons and Carols tradition), as to whether Patrick Hadley (1899–1973) or Herbert Howells could first compose a *Te Deum* for the college choir. Hadley failed the challenge altogether while Howells obliged magnificently and collected the proffered guinea. It was first performed in the chapel in 1944. Howells completed these evening canticles the following year, later following them with the rest of the Service, somewhat in the tradition of complete Services by Tudor composers. However, here the comparison with any musical tradition stumbles. The approach is quite different, because Howells imaginatively decided not just to paint the words obviously, as though wrenched from the context of their speaker. He remembered that the *Magnificat* is the ecstatic speech of the Blessed Virgin Mary and commented: ...if I made a setting of the *Magnificat*, the mighty should be put down from their seat without a brute force which would deny this canticle's feminine association. Equally ... in the *Nunc dimittis*, the tenor's domination should characterize the gentle Simeon. Only the *Gloria* should raise its voice. And that is what we get. The setting marked a new departure for the Anglican Choral tradition, and arguably only Howells himself, especially in his canticles for Gloucester Cathedral and S. Paul's, ever managed to match its extraordinary effects.

The anthem is *Celestial Fire* by Cecilia McDowall (b.1951 – and, it delights me to say, these notes are being written on her birthday, 29th May!). We are back in independent school territory here, because this is one of three anthems on various themes from the church year that she wrote for Oakham School, a rather extraordinary institution founded in 1584 by a Puritan cleric using the income from his four ecclesiastical positions to found this and Uppingham School. At one point long ago in its history, it was down to four pupils, whereas now Oakham has over a thousand. They have been remarkably far-sighted: in 1971, they were the first independent school to admit both girls and boys across the whole age range, and the first to go online, back in 1995.

The school has a place in the footnotes of music copyright enforcement in the UK. In 1981, Novello's music publishers and the Music Publishers Association sued it for photocopying Christmas carols, making an example of the school. To say the school cleaned up its act afterwards would be an understatement. In fact, the music department is very fine, and the choral music exceptional. More than 25% of the school's pupils are in at least one of its several choirs. The school has made a point of commissioning works from contemporary composers, and the three pieces (the *Oakham Trilogy*) that Cecilia McDowall has written for them (the others are *Light eternal* and *Candlemas*) are part of this burgeoning collection. *Celestial Fire* is written for a five-part choir (SSATB) and knits the melody of the quintessential Pentecostal hymn, *Come Holy Ghost* tightly into the musical texture. The text is by Denise Levertov (1923–1997), who began life in Ilford, because her father – who had been Hasidic-born, but converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest – was working in the parish of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch. She eventually married an American and moved to the USA, and her reputation as a poet is very much based on the work there that she undertook over the rest of her life. Although the daughter of a priest, faith did not come easily to her: it was quite a journey from agnosticism to, eventually, the Roman Catholic Church.

The music at Benediction, *O Salutaris & Tantum ergo*, is by Fernand (Pierre G.) Laloux (1901–1970). Laloux, while of Belgian descent, was effectively an English composer, albeit strongly influenced by French post-impressionist composers, especially Ravel (1875–1937). He and his parents came to England in 1914 when the Kaiser's troops entered Belgium, and here they remained, Fernand eventually dying where he had lived in Wandsworth. Along the way he became Director of Music at Farm Street, Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception, in Mayfair, one of the Roman Catholic churches known for good music and wonderful liturgy in London. Both settings were written for use at Farm Street, and are for unaccompanied choir.