

Music Notes 2017 – The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

The setting this Sunday at the Solemn Eucharist is the *Missa Brevis* K.275 (or K.272b in the renumbered *Köchel Werkverzeichnis* – the well-known catalogue of Mozart's compositions), also known as *Mass No. 9 in Bb*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). In spite of its brevity, this work of sacred music has something of the atmosphere of an opera in which the chorus just plays rather a large part. There must have been something special about the service for which it was written, because the *Agnus Dei* is astonishingly extended for a setting written in the period in which Prince Archbishop Colloredo presided over the church in Salzburg and laid down stringent rules about the required brevity of the service. Mozart would scarcely have risked the Prince Archbishop's wrath in this way had he not been on safe ground. Not only that, but when we reach the *Dona nobis pacem* section, the mood brightens considerably and we move into a blatant gavotte. While this remains rather decorous, it is still rather extraordinary from a formal point of view in this context. There is no mistaking the light-hearted tone. Perhaps the Prince Archbishop was away that Sunday... However, even more suggestive is the fact that Mozart was just about to leave Salzburg for what he rather hoped would be the last time and embark on a tour to Munich, Mannheim and Paris, places in which he hoped that he might be taken on in permanent paid employment commensurate with his skills. If K275/272b represents his state of mind shortly before his adventure, we can certainly sense the optimism. And just possibly, the long but jolly *Agnus Dei* was his version of having what he hoped (wrongly) would be the last word in Salzburg. *Dona nobis pacem* indeed, but a prayer destined to be thwarted when he was forced back in 1779 to accept a new position under the lash of Colloredo's rules.

The motet at the Offertory is one of Mozart's best known pieces: *Laudate Dominum*, a movement extracted from the *Vesperae solennes de confessore* K.339 (*Solemn Vespers for a Saint's Day*). In fact, the title is not Mozart's – someone else has added the *de confessore* to the manuscript, although this may have been done with knowledge of the composer's intentions or the work's actual use. The setting was written in 1780, actually the second time he had written such a work, the very comparably structured *Vesperae solennes de Dominica* (K. 321) – *Solemn Vespers for a Sunday* – having been composed the year before.

This setting of Psalm 117, *Laudate Dominum*, for accompanied soprano solo and choir is one of the most frequently performed works in the choral repertoire. It is written in a gently flowing 6/8 time signature, and its many arch-like melodic elements, starting with the opening phrase, emphasize its beautiful, undulating structure. After the soloist has sung the text of the psalm – the shortest in the Psalter, with just two verses – the choir repeats the soloist's music but this time singing the words of the *Gloria patri*, the soloist entering at the very end to decorate the *Amen*. It is one of those pieces that one might well dread hearing yet again, so well-engrained is it in

our subconscious. Yet, experience tells us also that almost at once, even the most jaundiced listener will often be overwhelmed by the beauty of Mozart's melodic imagination and the gentle, subtle, yet powerful emotion that it evokes.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Second Service* by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). A member of the choir of King's College, Cambridge, he went on to serve in the Chapel Royal and as organist of Westminster Abbey. By the time Gibbons came onto the professional musical scene, Elizabeth I (1533–1603) was coming towards the end of her 45-year reign, and most of his working life was therefore spent with James I on the throne. His family had been perfectly content to switch to the English church and all that this meant. It is therefore no surprise that his church music output is settings of English texts. He died aged 41 of the then fashionable "apoplexy", almost certainly brought on by the strain of arranging the music for the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles I. There is a gruesome description of an autopsy that was performed on his body in order to exclude the plague as cause. In pointing to apoplexy, the doctors meant that he had suffered a massive stroke. However, there is some reason to question this, because the plague was not at all an unlikely true diagnosis, and it might also explain why he was buried almost immediately at Canterbury Cathedral, where the King was waiting for the arrival of his new wife, Henrietta Maria. He had married her by proxy – a procedure that is among those no longer favoured by the Church of England hierarchy – and she was on her way to meet him with a few companions to help her along the way: four thousand of them, to be precise. It might have been seen as a swamping by European citizens, but they were made of sterner stuff in those days, and the royal household absorbed these new courtiers and servants. Whatever the cause of the death of Gibbons, as so often with these things, his misfortune certainly proved a stroke of luck for his friend and assistant Thomas Tomkins, who was able to step into the resulting breach and rescue both obsequies and coronation from a musical point of view. It was the making of him.

For Evensong, Gibbons wrote two settings of the Canticles: the *Short Service*, which is self-descriptive, and the more extensive *Second Service*, which we shall be hearing this week. 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 more dull than a simple four part texture moving more or less in blocks. Yet Gibbons treats this as a musical gauntlet that has been thrown down, and crafts beautiful and affecting music from such economical means.

The *Second Service* is quite a different matter. Unlike the *Short Service*, it is laid out more as though it were a verse anthem – that is, contrasting sections for soloists in various combinations, which are set alongside material for the full choir. It is easy to

see in these two settings something that was going on in English church music at the time. The English church had been through a period of quite severe self-denial, favouring liturgical – and with it, musical – austerity as a contrast with the lavishness of the Catholic tradition that had been so comprehensively rejected. But for musicians, this led to rather thin gruel in their services, something that, for example, greatly depressed William Byrd (1540–1623) in his sojourn at the then very austere Lincoln Cathedral. It is difficult to hold down a strong musical talent, and as time went by, it burst out more and more in any way it could, finding ways to enrich the musical language of settings and give some stronger meat to worshippers. A well-disciplined and inventive *Short Service* by Gibbons is not so surprisingly followed by the more ornate riches of the *Second Service*.

The anthem is by John Bull (1562–1628). He had been a pupil of William Blitheman (1523–1591), and duly joined his teacher as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. Upon Blitheman's demise, Bull succeeded him as organist at the Chapel Royal, an important position. He was considered to be a brilliant performer at the organ, something noted in William Boyce's entry in *Cathedral Music, Volume 2*, where he points out that his skills were said to excel over any other of his contemporaries, who included Tallis (1505–1585), Byrd (which he writes consistently as "Bird"), and Gibbons, none of whom was a slouch at the keyboard. It seems rather surprising to note that in 1607 he resigned all his positions in England and decamped to the court of the Archduke of Austria, who was in fact resident in The Netherlands. Not content with that, he later moved to work in Germany for the last years of his life – an early practitioner of the principle of free movement.

Of course, being a great performer was no limitation on also being a composer, and this verse anthem, *Almighty God, who by the leading of a star*, is a very good example of his skill in this area. It was one of his best-received works in his own day. There is some evidence for its having started life as a string fantasia – its original accompaniment is strings – to which words were later added, or it may have been a completely different anthem, *Deus omnipotens*, which he adapted for Epiphany purposes. This is because a certain John Baldwin (1560–1615) – a singer at St George's Chapel, Windsor, and himself a composer – copied out the music and wrote in this Latin text at its start, as though indicating an original text. Nevertheless, by 1616, it appears in the clergyman, Thomas Myriell's records of music of the period as the anthem we know, although even then in two different versions. Whatever the truth of the way it came into being, it is a marvellous example of the genre, and the atmosphere of the accompaniment, which you will have to imagine on viols, belongs especially to this period of English church music.