

## Music Notes 2017 – Seventh Sunday after Epiphany: Sexagesima

The *Mass in G, D167*, by Franz Schubert (1797–1828) is sometimes referred to as his *Mass No 2*. He wrote it in March 1815 in under a week, having performed a similar feat the year before when he had also written a mass setting for his local parish church at Lichtental, on the then outskirts of Vienna. Although he could not have known it, at the age of 18, he was already more than half way through his short life. His significant output is the result of an extraordinary rate of work, something he shares with some other short-lived composers, such as Mozart, and the other composer we will hear on Sunday morning, Mendelssohn. It is tempting – albeit fruitless – to speculate that there is a connection between these two characteristics. In Schubert’s case, during the course of 1815, he was also to write both his second and third symphonies, a further mass setting, a number of chamber works, and no fewer than 144 songs, including *Der Erlkönig*. It was an astonishing output for one so young.

If Schubert intended to show what a Viennese composer could do to exemplify Counter-Reformation guidelines on liturgical music, this would be the perfect example, combining great beauty of expression with tremendous directness in communicating the text. Perhaps for this reason, we have to wonder what he meant by his treatment of some passages. Rather than point up crucial doctrinal elements in the words, he sometimes skipped over them altogether, giving the impression that he might have been ambivalent about their content. Several times, he simply omits chunks of text. Later publishers have often reinserted these by re-apportioning other text, but that seems an unwarranted mangling of Schubert’s possible intention. He omits *suscipe deprecationem nostram* and *Jesu Christe* from the *Gloria*, and he leaves out the *one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church* and the *Resurrection of the Dead* from the *Creed*. Do these lacunae indeed reflect doctrinal difficulties, or, after the initial composition, did he remove chunks of music for some reason, sacrificing the text with the notes, or was just careless when setting the words and slipped up? We will probably never know.

The title of the motet at the Offertory may catch one off-guard. *Am Neujahrstage* is the second of *Sechs Sprüche zum Kirchenjahr* by Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), who lived just five years longer than Schubert, also packing an immense amount of composition and performance into these short years. *Sechs Sprüche* means literally “Six Sayings”, except that when used in church in German-speaking areas, they usually refer more precisely to *Sprüche Salomonis* – i.e. they refer to the biblical Book of Proverbs. So, these are better translated as *Six Proverbs for the Church’s Year*. (English-speaking publishers like to call them the more anodyne “Six Anthems”, but that really doesn’t do justice to the German.) The title of this particular one means *On New Year’s Day*, which may make it seem rather inappropriate now, when Lent is

just around the corner. Nevertheless, the text makes it clear that this *Spruch* has a very wide application:

*Herr Gott, du bist unsre Zuflucht für und für. Ehe denn die Berge worden, und die Erde und die Welt erschaffen worden, bist du Gott von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit. Hallelujah!*

*Lord God, you are our refuge for evermore. You are our God from age to age, from before the mountains were made, and the lands and the world were created. Hallelujah!*

Mendelssohn wrote these *Six Proverbs* over the course of 1843 and the first half of 1844. For reasons we will come to, he never conceived of them as a collection, and indeed, they were only published posthumously in 1849, as his Opus 79. The individual movements had all been composed for use in the “Berliner Dom”, which simply means “Berlin Cathedral”. This was not, in fact, the building that we know by this title today. The building that Mendelssohn knew was demolished in 1893, and replaced over the ensuing years by today’s impressive and dramatic Neo-Renaissance structure, known formally as the *Supreme Parish and Cathedral Church of Berlin (Oberpfarr- und Domkirche zu Berlin)*, but in practice just as *Berliner Dom*. Still, the building Mendelssohn knew, the origins of which dated from 1451, but which was much developed over the centuries following, was also by no means unimpressive itself.

We think of Mendelssohn as a Leipzig composer, and, indeed, nowhere is more “his city” than Leipzig, even today – and that in spite of the Nazis’ attempts to write him out of German musical history altogether, because of his Jewish ancestry. He was born in Hamburg, but two years later, his family settled in Berlin, and that is where he grew up, and from where his musical career was launched. He only started to work in Leipzig in 1835, at the age of only 26, as conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, an institution dating back to the 1740s, formed originally when Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was still alive.

In early 1843, the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV, announced the founding of a choir providing choral music for both the court and cathedral in Berlin. Mendelssohn was on the hook for this, because he was still technically in the service of the King’s household. When he had tried to resign the position the previous year in order to be free to concentrate on Leipzig, the King had imaginatively plucked from the air the idea that his star composer/performer should take over responsibility for sacred music, but only as and when the King created a worthy chapel of players and singers. Now the chicken of this agreement was coming home to roost. Still, Mendelssohn was unsure whether, in spite of the King’s declaration, this would ever really happen, observing that in Berlin *nobody knows, nobody cares, but everybody rules, from the King down to the meanest porter and the pensioned drummer*. Nevertheless, the King came good on his promise, and Mendelssohn was obliged to

fulfil his part of the bargain. Today, Berlin is only just a little over an hour away from Leipzig by train. As it so happened, the required connections between the cities were being developed at exactly the time that Mendelssohn had to fulfil dual roles in Leipzig and Berlin. Still, the amount of commuting involved was, for the times, immense.

By December, Mendelssohn was in place as Director of Music of the new Berlin ensemble alongside his duties in Leipzig. In the meantime, the King – who felt he had a gift for this, and the right to exercise it – had extensively revised the liturgy. He had, however, made it in the process much more complicated on the one hand, while on the other not communicating it entirely successfully to those who had to perform it. The result was something of a mess. This was further complicated by the King's desire for 'real' Renaissance music, such as the works of Palestrina, to play a much larger role in the services; meanwhile, Mendelssohn was doing his level best to introduce more and more of his own music, while also making the most of the instrumental ensemble. Both goals might have both been achieved with a little compromise on both sides – leading perhaps to the kind of mix of repertoire with which we are familiar at the Priory Church. However, the chances of this were poisoned by a third ingredient, the essentially negative views of the Cathedral's Minister, F.A. Strauß. He thought that music was anyway playing much too large a part in the liturgy, and did his best to undermine it both from the pulpit and administratively.

As too often happens, the church politics became ever more bizarre and everyone was soon vexed with more or less everyone else. By the autumn of 1844, Mendelssohn was so exasperated that he asked for a further audience with the King, and this time was able to negotiate a complete release from duties in Berlin, receiving instead a much reduced retainer in exchange for continuing to provide works for royal occasions. Nevertheless, this difficult period at the Dom had drawn from him a repertoire of wonderful music. Some of these works amount to remarkably clever examples of squaring the circle of his and the King's different ideas about musical liturgy. Several of these works were drawn together into collections published after Mendelssohn's death, and that is how we have come to have the *Sechs Sprüche*.

Fortunately, such conflicts between musicians, clergy, and would-be liturgists are a thing of the past and never affect church life in our time.

The canticles at Evensong are from the *Second Service* by William Byrd (1539–1623). The style of the setting corresponds with the views of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who had written as far back as 1544 in a letter to King Henry VIII of wanting settings *not full of notes, but, as nearly as may be, for every syllable a single note, so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly*. The amazing thing is that this very boring and

prescriptive precept was in due course surmounted by composers such as Byrd and Tallis, who managed to make even this kind of compacted music vibrant and exciting.

In this *Second Service*, Byrd does two particularly interesting things, both of which are likely to pass us by unless pointed out. The first is the innovation of a short introduction. All his settings expect an organ accompaniment. We are rather inclined these days to perform Tudor music unaccompanied wherever possible. Tudor musicians, who probably had far fewer good singers on which to rely, would generally have used either a light organ accompaniment to keep everything together, or else doubled the voices on, say, a consort of viols. In the case of this setting, the accompaniment is indispensable, because there is a short organ introduction to each canticle. Moreover, at the start of each, an alto soloist sings the opening phrase, so necessitating an accompaniment, and there are other solos along the way. The introduction, setting the pitch for the choir, was a new and very influential way to start a setting. The second interesting aspect is that the text of the *Magnificat* itself ends with a treble soloist singing the text *As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham, and his seed for ever* to a metrical version of the plainchant known as *Tonus Peregrinus*. This is the ninth of the Gregorian so-called Psalm Tones, and its presence in an Anglican service at this point might seem a little unexpected. It can be seen just as a bit of word painting by the composer: an old, pre-Reformation and familiar melody being used to illustrate the idea of “forefathers”. But surely it is also Byrd being slightly subversive, smuggling in a Catholic reference into this otherwise impeccably Anglican music!

The anthem is *See, see, the Word is incarnate* by the English composer, Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). He was a member of the choir of King’s College, Cambridge, and 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 (who was, of course, James VI of Scotland, from whence he came also to occupy the English throne) as monarch. Gibbons’s antecedents had been perfectly content to switch to Henry VIII’s English church when required to do so. It is therefore no surprise that his output is made up of settings of English texts. Many of these are quite robust anthems, suitable for major liturgical occasions. This verse anthem is a little different.

For a start, it was conceived with an accompaniment of viols, rather than an organ doubling the voice parts to keep them on track. As is the case with the Byrd canticles described above, the accompaniment is independent and essential. Moreover, the text is not the more usual quotation from the Bible. The author was Godfrey Goodman (1582–1656). As our former organist Robert Quinney has pointed out in notes for a recording of the work by the Choir of Westminster Abbey, Goodman was

a priest with distinct Catholic leanings, who was later a Chaplain to Queen Anne and Bishop of Gloucester. Perhaps Gibbons wasn't aware of Goodman's sympathy with Catholic theology and practice or just didn't care, because he evidently liked the text. It comprises a pretty brisk dash through the entire story of Christ's ministry. As the title – which is also the first line of the poem – suggests, it begins with the Incarnation at Christmas, shepherds and wise men are dealt with in the second line, Jews and Gentiles hear Christ's preaching in the third, while healings and miracles abound in the fourth. By the fifth, Jesus is on his way into Jerusalem and the Crucifixion is under way. In the sixth, not only does the earth quake and the sun darken immediately after his death, but the Resurrection also takes place. The risen Christ provides evidence of this to the disciples in the seventh, and promptly ascends. The remaining lines describe Him now reigning in heaven and glorified, comprising roughly thirty percent of the text! It is remarkably compact and efficient, and Gibbons captures this capsule of faith beautifully.