

Music Notes 2017 – The Sunday of the Epiphany

The Epiphany, which commemorates the visit of the gentile wise men to the baby Jesus, falls on the 6th January each year, but for practical reasons, churches with widely distributed congregations – such as ours – tend to celebrate such feast days on the nearest Sunday, which is what we will also be doing on the 8th January, calling this *The Sunday of the Epiphany*. Nevertheless, the Epiphany is really just a period within the overall season of Christmas. Although you should have removed any decorations made of greenery from your home during the period between sundown on the 5th January and sundown on the 6th January (which explains why most people are confused about whether the crucial day is the 5th or the 6th for this tradition), the season of Christmas lasts until Candlemas, and that is not until the 2nd February. Indeed, some of us may have re-decorated our homes following the removal of the greenery with gold or similarly bright decorative material to mark this subdivision in the season and to call to mind the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The fact that we are nevertheless still within the overall season of Christmas explains the choice of the mass setting this Sunday, which is based on one of the greatest of Christmas motets, while the Epiphany theme is given full reign in the motet at the Offertory.

The setting is the *Missa O Magnum mysterium* by the great Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611). If in December you attended either of the *Nine Lessons and Carols* in December, or one of the lunchtime carol services, you will have heard the choir sing Victoria's own motet on which he based this mass setting, which he composed using the procedure known as *Parody Mass*. This was like a very early form of what we now call in the pop music world "sampling", and which in other contexts sometimes ends in accusations of plagiarism. The composer takes a pre-existing work, and wresting a whole chunk of it from its original purpose, uses it as the jumping-off point for then composing an entirely new work that grows organically out of the musical quotation. This is not just a form of creative economy, but was one of two ways in which a composer would imbue a mass setting with a specific seasonal relevance. In this approach, the use of entire chunks of the pre-existing work set the relevant references, evidenced in the title given the work. Nevertheless, once the quotation had been sung, the rest of the section of music was freely composed until the next section began, usually with a further quotation. In the second approach, a plainchant, running as a thread through the musical texture, and sung at a slow rate of notes while the other voices move more nimbly around it, gave the character of its text to the mass setting. The "running as a thread" therefore applied not only to the music itself within the polyphonic texture, but also to the contextual significance that it added to the mass setting. For example, using a plainchant belonging to the season of – say – All Saints in such a way in a mass setting, would automatically mean it was also primarily suitable for the season of All Saints.

In many places, the singer given the plainchant to intone within the polyphonic texture of the music would sing the original words of the chant against – as it were – the normal words of the mass in the other voices. This is such a ubiquitous and obviously highly significant feature of Renaissance compositional practices that it is simply musically and spiritually illiterate when churches cheerfully and nonchalantly programme masses from completely the wrong season on the grounds that would be nice to hear it sung again, or some other similarly trivial reason. Mass settings should be performed in the season to which they belong, unless there is a very compelling and convincing reason for doing them at another time. Otherwise their meaning and the enriching contribution they make to the liturgical life of the church is simply lost.

Now, the original publication of Victoria's motet declared it to be for the *Circumcision of the Lord*, slightly muddying the waters here. This is a slight red herring, because that falls on the octave, or eighth day, which is 1st January, and so well within the Christmas season. Nevertheless, the text of the motet is a responsory from the Matins of Christmas Day, so it would be interesting to know what motivated the publisher to identify it as such. But it is unwise to speculate on why music publishers do what they do; that way lies madness. The motet has come to be the most successful individual Christmas motet from the entire period of the Renaissance. It is a wonderfully thrilling work, with a magical moment when the text turns to *O beata Virgo*, which is set with a beautiful and intimate tenderness, before the music turns to a vigorously dancing set of joyous *Alleluias* in sudden triple time, a marvellous effect.

When it came to transforming the material of the motet into a mass setting, Victoria evidently found most of its sections compelling as "jumping-off" material, but not the hushed *O beata Virgo* section, which is, evidently, too much of its own thing to be used for quotation purposes. The setting is a joyful work, thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the motet and making highly effective use of the music it borrows. The dancing triple time from the *Alleluia* section is used sparingly, but to considerable advantage: it appears once in the *Gloria*, turns up a few times in the *Credo* (which we, however, do not hear in our liturgy), and is deployed most thrillingly in the *Hosanna* sections that follow the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*.

The motet at the Offertory during the Solemn Eucharist picks up on the Epiphany theme directly: *Three Kings from Persian Lands* by the German composer Peter Cornelius (1824–1874). Cornelius is in some sense the poor relation of Liszt and Wagner, not through a poverty of musical imagination, but perhaps because he was too nice for the world in which he found himself. His major success was the comic opera *Der Barbier von Bagdad* in 1858, which Liszt himself conducted for its first run, and which is still performed in Germany today. There was a surprising amount of feeling against what was regarded as the *New German School* at the time – Liszt (not

German at all) and Wagner (definitely German) being its leaders – and although Cornelius’s music really only modestly tended in that direction, he still ended up with a major demonstration on his hands at the premiere. He felt a great deal of caution about getting too close to Wagner at first, but to his evident chagrin, was forced by financial need to accept a job as his assistant. There he was pretty much bossed about by Wagner’s more robust temperament, although he did stand up to him sufficiently to insist on (obviously most unreasonably) going to attend a premiere (much deferred) of one of his own works instead of attending rehearsals of *Tristan and Isolde*. He nearly got the sack, but survived. Much involved with the building of the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, he did at least manage to marry and produce four children while living in Munich, only to deprive Wagner permanently of his services by dying of diabetes at the age of only 50.

This little Epiphany carol speaks of *Drei Könige* – *three Kings* – who come from Persia in the usual English translation, but just from *Morgenland* – *the Orient* – in the German original. The English geographical detail is certainly not in the bible story, but the main problem with the *We three Kings* version of the Epiphany story is that the bible speaks neither of “three” nor of “Kings”, saying only *there came wise men from the east* – which is not necessarily the same thing as the Orient. It is church tradition that makes them Kings – as well as, presumably, wise – and gives them the names of Melchior, Casper, and Baltazar. Cornelius was unfussed by any such nit-picking, and wrote his own text, setting it for a solo baritone, with the chorale melody (with words by Philipp Nicolai) that we know as *How brightly beams the morning star*, forming an accompaniment. In fact, although we have become used to hearing the chorale sung by a choir, this was not Cornelius’s own intention. He wrote it just for soloist with piano accompaniment, and it was the sometime organist of Worcester Cathedral and a good friend of Edward Elgar, Ivor E. Atkins (often, for obvious reasons, known as Ivory Atkins) who had the happy idea of re-forming it to be accompanied by a choir singing the chorale, first in male voices only, and then in full choir, the version that is more or less universally known today. Incidentally, the steady progress of the sung chorale does seem to provide an image, rather missing in the more prosaic piano original, of the steady onward progress of the Kings on their journey, drawn on by the brightly beaming star.

The evening is given over to our Epiphany Carol Service, an annual and wonderful tradition. This begins with *Tribus miraculis* by Luca Marenzio (1553–1599). He is thought of as the epitome of the Italian madrigalist, rather like rolling all of Morley, Byrd, Tomkins, Wilbye, and so on into one, but doing it in Italy. The key to his renown is his vivid (almost too modest a word) approach to word painting. He did not write much church music in comparison with his British counterparts, but those works that we do have, take a similar approach to illuminating the text. This motet includes radically different textures for each section of the text. It opens with a description of the “three miracles” that mark the day set floridly for three voices, the

upper two representing the star of the “first miracle”, the visit of the Magi. There is an abrupt change of timbre when we are told of water being turned into wine (the “second miracle”), and then vivid chromaticism brings in the Baptism of Jesus (the “third miracle”). The whole piece is rounded off with a wonderful *Alleluia*.

From the rising of the sun is by Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley (1825–1889). A really fascinating and underestimated figure today, Ouseley found himself having to wrestle all his life with reconciling aristocratic origins with his real callings, which were to the priesthood and the performance and composition of Anglican church music, both considered somewhat beneath someone of his birthright. In a somewhat complex life, he managed to be Professor of Music at Oxford University, as well as Precentor of Hereford Cathedral and Warden of St Michael’s College, Tenbury Wells, all at the same time. In fact, he founded and generously endowed St Michael’s College himself – thanks to considerable private wealth – as a training college for boys to learn the Anglican choral tradition at the highest level. It managed to maintain its activities until 1985, when financial difficulties led to its closure. The proceeds from the sale of its assets were put into the Ouseley Trust, a charitable body that uses the proceeds to support the Anglican choral tradition, and from which our Priory Church itself has very gratefully benefitted from time to time. Ouseley was very much part of the Oxford Movement – the origins of today’s Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England – and this anthem rather relishes saying that in every place incense shall be offered up – so he would have been at home with us! The setting is absolutely straightforward, almost hymn-like, and particularly direct in *Thus saith the Lord* at the end, with a firmness that brooks no quarrel!

When Jesus our Lord, by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–1847), comes from the composer’s unfinished oratorio *Christus*. Alas, only fragments of the planned work were left behind at his early demise, and this is one of them. It tells the story of the wise men asking *where is he born King of Judea*, for they have seen his star. It begins with a soprano recitative, but then, when the wise men speak for themselves, three male voices take over with a walking accompaniment in the bass that graphically illustrates their long journey. It all depends how fast the piece is taken as to whether they have been on a long trudge or are striding purposefully.

I wonder as I wander is by Andrew Carter (b.1939). Although originally a Leicestershire boy, Carter has a close association with York and especially the Minster. He has spent many years working as a composer and traveling the world giving workshops and performances as a choral director. His music is characterized by atmosphere and a brilliant sense for harmony. His carols are exquisite, and should undoubtedly be much better known. This particular *a capella* setting is a compelling example. As for the text, just as we had Ralph Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharpe rushing around the British Isles collecting folk songs, so the United

States had people such as John Jacob Niles (1892–1980) collecting the indigenous songs of Native Americans in the Appalachian Mountains. The text of *I wonder as I wander* comes from his collection *Songs of the Hill-Folk*, and hails from the state of North Carolina.

Seek him that Maketh the Seven Stars is by Jonathan Dove (b.1959). It was written for the Friends of the Royal Academy of Arts, for their annual Service for Artists in St James's, Piccadilly. Jonathan has written that *the theme of light, and starlight in particular, is an endless source of inspiration for composers*, and in this case, he obviously saw it as particularly applicable also to those working in the visual arts. The night sky is evoked first by a twinkling organ that suggests the twinkling of the stars. One of the most beguiling moments one can have reading a lesson in church occurs in the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis. Quite early on, God has created the sun and the moon, and then the narrator drops in, almost apropos of nothing, *and he made the stars also*. With the benefit of a post-Enlightenment, post-Einsteinian education, this understated aside deserves a wry smile. The writer perhaps saw the decorative, twinkly little lights as just so much visual embellishment compared with the immanent majesties of sun, moon and earth. We now know rather better and can appreciate the stars as the largest part of creation, so it is appropriate that the singers question who might have made *them*. The refrain *Seek him* begins with a passionate devotion which gradually becomes less and less constrained as it turns into a joyful dance before subsiding into a serene conclusion.

Finally, *Lux Aurumque* is by Eric Whitacre (b.1970), whose star has shone brighter and brighter on both sides of the Atlantic over the past decade. The text is from a poem, originally written in English by the elusive Edward Esch. Whitacre was *immensely struck by its genuine, elegant simplicity*. At his request, the American poet, Charles Anthony Silvestri, translated it into Latin.