

Music Notes 2017 – Sunday of the Ascension

Forgive me if you have read this before, but... While walking home one evening four years ago, and crossing at some pedestrian lights in front of a rather elegant large convertible, it suddenly dawned on me that, rather than the resonant beat and heavy rock guitar that it is customary to hear blaring from your average open-topped, sports vehicle in London, I was hearing a familiar piece of piano music. My respect for the young, elegantly attired, driver heightened at once. The piece was *Frühlingsrauschen* or *Rustle of Spring* by the Norwegian composer Christian Sinding (1856–1941). It was not that this was a young man in a sports convertible listening to classical music that was so unexpected, but rather the quirk that this piece was exclusively published until 2011 by the firm for which I happen to work, Edition Peters. Moreover, the piece was the subject of a famous High Court case in the early 1950s. The case established that the music publishers Novello, who had acquired the right to publish the company's catalogue during the Second World War (the firm had been confiscated and sold by the Nazis on account of the publishers' Jewish heritage; one of the owners, Dr Henri Hinrichsen, had perished at Auschwitz), was obliged to cede the rights back to the original owners' heirs. In this sense, that piece is the reason Edition Peters exists today.

It might have been interesting to leap to the driver's door and try to explain this strange and implausible convergence, but common sense prevailed. Had I done so, he might have quickly discovered his inner Clarkson, slammed his foot to the floor and roared away from the manifest lunatic trying to get his attention. Yet, it might also be that knowing something slightly unexpected about a piece of music – as you do now – might shed an additional and interesting light on it. Alas, I did not try giving the driver the chance to see the light. Music often leads two parallel lives: one, the straightforward life of being a piece of music to be heard and appreciated on its own merits; the other a more secret life composed of unanticipated origins, influences, hidden meanings, personal codes, and uncanny quirks. For example, it surely *does* add something to the *Missa Brevis* by the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) to know that it received its first performance in the downstairs cloakroom of the Budapest Opera House during the Second World War. The composer and his wife were living in the basement there after having been bombed out of their apartment.

The *Missa Brevis* is not quite a newly-minted work in the Kodály canon. He adapted it from the pre-existing material in his 1942 work, *Organ Mass*, which was written as an instrumental work with no voices. It was, therefore, a purely musical meditation on the sections of the mass. This is, of course, something of a challenge for a composer, who must imbue the instrumental material with something that “speaks” to the listener of the content of the Ordinary of the Mass (i.e. the regular sections that occur in every mass, such as the *Kyrie*, or *Sanctus*). Arguably, having created such a

work, it was rendered only more potent by having a text added when it was re-worked as the *Missa Brevis*.

Kodály was very much a nationalist composer – not in the political sense, but in the sense of being inspired and motivated by the folksongs and dance of his own country, which inspired him to create his own distinctive musical language. An easy comparison might be Vaughan Williams and his use of old folksongs from around the UK in his music – although sometimes the moving folksong you think he is quoting is his own original composition and just *sounds* like an old, borrowed melody. So it was with Kodály's distinctive style derived from the folk music of Hungary: sometimes the melody you are sure must be a quotation is his own original idea.

The mass begins and ends with organ movements – a hangover, obviously, from the *Organ Mass* – an *Introitus* and *Ite, Missa est* (which is the original of our familiar dismissal *Go in the peace of Christ – Thanks be to God*). The latter movement is, indeed, our Postlude at the end of the Solemn Eucharist this Sunday. In between come the usual movements, with a marvellous variety of highly lyrical expression. The *Gloria*, which we at the Priory church used to use every year on Easter Eve during the Vigil, is particularly thrilling. But it is invidious to pick out any movement for special praise: this is a collection of very special settings. The first performance in the cloakroom of the opera house was accompanied by a harmonium for practical reasons. In 1948 the work received a proper premiere, and, perhaps, also unexpectedly, this was not in Hungary, but at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester.

The motet at the Offertory is *Ascendit Deus* by Peter Philips (ca.1560–1628). Philips eventually combined being a musician with being a priest. As a boy, he was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, where the Master of Choristers was a closet Catholic. It is not known whether it was this influence that led him to convert to Catholicism, or whether he grew up in a Catholic family. Circumstances were not propitious, however, for a young man with such inclinations, and in his early twenties he left England for good, eventually settling in Antwerp. There he married, and the couple had one child. Alas, both wife and child died subsequently, but, by doing so, happen to have freed the way for Philips to be ordained. This motet is one of a considerable number of works that he composed in what must have been a very difficult life: living in exile, losing his new family, and often maintaining only a precarious existence as a musician – no change there! Nevertheless, this piece is as exuberant as you would hope for this Feast. You might expect that the Ascension would encourage a composer to use a strong upward musical motif... Well, you won't be disappointed in this (in every sense) uplifting work.

At Evensong, we have split canticles from English composers: first a *Magnificat* by Gerald Finzi (1901–1956), and then a *Nunc Dimittis* by Gustav Holst (1874–1934). Finzi was something of a depressive character, and this quite often comes through in his music, but not in the works we will hear this Sunday evening. The *Magnificat*, we must remember, is the ecstatic utterance of a young woman reacting to everything that has happened to her and her kinswoman Elizabeth through the actions of God in making them both unexpectedly mothers to be. Finzi focuses strongly on the ecstatic nature of piece, and *My soul doth magnify the Lord* bursts out of the organ introduction dramatically. You cannot help but feel that this would have given Elizabeth quite a start. In fact, this opening material is significant, because Finzi structures the piece somewhat like a baroque concerto, and this music, or something made from it, reappears several times as what we call a “ritornello” – a recurring passage in an orchestral or choral work, akin to a refrain.

Notwithstanding this boisterous opening, the Blessed Virgin in this conception does permit herself delicate musings, but when the moment is right, she is – as the saying goes – full on. The mighty are put down from their seat pretty decisively. After quite a long section of calmer music during which the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent empty away, the thought of Abraham generates in a short space of time rapidly mounting excitement, culminating in an immense climax, from which the choir descends in a cascade of *forevers* until the music has quietened and comes to a halt. Then a slight surprise: no *Gloria*. Instead we have a series of very lyrical concluding *Amens* that seem to owe something to the closing passage of Finzi’s anthem *Lo, the full final sacrifice*.

The reason for no *Gloria*, and, indeed, for the absence of a *Nunc Dimittis*, lies in the history of commissioning this piece. It was written at the behest of Iva Dee Hiatt, when she was Director of Music (and founder) of the Smith College Chamber Singers, at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, which, as it so happens, is some 160 miles north-east of where these music notes are being written this week. Its first outing was at the college’s Christmas Vespers service on 12th December 1952, a service at which there would be no *Gloria*, and no *Nunc Dimittis*. It was performed with the choir of the then all male Amherst College. Curiously, this was the only occasion on which Finzi was commissioned from outside the United Kingdom. It’s a remarkable piece, and one hopes that the college was and remains proud of having brought it into being.

Finzi’s *Magnificat* is paired with Holst’s unaccompanied *Nunc Dimittis*, a setting in Latin. Curiously, this was written in 1915, but then lay unperformed until 1974, when the irrepressible Imogen Holst (1907–1984), his daughter (and a good composer herself), revised it for performance, later sending it to Novello (no doubt you were just waiting for them to pop up again in these notes) for publication in 1979. Back in 1915, (Gustav) Holst had written the piece at the request of Richard

Terry, who was organist of Westminster Cathedral at the time, which in those heady far-off days obviously meant that everything would be in Latin. It was used on Easter Sunday that year, and then mysteriously vanished from sight and sound until it was performed again by the BBC Singers at Framlingham Church as part of the 27th Aldeburgh Festival in 1974. As it so happens, I was present at that performance.

The setting is, perhaps, not without its challenges, but is certainly not impossible for a good choir. Holst was fond of the music of the Renaissance composers. It is not too fanciful (as Rupert Gough has pointed out in his notes for a recording by the Royal Holloway Choir on Hyperion) to see the modal language and the contrapuntal textures of this piece as a nod in the direction of composers of that era, whose music Richard Terry had introduced into the repertoire of Westminster Cathedral.

Lest you were to think that a Latin setting for a Roman Catholic cathedral means no *Gloria* once again, you would be wrong. Indeed, it is a powerful and exciting one, which is just as well, since it is doing double duty at this service.

Back to Finzi for the anthem, which is the well-loved and “must-have” Ascensiontide anthem, *God is gone up*. It was written for St Cecilia’s Day 1951 – just a year or so before the *Magnificat* – and first performed at our near neighbour, St Sepulchre-without-Newgate. The text is by Edward Taylor, (1642–1729), from *Sacramental Meditations*. Taylor, who started life in Leicestershire, emigrated to America when the Act of Uniformity made it impossible for him to continue as a teacher without renouncing his non-conformist faith and becoming an Anglican. Unwilling to put himself through this, Taylor left the country. He left strict instructions that after his death none of his poems should ever be published. Of course, he should have destroyed them himself if he really wanted that to stick, and as late as 1937 they turned up in a 7,000-page (!) volume at Yale University, where he had studied, and to which, presumably, many of his papers were bequeathed. They were, naturally, published in contradiction to his express wishes, and this anthem is one of the fortunate results. There is a quite magical harmonic change at the word “Glory” the second time through. If it does not make you rise at least six inches off your seat, you will not have been paying proper attention.