

Music Notes 2017 – the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The setting at this Sunday's Solemn Eucharist is *Missa Quaeramus cum pastoribus* by the Spanish Renaissance composer Cristóbal de Morales (c.1500–1553). This is a parody mass setting, one where inspiration is derived from taking bits of a pre-existing work and using them as “jumping-off” points for a new composition. In this case, the inspiration is a Christmas motet by the French composer Jean Mouton (c.1459–1522), and the “jumping off” is done in an unusual and clever way.

Although we know rather little about Morales's life, apart from the fact that he spent a part of it in Rome in the papal choir. There is evidence (quite possibly put about by jealous detractors) that he had a temperamental personality, was frequently on the wrong side of people, and was considered arrogant and supercilious. Fortunately, this doesn't come across in his music, although he did have more than enough talent as a composer to give him something about which to be arrogant. This mass setting is an extremely clever piece of music; it flows very naturally, because its artifice is remarkably well concealed.

Unlike some Spanish composers (for example, the slightly later Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), born towards the end of Morales's life), who seem to use a particularly Iberian musical language, Morales brings together strands from all over the place and unites them in his own way. Obviously, these include that Iberian quality stereotyped as being “passionate” in contrast with, say, the more austere and refined Palestrina (1525–1594). (It comes to something when the stereotype of a “passionate” Spaniard trumps the stereotype of a “passionate” Italian!) Morales also has a much more relaxed approach to dissonance than other composers of his time, relishing head-on collisions between voices. He evidently enjoyed that special sense of transitory musical seasickness we call “false relation”, where one voice sings, say, an F sharp at the same – or almost the same – moment that another voice lands on an F natural. For a moment, the entire tonality of the music seems in danger before order is restored, as though one has stepped on a paving stone that turned out only to be balanced on something beneath it, the world momentarily spinning as your footing wobbles back and forth unexpectedly. In fact, while the timing of where this happens is usually carefully calculated, this effect flows from what we call “voice leading”, which is the flow of vocal parts in multi-voice music, and the way they weave together to create what we might call the “by-product” of harmony. For very good reasons, voices travelling in an upward direction from time to time will sing, say, an F-natural because that is what sounds right in a rising melody. At the same time, however, a downward-travelling line in another voice will sing an F-sharp because that is what sounds right in a falling line. Manipulating the moments at which this occurs was a key compositional skill for composers of this period.

But, as they say, *revenons à nos moutons...*

Quæramus cum pastoribus was an extremely well-known Christmas motet at the time that Morales was in the papal choir. Jean Mouton was himself a very skillful, prolific and successful composer in his own right some fifty years ahead of Morales and choirs flocked to perform his works. This particular Christmas motet was, as it were, the *In the bleak midwinter* of its day. One of its striking features is that each of the text's four sections ends with the word *Noel* (actually, *Noe* in the language of the day), a minor intrusion of a vernacular word into church Latin. Mouton sets each appearance to the same melodic idea, albeit in a slightly different way on each occasion, and you will be able to identify it as the notes sung right at the start of the *Kyrie* of the mass setting by the bass voice.

So, what does Morales do with this little gem? First, he expands the motet's four voices to five by splitting the basses in two, giving a much richer, denser texture, but avoiding any resulting woolliness. He then manages to derive just about every part of the setting from some part of the motet, not by a crass method of just sheepishly quoting chunks of it, but by taking material from separate parts and finding new ways to fit them together. Of course, he is helped in this by the somewhat restricted harmonic palate of the day, which makes it a great deal easier to herd together lines that are far apart in the Mouton original. Naturally, we don't know the motet in the way that Morales's listeners would have known it (although perhaps we might think of it for a future carol service – it is *very* attractive), so we may not notice so readily the way that he does this. Still, with a little concentration, one may notice that there is a little motif that comes back again and again. It is the *Noe* music from the motet, first heard in this work at the opening of the *Kyrie*. It is used in most of the movements of the setting, and certainly is both memorable and noticeable. This is a great setting and a real compositional *tour de force*.

At the Offertory, the motet is *Felix namque es* by the Latvian composer Rihards Dubra (b. 1964). Our own Rupert Gough is, in fact, one of the major exponents of his music, and has recorded a CD of Dubra works for Hyperion with the Choir of Royal Holloway College under the overall title *Hail Queen of Heaven*. At the risk of turning these notes into advertising material, it is worth remembering that this album – which can be downloaded to your PC or other digital device from the Hyperion website, or else bought as a physical CD – is very well worth hearing. Rupert writes compellingly about all the pieces, including this motet, as well as about the composer in general in the CD booklet. Rather than break copyright or plagiarize him here, I shall just give you the link to the booklet online, and recommend you follow it (or copy it into your browser address bar) and read what Rupert has to say. Here's the link: <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/67799-B.pdf>.

The Canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in B minor* by T. Tertius Noble (1867–1953). He succeeded Basil Harwood (1859–1949) – a great church music

composer – at Ely Cathedral, serving there from 1892 to 1898 before moving on to York Minster, where he succeeded John Naylor (1838–1897), another great church music composer. (Noble was succeeded in York by Edward Bairstow (1874–1946) – as you will guess, yet another great church music composer...) That was, however, as nothing compared with Noble's next move, which was across the Atlantic in 1913, where the Church of Saint Thomas, Fifth Avenue in Manhattan was being rebuilt after a disastrous fire three years previously. The Vestry (the name we also used to use for an Anglican church's governing body, but which has meantime been turned into "PCC" over here) was considering how the church might establish cathedral-standard music, such as was believed to exist in England. The obvious solution was to pilfer a genuine example of a great English cathedral organist, and their eye fell on the appealing-sounding Noble, then conveniently engaged in a series of organ recitals in the United States. He accepted the challenge, and made permanent the move across the Atlantic from Old York to New York, living the rest of his life there. He accepted a parallel position in the editorial department of Messrs Schirmer, music publishers, so his time was well and truly occupied on all fronts. Six years later, the Saint Thomas Choir School for boys was established (the only church-related boarding school in the USA), and the church has not looked back since. It is still an excellent example of the Anglican choral tradition and was, until his most untimely death in 2015, directed by another import from this side of the Atlantic, John Scott, previously organist of St Paul's Cathedral.

Writing about Noble's move in the *Musical Times* on 1st February 1913, the legendary organist, teacher and writer, Walter Alcock, noted Noble's *genial and cordial manner, overflowing with enthusiasm for his art, with the highest ideals of all that is manly and true...* and noted that he was accompanied on this venture by his *charming wife, daughter of the late Bishop Stubbs of Truro, formerly Dean of Ely, adding: The wholesome traditions of English family life will be well represented in a country where they are certain of a cordial reception.* Well, so little of those quotations would be framed in quite the same way today. Nevertheless, it was a big step, and although it was an Anglican church he was going to, he had in effect left the Church of England, with its rules and governance structures, and joined the Episcopal Church, which did things differently, as it still does today.

Noble's *Evening Service in B minor*, written while he was at Ely Cathedral working under the patronage of his future father-in-law, is one of the best loved settings in the Anglican tradition. The music displays an engaging late Victorian chromaticism that lends it much emotional colour. Interest is also maintained by constantly changing combinations of voices and long flowing lines for the top line, clearly designed for cathedral choirs to show off their trebles' voices.

The anthem is an excerpt from the first oratorio composed by Edward Elgar (1857–1934), *The Light of Life (Lux Christi)*. By the time he composed this, although still

young, Elgar was already an established composer, and it was no surprise, therefore, that he was commissioned to write a major choral work by the Three Choirs Festival for performance in their 1896 season, which was held that year in Worcester, Elgar's home territory. Still, although he had written choral music, oratorio was a new genre for him. He was indeed soon to compose *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*, all much more substantial pieces. In fact, lists of Elgar's works tend just to regard *The Light of Life* as some sort of cantata, as they do his other work on a similar scale, *The Music Makers*, which dates from 1912. Nevertheless, the orchestral scale of both works really makes it difficult not to regard both as "small oratorios".

Elgar, a Catholic with a determination not to be ashamed of his faith in a country that still felt very ambiguous about the Roman church, wanted to call his work *Lux Christi*. His music publishers, Novello, were alert to the commercial implications of such a choice and prevailed upon him to give it primarily an English title, with the result that it was published as *The Light of Life* with *Lux Christi* in brackets as a subtitle.

More than one movement from this work has found its way into fairly regular performance, even if the whole thing is only rather rarely performed or recorded. The orchestral *Meditation* that opens the work is among these, and so is the choral movement *See him that maketh the seven stars*, which has sometimes been performed at our Epiphany Carol Service. The final movement is known as *The Light of the world* from its first line of text, and this is the music that will form our anthem. The text of the work is largely derived from John's Gospel, but with what www.elgar.org refers to as *some rather unsatisfactory additions by the Reverend Capel-Cure*, who was then Vicar of Bradninch in Devon, and a friend of Elgar. Capel-Cure, incidentally, came to be sufficiently prominent, such that a portrait of him hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, while the Royal Collection holds a copy of his sermon for the funeral of John Winston Spencer-Churchill, 7th Duke of Marlborough (1822-1883), with the snappy title of *Sudden Death: Is It To Be Depreciated?* If you wish to know his conclusion on this point, you will be happy to learn that a "print-on-demand" copy of the sermon can be purchased from Amazon for £16.95 in hardback and £13.99 in paperback.

Benediction will be an Anglo-French affair. The canticles (strictly speaking, they are extracts from hymns by S. Thomas Aquinas, but they seem to lack a better collective noun) are by two different composers: Elgar, again, in the case of *O salutaris*, and his contemporary Louis Vierne (1870–1937) in the case of *Tantum ergo*. The latter is an early piece from Vierne's hand – he was just sixteen at the time. Nevertheless, it is an assured and elegant piece, with a considerable interest in which harmonic corners one may get oneself with a little manipulation, making it very effective, even if it sounds not especially like his later, more developed style. Meantime, Elgar produced three settings of the *O Salutaris* text, and we hear the third and best-known of these.