

## Music Notes 2017 – Trinity II

The mass setting this week is the *Missa Sanctæ Margaretæ* by the Bermuda-born British composer Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962). He is particularly well-known for writing wonderful choral music, and his skill in this genre doubtless comes in part from his time as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, after which he attended the Royal Academy of Music in London. He was commissioned by friends of a late parishioner at St Margaret's church in North Oxford to compose a work in her memory. It was premiered there on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2010. Gwyneth Davey (1949-2009), in whose memory it was commissioned, had been a committed member of the church choir and of the Oxford Bach Choir, and it so happened that her death occurred not far from the church's Patronal Festival, on which day the first performance duly took place. Of course, the best sign of a successful work is that it is taken up by other performers elsewhere, and on that basis, the *Missa Sanctæ Margaretæ* has been extremely successful, and it is clearly in the repertoire.

Jackson's music is published by Oxford University Press, and the publisher makes the following helpful observations on their website about this piece: *The Missa Sanctae Margaretae is a stunning new setting of the Missa Brevis, showcasing Jackson's mesmerizing choral writing. Scored for SATB and organ, the accessible choral lines move through a variety of textures and harmonies, with linear passages in the Kyrie and Agnus Dei and rich, chordal writing in the Gloria. The idiomatic organ accompaniment brings additional flavour to the music, sometimes answering the choral lines, sometimes offsetting them with fast, rhythmic passages. Ideal for use in services and concerts.*

There is an element of secret code about this comment, because the most important word in this quotation is *accessible*, which doesn't just mean that the publisher will readily sell you the music, but rather that the company want you – or a choirmaster attuned to the code – to understand that the choir will not find the vocal lines impossibly difficult to sing, and that the more conservatively-minded members of the congregation will not be pulling grumpy faces and sticking fingers melodramatically in their ears because it seems too esoteric. In short, it is contemporary music that won't feel offended if you simply happen to enjoy it.

The motet at the Offertory is *O Nata lux* by the British composer, Ben Parry (b.1965). He was born and raised in Ipswich, Suffolk; his father was an organist and a music teacher. Ben went on to sing in the choir of King's College, Cambridge. One of his most important career breaks was with The Swingle Singers, which had been founded in 1962 by the jazz musician and singer, Ward Swingle (1927–2015). Lest you think his name was made up for the purposes of his career, Swingle was in fact directly descended from the Swiss religious reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), who established the Reformed tradition in Zürich in Switzerland. Zwingli very much liked music, and played many instruments himself, but thought it not seemly

to emphasize the use of music in divine worship (Boo! Hiss!). He even had the great organ of the Grossmünster – the main Reformed church in Zürich to this day – broken up and destroyed to prevent its morally and spiritually damaging effects from being visited on the congregation any further. What he would have made of his much later relative, Ward Swingle, is probably beyond the powers of description. Anyway, Ben Parry was first a singer, then an arranger, and then music director of the Swingle Singers after Ward Swingle eventually retired. Today, he is Director of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, Music Director of the resident choir of the Aldeburgh Festival, Assistant Director of King's College, Cambridge, and co-Director of London Voices.

Ben's deft skill as an arranger is paralleled by his talent as a composer in many genres, including light music, film music, and classical – especially sacred – music. The motet is a very engaging piece for four voices, with some exhilarating harmonic shifts. The text is as follows: *O Light born of Light, Jesus, redeemer of the world, with loving-kindness deign to receive suppliant praise and prayer. Thou who once deigned to be clothed in flesh for the sake of the lost, grant us to be members of thy blessed body.*

The canticles at Evensong are the *Second Service* by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). After being 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 (1566-1625) 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 (1600-1649) in 1626. 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, his misfortune certainly proved a stroke of luck for his friend and assistant Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656), 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 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 as though it were a verse anthem – with 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 musical trends occurring 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 in contrast to 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 restrain 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 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 the exuberant *O clap your hands*, also by Gibbons. Being so much at home with the Reformed Anglican Church, Gibbons was utterly content to set English words, and to take great pains to illustrate them subtly in the music, as we have seen. However, in this setting of Psalm 47, he cuts across his own usual pattern in this respect, and produces a complex and fizzing eight-part setting that is simply exuberant from start to finish. Gibbons's work is a little like Rembrandt's: there is less of it about than there used to be. Some misattributions have come to light and once you hear about them, you realize that one could have known all along from the style of the music that it wasn't really Gibbons. However, even if *O clap your hands* is an unusual work, there is no doubt as to who composed it. Gibbons took his first degree, a BMus, at Cambridge University, but having tried out that establishment for size, then took himself off to study at Oxford. In 1622, his friend, confusingly called William Cambridge, founded a Chair of History in the university, and at the same ceremony, Gibbons was awarded his DMus along with a further friend William (again!) Heyther. In honour of this happy occasion, Gibbons composed *O clap your hands*, and no doubt the congregation obliged. You can see from this why the mood of the work is so relentlessly uplifting.