

Music Notes 2017 – Trinity III

You may have noticed that pre-Reformation English mass settings contain no setting of the *Kyrie*. The reason for this is that they were written in accordance with the English liturgy known as *The Sarum Rite*, a variant of the Roman rite, which was used in Britain before the schism between the Catholic church and the Church in England. English mass settings began with the *Gloria*.

At the Priory church we take it for granted that we hear both the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* in a mass setting virtually every Sunday of the year, unaware that the appearance of the *Kyrie* in English mass settings carries much significance. It is indicative of the fact that at one time the shape of the liturgy changed from what had been normal English practice to conform instead to mainland European practice. This is because English-born Catholic priests had become a somewhat scarce commodity after Henry VIII broke with the Pope in Rome, and so those who wished to continue to pursue their religion imported priests from Europe to tend to them spiritually and to say mass. These priests, of course, wanted to use a liturgy that was familiar to them, which meant having a simpler *Kyrie* that conformed to the Roman rather than the English practice.

It wasn't that the *Kyrie* was simply omitted from the English rite, but rather that it was used in a different way. We need some musicological language here, but bear with me: it's not too ghastly: it is all about the word *trope*. Originally from a Greek word that means *to turn, to direct, to alter, or to change*, it cropped up extensively in the medieval period, when texts were incorporated into standard liturgical material to amplify and expand its meaning. Of course, including them in the text meant that the chant also had to have additional material for the trope, and these sections of music came to have an identity as *tropes*.

The English church was accustomed to *troping* the *Kyrie*, meaning that the familiar words of the *Kyrie* were there, but additional material was added that varied from Sunday to Sunday. So, the English *Kyrie* behaved more like the *Alleluia* does today in our services. In other words, it had a constant element – *Kyrie eleison* and *Christe eleison* – but then was extended with material special to the day. So, the English *Kyrie* was part of the *Propers* of the mass – the variable material that changes every Sunday, not part of the *Ordinary* that remains the same (such as *Gloria, Sanctus & Benedictus, Agnus Dei*) – and sung to chant. However, once Henry VIII decided to cut the country off from the influence of Rome and take control of the church himself, the scene was set for the traumatic changes that hit this country: on the political side, leading to a loss of important alliances and an economic crisis, and on the cultural and religious side, the destruction of the monasteries of which St Bartholomew's was a part, and the loss of so many works of ecclesiastical art and sites and buildings of great beauty and significance. Ultimately it led to the sobriety

and rigour of reformed religion all the way to a Commonwealth in which even the celebration of Christmas was banned. The adoption of the Roman style of *Kyrie* in England, while never a protest vote, is an ironic by-product of this whole “take back control” conflagration.

This Sunday we have one of the last of the “old English” mass settings, dating most probably either from the last years of Henry VIII’s life (1491–1547), or else, possibly, from Queen (Bloody) Mary’s reign, which was from 1553 until her death in 1558). It is the *Mass for Four Voices* by Thomas Tallis (c. 1505–1585). So, no *Kyrie* here either, meaning that – since we still use the post-Roman tradition – our *Kyrie* will have to be sung to chant. Interestingly, the style of the composition of the mass setting seems far more like some of Tallis’s music for the reformed church. It is mainly syllabic – i.e. one note per syllable – and generally homophonic (akin to a hymn) rather than polyphonic (over-laying lines as in most Renaissance masses from the mainland). To my mind, this suggests the later dating of Queen Mary’s reign. This means that Tallis would already have been through the period of Edward VI’s reign, from 1547 until 1553, when strict adherence to Reformation principles was required, and Archbishop Cranmer’s inclination towards much simpler liturgy had done its work. Church composers had already bent over backwards to accommodate the reforms, and a whole new approach to composition had been the result. This mass setting is a very elegant merging together of the English liturgical tradition with this new compositional approach. By the time Tallis’s pupil, friend, colleague and fellow music publisher, William Byrd (1539–1623), had started to produce music for the recusant community some years after this, the new *Kyrie* was firmly in place as the first item of the *Ordinary*, and a polyphonic, “Roman” style of composition (albeit seen through English harmonic filters) had become the order of the day, at least in households and communities bold enough to organize a mass.

More Tallis at the Offertory: one of his best known works, *If ye love me, keep my commandments*. Peter Philips, founder and director of The Tallis Scholars, has pointed out that we tend to accept uncritically and unrealistically the thesis that Tallis and William Byrd lived embittered lives as semi-secret Catholics, while the religious life of England turned robustly Protestant around them. If it were today, the right-wing press might label them “Remoaners”. According to this thesis, Tallis composed music for the English church – easily recognized by the language being the vernacular – hating every minute of having to do so. Yet this idea seems preposterous when one hears this little gem of a work. It sounds like the product of a composer completely at ease with what he is writing, inspired by the ideas implicit in the text. While the Catholic tradition implied certain restrictions on what a composer could do, the English church unbuckled those restraints, allowing a composer to explore the richness of the ideas conveyed in a language understood by all. Could the truth be that Tallis was quietly happy to switch from one to the other? *If ye love me* suggests, just by its elegant word painting and comfortable idiom, that

Peter Philips was right to question this thesis. The same seems inevitably true of Byrd, and you don't have to spend long looking at the *Great Service* canticles, or most other English works from his hand, to conclude that at least the music came first for both of them, and that they found considerable creative inspiration in both traditions, regardless of what they might have felt about the religious turmoil involved.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in A minor* by the English composer Richard Farrant (1525–1580). He was one of that substantial list of notable composers who were part of the Chapel Royal – in fact, *all* the composers of the choral music we will hear today were there! Nevertheless, we do not know nearly as much about Farrant as one would wish were the case. In fact, we also have very few surviving works by him, or, rather, we have far fewer than we used to think we had. As with Rembrandt, not many of the works formerly considered Farrant's are now regarded as the work of his hand, and musical historians have attributed more than half of them to others. In any case, his main claim to fame in his lifetime was not as a composer, but as a trainer of choirboys. Following his stint at the Chapel Royal, he became Master of the Children at St George's Chapel, Windsor, eventually adding to this responsibility being Master of the Chapel Royal, his former employer. In the meantime, he was active theatrically, partly by successfully training his boys to take musical roles in plays, for which he often also provided the music, although absolutely none of his work in this area has survived to this day. Somewhat unusually, he seems to have resigned again from the Chapel Royal towards the end of his life and gone *back* to Windsor. Farrant would have found the M4 very helpful, were it to have existed then.

This setting of the canticles, which is from a Complete Service for both Morning and Evening Prayer, is relatively straightforward. It is nevertheless quite illuminating in the way the words are set, revealing how rhythms of speech in the English language have developed over the years. You may recall references in past Notes to the very important collection of choral works for the Anglican Church, called *Cathedral Music*, that was started by the English composer Maurice Greene (1696–1755) and completed by a pupil of his, another English composer, William Boyce (1711–1779). This collection established the core of what we think of now as the Anglican choral tradition. Boyce included this setting among the contributions he put into the collection, and he didn't include items nonchalantly.

As with Tallis in the morning, Farrant sticks mainly to chordal structures – rather as though they were rather flexible and erratically metred hymn tunes – breaking into slight polyphonic movement at the end of the two different *Glorias* that conclude each canticle. It was very much the kind of music that was required by the young reformed English church, and if it seems somewhat functional to us, it is because composers were running as fast as they could away from the ritual, colour, and

florid style of the church as it had been in the past. We are today happy to be as accepting in the Priory Church of the floridly Catholic as of the more drily intellectual Reformed, and so it will be no struggle to accommodate this at Evensong.

The anthem is *In pace* by John Blitheman (1525–1591). He succeeded Thomas Tallis at the Chapel Royal, and then in turn trained up the composer John Bull (1562–1628), about whom more – briefly – below. Because of the Latin text of this piece, we may surmise that Blitheman also wrote this piece during the reign of Queen (Bloody) Mary when Catholicism and its associated music were allowed once more to flourish. It is derived from a Respond (a technical term for a response to what is called a Versicle – for example: *O Lord, open thou our lips*, to which the Respond is *And our mouths shall shew forth thy praise*) at Compline in the *Sarum Rite* that would have been in use in the Chapel at that time. The text is a fusion of verses from Psalms 4 and 132 in the *Vulgate* version, followed by a *Gloria*, and is essentially a prayer for a quiet night's sleep. The structure of the music is made up of sections of polyphonic music interspersed with sections of plainchant.

When Blitheman died, he was buried in the graveyard of the church of St Nicholas Olave, which stood in what is now Queen Victoria Street until the Great Fire carried it off for good. An inscription, now lost, was affixed nearby and read:

*Here Blitheman lies, a worthy wight,
who feared God above;
A Friend to all, a Foe to none,
whom Rich and Poore did love.
Of Princes Chappell, Gentleman,
unto his dying Day;
Whom all took great delight to heare
him on the Organs play.
Whose passing Skill in Musickes Art,
a Scholar left behinde;
John Bull (by name) his Master's veine
expressing in each kinde.
But nothing here continues long,
nor resting Place can have;
His Soule departed hence to Heaven,
his Body here in Grave.*

Well, the idea that *nothing here continues long* certainly has as much resonance today as it did in Blitheman's time.