

Music Notes 2017 – Trinity Sunday

In 2007, a book called *The Shack* by a Canadian writer, William P. Young, was published. Originally written for a small circle of about fifteen friends and family, and later rejected by publisher after publisher, Young eventually self-published it, spending less than \$200 (currently about £155) on its marketing. One year later, word of mouth had propelled the book to number one on the New York Times Bestsellers List, where it remained from June to November 2008. A few weeks ago, it came out as a film and is currently showing in cinemas.

The Shack tells the story of a man who is deeply damaged by the abduction and murder of his young daughter. In due course, after much personal trauma, he meets the three persons of the Holy Trinity near to a shack where he believes his daughter was held and murdered by a serial killer. Unsurprisingly, this encounter also has a great effect on him, but you ought to read the book or see the film if you want to know more. It is one of those tales that you either love or hate, that makes you either weep uncontrollably, or start searching for the Alka-Seltzer (other antacids are available). Furthermore, theologians are likely to seize up completely when they hear the language and see the imagery by which the Holy Trinity is presented. Nevertheless, one idea in it resonates strongly: the bond that brings the Persons of the Trinity into an indivisible unity of “three-in-oneness” is Love in the widest and fullest sense. In essence, Young says, God is Love because that is the fundamental relationship between the Persons of the Trinity.

The distortions of the profound theology of the Holy Trinity in *The Shack* are no more egregious than the many representations in paintings over the centuries, which tend either to show three men sitting around a table (on which often stands a chalice), or else depict an old man (the Father), a younger man (the Son, who may or may not be shown crucified), and a dove (the Holy Ghost) floating around in the sky together. Hopefully, our musical language this Sunday will give a meaningful expression of this greatest of all Mysteries, which, at the very best, can only ever be represented in metaphor – something music is particularly good at doing.

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist, the *Cantus Missæ*, is by that paragon of German domestic decency and artistic standards, Josef Gabriel Rheinberger (1839-1901). Yet, despite the composer’s distinguishing cultural virtues, there is a small personal and professional drama hidden behind this elegant and well-crafted work, because it was composed in the wake of Rheinberger’s decision finally – after some personal inner struggle – to reject the tenets of what was known as the Cecilian movement, which sprang up in the nineteenth century. It favoured a relatively conservative approach to the music of the liturgy, returning to forms that eschewed individuality and drama in favour of a comparatively neutral and comparative passionless quality. This, the followers thought, characterized both the plainchant and *a capella* music of

the Counter-Reformation period, which they fondly imagined to have been unemotional and passionless church music – although this is now recognized as spurious and inaccurate nonsense. Word-painting, except in the most basic sense, was to be avoided, and a serene and non-intrusive approach was preferred.

One of the chief movers and shakers – if that isn't too energetic a description – in this movement was Franz Xaver Haberl in Regensburg, whom we have met before as the editor of the first proper “modern” edition of Palestrina's (1525–1594) complete extant works. He was Regensburg's Domkapellmeister – in other words, he ran the music at the Cathedral, a task taken on much later by Georg Ratzinger, the brother of the Pope Emeritus. Haberl was very keen to promote the Cecilian cause, and even republished the old version of the *Graduale* – a book of plainchants for almost every normal service of the church's year – claiming that it was the work of Palestrina, which made it a commercial success. This was not in fact true, although there may be the odd bit of chant in which Palestrina had played some part, but even then, not much. A decree in 1904 from the Vatican essentially nixed this whole project by restoring the version of the *Graduale* that had preceded Haberl's efforts, and, in any case, the conservatism of the Cecilian movement had already begun to exceed the tolerance of many of its would-be adherents.

By the end of 1877, Rheinberger had concluded that the Cecilians represented a dead-end, with an unnecessary restriction on musical expression in the liturgy. The next year, he composed this *Cantus Missae* in E-flat for unaccompanied double choir. He dedicated it to Pope Leo XIII, who was sufficiently impressed to award him the Knight's Cross of the Order of St Gregory in exchange. In contradiction of the perceived “coolness” of composers such as Palestrina, Rheinberger demonstrated his freedom from the backward-looking trends with which he had been previously identified, and instead made reference to the Venetian school that had carried liturgical music over the borders between the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods. So, the *Cantus Missæ* makes much of being for double choir, with the kind of antiphonal writing (known as *cori spezzati* or “spaced choirs”) in which Venetians such as the Gabriellis and Monteverdi (1567–1643) delighted.

Rheinberger, however, does not in any sense go wild with his new-found freedoms; he aims rather to combine a degree of conservative restraint with a much more adventurous musical language nearer the cutting edge of his day. Rheinberger shows his greatest genius in managing to use the polyphonic procedures of the past while bending them to the service of expressive word painting and illustration. The musicologist and theologian Otto Ursprung – whose surname rather delightfully means *original source*: quite a claim to advance when introducing yourself – opined that this was the *most beautiful, pure vocal music of the 19th century*, and, while there are many other possible contenders, you can see right from the flowing melodic lines of the *Kyrie* what he meant. In fact, this movement is only a matter of seconds shorter

than the entire *Gloria*, which is delivered with an impressive *Missa Brevis* efficiency, yet without sacrificing any colour along the way. Jeremy Summerly, well known to us from the services he has conducted in the past at the Priory Church, describes the *Sanctus* as *ethereal* in his notes for a Hyperion recording of the piece by Westminster Cathedral Choir under Martin Baker's direction. He also draws attention to *a gently dancing Benedictus, and an Agnus Dei whose carefully notated dynamic contrasts and elliptical modulations lead into an extended dona nobis pacem section whose instrumentally conceived textures create a symphonic conclusion to this remarkable piece.*

The motet at the Offertory is the highly atmospheric *Cherubic Hymn* by the Russian composer Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857). His name is doubtless connected with his family history, for he was descended from a Polish nobleman, and in Polish, *glinka* means *clay*, or – even better – *loam*, perhaps a reference to the family's connection with the land of its estates. *Glina* also means *clay* in Russian, so *glinka* might possibly mean *a little bit of clay*. This is more than just playing around with Glinka's name. He was embedded – as people always are – in the cultural and physical environment in which he grew up, but in his case, it played a significant role in the development of his creativity. He didn't just use a learned musical language, but filtered it – as it were – through the loam of his environment. This proved successful, and he came to have a profound influence on the development of Russian music. For example, one of his earliest memories was of the church bells in the village where he grew up. There was obviously no English change-ringing tradition there, and the bells were used in a completely different fashion, which to western ears might sound somewhat wild, and even dissonant. Glinka grew up in this sound world, and – it is hypothesized – this influenced his own musical language, which developed a freedom from harmonic restraint in which he just treated sound as sound, something inherently beautiful, irrespective of whether it harmonized in a conventional sense – at least in terms of his day. Much later composers were, of course, to take this far further than he did. His independent line had a strong influence on the work of five other composers, Mily Balakirev (1837–1910), César Cui (1835–1918), Modest Mussorgsky (1839–1881), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) and Alexander Borodin (1833–1887), collectively known as *The Five*, who, taking Glinka's lead, went on to forge a distinctive nationalist school of Russian music. The *Cherubic Hymn* is a setting of Orthodox liturgical words and it is in two sections: the first a dense texture derived from the sounds of Orthodox church music, and the second a kind of wild dance that evokes the angels singing *Glory to God in the highest*.

The canticles at Evensong are by the English organist and composer John Stainer (1840–1901), part of his complete *Service in Bb*. Most of us know Stainer primarily as the composer of the “parish church oratorio”, *The Crucifixion*, which is enjoying, along with other music from the period, something of a re-evaluation. Indeed, our Director of Music, Rupert Gough, and his choir of Royal Holloway College have been playing a part in this, and if you have not listened to their CD of *English*

Romantic Madrigals, including five examples by Stainer, you will undoubtedly want to put this right as soon as possible. The link to the recording is http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_CDA68140.

This reassessment of Stainer is a real *volte face* from what popular musicology used to say about him. Indeed, the musicologist and Professor of Music at Durham University, Arthur Hutchings, wrote in 1967: *Do not let us underestimate Stainer. We ought to have sent most of his church music to be pulped, and let us waste no time in delaying the pulping*. However, what was once considered schmaltzy and sentimental is now being recognized for its fine qualities, and, in any case, the schmaltz and the sentimentality is the result of not performing the works properly, either by overloading them with goo, or prissying them up, neither of which produces something attractive. But do them well, and you get something very different.

In fact, the three services that Stainer wrote are considerably more restrained than works with such emotive overtones as *The Crucifixion*. It is as though the canticles brought out the formal in him. The English musicologist and cleric Edmund Fellowes, who did so much to revive English sixteenth- and seventeenth-century music in the first half of the twentieth century, and could be a bit sniffy about Stainer, thought the canticle settings were the best music Stainer ever wrote. The Bb evening canticles were written in 1877, some five years after Stainer became organist of St Paul's Cathedral. (The Morning and Communion Services from the full set were not written until 1884, four years before he retired from the Cathedral.) The *Magnificat* opens with a typically robust and muscular opening, but there are many gentle sections also in this splendid work – for example, around *And holy is his name*, which is just magical. There is a “fingerprint” in Stainer's harmonic language, which is playing around with keys a major third apart. In this case, it is the home key of Bb and D major. Now, you may know that Beethoven's *First Symphony* is in C major. Nevertheless, it opens with a kind of musical joke, a chord based on C, but with a most unexpected flattened seventh that pushes the harmony instantly into F major. It was a rather bold thing to do at the time. Well, the organ introduction to Stainer's *Magnificat in Bb* begins unmistakably in D major, and then takes seven bars to work its way to Bb, at which point the choir enters. When he gets to the “magical” section referred to above at *and holy is his name*, the harmony is firmly back in D major, and hangs around in that area until we return to the energy of the opening music. This ambiguity about the tonal centre is something he clearly enjoyed and made the most of. It's a very good sing, and highly rewarding for the listener as well.

The anthem is also by Stainer: *I saw the Lord*. The text is partly from Isaiah's vision of the Lord “lifted up” in the Temple, the seraphim crying to one another *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory, while the house was filled with smoke*. To this, Stainer adds the final verse from *Ave, colenda Trinitas*, an anonymous 11th century hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity. The work is for eight voices split into

two distinct choirs with an adventurous organ part. It was clearly written with St Paul's Cathedral in mind. This is big-scale, dramatic stuff. The evocation of the temple filling with smoke is extremely vivid, and it is worth coming just to hear this moment. If we were having Benediction or Solemn Evensong, it would even be possible to demonstrate exactly this phenomenon, but that will not happen until next week and the Sunday of Corpus Christi.