

Music Notes 2017 – Fifth Sunday after Trinity

One man's meat is another man's poison, goes the saying. This expression springs to mind in the light of the 'fight' between the Italian composers Giovanni Artusi (c. 1540–1613) and Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), which has some relevance to this week's mass setting. The story – which has featured in these notes previously – takes some telling, so please be patient and bear with the lengthy explanation; I hope you will agree that it's a tale worth telling and re-telling.

It was Artusi's misfortune to have been regarded as *the famous reactionary polemicist*, as Wikipedia records, a comment which could be considered extreme, especially when the field at the time was so rich in plausible competition. It was, in fact, probably the result of an exaggerated regard for his teacher, the composer Gioseffo Zarlino (1517–1590) that led him to earn this rather unappealing description.

The story indeed starts with Zarlino, who came from Chioggia, near Venice, a comparatively unfashionable southern part of the Venetian lagoon. After an early education with the Franciscans he became a singer and organist at Chioggia Cathedral. Indeed, later, Zarlino joined the order: organists, singers and composers went in surprisingly often for getting ordained in those days, in spite of – or perhaps because of – frequently colourful private lives that are obviously so different from those of today's sedate and fastidiously proper musicians. Eventually, Zarlino crossed the lagoon to study at San Marco with its famous Netherlandish composer and *Maestro di Capella*, Adrian Willaert (1490–1562), whose contrapuntal mastery he considered just about flawless and certainly exemplary. San Marco and Willaert evidently did it for him, because Zarlino stayed there, even after Willaert died. Whether Zarlino had designs on the job is unclear, but the tiresome authorities gave it to another composer, the Franco-Flemish Cipriano de Rore (1515–1565), in 1563 – although they can't have taken up references very carefully, because his busy resumé could hardly have made him look as if he could be a long term bet. Indeed, two years later, de Rore was off (it may have been a bad move, since he expired two years later from some unknown cause at the age of only 49), and Zarlino finally succeeded to the title of *Maestro di Capella* at San Marco. So far, so good. Although he was a decent composer himself, it was his skill as a theorist that really marked him out. He was, in this sense, a musical intellectual to his fingertips, and he nailed the rules for writing beautiful Renaissance counterpoint with a precision and completeness that certainly won the devotion of Artusi. Remember Artusi? The reactionary? Well, after going into minor orders, (see above for the propensity of musicians to do such things), he – Artusi – went off to Venice and studied with Zarlino, subsequently becoming his chief apologist when anybody dared to comment adversely on the Zarlino rules-for-composition oeuvre, even while his revered teacher was still alive and theoretically capable of answering for himself.

Zarlino, however, died in 1590, and for a time afterwards, it all becomes slightly bewildering. He was succeeded by the composer Baldassare Donato (1525–1603), who was a singer and teacher at San Marco, and who is remembered for his contributions to Venetian secular music, notably his madrigals and especially his villanellas. But despite his talents, Donato did not enjoy an amicable relationship with Zarlino while they both were serving at St. Mark's, to put it tactfully. Indeed, Zarlino and Donato had a spectacular and highly scandalous public fight during the Feast of St Mark (no less), in 1569. In 1577, Donato left St Mark's to cool his heels at another church, later finding his way back to San Marco and taking over from his former antagonist upon his death, as noted. Donato lived until 1603 before expiring in turn and being replaced by the composer Giovanni Croce (1557–1609), who had also come from Chioggia and who – natch – in common with Zarlino and Artusi, had also become a priest. Alas, this was no guarantee of good health, and, as his declined, so did the standard of the singing. His health gave out completely in 1609, and when he died he was replaced by the composer Giulio Cesare Martinengo (1564/68–1613). The unerring ability of the authorities to appoint those not physically in their prime was evidenced once more, because Martinengo's health was really no better than that of his predecessor, and, as he too went into an immediate decline, musical standards hit the floor and dragged their fingernails gratingly across its surface. When he died in 1613, morale must have been at an all-time low. Enter Claudio Monteverdi.

Coming originally from Cremona, where he sang in the cathedral choir and studied at the university, Monteverdi joined the court of Vincenzo I of Gonzaga as a musician and in 1602 became its Director of Music. All went marvellously until 1612, when Vincenzo died, and his son, Francesco – whom I am disposed to dislike (you will see why, although he did have to cope with the crippling levels of debt left by his father) – decided to make economies, and sacked Monteverdi. Well, we must actually be glad that he did, because after what was undoubtedly a rather miserable year living on his savings and wits in Mantua, Monteverdi was summoned to San Marco in 1613. Perhaps if his circumstances had been better he would have turned down the offer, so poor had standards become there. Still, San Marco *was* San Marco, and a salary was a salary, and so he summoned up his determination, grasped the problem, imposed the firm smack of musical discipline, and turned the whole enterprise around, starting San Marco on one of the biggest come-backs in the music business. He had in fact married in 1599, but his wife died in 1607, so in 1632, when the moment seemed right to him, Monteverdi was able also to become a priest.

Now, Monteverdi's approach to music was rather different from that of Zarlino. He was interested in the latest enlightenment thinking, and in particular the marked drift from collectivism to individualism that came with it. One consequence of this was that the collective voice of choral polyphony – in which the beauty of the contrapuntal writing predominated over all else, and the text was, at best, something

to be illustrated by lavish musical gesture – was increasingly being replaced by a strong emphasis on the primacy of the text, following what was considered to be the focus of the great Greek theorists of the Classical period. This was to lead inexorably to what we call “recitative” – then something new – being a central form of musical expressiveness, but it also affected the shape of melodic lines, especially the way that collisions between voices were managed. Artusi – still remember him? – was incensed by some madrigals he came across and wrote critically about them in books in 1600 and 1603. He didn’t identify the criminal composer, but it was in fact Monteverdi. In order to differentiate good practice from bad practice, Artusi referred to good, Zarlino-approved techniques as being *Prima Pratica*, and nasty and naughty Monteverdi-style techniques as *Seconda Pratica*. It was not remotely unclear which he considered the superior. It didn’t take that long for Monteverdi to catch up with this. In 1605, while he was still working for Duke Vincenzo, he brought out his fifth book of madrigals, and decided to weaponize the preface, letting Artusi have it with both barrels in a text addressed to *studious readers*. There is too much to quote here, alas, but he started off by saying of the madrigals: *since his Highness did not disdain to listen to them several times in his royal chambers, when they were still written by hand, and on hearing them made it known that they greatly pleased him, for which reason he honoured me with the charge of his most noble Music: thus ... under the protection of such a great Prince, they will live eternally, to the shame of those tongues which seek to destroy the work of others... Be not surprised that I have presented these madrigals for publication without first responding to the criticism levelled at them by Artusi. I do not do things at random and as soon as it is rewritten it will appear bearing the name of Second Practice, or Perfection of Modern music.*

By the time the mass that we are going to hear this Sunday, *Messa da Cappella*, a work for four voices, was written, the *Seconda Pratica* was an accepted part of the musical landscape. Nevertheless, all is not so simple. The mass is found in a publication *Selva morale e spirituale*, which rather charmingly means *Moral and Spiritual Forest*, and was published in 1641. It’s a curious collection of sacred works that were probably written during Monteverdi’s career at San Marco. He was in his seventies by this stage, and no longer in rude health, so the idea of looking back and collecting all his oeuvre created in Venice may have been appealing. Of course, this means that we don’t know the actual date of composition of any of these pieces. However, the interesting point about the mass is that it is definitely a work of the *Prima Pratica*! It behaves itself quite immaculately by Zarlino’s standards, and the main thing that would have made his eyebrows twitch would have been the strong sense of a modern, diatonic key rather than a mode that it inhabits. It is a relatively straightforward work – a more complex four-part *Messa da Capella* was to be published posthumously in 1650 in *Messa e salmi* – but it is also very satisfying and elegant. So, this is a perhaps surprisingly conservative work by a composer now mainly but somewhat misleadingly remembered for his ground-breaking departure from exactly this kind of music!

A footnote on the reactionary Artusi: he came to repent of his attitude to Monteverdi's music and even wrote in praise of it. But who remembers that now?

The motet at the Offertory is *Exultate justi* by Lodovico Grossi da Viadana (1560–1627). We tend to call him *Viadana*, but this is the same mistake we make with Palestrina (1525–1594), calling him by the name of the city from which he came, rather than by his real name. Lodovico Grossi was an Italian composer who was – you will no longer be surprised to hear – also a Franciscan Friar. His main claim to fame in the shorthand of musical history is as the first strong proponent of what we call *figured bass*. We tend to think of musical notation as a ubiquitous and fairly precise way of saying exactly which notes should be used and in which order (Eric Morecambe notwithstanding) they should occur. However, especially in the earlier phases of western musical history, far more was left up to performers than the control freakery of later generations came to permit. So, in early times, the general outline of a chant would be decorated with a high degree of improvisation, most of which we have to guess at today, because it was rarely notated in a way that most people now learn and understand.

To make this simple, the bass line, which supports the entire harmony above it, is written out with numbers underneath that indicate the shape of the chord to be played. It may seem strange to those unable to do this, but it is possible to become extremely adept at reading this combination of note and a little cluster of numbers and know immediately what notes to put down on the keyboard. A crucial part of the artistry is that, as you play, you also create a kind of improvised melodic and spatial structure that is freshly minted each time, almost akin to the way that jazz musicians decorate a defined underlying harmonic structure behind a well-known melody. In more recent times, realizations of figured basses have been created and published by musicologists for all the main works composed using this system. However, part of the beauty of the original approach is that no two performances are the same, even if the underlying harmony always is. The best results come from doing this “on the fly”.

The first figured basses have been shown to have been used three years after Palestrina's death in 1594. By 1602, Lodovico Grossi (da Viadana) had already produced the first volume of music that used this procedure extensively. It plays such a crucial underpinning part in what we call *Baroque Music* from this point up to Johann Sebastian Bach and beyond, that it must be seen as one of the defining developments that moved the language of music on in the post-Palestrina period. The texture of this motet, while clearly belonging to the Italian school out of which Lodovico Grossi emerged, has nevertheless a kind of engaging lightness that makes one already see the hints of the musical language to which he and the next

generation of those influenced by his work, such as the German composers Prætorius (1560–1629) and Schütz (1585–1672), were headed.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong (sung this week by our voluntary choir, the Rahere Singers) is the *Evening Service in C* by the Irish composer Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). Written in 1909, this was the last of his great services for the Anglican Church. It stands out from his earlier settings in many respects. For a start, his general practice had been to compose a rather jolly *Magnificat* – the famous settings in G, A and Bb all have something of the scherzo about them. The setting in C, however, has a broad, generously spaced *Magnificat*. It also differs in structure from his usual liturgical settings. The earlier settings are either in a single, more or less continuous section, or else have an opening section, then a contrasting middle section of some kind, before the first music returns to round it off before the *Gloria* – a form referred to as “ternary” because of its three parts. This setting is rather in four contrasting sections. The first is itself in two halves: the music begins, comes to a halt, and then repeats itself almost exactly, as in “Sonata Form”, a structure used since the late seventeenth century that makes use of this kind of opening. The following two sections take us off into remote harmonic areas, using this to add colour that illuminates the text. Then we come back home to C major territory for the final section, which includes a modified version of the ending of the first section, again echoing Sonata Form, where the opening music returns after an intervening period of musical development. Although there are so many sections, *all* the melodic material is derived from that opening section by processes of rhythmic, melodic and harmonic transformation – quite a *tour de force*, and obviously the product of Stanford’s maturity as a composer. The *Nunc Dimittis* is more straightforwardly constructed, a single section that unfolds beautifully, if slightly less innovatively. This is not damning with faint praise: it really is a fantastic setting.

The anthem is *How lovely are thy dwelling fair* from *Ein deutsches Requiem – a German Requiem*, by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897). Brahms was clear that the title only refers to the language as a contradistinction to a requiem composed to Latin words (although ironically we will be hearing it in the well-established English translation). He would, he said, have been happy for it to be described as *ein menschliches Requiem*. The translation of this expression has taken up quite a degree of musicologists’ time: did he mean a human requiem or a humanist requiem – in other words, does the absence of the text of a conventional requiem mean that the work is in fact an attempt at a non-religious requiem? People have expressed a variety of opinions on this, especially in light of the fact that he was begged to include references to salvation through Jesus Christ in the text and declined. As a matter of fact, every word of the text is from Luther’s translation of the Bible, an unusual procedure for a humanist work. Nevertheless, it is widely considered that Brahms was not a believer. Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904), who was a committed Roman

Catholic, thought it extraordinary that such a wonderful person and composer should, in the end, believe “nothing”.

The *Requiem* was composed between 1865 and 1868, and it was most likely triggered by the death of the composer’s mother in 1865. How could he not have been thinking of her when he decided to compose a work of this kind? The biblical texts concentrate on the emotionally painful effects of death upon the living. So, for example, the opening words are from the Beatitudes: *Blessed are they who mourn. They shall be comforted.* It is an optimistic work, envisaging, as it were, life overcoming the anguish of losing a loved one, escaping from the shadow of death and on the whole asserting the unbowed strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Of course, the religious element cannot be kept out of a work all based on Biblical texts, but it is its comforting quality that plays the largest part. Indeed, one can understand Brahms’s attitude to God and religion as being a human projection of the highest values – the gold standard, as it were – of human aspiration and wisdom, and therefore worthy of being idealized as a source of inspiration and of comfort. This movement comes at the pivotal point right in the middle of the *Requiem*, with three movements on either side of it. The words are drawn from the first, second and fourth verses of Psalm 84.