

Music Notes 2017 – Trinity VI

The history of music is often presented as though there were smooth transitions from one kind of musical language to another. Analyzing stylistic differences between, say, the works of Schubert (1797–1828) and Schumann (1810–1856), could fill pages of research and commentary, but for most people, the differences would probably seem quite minor. On the other hand, were you to compare the musical language of Palestrina (1525–1594) with that of, say, Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), anyone would recognize a radical difference. (Actually, it would also be possible to demonstrate how surprisingly close Britten and Palestrina are, but that's another story...) The greatest observable transitions for most people are where musical historians have parcelled up composers into distinct periods to which they have given names. So, we are quite clear that the Baroque and Romantic periods were significantly different from one another, and in between we have the very misleadingly described Classical period, which supposedly connects the two. We can probably name some exponents of each: Bach (1685–1750) and Händel (1685–1759) are definitely Baroque, Mozart (1756–1791) and Haydn (1732–1809) Classical, Schumann and Brahms (1833–1897) Romantic. There is that tiresome chap Beethoven (1770–1827), who starts more or less alongside Haydn and then embraces change – or perhaps better, drives it – all the way to Romantic, but he is, anyway, one of those massive, gravitational bodies around which our perception of the whole story orbits.

However, these distinctions only make sense when looking back and trying to compartmentalize our sense of musical history. In reality, the development of the story wasn't in the least so tidy or conveniently packaged. Composers composed, and went where the winds of inspiration and technique took them. They had no idea where the road led. While Bach respected and studied the works of Palestrina, the latter had no idea that the former was ever going to exist, and certainly did not think that his own work might in some way influence the development of what for him would have been an utterly alien musical language.

This Sunday morning, without reading a scholarly musical history, we will have a chance to catch a glimpse of the moment when the musical language of Palestrina, Lassus (1532–1594) and Victoria (1548–1611) began to turn in the direction that would ultimately lead to Bach. We will experience a work signalling a transitional musical period.

Palestrina, although born in the city of Palestrina – from which we get the name by which we know him – spent most of his adult life in Rome. There, he became acquainted with Lassus, who had ventured from the Flemish Netherlands and would eventually settle in Munich. Palestrina also knew Victoria well while he was working in Rome, *en route*, as it were, from Ávila to Madrid. It would be fascinating

to hear what those three said to one another in conversations about music; for these composers shine out at the head of the herd of all the fine composers working in at the time in Rome, which was considered the epicentre of sacred music at that time. Yet, while each of these composers is completely distinctive in his musical approach, his compositions still reflect the broad musical language of the day. To see what came next, however, you have to look quite a way north to Venice, where a remarkable convergence took place between Andrea Gabrieli (ca. 1533–1585), his nephew Giovanni Gabrieli (1557–1612), and Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). By the time the latter was gone, musical language had changed distinctively and decisively – to a large extent at his hands – and Bach was only 47 years away from being born.

Andrea Gabrieli was very probably born in Venice, and certainly spent his career there. In his mid-30s, he went on a trip to what we now call Germany. In Munich, he made the acquaintance of Lassus, who was almost exactly his contemporary. They hit it off extremely well and became lasting friends. By the time Andrea returned to Venice, he had benefitted from some of the very best musical influences that he could ever have hoped to come across. It wasn't long before he was offered the post of Organist at San Marco, Venice's remarkable Byzantine cathedral, distinguished *inter alia* by an astonishingly resonant acoustic, and a somewhat sprawling layout that allows for two choir galleries, each equipped with an organ. The Flemish *Maestro di Cappella* from 1527 until 1562, Adrian Willaert (1490–1562), had seen the possibilities of using this physical layout to advantage. The Flemish tradition had already explored the pitting of two or more choirs against one another to produce spatially exciting effects, and he recognized that this technique would be perfect for San Marco. The physical layout at San Marco was actually more ideal for this than was the case with Flemish churches, because the greater space between the choirs in the basilica necessitated writing music in which it wouldn't necessarily matter that they simply couldn't be perfectly synchronized. This produced extremely interesting collisions.

Of course, the musicians didn't know that they were supposed to aspire to the cut-glass timing and accuracy of twenty-first-century British consort choirs, and positively revelled in a flexibility that rarely features in modern recordings of this repertoire. Within a century or so, the high German Baroque movement would have ironed out these effects from its music – although you can still see its legacy in Bach's use of the two separate choirs in the *St Matthew Passion* – just as it also ironed out the collisions between notes caused by two lines in the choir following separate rules about whether to sing a flat, natural or sharp version of a note. Neither the Venetian polychoral rhythmic flexibility nor the acceptance of harmonic astringency would reappear as so acceptable in music again until the twentieth century.

Andrea was not only an outstanding organist but also an excellent composer. We are going to hear his *Missa Brevis in F*, written for San Marco, but evidently used not in

the antiphonal choir lofts, but down in the choir stalls at ground level. The style is clearly influenced by his contact with Lassus. It mixes together passages of imitative counterpoint (in which each part sings roughly the same line in turn, these all being wound together by the composer) with sections of “block” or “homophonic” music (like a typical Anglican hymn texture). Moreover, already here – much earlier than in Rome – we can hear a much clearer sense of a diatonic key, rather than strict adherence to the modes. When we come to the *Agnus Dei*, Andrea adds an extra alto part to enrich the texture and the emotional intensity of the music, just as composers were accustomed to doing in Rome. Nevertheless, although this music reflects so much the influence of Lassus, its sense of harmony is clearly on a different track; but Andrea couldn’t possibly have known that this was the kind of language that would in due course become dominant.

We can make a comparison between what Gabrieli does in his mass with the language of Lassus in his motet *Eripe me de inimicis* at the offertory. Lassus wrote two settings of this text from Psalm 143, one in three parts, and this one in four. The text translates as follows: *Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord, to thee have I fled; teach me to do thy will, for thou art my God*. Strictly speaking, both settings were written for Passiontide, but the sentiments of the text apply to us at all times.

The canticles at Evensong are by Charles Wood (1866–1926), his *Evening Service in E Minor*. Wood, whom we think of as having contributed so much music to the English church, was actually born in Ireland, and his early musical experience was at St Patrick’s Cathedral in Armagh, where his father sang in the choir. Later, he was among the very first intake of students at the Royal College of Music, studying under Stanford (1852–1924) and Parry (1848–1918). He was destined to succeed Stanford as Professor of Music at Cambridge. Wood’s influence today is still pervasive. Thanks to him we have the music to which we sing the hymn *This joyful Eastertide* and the standard versions of *Ding! Dong! Merrily on high*, as well as of *Past three o’clock*, *King Jesus hath a garden*, *A virgin most pure*, and many more. Wood was above all a composer of well-shaped melodies and refined accompaniments that always go where they should.

The setting dates from 1891, the same year that it was published. It is an unaccompanied work, echoing in many respects the style and musical language of Tudor settings. It is somewhat reminiscent of William Walton’s semi-pastiche music for the 1944 film version of *Henry V*, with Laurence Olivier as both star and director. Wood is deliberately aiming at a “period” feel, and yet his own much more modern musical language keeps bursting through uncontrollably. As with Walton, Wood is much too well-mannered a composer to reduce his music to mere pastiche, however, and the result is elegant, polished, and thoroughly satisfying music.

The anthem is by Stanford: *How beauteous are their feet*. The text is from a hymn by Isaac Watts, the eighteenth-century minister, hymn-writer, theologian and logician. He is often spoken of as the founder of our tradition of hymnody, so it is rather satisfying to have both him and Charles Wood, another great musical hymnodist in the same service. In the aftermath of the First World War, Stanford wrote a significant number of quite substantial works, but just couldn't get them published. On the other hand, when it came to sacred music, he had two music publishers anxious to publish whatever he wrote. These were the great house of Novello – still a dominant player, albeit no longer an independent company – and the still very independent Stainer & Bell, which had been more or less saved financially by two of Stanford's earlier compositions.

Being always rather anxious about money, it seems likely that Stanford recognized fairly readily that he had better feed the sacred music cash machine with works, so towards the end of his life a number of pretty substantial sacred works appeared. Among these were *Veni Creator* in 1922, *Three Anthems for Advent, Christmas and Easter, When God of old* and *How beauteous are their feet*, all published in 1923. The latter is written in a kind of variation form, where the lovely lilting melody that we hear on the organ at the start of the pieces is treated differently every time that it appears for each of four verses of the (originally six-versed) hymn. The result is an elegant and charming work, and certainly worth the royalties.

After this Sunday, the brief summer programme begins at Great St Bartholomew. The Solemn Eucharist moves to St Bartholomew the Less, with a congregational chant mass setting, led by a cantor, who also contributes a solo item at the offertory. Choral Evensong continues with a small choir. The music notes will be more succinct during this period, but they will revert to their usual more expansive scope for our Patronal Festival on 27th August, well in time for the *season of mists and mellow fruitfulness*.