

Music Notes 2017 – Trinity X

There is one more Sunday in our summer programme, and so one more Solemn Eucharist in St Bartholomew the Less before we return to The Great for our Patronal Festival of the Apostle Bartholomew next week. Having the service at The Less doesn't necessarily cut down the scale of the music that is possible – on some occasions we use the full choir there – but we do use the services of just a cantor during the summer programme.

The mass setting is *Missa Rosa Mystica*, by the German composer, Peter Griesbacher (1864–1933). He is sufficiently obscure that even the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, that indispensable source published in 2001 on paper, has no entry for him. The wonders of the age of the Internet, however, mean that this shocking lacuna no longer leaves us in such murky ignorance. Griesbacher's first calling was as a Catholic priest, and he was ordained in 1886. The Roman Catholic Church has always welcomed musical priests, and the advantages of this are considerable. It means you have a pool of people who are very knowledgeable about both liturgy and music, as well as the underpinning theology. In darker moments, one can feel quite depressed by how little the musicians who serve the Church of England seem to know about liturgy, or how the music they are performing is meant to fit into it and enhance its meaning. Of course, in a post-Vatican II world, you could say that the need for Roman Catholic priests to have real expertise in the music of, say, the Renaissance, has declined dramatically; expertise in the musical literature of the worship band would now be considerably more apposite.

No such issues for the erudite Griesbacher, whose contribution to the church music of his day was substantial. He held several musical teaching positions, notably in Regensburg, which has been a major centre for Catholic music in Germany for several centuries. He was a prolific composer, generating some 250 works in all, of which 49 are masses. (<https://alchetron.com/Peter-Griesbacher-1211903-W>)

Griesbacher is another composer identified with the Cecilian movement, which we have discussed previously in our Music Notes for Trinity Sunday (http://greatstbarts.com/Documents/Music/Music_Notes/17/Music_Notes_2017_Trinity_Sunday.pdf) earlier this year when talking about Rheinberger (1839–1901), who was an aficionado, but who also decisively broke with his Cecilian fellows, when their insistence on Renaissance sensibility in church music became too restrictive for him. Griesbacher avoided a breach, but instead subverted the purity of the concept by introducing rich harmony – certainly not in keeping with Renaissance ideals – and organ accompaniments.

The Rosa Mystica of the title is a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she appears as a liturgical reference this Sunday in honour of the Feast of the Assumption on August 15th of this past week. Griesbacher composed the work for a two-part choir made up of one upper line and one lower line, with the organ supporting the texture throughout. In this, the composer refers to the antiphonal style of setting with which we might be familiar from, for example, our *Missa de angelis* Sundays. Cleverly, these two voices never have to sing together, meaning that it is also perfectly possible to perform this with a single voice, making it a very flexible setting for parochial use.

At the Offertory, we will hear one of the *Bible Songs, Op. 113*, by the Irish composer Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). While these compositions are for solo voice, his intention was that they should be used in church rather than as concert works. They were first performed by the marvellously named baritone Harry Plunket Greene, who was also Irish, and who in 1935 published a significant biography of his composer friend. It remained the only such work about Stanford until 2002, when another important biography by Paul Rodmell was published.

This song – *A Song of Hope* – is the most emotionally affecting of the six works, and is an astonishingly poignant setting of Psalm 130, which begins: *Out of the deep have I cried unto thee, O Lord*. The important aspect of this text is that, while the psalmist is in deepest distress, his hope in God remains undimmed.

The canticles at Evensong this week are by our own Director of Music, Rupert Gough (b.1971), and are simply described as *The Fauxbourdon Setting*. Rather than write worthy notes, we might as well hear directly from the composer:

“The Fauxbourdon Setting was composed at Wells Cathedral one afternoon in 1998 prior to Evensong where there was a sudden need for unaccompanied canticles for men’s voices. The setting grew popular and was later re-scored for mixed choir (SATB) for the Choir of Royal Holloway. Fauxbourdon (or false drone) was an early method of harmonising chant, originally in the Middle Ages, with two or three parallel parts, and perhaps some ornamentation. The practice became popular again in England in the Tudor period with a number of composers setting the chants for Evening Canticles to simple harmony. [My] setting takes the 5th plainsong tone. Treated simply in the Magnificat, the chant in the Nunc Dimittis is accompanied by drones which explore alternative harmonic possibilities leading to the final chord – a deliberately unresolved chord used by Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) in his only choral work O sacrum convivium.”

The anthem, *May the grace of Christ*, has a special significance for us, being by a former Director of Music at the Priory Church, Brian Brockless (1926–1995). The Priory

Church has had a remarkable line of distinguished Directors of Music, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Brian Brockless took over in 1961 from the legendary Paul Steinitz, founder of the London Bach Society that brought a period-approach to the performance of Bach's works well before it became somewhat mandatory. Steinitz had himself taken over from Nicholas Choveaux (1904–1995), a minor composer whose music is still sometimes performed today. Brockless was very interested in Renaissance music, and helped to found the much-recorded and widely performing choir *Pro Cantione Antiqua* (<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/pro-cantione-antiqua-mn0002268404/biography>), originally known as *St Bartholomew's Singers*. He served as organist from 1961 until 1969, and again from 1979 until 1995. In between his two spells with us, the Director was Andrew Morris, who happens to be the current Master of the Worshipful Company of Musicians, and who, with Nigel Short, is also one of only two former Directors of Music who are now still alive. Brian Brockless died the night of his final service as our organist, although he was too ill to attend himself. Extraordinarily, Newell E Wallbank, the Rector for whom Brockless had first worked, died himself during the Memorial Evensong for Brockless, at which he was due to preach.

May the Grace of Christ was written in 1955 before Brockless came to the Priory Church, and is dedicated to "the Revd Canon Frederic Hood D.D.", a legendary Principal of Pusey House in Oxford always known as "Freddy", who was Priest-in-Charge of St Mary Aldermary in Watling Street by the time this piece was composed. Later, in 1961, Hood was to become Canon Chancellor and Chapter Treasurer of St Paul's Cathedral. According to the sheet music for the piece, this anthem is "suitable for weddings or general use", and we are obviously using it for the latter purpose this Sunday. The musical language here does not go out of its way to shock. Brockless studied at the Royal College of Music under Herbert Howells (1892–1983), who was, unsurprisingly, a strong influence on his compositional style. If you think you catch echoes of his teacher in this piece, you can be sure you are not mistaken.