

Music Notes 2017 – Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the *Mass in G minor* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). This was written in 1921, and first performed the following year in Birmingham Town Hall. Its first liturgical performance was at Westminster Cathedral in 1923; it was dedicated to “Gustav Holst and his Whitsuntide Singers”. Holst (1874–1934) was the founder of the Whitsun music festival, which takes place in Thaxted, Essex and now features a broad range of musical genres. Holst had discovered Thaxted while on a walking tour; he was very taken by the glorious architecture of Thaxted parish church, and the village’s charm. From 1914 onwards he always had a home in Thaxted; and it was there that he composed the *Planets*.

The death of Henry Purcell (1659–1695) signified almost an end to a line of innovative and extremely interesting musical development in this country, one stretching back well before the great Tudor composers. Purcell’s successors tended to be comparatively less inspiring. The intervention of the humourless and musically attenuated Commonwealth and the Puritans suppressed a promising strand of development. The brightest period was occasioned by Georg Friedrich Händel (1685–1759) – and, as we all know, he was German. The chronological list of English Classical composers for this period on Wikipedia makes rather depressing reading. For nearly two centuries British music was largely – with some heart-warming but comparatively minor exceptions – in the doldrums and, to the extent that it had any enriching voice, this was in pale imitation of mainland European composers. Edward Elgar (1857–1934) prompted the tide to turn. His musical language was also fundamentally derived from the great mainland tradition, especially from Germany. Elgar was very sensitive to the influences of Brahms (1833–1897) and Wagner (1813–1883), but still he developed his own style on this foundation, and he did so superbly well.

Vaughan Williams, only fifteen years younger, went a different way. One substantial interest that floated his boat was the partially occluded tradition of British folksong, preserving influences that ran back before it all went dull, together with the great English Tudor tradition. He wove characteristics from all this music into his own harmonic language, modifying it to create a style of British music that is often called “pastoral” – sometimes referred to unkindly as the “School of Cowpat”.

This rude description has an unconscious subtlety to it. English music in the Renaissance period did not follow strictly the harmonic norms that were prevalent on the mainland. Renaissance composers here for some reason became more interested than their mainland colleagues in what we would regard as a “major key” structure to harmony, particularly enjoying the “major third” interval that primarily gives major keys their character. Making this kind of harmony work well leads to

some additional pertinent characteristics that it would be too turgid to go into here. The end result is a mixture between a generally minor ambience that we anyway hear today in most of the medieval modes, set against a more sunny and vividly contrasting major key ambience. You might like to think of it as a kind of dappled light represented in music. When composers such as Vaughan Williams – and many of his contemporaries as well – went back to examine the Tudor roots of English music, they picked up on this characteristic switching from shadow to light and back again, and incorporated it into their own language, leading to a revived harmonic language that is sufficiently distinctive to be recognizable, but which has only ever strongly caught on in this country. It happens to fit well the kind of seemingly randomly quilted countryside and its associated patterns of light and shade that one can experience particularly well when looking out of the window of a plane approaching Heathrow on a summer's evening. Hence: "British Pastoral". Hence, "School of Cowpat".

The harmony of the *Mass in G minor* is very much in this semi-modal tradition. Although the *Kyrie* does indeed start in G minor, every other movement has a key signature of G major at its start. That might lead you to expect lots of F sharps, especially at cadences (the chords that comes at the end of musical phrases). Instead, there are fistfuls of F naturals, constantly subverting the music from a major key back into modal, seemingly minor territory. This gives the harmony a softer, unassertive and ambiguous quality – harmonically dappled, as it were. The setting is for double choir and an additional group of four soloists. It is texturally rich, and the music is exciting, if you are a fan of this kind of musical language. Of course, we must recognize that this is actually like musical marmite: some people dislike it, and some love it. Even within this country, it is another of those national divisions.

The motet at the Offertory is by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b.1935). Its "official" title is *The Deer's Cry*, but the text is more familiar to us as the prayer of St Patrick, also known as the *Lorica* – a prayer for protection (*Lorica* means "shield" or "armour") – that occurs just before the last verse of *St Patrick's Breastplate*, the hymn we sing on Trinity Sunday: *I bind unto myself this day the strong name of the Trinity. The Lorica is the verse – generally sung unaccompanied at the Priory Church (and given here in its original, not the metrical form found in the hymn): Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.* The composition dates from 2007, and was the result of a commission from the Louth Contemporary Music Society in Ireland. The name seems slightly confusing for a text that was to be found inscribed on the shields of knights going into battle, but derives from the legend about the way that St Patrick and his followers were able to escape from an ambush in a forest. After St Patrick had prayed in the terms of this

text, they were able to flee because the eyes of their enemies were deceived into seeing them as a doe and a herd of fawns and left them in peace.

The music at Evensong is all from the Wesley family. They are a tricky bunch to keep straight – rather like trying to distinguish between George Herbert Walker Bush and his son, George Walker Bush – two US Presidents that now seem so much surprisingly better by contrast with today's incumbent. But we digress... The relevant line of the Wesleys starts confusingly with a Samuel Wesley (1662–1735), priest and poet but *not* the composer. Among a positively Bachian clutch of nineteen children (of whom, as in Bach's case, many died in infancy,) were John (1703–1791) and Charles (1707–1788). The former effectively established the principles of what we know as Methodism, although he remained an Anglican cleric to the end of his life; the latter is remembered for having written many of our great hymns, and also remained an Anglican. Charles produced a handful of children, among them *the* Samuel (1766–1837), who became a notable organist and composer. Samuel Sebastian (1810–1876) was his son in turn. He was awarded his middle name as his father's sign of profound respect for "the" Bach (1685–1750), although being called SS Wesley has left him with the nickname Steam Ship Wesley.

The Samuel was the astonishingly "modern" member of the clan who decided that marrying his inamorata, Charlotte, after they had already had sex was redundant. Despite this determination, he did later marry her, but afterwards took up with the maid, Sarah Suter, who was in fact Steamship Wesley's mother – he was, therefore, born out of wedlock, which could have been a major block on his advancement in those days. Between the three parents, they produced seven children. While not busy with all that, Samuel (the father) became a very fine musician, although he became increasingly odd after injuring his skull by falling into a ditch in Snow Hill just around the corner from the Priory Church.

With the *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in E*, Samuel Sebastian (the son) introduced an approach to setting these texts that ultimately inspired Stanford's (1852–1924) rather symphonic settings and the large Howells (1892–1983) settings. The style is broad and substantial, with strong word painting and varieties of choral texture. To us, it may just sound like one of the many robust sets of canticles in the repertoire, but it actually broke new ground at the time, and the latter familiar examples owe their origins to this setting.

The *Service in E* was written during SS Wesley's time as Organist at Leeds Minster. It marks in some ways the end of a period in his life during which he had composed on a broad and generous canvas. The interesting musical aspect about composing canticles is that almost every phrase introduces some new mood or concept that has to be reflected in the composition. In the case of the *Magnificat*, the mighty are being put down from their seat at one moment, while at the next, the humble and meek are

being exalted. The composer has to be the master of the nimbly inflected mood change while still making it a cohesive work. Wesley wrote settings for Matins and Holy Communion, but seemed to stall at the evening canticles. Their addition was the fruit of SS's acquaintanceship with Martin Cawood, the secretary of the choir committee, who acted as a helpful and necessary buffer between the Vicar, Dr Walter Farquhar Hook, and his organist. . Cawood regretted the incompleteness of the *Service*, and personally commissioned his friend to finish the work, which he did.

The press, which used to take an interest in such matters – it would be quite hard to imagine this occurring today in the UK – was, however, rather beastly about the whole composition, although in the long term the press's objections proved wrong. The style of the work is broad and substantial, with strong word painting, varieties of choral texture and changes of tempo that increase excitement and drama. To us, it may just sound like one of the many robust sets of canticles in the repertoire, but it broke much new ground, and within quite a short space of time, was being performed up and down the country (no doubt helped along its way by Wesley's progress as organist through the cathedrals of England).

The anthem, *In exitu Israel*, is by the father, Samuel Wesley. This is a rather robust work for unaccompanied double choir. In fact, this piece just predates the birth of Samuel Sebastian, because its first performance took place on 18th May 1810 at a benefit concert Wesley held at the Hanover Square Rooms. (Samuel Sebastian was born on the 14th August, and so was in some sense present in the company of his pregnant mother.) The quite grand Hanover Square Rooms were at one time a principal concert venue in London, where the works of many prominent musicians were played; Thomas Gainsborough painted transparent paintings on glass for the main room. Meetings of the women's suffrage movement were once held there. Wesley's concert was mixture of vocal and choral music with organ solos and duets thrown in for good measure. The main composer featured, as so often in concerts in which Wesley père took part, was Johann Sebastian Bach. In fact, Samuel Sebastian was present at the concert, but experienced it from the womb, as it were, not being born until 14th August 1810. His father also included in the programme two of his own works. One was *Father of Light and Life*, an anthem in four parts, and the other *In exitu Israel*, which Wesley had completed only two weeks previously as a contribution designed specifically for this concert. So, the anthem was in fact not originally destined especially for church use.

This is interesting, because Wesley, for all his fascination with the profoundly Lutheran Bach, had become extremely interested, at an early age, from about 1780 onwards, in Roman Catholicism, to the considerable alarm of his Anglican, Methodism-inspiring father. Some of his father's concern would have been spiritual, doubtless, but some would have been rather practical. The passing of the Catholic Relief Act in 1778 (and subsequent related Acts) had had a political effect not

dissimilar to Chancellor Merkel's opening of Germany's doors to a million Syrian refugees in 2015. The UK Parliament's purpose was to reverse some of the restrictions placed on Catholics by the Popery Act ("an act for the further preventing the growth of Popery") of 1698. A fear of being overrun by rampant Catholics with their outlandish practices and strange beliefs came over an easily spooked population, and the result was the Gordon Riots in June 1780, with substantial damage to property and people alike. Samuel's father was, therefore, concerned not only for his son's soul, but also for his physical wellbeing if he were to be identified as a Catholic sympathizer – all the more so, because Samuel was only 12 when he first started to express these leanings. Four years later, he was received into the church to general familial alarm. This sits very oddly to us with his espousal of a certain kind of "free love" and his open – one might say shameless, in the eyes of those around him – taking of a mistress into his household. Of course, his story is not unique in this respect.

Later in life, Wesley was to deny absolutely that he had ever been a Catholic, and certainly in his later years, any attraction to such a churchmanship disappeared altogether. Nevertheless, his choral compositions from 1780 for a good forty years were clearly inclined in a Catholic direction, with numerous Latin text anthems. The use of the language for choral music at this time was like a rather unsubtle coded way of making it clear that it was only intended for Catholics – any Anglican or Dissenter worth his or her salt knew only English texts reached the ear of Almighty God.

In exitu Israel very obviously falls into this category, but seems to have caused no raised eyebrows, perhaps because it was initially seen as a concert work. By 1810, the position of Catholics in English society had been much improved, strongly contrasting with the position of Catholics in English society some thirty years earlier. In 1829, the Roman Catholic Relief Act was to put British Catholic citizens on a more or less equal footing with their Anglican and Dissenting fellows. It is not just the language that makes this work interesting. It is robustly presented by the choir, and is in a kind of counterpoint that sounds like a substantial updating of Renaissance procedures coupled with a strongly lyrical style, with a dose of Bach thrown in. The form of the anthem has received some fierce criticism over the years, and, in truth, it is quite hard to analyse it structurally. Does that matter? Not really. It is a good belt of a piece and must have stirred its first audience no end in the Hanover Square Rooms.