

Music Notes 2017 – Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

The “Elizabethan Religious Settlement”, established by the Act of Supremacy of 1558 and the Act of Uniformity of 1559, put to bed religious and political divisions that had plagued England from the moment Henry VIII declared ecclesiastical independence from Rome. One cannot help but see in those divisions a reflection of our deep splits in the country over Brexit, although in honesty, even these seem like a well-behaved tea party compared with the divides that Elizabeth I was trying to heal. The solution, often surprisingly successful within our country, was a diplomatic fudge, and one could suppose that we might need another fudge to deal with the present fracas as well.

The Elizabethan Settlement largely held through thick and thin until the Oxford Movement came along in the nineteenth century, when some Anglicans became excited by the idea of reintroducing Catholic teaching and practice into the Church of England, setting off a fresh set of rifts, that led to anxiety in parliament and arrests of Anglican clergy for excessive “ritualism”. Still, this dilemma, too, was tactfully fudged, so that today we have one Church of England with two wings that are remarkably distant from one another: the Evangelicals and the Anglo-Catholics.

You might have thought there would be a good relationship between Anglo and Roman Catholics, and indeed this has sometimes been so. But there has also been the peculiarity of some Anglo-Catholic clergy seeing the Roman church as a kind of “emergency exit” for when *Ecclesia Anglicana* does something of which they disapprove. This has generally involved women’s ministry, rather than anything else, such that a group of men who have no concerns about the validity of Anglican orders (officially rejected by Rome) and same-sex relationships (ditto) have been thrown into paroxysms by the thought of women joining the priesthood, and worse, becoming Bishops. On the latter subject, Ruth Gledhill (who is the editor of *Christian Today*) once wrote a front page article for *The Times* that was headlined *Five hundred priests poised to quit the Church of England over woman bishops*, causing Andrew Brown – of *The Guardian* and *The Church Times* – to point out that there are *always* 500 Anglican priests poised to quit the Church of England.

Our music this Sunday has a great deal to do with this cross-over between Roman Catholics and Anglicans. We will enjoy the work of composers who converted to Rome, who stayed with Rome, and who never went near Rome.

The mass setting is the *Missa Brevis* by Lennox Berkeley (1903–1989). Berkeley attended the same school (Gresham’s) as Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), albeit a decade earlier. In a case of lightning striking several times in a row, the poet and playwright Wystan Hugh Auden was also a pupil there, fitting in his time at the school between theirs – Britten and Berkeley only met some years later. Berkeley

promptly fell for Britten romantically and pursued him with some ardour. Although they did share a home for a time, it was a chaste affair, and the matter was concluded beyond question when Britten and the English tenor Peter Pears formed their remarkable personal as well as professional relationship that lasted for the rest of their lives. In any case, Berkeley's life eventually took a quite different turn. In 1946, by which time he was working at the BBC, he surprised the bachelor friends with whom he then shared a flat in Pimlico by announcing that he had decided to marry his secretary, Freda Bernstein.

Dire warnings of future unhappiness if Berkeley were to pursue this course proved ungrounded, and Lennox and Freda formed a very happy household, into which they eventually welcomed three sons. Berkeley (as was also the case with Britten) was far from a Bohemian; he craved the stability and "normality" that the society of those days was never going to attribute to any other kind of relationship than conventional marriage. With Freda he had both. Britten opted to face society down, with considerable success, but with a perpetual air of anxiety about doing so. Nevertheless, when Berkeley's eldest son, the composer Michael Berkeley, was born in 1948, he asked Britten to be his godfather, an invitation that was warmly accepted. Both Britten and his godson were to become life peers, the only composers to whom this has ever happened. Julian, the middle son, who studied organ and flute at the Royal College of Music, went into burglar alarms and founded a very successful business. The youngest son, Nick, is a successful photographer and film maker, a career that he arrived at via a spell in what is known technically as a "proto-punk" band.

Lennox Berkeley wrote two mass settings, the *Mass for Five Verses* in 1964 – a piece in which he explored a more astringent musical language that he had found himself developing in the years leading up to the mass – and the *Missa Brevis* in 1960. Both settings were written for Westminster Cathedral, and the dedication of the earlier work is to his sons Michael and Julian Berkeley and the boys of Westminster Cathedral Choir. Berkeley had become a Roman Catholic in 1928 while studying in Paris with Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), and his music is imbued with his faith, which remained extremely important to him throughout the rest of his life. His deep affection for Renaissance composers and their music is reflected in this setting by his use of imitative counterpoint, a feature of the musical language of the Renaissance.

The motet at the Offertory is *Ave Verum Corpus*, one of the *Three Motets*, Op. 2 by Edward Elgar (1857–1934), the others in the cycle being *Ave Maria* and *Ave Maris Stella*, all three beautifully expressive works born of lifelong (Roman) Catholic devotion. Elgar became the organist at St George's Roman Catholic Church in Worcester in 1885, where he remained for the next four years. During this time, in 1887, a family friend – a solicitor, in whose office the young Edward had worked for

a time – died, and for his funeral Elgar wrote a setting of *Pie Jesu*, basing it on the melody of a *Kyrie* he had composed the previous year. Later, in 1902, he re-set the music to the words of *Ave Verum Corpus*, and sent it to his publisher, Novello. By 1907, he had additionally re-cast two anthem fragments he had also written in 1887 as *Ave Maria* and *Ave Maris Stella*, and Novello brought them out as *Three Motets*, Op. 2. Sending the two additional motets, he wrote in his accompanying letter: *They are tender little plants, so treat them kindly, whatever is their fate*. In fact, they did sufficiently well to be orchestrated and published in that version as well.

The question of the Real Presence in the Sacrament has been a heated matter since the Reformation, because virtually all Christians participate in some version of Holy Communion at some point in the year. The question of what each thinks is going on in this is keenly felt. For a Roman Catholic of Elgar's generation – as also for an Anglo-Catholic – this was and is a decisive mark between "their religion" and the Protestant alternatives. Is Jesus substantially (which in theological language means "spiritually", not "physically") present in the Eucharist or present just symbolically? The statement *Hail true Body, born of Mary* sets down a real marker. Indeed, it could be said to be a little sermon in a few notes of music.

After an assertively English Catholic morning, the music in the evening exhibits more of the complications of the Elizabethan Settlement. The canticles are from the *Second Service* by William Byrd (1539–1623). He started life in a Protestant family and, like Berkeley, converted to Catholicism, perhaps through the agency of his teacher, mentor and friend, Thomas Tallis (1505–1585). Whether this is the case or not, he certainly followed his teacher's lead in being a convinced Catholic, and yet writing music extensively for the new English church. Indeed, this setting corresponds in style with the views of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, who wrote in a letter to the King of wanting settings *not full of notes, but, as nearly as may be, for every syllable a single note, so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly*. The amazing point about this prescriptive precept is that composers such as Byrd and Tallis managed to make even this kind of compacted music vibrant and exciting.

In this *Second Service*, Byrd accomplishes two particularly interesting feats, both of which are likely to pass us by unless pointed out. The first is the innovation of a short introduction. All his settings expect an organ accompaniment. We are rather inclined these days to perform Tudor music unaccompanied wherever possible. Tudor musicians, who probably had what we would regard as much worse singers to contend with, would generally have used either a light organ accompaniment to keep everything together, or else doubled the voices on, say, a consort of viols. In the case of this setting, the accompaniment is indispensable, because there is a short organ introduction to each canticle, at the start of each an alto soloist sings the

opening phrase, and there are other solos along the way. The introduction, setting the pitch for the choir, was a new and very influential way to start a setting. The second interesting achievement is that the text of the *Magnificat* ends with a treble soloist singing *As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham, and his seed for ever* to a metrical version of the plainchant known as *Tonus Peregrinus*. This is the ninth (or “wandering tone”) of the Gregorian so-called Psalm Tones, and its presence in an Anglican service at this point is interesting. It could be seen just as a bit of word painting by the composer: an old, pre-Reformation and familiar melody being used to illustrate the idea of “forefathers”. But surely it is also Byrd being slightly subversive, smuggling in a Catholic reference into this otherwise impeccably Anglican music!

The anthem is *Lord, let me know mine end* by Maurice Greene (1696–1755), who was at one time Organist of St Paul’s Cathedral, and in every sense a settled member of the new English church, with no Catholic complications at all. In his meteoric rise, he moved from St Paul’s to be Organist of the Chapel Royal and from there to be Professor of Music at Cambridge University. Not content with that, he eventually became Master of the King’s Musick for the last twenty years of his life. Some people have attributed the creation of the Anglican choral tradition to him, not because of his own compositions, but rather because he initiated the work of assembling a formal collection of anthems eventually published as *Cathedral Music*. Alas, Greene died before he could finish the project, which was completed by William Boyce (1711–1779), a former pupil of Greene’s. This collection was so influential that it can be said to have formed the indispensable basis for our tradition of Anglican choral music. Indeed, one influential British music critic, John Alexander Fuller Maitland, considered Greene as one English composer of the period *who undoubtedly deserves the honour of being mentioned in the same breath with the great masters of the continent*.

Greene’s own contributions to the genre are now considered modest in their scope. He is known for a rather breathless Rogationtide/Harvest verse anthem, *Thou visitest the earth* (taken from a larger verse anthem, *Thou, O God, Art Praised in Sion*) which, in the wrong hands can sound as though its effect on the crops was so successful that half the choir now has advanced hay fever. However, his one real masterwork is this Sunday’s anthem, a setting of Psalm 39, which really brought out the best in him. The score is marked for sections to be taken separately by each side of the choir, and there is also a central section that is a duet between two treble soloists.

What is so magical about this piece is the bass line of the accompaniment, which later generations would refer to as a “walking bass”. There is an inescapable impression that this constantly moving line, changing note exactly on every beat from beginning to end, represents the ticking away of a person’s life. This is especially strong in the duet section, where the text declares that *man walketh in a vain shadow* – and you can hear him in the bass doing precisely that.