

## Music to Christmas Day 2016

Three of our more unusual carol services take place between now and the services for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

First, on Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> December at 18:00, we have *A Star-Spangled Christmas*, which is a carol service drawing on the American musical traditions of the season. A perhaps surprising number of our Christmas carols started life on that side of the Atlantic. For example, *O little town of Bethlehem* was written by Phillips Brooks (1835–1893), an Episcopal (i.e. Anglican) priest of Holy Trinity in Philadelphia. He was inspired during a visit to the Holy Land in 1865, where he saw Bethlehem from a hillside. Three years later, he wrote this poem we now know as this hymn. Back in Philadelphia, his organist, Lewis Redner (1831–1908) composed a tune so that the Sunday School choir could sing the poem – and from there it travelled across the country. The poem, shorn of its tune, also reached Britain, where Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) adapted a folk tune, *The Ploughboy's Dream*, to fit the poem, naming it *Forest Green* after the community in Surrey where he had collected the original version from a certain Henry Garman. It seems likely that Vaughan William shad no idea at the time that there was already a tune in use in the United States.

That is just one example. There is a very similar story about *It came upon the midnight clear*, written by Edmund Sears (1810–1876), a Unitarian minister in Wayland, Massachusetts. You can fairly readily detect the Unitarian influence in the text, if you know what to look for. Nevertheless, this has become an enduring favourite with Trinitarian Anglicans as well. In much the same way, it was set to a jaunty tune to which it is sung to this day in the United States, while we have a modified folk tune adapted by Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), most famous to us today as one half of Gilbert & Sullivan.

To this, we can add *Away in a Manger*, *We Three Kings*, and *Deck the Halls*. This carol service uses hymns that are particularly often used in the USA. Some have the same tune on both sides of the Atlantic, but where there is a different tune used in the USA, that is the one that we will be singing. Meantime, the choir's music is drawn almost entirely from American composers, demonstrating the rich and vibrant choral tradition that makes America one of the most chorally active nations in the world.

Something not entirely dissimilar happens on Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> December at 18:00. This service is entitled *Stille Nacht*, and is a carol service based on the Christmas music traditions of Germany. This is a country that has contributed more "substance" to the world of so-called "classical music" than any other, and yet, when it comes to Christmas music, its traditions extend no further than Austria and the German-speaking Kantons of Switzerland. Apart from (Austria's) *Stille Nacht*, which

we know as *Silent Night*, and the secular *O Tannenbaum* (also known as *O Christmas Tree* in English), appropriated in the English speaking world so as to “keep the red flag flying”, there are very few points of contact. This service puts us in touch with this rich tradition. In spite of two disastrous and horrific wars between Britain and Germany, their underlying history is one of friendship and mutual understanding. You only have to look at the interplay between English and German music over the years, from Händel settling here and becoming “Handel”, to Mozart, Haydn and Mendelssohn’s (among many others’) sojourns here. To this, we can add Prince Albert, much-loved consort to Queen Victoria, who introduced to us the German traditions of Christmas trees and Christmas cards, and the fact that, when we ran out of heirs to the throne, parliament invited the Elector of Hanover to come to be George I, and it is his heirs who have sat on the British throne ever since. It is not for nothing that our present royal family continues the German tradition of celebrating Christmas on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>, rather than on the 25<sup>th</sup> as do most of the Queen’s subjects.

So, the hymns in this service are the great chorales of Christmastime in Germany. The booklets for the service contain all the texts in German and in English, and the congregation is free to sing in whichever language is preferred or easiest. The tunes are all printed in the booklet as well. Of course, this is by no means the first time we have had this service, so the music is naturally becoming a part of our own Choral tradition at the Priory Church. The best moment, in my view, is the very last hymn: this is the broad and thrilling *O du fröhliche*, perhaps the most loved of them all. In the last verse, everyone is encouraged take out bunches of keys, or anything else that will jingle, and shake them enthusiastically. It is a wonderful moment.

The choral music, in the meantime, is all from composers from the German-speaking area or, very occasionally, settings of great pieces from the area. For example, we will hear *Still Nacht* in an arrangement by our own Director of Music, Rupert Gough.

On Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> December at 18:00, we are introducing a new carol service, that in a way fills in the remaining gaps in telling the story of how we have arrived at our contemporary Christmas traditions in the UK. If many carols came to us from America, and cards and Christmas trees came from Germany, much of the rest came from the pen of Charles Dickens (1812–1870). His emphasis in *A Christmas Carol* on one’s duty to care for the poor, to improve the conditions of society, and the importance of personal redemption are all straight out of the Christian gospel, of course, but he smuggled them into Christmas via the compelling and memorable tale of Scrooge, whose shrivelled soul is the epitome of fallen humankind. Fortunately and thankfully, by the end of the story, Scrooge is redeemed and renewed, and knows how to keep Christmas better than any. Between the poles of this story, we have hung other readings by Dickens and a couple from his contemporaries.

Meantime, the music is all from what Dickens would have heard or sung himself in the season. One is a jolly piece by Charles Hubert Parry (1848–1918), for 25 years his contemporary, and the other is the *Hallelujah Chorus* from *Messiah* by Handel. Any examination of choices of choral music in concerts from the time of Dickens reveals that *Messiah* played an extraordinarily large role in their programming, so we have included this in our service. The rest of the music comes from a collection of Christmas carols published in 1867 by the Revd Henry Ramsden Bramley, fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and John Stainer (1840–1901), then its organist. *Christmas Carols, New and Old*, provided a decisive turning point in British Christmas music. In fact, they were somewhat preceded by William Sandys, a carol-collecting lawyer, who produced *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* in 1833, a rather learned tome of texts. Bramley & Stainer, however, were interested in the practical performance of Christmas music, and included the first definitive versions of both words and music. Their influence has lasted: the life of a contemporary church musician at this time of the year is now dominated by many such books – above all, OUP’s series, *Carols for Choirs*, so far in five volumes. This tradition has since dramatically shaped Christmas music on both sides of the Atlantic.

The setting at Midnight Mass is – as always – the wonderful eight-voiced setting *Missa Ego flos campi* by the Spanish composer Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (1590–1664), who went to live the rest of his life in Mexico at the age of 30. This is a glorious piece, and since the first time we used it at Midnight Mass many years ago, it has become a firm favourite. The *Gloria* is especially memorable. The singers are split into two four-voice choirs, and while one works its way through the text of the *Gloria*, the other continually interjects repeated phrases: *bonae voluntatis*, or later, *miserere nobis*, and so on. The whole work is informed by a distinctive rhythmic vitality and structure that was quite different from contemporary European music, so de Padilla certainly picked up some local influence after his arrival there!

At the Solemn Eucharist on Christmas, the setting, *Missa Sancti Nicolai*, is by the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), one of the most interesting figures in musical history. His real big break in life came when he was employed by Prince Paul Anton Esterházy in 1761, and from then on his life – *pace* an unhappy marriage – improved dramatically. Well, up to a point, perhaps.

Not long after Haydn was employed by the prince, the princely family built a new magnificent palace in rural Hungary that was called *Esterháza*. Their time was thereafter divided between this new, exotic, but fundamentally rural, establishment, and Schloß Esterházy in Eisenstadt, which was at least a little closer to Vienna, the centre of much vibrant artistic activity. The upshot of this was that Haydn spent the next thirty years of his life as an increasingly respected, and even revered, composer, and yet was obliged to work in almost complete artistic isolation in rural Hungary

and fairly rural Austria. A lesser composer might have withdrawn into safe, familiar musical language, but not Haydn. Instead, almost every successive work he produced pushed at the boundaries, whether he was writing string quartets, symphonies, or piano music.

In 1772, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, who had succeeded his late brother the year after Haydn was employed, found the hunting season at Esterháza especially beguiling, and the date at which the court would have returned to Schloß Esterházy in Eisenstadt came and went without the prince showing any sign of wanting to leave. The staff became restive, not least of all because this was also the first year that it had been decided there was no room for their families to accompany them because of the relatively cramped quarters at the Hungarian palace – clearly an architectural oversight. Finally, Haydn – who had a particularly good relationship with the prince – sat down and wrote a somewhat pointed *Farewell Symphony*, at the end of which each group of musicians in the orchestra successively came to the end of their music, snuffed out their candles and left the performing area. Finally, just two violins and Haydn were left to end the music. The prince took the hint and laying his hand on Haydn's shoulder is reported to have said: *My dear Haydn, I take the point. The musicians long to go home. Very well, we'll set off tomorrow.* You can just imagine the panic on the part of those who then had to do the necessary packing!

Haydn seems to have been very appreciative of Prince Nikolai's broadmindedness and willingness to take a hint. Later that same year, he composed the *Missa Sancti Nicolai* for performance on 6<sup>th</sup> December, the Prince's name day. Whether this was, as some have surmised, a specific thank you for the Prince's understanding attitude or not, the two events are evidence of the warm relationship that existed between them. The Mass itself is a charming setting, with a first movement in a lilting pastoral style that would immediately have evoked shepherds and the countryside in the ears of contemporary listeners. Haydn reinforces the point by bringing this music back right at the end of the *Agnus Dei* after a rather solemn opening. The *Gloria* is unashamedly exuberant and jolly, the *Sanctus* again a pastoral piece followed by a boisterous *Osanna*, and the *Benedictus* a beautiful movement for solo quartet.

As it so happens, Christmas Day is also the birthday of our Celebrant and Preacher at Midnight Mass and the Solemn Eucharist on Christmas Day, the former Archdeacon of London, the Revd Preb. Nick Mercer, who tells me that his first name was given to him by his parents in recognition of his date of birth. Of course, as we have seen above, had he been born on the European mainland, this connection between the name "Nicholas" and the saint would only have worked if Fr Mercer had been born on 6<sup>th</sup> December, not the 25<sup>th</sup>. In this country and in the USA, however, the connection between Saint Nicholas and Christmas Eve/Christmas Day has long been the paramount one. It is particularly apt, therefore, that we are having the *Missa Sancti Nicolai* at our Solemn Eucharist.