

Music Notes 2018 – Sunday of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple: Candlemas

The mass setting on this important festival that marks the true end of Christmas is the *Missa Brevis* by the evocatively named British composer Grayston Ives (b. 1948). Until six years ago, he was the Director of Music – known as *Informator Choristarum* – at Magdalen College, Oxford where he followed (albeit not immediately) in the footsteps of another great *Informator Choristarum*, Bernard Rose, whose *Preces & Responses* are a staple part of our Evensong diet.

The name “Grayston Ives” is capable of generating some confusion in our time too, because he actually goes by the name “Bill” in real life, but composes and otherwise appears as a professional musician as Grayston. In fact, when you use Google to find his personal website www.graystonives.com, it actually comes up and offers you “Bill Ives” as its principal search result. Moreover, if you look up the Magdalen College choir recording of today’s mass on www.allmusic.com, it cheerfully lists the work as being by Grayston Ives, while the performance is conducted by Bill Ives, perhaps thinking them brothers, or that it is all just a coincidence.

His personal website says the following of Bill’s biography: *He was a chorister at Ely Cathedral and then studied music at Cambridge, taking composition lessons with Richard Rodney Bennett. After Cambridge he sang in Guildford Cathedral Choir before joining The King’s Singers, with whom he recorded and performed worldwide. For eighteen years Bill directed Magdalen College Choir, Oxford.* Composition lessons with lamentedly late and great Richard Rodney Bennett is a very good start to have had as a composer, and the distinctive but approachable musical language you will hear in this *Missa Brevis* is a valuable legacy of those lessons without being any kind of copy of his teacher’s style.

The *Missa Brevis* was written in 1987 for Magdalen College’s sibling choral foundation in Oxford, New College. The university boasts three such foundations now: Magdalen College, New College and, since 2008, Merton College, the newcomer in this world, in spite of Merton being nearly 750 years old. Incidentally, for anybody who wonders at the omission of Christ Church from the list of choral foundations at Oxford, it is actually part of the cathedral, rather than the university, even if the two institutions almost seem to merge in practice.

Of course, there is another famous “Ives” composer, the redoubtable and fascinating American composer and insurance magnate Charles Ives, whose profoundly iconoclastic music in the first half of the twentieth century is either wildly wonderful or frustratingly impenetrable, depending on your personal taste. His is, however, certainly a world away in every sense from that of Bill/Grayston Ives. The Mander Organs online forum, generally full of a great deal of more and less informed, more

and less opinionated, comment exchanged between more and less nerdy organists, includes the following exchange between two contributors:

First contributor: *Grayston Ives' "Listen sweet dove" was once announced here as being by Charles Ives - I was sorely tempted to play the left hand a semitone higher but resisted!*

Second Contributor: *Almost the exact same thing happened to us at Selby Abbey once: the semi-retired Curate was a bit of a music buff and would occasionally include a potted history of the anthem in his announcement of it, but clearly his edition of New Grove didn't go much past 1950 because he confidently informed the congregation that "Listen Sweet Dove" was set to music by the American composer Charles Ives ... and then gave a long spiel all about him!*

Just to be clear, this is the *Missa Brevis* by Grayston Ives, whose friends call him *Bill*.

At the *Offertory*, we will be hearing a motet, *O Nata lux* by the Lithuanian composer Vytautis Miškinis (b. 1954). A highly respected university professor and choral director, he has been Choir Director of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre conservatory since 1985. He has also been active all over the world, lecturing, teaching, training, and of course, composing. Our Director of Music, Rupert Gough, explored Miškinis's choral repertoire in the second CD that he and the choir of Royal Holloway recorded for Hyperion, *Time is Endless*. Rupert writes about the composer and the works on the CD in the booklet, and you can read this here: <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/67818-B.pdf>. In fact, this motet is not on the CD, but you can get a very good idea of his musical style from listening to it. *O Nata lux* is written for eight voices – double choir – and the composer takes full advantage of the sound world this provides to create a luminous-sounding texture. The words are from the office hymn at Lauds of the Feast of the Transfiguration, but this is a festival that shares much with both the Epiphany and Candlemas, and so this text is very appropriate here. *O Light born of Light, Jesus, redeemer of the world, with loving-kindness deign to receive suppliant praise and prayer. Thou who once deigned to be clothed in flesh for the sake of the lost, grant us to be members of thy blessed body.*

The *Magnificat* at Evensong is by Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). Born in Cremona, but largely associated in our minds with the city state of Venice (although he was already 46 years old when he went there to direct the music at the Basilica of San Marco), he is generally credited with being the link between the renaissance music with which we are so familiar at the Priory Church and the true Baroque. Indeed, he died only 42 years before Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was born, when Dieterich Buxtehude (1637–1707) was already six years old, and in the same year that Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643) also died. Along the way, he substantially contributed to the shifting of musical language away from modalism (the system of eight or more scales that had been used from medieval times) towards what we

know as the diatonic system. This piece of musicological gobbledygook simply comes from a Greek expression meaning “moving through the tones”, and is somewhat easier to manage than the alternative expression, *heptatonia prima*. Aside from having a radical effect on our sense of “key” and what is meant by that, Monteverdi was also a major contributor to developments of form, including being a very important early contributor to the genres of opera and oratorio, each freshly departing from their starting blocks during his lifetime. Perhaps his best-known work is the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* of 1610, usually just know casually as *Monteverdi’s Vespers*. This is a very substantial and complex work, and really demands a great deal more discussion than we have space for here this week. There are numerous question marks about what Monteverdi intended to create with this music. One issue is that he wrote not just one *Magnificat* setting, as one would expect, but two: one for seven voices and quite a large orchestra, the other markedly smaller in scale, for six voices and fewer instruments. The latter is the one we will be hearing.

The *Nunc Dimittis*, meanwhile, is a simple but charming little setting by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). It alternates plainchant with sections of five-part harmony, and while not demanding, is very effective and charming.

The anthem is *Maria wallt zum Heiligtum* (*Mary made a pilgrimage to the Temple*) by Johannes Eccard (1553–1611). Born in Mühlhausen, he went aged eighteen to München, where Orlande de Lassus (1532–1594) was in post at the court of Albrecht V, Duke of Bavaria, whose goal it was to create a musical establishment to rival any in Italy. Eccard studied there with Lassus, and his mastery of choral and contrapuntal style clearly owes much to his illustrious teacher and his rich inventiveness. Lassus was originally from the Netherlands, and so would have known and sung the music of that area before he was swept off to what we now know as Italy, much in demand because of his beautiful singing voice. Later, he worked in Rome and knew Palestrina and Victoria (1548–1611) there before eventually settling in München. So, his influences alongside his own genius came from that background. And yet here is the thread that joins him and Eccard into today’s story: in 1562, Andrea Gabrieli (1532–1585), a predecessor of Monteverdi in Venice, had gone to München to study with Lassus, followed almost certainly later by his nephew Giovanni (1554–1612). Eccard was only 9 years old at the time, so there is no direct connection there, but we can at least say that Eccard and the Gabrielis learnt from the same master and that Venice was the beneficiary.

Eccard wrote *Maria wallt zum Heiligtum* as a six-voice motet for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, otherwise known to us as Candelmas, which we are celebrating this Sunday. If you have decorated your home for the Epiphany with gold in honour of the season, it is time either to return it to the bank vault, or if

your approach is more symbolic, just put it away wherever you keep it until next year. Lent is already breathing down our necks...

Next week, we have a wonderful musical feast for the Institution, Induction, and Installation of Fr Marcus Walker as our new Rector, which fortunately falls just before Ash Wednesday, allowing us one more hurrah before the penitential season begins. More on that in due course.