

Music Notes 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

The *Mass in G, D167*, by Franz Schubert (1797–1828) is sometimes referred to as his *Mass No 2*. He wrote it in March 1815 in under a week, having performed a similar feat the year before when he had also written a mass setting for his local parish church at Lichtental, situated in what was then on the outskirts of Vienna. Although he could not have known it, at the age of 18, he was already more than half way through his short life. His significant output is the result of working at an extraordinary fast rate, a feat he shares with some other short-lived composers, such as Mozart and Mendelssohn. It is tempting – albeit fruitless – to speculate that there is a connection between these two characteristics (fast rate of composition and short life!). In Schubert’s case, during the course of 1815, he was also to write both his second and third symphonies, a further mass setting, a number of chamber works, and no fewer than 144 songs, including *Der Erlkönig*. It was an astonishing output for one so young.

If Schubert intended to show what a Viennese composer could do to exemplify Counter-Reformation guidelines on liturgical music, this *Mass in G* would be the perfect example, combining great beauty of expression with tremendous directness in communicating the text. Perhaps for this reason, we have to wonder what he meant by his treatment of some passages. Rather than point up crucial doctrinal elements in the words, he sometimes skipped over them altogether. Perhaps this is because he might have been ambivalent about their content. Several times, he simply omits chunks of text. Later publishers have often reinserted these by re-apportioning other text, but that seems an unwarranted mangling of Schubert’s possible intention. He omits *suscipe deprecationem nostram* and *Jesu Christe* from the *Gloria*, and he leaves out the *one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church* and the *Resurrection of the Dead* from the *Creed*. Do these lacunae indeed reflect doctrinal difficulties, or, after the initial composition, did he remove chunks of music for some other reason, sacrificing the text with the notes, or was he just careless when setting the words and slipped up? We will probably never know.

The motet at the Offertory is *A new song* by the Scottish composer, James MacMillan (b. 1959). He is one of the United Kingdom’s most successful and prolific contemporary composers. He is particularly upfront about his Roman Catholic faith – indeed, he is a lay Dominican – and has composed a considerable volume of liturgically-related music alongside his orchestral and other larger-scale and secular works. This motet was composed in 1997 as the result of a commission by Nicholas Russell for St Bride’s Episcopal Church in Glasgow, its purpose being to commemorate Russell’s mother, Kath, and also to mark his father’s 70th birthday. It was first performed by the church choir in March 1998, and, since then, has been recorded by several professional ensembles. The text is taken from Coverdale’s translation of Psalm 96, being the first two and the last verses of the psalm:

O sing unto the Lord a new song, sing unto the Lord all the whole earth. Sing unto the Lord and praise his Name, be telling of his salvation from day to day. For he cometh to judge the earth, and with righteousness to judge the world and the people with his truth.

This setting is for an SATB choir with organ, but the organ takes centre stage later on in the piece with a magnificent and dramatic interlude that occupies pretty much the entire last minute of this six-minute piece. Earlier, the work is built upon what are known as “pedal points” – long-held notes that anchor the harmony of a section of music around a particular pitch. As it so happens, these are quite often in the bass, most typically played on the

organ's pedals, hence the name. However, nothing is so simple in this life, and pedal points can occur actually anywhere in the harmonic texture, including at the top, although it is then usually considered polite to call it an "inverted pedal-point". This terminology has come to be used generally to describe this procedure in any kind of music, not just in pieces involving the organ. Macmillan uses pedal-points in this work that also act like "drones", for example like the permanently sounding notes that underpin bagpipe music, or the long-held notes that are a feature of much music in the Orthodox church's traditions.

The piece begins, then, with a simple statement of a melody by the sopranos over a quiet pedal-drone in the background; the organ then creates a decorated texture, over which the choir comes back in with a more decorated version of the tune. The music comes to a brief halt, and then the lower voices repeat it again with their own version of the drone, and this precipitates another version, this time with the voices singing in canon – the same kind of thing as *Frère Jacques*. The music comes to a halt once more, and then the canon re-starts over a drone in the lower voices, and it is from this final statement that the organ eventually breaks free to make its own dramatic solo statement that brings this beautiful work to a final close.

The *Magnificat* at Evensong is set by Luca Marenzio (1553-1599). A widely travelled and prolific composer, the main output for which he is remembered today is his vast contribution to the genre of the Italian madrigal, on which he was hugely influential. His approach is synonymous with elaborate word-painting, and this really helped him also to make his sacred works that much more vivid. This setting is for eight voices, being two four-part choirs, which Marenzio plays off against each other with a very elegant effect. Apart from the opening word, which is intoned, the rest of the setting is fully composed. There are, in fact, two versions of this setting abroad in the world: one significantly longer than the other, with many more repetitions of the text sections between the choirs, and one that significantly compresses the work, although all of the second version can be found in the first one. This setting of the *Magnificat* is paired with a *Nunc Dimittis*, also set for eight voices, by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). While the composers' respective approaches to word painting are very different, this makes for a very attractive set.

With the anthem, we find ourselves back in the UK, with *Laudibus in sanctis Dominum* by William Byrd (1539–1623). The anthem comes from his second book of *Cantiones Sacrae* from 1591. This was produced by Thomas East, a renowned London music printer, retailer and publisher whose premises were, as it so happens, in Aldersgate Street, near The Great. Byrd and Thomas Tallis (1505–1585), were granted exclusivity as music publishers by Elizabeth I, and, until 1596, when Byrd's patent expired, this represented quite a limitation on East's work. While he could engrave and print – and Byrd used him exclusively to do this with his works between 1588 and 1596 – he could not act as the actual publisher, except by licence. Nevertheless, he engraved, printed and sold a great deal of music in what cannot have been ideal circumstances. "Engraving", as the word suggests, was a manual process (taken over in more recent years by computers, but often still known by the same – now inappropriate – word) of incising notes into stone or metal plates. But even by Byrd's time, music was capable of being set in 'type', where the different notes were assembled together from individual note 'units' that were clamped together to form the musical 'text'. This was how East produced nearly all of Byrd's music, an example of the industrialization of the production of music as mechanization progressively took over from the artistry of the human hand.

Byrd's monopoly actually began in 1575, but for whatever reason, he took minimal advantage of this until 1588, when, quite suddenly, he began to make the most of it, and East was deeply involved. This was an important relationship: East distinguished himself from other printers partly by being willing both to print and distribute music, and by making English composers a focus of his attention. Importantly for Byrd and for Catholic worship in Britain, East was also willing to bring out uncompromisingly Catholic works in print.

Laudibus in sanctis is a motet in three sections and its text is a paraphrase of Psalm 150. Although a sacred work, Byrd cheerfully incorporates secular madrigal-style word painting within the music. In fact, he seems almost to relish doing this, as if he was determined to ensure that the secular world doesn't have all the best music. The psalm invites the listener to praise God in various ways: with the sound of the trumpet, lute and harp, with strings and pipe, and with cymbals and dances. Such a text is a gift to a composer with an imagination, and Byrd goes for it, most obviously when it comes to praising God in the dances, when he switches into triple time, and gives us a boisterous courtly dance.

It would be interesting to know when this work was first performed in the Priory Church, and at the hands of which Director of Music it premiered. It is, of course, most likely that its first appearance within our walls was with an English text acceptable to the Protestant world, something known as a *contrafactum* (the substitution of one text with another without substantial changes to the music), which might or might not have some connection with the original text (usually not, as it so happens). But somebody must have been the first to have this piece sung within our walls to the original text, with the word painting doing the job Byrd intended, and so completing what was a rather protracted journey from Aldersgate Street to St Bartholomew the Great.