

Music Notes 2018 – Sixth Sunday after Easter

The mass setting this Sunday is the *Missa Papæ Marcelli* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). Over many years, this setting became encrusted with a mythological belief that it “saved” western music virtually singlehandedly. The German composer Hans Pfitzner’s (1869–1949) opera, *Palestrina*, explored this myth in great depth. Alas, although the myth does not absolutely bear up in truth, there is some substance in it. Indeed, the myth has been cheerfully disparaged in these notes several times.

The legend appears to have started with comments written by the composer Agostino Agazzari (1578–1640) thirteen years after Palestrina’s death:

Music of the older kind is no longer in use, both because of the confusion and babel of the words, arising from the long and intricate imitations, and because it has no grace, for with all the voices singing, one hears neither period nor sense, these being interfered with and covered up by imitations...And on this account music would have come very near to being banished from the Holy Church by a sovereign pontiff [Pius IV], had not Giovanni Palestrina found the remedy, showing that the fault and error lay, not with the music, but with the composers, and composing in confirmation of this the Mass entitled Missa Papæ Marcelli.

Jesuit musicians found this a particularly engaging idea and perpetuated it enthusiastically.

Finally, in the first attempt at a definitive biography of Palestrina in 1828, the author – also a composer – Giuseppe Baini (1775–1844) supported the verity of the myth, describing the composer as “the saviour of church music” and speaking of the Council of Trent as having intended to “ban all polyphonic music”. It is conceivable that Cardinal and Archbishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo asked Palestrina to compose the mass to demonstrate that it was possible to have polyphonic music in which the text was still intelligible, or else Palestrina performed this feat off his own bat, and Borromeo was, so to speak, knocked over by what he heard and stayed the musical executioner’s hand. Of course, Agazzari simply said that Palestrina’s mass demonstrated that it was possible to create an intelligible, polyphonic setting, although he clearly believed that the Pope was minded to limit compositional freedom. Nevertheless, the documented history of the Council doesn’t really support the supposition that it was ever determined to ban the polyphonic treatment of text in sacred music.

The first mystery with this setting is *when* it was written. Pope Marcellus II reigned for a mere three weeks in 1555. The Council of Trent ran from 1545 until 1563, and initially Marcello Cervini degli Spannochi (he was the last of the Popes to use his own name as his papal name) was one of its three Presidents. This, of course, strengthens the idea that Palestrina was making a reference to the Council by naming the setting after one of the people charged with managing its affairs. Marcello was elected in succession to Julius III, the former Bishop of Palestrina, who had brought Giovanni Pierluigi to Rome in the first place. Julius proved something of a scandal-ridden Pope, in fact, not least because he had an “adopted nephew”, Innocenzo Ciochi Del Monte, whom he elevated to “Cardinal-Nephew” after his accession, and who was said to “share the Pope’s bed” as if he were his own son or grandson – although it was evidently not the questionable familial relationship that bothered his critic! What we know is that the first historical appearance of the mass is when it was copied into the manuscript book at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome in 1562 or 1563, when Giovanni Pierluigi was the Director of Music.

Interestingly, 1562 is also the date of the Council's declarations on music. This said that compositions should be *constituted...in such a way that the words be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of the listeners be drawn to desire of heavenly harmonies, in the contemplation of the joys of the blessed*. Giovanni Pierluigi undoubtedly was aware of this, and perhaps legend and reality do cross over here, in that he may have reacted by composing a work that really was his interpretation of this instruction, and named it for the President of the Council who subsequently became Pope.

On 28th April 1565, the Papal Choir's records state that the choir members assembled at the request of the Most Reverend Cardinal Vitellozzo Vitelli at his residence to sing some masses and to test whether the words could be understood, *as their Eminences require*. We only know of the identity of one of the settings that were performed, and it isn't this one. However, it is plausible that it was also sung on this occasion, because it was entered into the papal choir's codex that same year, and published formally two years later. This, perhaps, is the starting point of the legend, and, if it is correct, what it tells us is that those present agreed that Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina had really hit the nail on the head.

Last Thursday was the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross. This rather curious expression refers to the discovery of the True Cross by S. Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine – he who introduced Christianity to the Roman Empire. 'Invention' is derived from the Latin word *invenire*, which means 'to find'. We think of inventions as things that are constructed as completely new artefacts, but in earlier times, the creation of something new was seen more as a 'discovery' – a finding of something that was always potentially there – rather like the statue of a horse that is waiting to be 'found' in a block of uncarved marble.

The motet at the Offertory gives us an opportunity to be mindful of last week's feast day, while, on the last Sunday named for the season of Easter, it also reminds us of the crucifixion that was the necessary precursor to the Resurrection we have been celebrating. It is *Adoramus te, Christe* (also known equally well as *Christe, adoramus te*) by Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), a piece written while he was Director of Music at the Basilica of San Marco in Venice. In an earlier stage of his career, he had gone to work at the court of Vincenzo I of Gonzaga in Mantua as a vocalist and viol player: and he worked his way up to become Master of Music. While there, he met one Giulio Cesare Bianchi (1590–1661), himself a writer of motets. When Bianchi decided to publish a collection of such works, he asked his friend if he might contribute some of his excellent works to the book. Among the works Monteverdi sent were two associated with the Holy Cross, the five-part *Adoramus te* that we will hear this Sunday, and a six-part work using an adaptation of the *Adoramus te* text.

Feasts of the Holy Cross had a special position in Venice. First, the relics of St Helena – she who discovered the True Cross – were said to have been transported to the city in 1211. Furthermore, the city claimed – and still claims today – to possess one of the extant pieces of the True Cross – measuring 445,582 mm³ to be precise. Venetians therefore marked not only the Feast of the Invention of the True Cross but also Holy Cross Day on November 14th. The two festivals, together with the obvious attention paid to the Cross on Good Friday, kept a Venetian composer busy with this theme in any given year, and it is no wonder that there are two such motets by Monteverdi in Bianchi's collection. The text is familiar to us from the liturgy of Good Friday: *We adore you, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your holy cross, You have redeemed the world*.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in G* by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). He wrote several settings, conveniently using different keys each time – apart from one duplication prompted by an eight-part *Magnificat in Bb* written in memory of Hubert Parry (1848–1918) – which allows church musicians an easy way to catalogue them mentally. Each of the settings demonstrates a completely different way of setting the text with remarkable inventiveness. This setting dates from 1904. The characteristic feature of ‘this’ *Magnificat* is a rapid staccato right-hand pattern chattering its way up and down the keyboard, while a soprano solo takes the main burden of communicating the text of the *Magnificat*. It is undoubtedly one of the prettiest settings there is. It is also a good source of laboriously studious discussion between organists as to whether one ‘hops’ between the patterns of the right-hand accompaniment or attempts to create a smooth and more ‘politically correct’ fingering pattern.

The *Nunc Dimittis* gives us the darker colouring of an extensive baritone solo with the rest of the choir answering him. It is in fact a very demanding sing for the soloist – one of the times a church baritone comes nearest to a ‘Pavarotti moment’. Stanford’s settings could be conceived of as highly refined and bottled Anglican choral essences, an entirely indispensable part of the repertoire. Even in his lifetime, he was viewed as old-fashioned, perhaps even rather stuffy, but that’s just plain wrong, as any comparison of his vividly imaginative settings of these familiar texts readily demonstrates. And, of course, when you hear any of his now more available and performed secular music, you realize what a very substantial gift he possessed as a composer.

The anthem *Good Christian men, rejoice and sing* is by Ernest Bullock (1890–1979), perhaps best known for his anthem *Give us the wings of faith*. He was both a successful cathedral organist (Manchester as Assistant, and then Exeter and then Westminster Abbey as Organist) and an accomplished academic (Professor of Music at Glasgow University, and Director of the Royal College of Music from 1952 to 1960). This is a good boisterous anthem, derived from the familiar words and melody of the hymn book (in our *Common Praise* it is number 145, the words of which have been adjusted to be gender-neutral), and guaranteed to ginger up robust cheerfulness for this last Sunday that bears the name of the season.