

## Music Notes 2018 – Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Quinquagesima

This is, of course, a very special Sunday for us this year, being the day that our new Rector, Fr Marcus Walker, will be instituted, inducted, and installed. These three words describe three slightly different actions that are involved in transferring the parish and its properties (for example, ownership of the church buildings) into the hands of the new Rector, who is to hold them in trust, as well as exercising his pastoral and sacramental ministry within its bounds and among its membership. The Rector designate is taken by the Churchwardens together with the Archdeacon (who undertakes the actual transfer as a commission from the Bishop) to the west door, where the building is ceremonially transferred to him while he holds the handle of the door. Then we go to the bell tower, where he tolls the bell in order to inform the parish that his ministry has begun. Finally, he is led to the Rector's stall, where he is literally in-stalled by the Archdeacon, to begin his role in leading the worship by our church community. The Bishop then presents him to us as our new Rector, and after an opportunity to greet him in a suitable manner – for example, by applauding – he does indeed do this by reading the intercessions from his stall.

During the interregnum, one of the most frequent questions posed to me concerned whether the choice of a new Rector would take into account a love for the kind of music we are used to having in our services. It seems to me that the best way of answering this is to tell you that virtually all the music in the Induction service (to use a shorthand version for the whole service) has been chosen by Fr Marcus. This collection of pieces should certainly provide you with the answer to the question.

The setting is the *Missa Sancti Nicolai*, by the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732–1809). As it so happens, this is a setting that we have been used to hearing each year on Christmas Day, including this past Christmas, so it may be fresh in our minds. You may, therefore, feel that you have read some of this commentary rather recently – please forgive the repetition.

It is something of an understatement to say that Haydn is 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.

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 the course of 1772, Haydn composed the *Missa Sancti Nicolai* for performance on 6<sup>th</sup> December, the Prince's name day, clear evidence of the warm relationship that existed between composer and employer. 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.

The motet at the Offertory is *Hæc Dies* by the English composer William Byrd (1539–1623). While we do not always specifically know for which occasion a work such as this was composed, it is safe to say that this was written for the recusant English church in which Byrd was an active participant. One substantial piece of evidence for thinking this is that the text, which translates as *This is the day the Lord hath made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it. Alleluia!* is said to comprise the last words said by Fr. Edmund Campion, a Jesuit priest who ministered to Catholic communities in Elizabethan England, but who was arrested, tortured, tried, hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. Byrd was much affected by this, yet saw past the human tragedy to the positive message of the text. The piece ends with an especially joyfully cascade of *Alleluias*.

During the Communion, the choir will be singing the great motet by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), *Tu es Petrus*. This is especially associated with Papal events, because the Pope occupies the Seat of S. Peter, and this text is, obviously, about S. Peter. However, everything to do with priests and the apostolic succession (on which our new Rector is a considerable and very interesting expert from an Anglican perspective) also traces its lineage back to a rather wonderful pun in the Gospel according to S. Matthew. It occurs in chapter 16, after Peter declares Jesus to be *the Christ, the Son of the Living God*. Using the Aramaic word for “rock” at the key point, Jesus's response goes, *You are Kepha and on this kepha I will build my church*. The Greek in which the Gospel was actually written has the slightly less tidy *You are Petros and on this petra I will build my church*. *Petros*, a masculine noun, is an individual stone, whereas *petra* is a feminine noun meaning a mass of rock. In fact, with a little imagination, this can be made to work in English rather as in Aramaic. Had the words been addressed to Mr Hudson, the late American film actor, they would have been *You are Rock and on this rock I will build my church*. (This is only slightly spoiled by knowing that he was actually born Roy Harold Scherer, and

acquired the name by which we know him from the talent scout Henry Wilson, by mixing the Rock of Gibraltar with the Hudson River. Still, there is a small connection in that both apostle and actor were *given* the name *Rock*, and neither appears to have resisted it.)

Palestrina actually wrote three different settings of these words: the first in 1569 for seven voices and the last in 1593, the year before he died, for five voices. In between, in 1572, he wrote a setting for six voices that has become one of the most performed works in the repertoire from this period, and it is this version that we will hear on Sunday. It was almost certainly written for the coronation of Pope Gregory XIII, who was elected on 13<sup>th</sup> April that year. He it was who reformed the western calendar some ten years later and gave us what is called the Gregorian Calendar, successor to the Julian calendar and still the basis of our date system today.

Each of Palestrina's settings of this text is upbeat and optimistic in character, but this one surpasses both of the others. To our ears, it has a major key tonality – Palestrina and his contemporaries would have viewed and described this rather differently, but the effect is the same. He delights in splitting the choir into little blocks of singers with music that passes back and forth between them, and one can fancy that these represent the “stones” of the putative church being passed among the builders as the edifice is assembled, or perhaps that they signify the multiple parts from which the whole is constructed. Most of all, you will hear frequent upward scales in the voices, repeatedly illustrating musically that the building of the church progresses upwards.

The canticles at Evensong are the set known as *The Chichester Service* by William Walton (1902–1983). It is rather extraordinary to think that Herbert Howells (1892–1983) died just thirteen days after Walton, a remarkably quick cull of two of the greatest contributors in the twentieth century to the Anglican choral tradition. Howells added substantially to the repertoire of evening services, Walton considerably less. In fact, he struggled a great deal with setting religious texts, often commenting that one or other of the works he was writing had very boring words. For example, he found the Ordinary (i.e. the regular sections that are always there) of the Mass very dull indeed.

Walton's musical life almost didn't get off the ground. He was born the son of a musician in Oldham in Lancashire, which should have been a good start. However, his father was not the most reliable person, especially when it came to drink. In 1912, Walton's parents saw an advertisement inviting candidates for a place as a chorister at Christ Church in Oxford and applied on William's behalf. However, on the night before the boy was to be packed off to take a shot at the auditions, his father drank away the money needed for the train ticket. Mrs Walton was distraught, and – let us not forget, living as we do in an age obsessed with “maintaining” a personal privacy that is purely a metropolitan modern invention – everyone so knew everyone else's

business in the community in which they lived, that the greengrocer took pity on her and lent her the funds necessary to get them down to Oxford. There, they arrived too late for the auditions. However, Mrs Walton was a robust Lancastrian who would brook no nonsense about mere timetables, and, having travelled a considerable distance, prevailed upon Henry Ley, the Organist at the time, to put young William through his paces. He passed – obviously, because there would be little point to this story otherwise – and so began his life as a chorister, followed by a further period as an undergraduate and choral scholar at Christ Church. It was a fantastic musical grounding, and clearly revolutionized his life. From Oxford, he would continue to move further and further away from Lancashire, ultimately taking up residence on the island of Ischia, where he famously based the rest of his life.

In 1974, Walton wrote to his publisher: *How I dislike the words of Mag. and Nunc – most uninspiring. But as the queer dean has been very generous, I feel I must try to do something at least respectably good.* Today, this kind of language has a politically incorrect shock value. However, one has to remember that the decidedly heterosexual Walton's first appearance in the fashionable and culturally aware world of Britain was alongside the Sitwells (with whom he created *Façade*), and other louche or outrageous figures such as Stephen Tennant, Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler. There wasn't a group – for its day – more overtly and contentedly gay or honorary gay than that, so we can assume that his *queer dean* comment was more affectionately or humorously meant than spiteful. The Dean in question was Walter Hussey, who had previously asked him for a work while he was Vicar of St Matthew's, Northampton. Hussey had inherited significant wealth, which he largely used to benefit the institutions in which he served as a priest. St Matthew's, Northampton handed out numerous commissions at his expense, as in due course did Chichester Cathedral, after he became its Dean. When Walton turned down Hussey at Northampton, Benjamin Britten was commissioned instead, writing *Rejoice in the Lamb* for St Matthew's, a magnificent and valuable addition to the choral world. So, when a request came from Hussey a *second* time, albeit this time for Chichester, Walton was not going to ignore the call, and on receipt of a very generous cheque, felt obliged to deliver the goods.

In spite of his negative remarks about the inspiration he said that he did not find in the words, he produced two very exciting pieces of music. One might, if one were so minded, draw attention to the way that Howells responded to what he saw as the essential femininity of the *Magnificat*, whereas Walton from the outset presents it robustly, forcefully and dramatically – one could say bringing his own masculine outlook resolutely into the picture. His image of the Blessed Virgin is as something of a firebrand, rather than in any sense a meek or submissive figure. Yet, even if she seems surprisingly forcefully presented, he does capture in his music the atmosphere of ecstatic utterance that surely rings through the words of the *Magnificat*.

Lest any of this should seem critical, this is a thoroughly exciting and dramatic presentation of the canticles, and if at all possible, one would be well advised to take the chance to hear them live. There is a muscularity about them that is beguiling and stirring.

The anthem is the splendid *Antiphon*, the last of the *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). The text is a poem by the great metaphysical poet George Herbert (1593–1633), and speaks of the majesty and kingship of God, and how the response of all the earth should be to acclaim Him in every way possible. The structure makes reference to the refrain/verse/refrain structure of a liturgical antiphon. An energetic figure bustles up from the depths of the organ (originally the orchestra, of course), working away at fragments of the melody that are then taken up by the singers as they burst in over the restless accompaniment: *Let all the world in every corner sing, My God and King*. Changes of pace and texture occur in the verses of the Antiphon, yet always over busy figures in the organ that remind us that much is afoot throughout this whole energetic world. Finally, the choir makes one last dramatic statement of the refrain alone, and then the accompaniment rushes back in, crashing through to a totally exhilarating end.