

Music Notes 2018: Maundy Thursday to Easter Eve

Maundy Thursday

Since Ash Wednesday on 14th February, we have been consciously deprived of certain parts of our usual liturgical experience, a symbolic reflection of the way that this period of reflection and self-discipline prepares us for the drama that comes to a head at the end of this week. One of these deprivations has been the loss of the *Gloria* from the Eucharist, which we have not heard in the church since the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. Now, however, we come to the first of the great days that make up the Triduum, the three-day period that takes us from betrayal and death through to the Easter Resurrection. On the first of these days, we revisit the Last Supper, which has been the basis for the central act of worship for some two thousand years of Christian life. In a moment of striking beauty, this briefly overcomes the liturgical rigours of the season. It always seems as if the *Gloria* bursts through into the Mass of the Lord's Supper, as though refusing to be denied in this of all contexts. Then, the music becomes ever more austere as the story proceeds, moving on to the Garden of Gethsemane. The atmosphere of the church darkens and, finally, the Blessed Sacrament is laid to rest in poignant solitude on the Lady Chapel altar for the Watch until midnight, and through the lonely night. There is a kind of stripping away in the process not just of the high altar's ornamentation, but also of the sound world we usually inhabit in church: and this is stressed afresh when we come together on Good Friday with the organ firmly switched off, and the music strictly *a capella* during the Solemn Liturgy, after which the church is left utterly empty, even of the Blessed Sacrament.

The *Kyrie* and *Gloria* on Maundy Thursday must therefore catch our attention dramatically, and few do this as successfully as those of the *Messe cum júbilo* written in 1966 by the French composer Maurice Duruflé (1902–1986). Our own services are suffused with plainchant; indeed, the remainder of the Sung Eucharist after the *Gloria* is largely sung to chant. Duruflé, the very dedicated organist of St-Étienne-du-Mont in Paris from 1929 to the end of his life, so absorbed chant into his own music that some of his works amount in effect to highly coloured accompaniments of pre-existing chants, although often extended, mutated, transposed and otherwise processed. The *Messe cum júbilo* is written for a chorus of baritones with a baritone soloist who must be capable of reaching very demanding top notes. The highest of them comes where the text pleads for mercy in the light of our sins, the high pitch giving an extra layer of audible tension and anxiety to the prayer. This exuberant setting is among the most exciting pieces of music in the church's year, and, extraordinarily, this feat is accomplished with just a single vocal line and organ accompaniment – their very simplicity somehow making the music's dramatic flourish even more powerful. The next time we hear the *Gloria* will be when we start our Easter celebrations on the evening of Holy Saturday – chronologically a short period in time, but one that encompasses a huge liturgical journey.

During the service, the celebrant ceremonially washes the feet of servers and members of the congregation, following Jesus's own actions with his disciples in St John's account of the Last Supper. In John's Gospel, there is in fact no account of the institution of the Eucharist: the foot washing is the focal point, apart from Judas practically being instructed to go and complete his betrayal. So, we can assume the washing was seen by St John as an extremely significant symbolic action – indeed, one of the most important occurrences of that evening. Jesus sums up the point of this action: *If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an*

example, that ye should do as I have done to you. This is emphasized in the chant that concludes the foot washing rite, Ubi caritas: Where charity and love are, God is there. Christ's love has gathered us into one. Let us rejoice and be pleased in Him. Let us fear, and let us love the living God. And may we love each other with a sincere heart. Where charity and love are, God is there.

Good Friday

Good Friday is obviously a day with a very sombre aesthetic. Despite this, or perhaps equally because of this, it has inspired composers to write music of the very greatest beauty and passion. During the Solemn Liturgy at noon, we will hear the second of the settings by Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611) of the Passion narrative, this time according to the text of St John's Gospel. As with last Sunday's setting, the story is narrated by a singer known as the Evangelist, while individual and collective character parts are played by soloists and choir.

The Reproaches or *Improperia* date from the ninth century and were in regular use throughout most of Europe by the time that the Priory Church was founded nearly 900 years ago, in 1123. Even so, they may well not have been in use within our walls until a couple of hundred years thereafter, when their inclusion in the Liturgy of Good Friday was formalized by Rome. They are often performed in a setting derived in part from music by Victoria. However, we will be hearing once again the wonderful setting produced in 1984 by the British organist and composer, John Sanders (1933–2003). His first job after studying at the Royal College of Music and then at Cambridge, where he was an organ scholar, was as Assistant Organist at Gloucester Cathedral. From there, he went to be organist of Chester Cathedral in 1963. In 1967, however, he was called back to Gloucester, this time as Director of Music. When the cathedral introduced a revised Good Friday liturgy in 1984, he composed this wonderful setting of the *Reproaches*, taking as his structural inspiration the *Miserere* by Gregorio Allegri (1582 – 1652), with its alternating sections of polyphony and plainchant, although the resemblance does end there.

The text is constructed as reproaches addressed by the crucified Jesus to his people: *What have I done to you? How have I offended you?* Between the verses, we hear the *Trisagion*, a hymn of praise that tradition dates from Constantinople in the fifth century. *Holy God, Holy Strong, Holy Immortal, Have mercy on us!* In those days, the Christian Church could still be regarded as largely being in one 'piece', and this text spread across it, being adapted into various local liturgies. It continues to play an important role in the regular liturgy of the Orthodox Church and many other parts of the Eastern Church. In the Western Church, it has come to be associated primarily with this moment on Good Friday. At this moment in the service, when we personally come to the foot of the Cross, faction seems to break down, as we hear this distinctive refrain, which is shared by eastern and western Christianity.

We follow with one of the most enduring pieces of Good Friday music: *Crux fidelis*, reputedly set by King John IV of Portugal (1604–1656). It seems rather extraordinary that this wonderfully devotional piece came from his royal pen, because his political life was full of turmoil and drama – just by coming to the throne he precipitated a twenty-eight-year war with Spain. However, King John (more correctly: *João*) was also a person of great culture, especially in the field of music, writing important works about the subject, befriending many composers, and building a wonderful library of music that was, alas, later destroyed during

the Lisbon earthquake in 1755. The text of *Crux fidelis* is the eighth verse of the hymn known as *Pange lingua* (*Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle*). It was most probably intended to be sung as a Responsory at the end of every plainchant verse of the hymn, but nowadays is usually just performed as a stand-alone piece.

We think naturally of Anton Bruckner (1824–1896) as a symphonist with a vast body of substantial work to prove it. He was also a man of passionate Catholic faith, writing some thirty motets of great emotion and depth, and working as a church organist for a significant part of his life, during which his skill as an improviser attracted much attention. *Christus factus est* is from a set of four motets that were published together. Starting simply and quietly, it builds to a passionate climax before subsiding again to a peaceful conclusion. The text is from the Epistle to the Philippians: *Christ became obedient for us unto death, even to the death, death on the cross. Therefore God exalted him and gave him a name which is above all names.*

The structure of *Tenebræ* on the evening of Good Friday was created through the melding of the cathedral offices of Matins and Lauds and used exclusively during the last three days of Holy Week. Allegri's *Miserere*, which, as noted above, we heard on Ash Wednesday, is an example of a piece that was composed expressly for *Tenebræ*, in Allegri's case for use in the Sistine Chapel, where the service began at 3am. The music we use in this service is a combination of plainchant and wonderful settings of the *Responsories* by Victoria, and culminates in a further version of *Christus factus est*, this time set by Felice Anerio (c.1560–1614). He was very much a Roman composer, born and working in Rome for his whole life. He was first a member of the Julian Chapel Choir of St. Peter's before moving on to other church institutions, including the Collegio degli Inglesi, where he was *Mæstro di Capella*. When Palestrina (b.1525) died in 1594, it was Anerio who took over as the official composer to the papal choir. The position had been created especially for Palestrina, and as it so happened, they didn't continue it after Anerio. In fact, the younger composer had modelled his style closely on that of his predecessor, so the gear change will not have seemed at all severe.

Although by no means a long service, *Tenebræ* is extraordinarily atmospheric. This is accomplished partly through the beautiful music sung in the Priory Church's awe-inspiring architecture as the light leaves the sky, and partly through the fifteen lit candles at the east end of the church with which the service begins, being gradually extinguished during the course of the service, until the last one is carried out of sight behind the High Altar.

If the American composer John Cage (1912–1992) was correct that "all sound is music", what happens next, as everyone (this moment is not restricted to the choir, clergy and servers, but can and should be entered into by all) starts to bang books or whatever against the nearest resonant surface, seems to qualify for this description. It is known as the *Streptitus*, which means 'great noise', and has been interpreted by commentators as indicating a protest against the darkness, and a demand for the return of the light (looking forward hopefully to the Resurrection), or else as an allusion to the earthquake that the Gospels report as following the death of Christ on the Cross. More prosaically, it may be considered as originating in the Master of Ceremonies' use of a sound signal in the darkness to indicate that the clergy should now return to the sacristy. Whatever the origin or meaning, this final moment of vigorous sound, the last 'ritual' that we perform in church

before the First Fire of Easter, and which is rewarded with the reappearance of the fifteenth candle, does seem as if it is a timeless and somehow fundamentally human moment. In its crude hammering for attention it is like a baby crying out wordlessly to express its need for comfort or food. For all its primitive nature, this sound piece expresses the same longing that all the Passion music of Victoria and the music of all the other composers we will have heard in this season intended to express: our fundamental need and desire for the Grace of God in Salvation.

Easter Eve

The Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday marks the beginning of Easter. From this year, it will morph seamlessly into the First Mass of Easter, even though it is still Saturday evening. One might be surprised by this, unclear how, if Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, we could celebrate Easter as soon as the following evening. This is because the church inherited from its Jewish roots the understanding that the day begins at sundown. This is, indeed, part of the story of Good Friday: the authorities are anxious that all those executed on crosses should be dead and down before the start of the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Good Friday. Jesus said he would rise on the third day. The first day is therefore Good Friday, the second is Holy Saturday, beginning at sundown on the Friday evening, and the third day is Easter Day, beginning at sundown on the Saturday, and known as Easter Eve, just as Christmas Eve is the evening before Christmas Day. The biblical account says the women found the tomb already empty early on the Sunday morning, and so the Resurrection must be understood to have taken place during the night.

The music of the Easter Vigil also emerges out of the darkness. Beginning with the Deacon's three stark cries of *The Light of Christ* into a building illuminated initially only by the paschal candle he or she carries, and the people's response, *Thanks be to God*, we move to the lectern, where the *Exsultet* is proclaimed in chant by the Deacon into the huge space, amid flickering candlelight that still fails to penetrate the darker corners of our extraordinary building. Then scores of other candles throughout the building are brought to life and the first *Gloria* of Easter, absent throughout Lent apart from being heard once at the Maundy Thursday Solemn Eucharist, bursts from the choir and organ and the whole space seems to come to life. Lit now almost entirely by candles, the church looks the way it will have appeared on such an occasion for the first 750 or so years after its foundation.

The setting on this evening is the *Messe Solennelle* by the French composer, Louis Vierne (1870–1937). The origins of this dramatic work lie in a summer holiday Vierne spent in 1899 in Cayeux-sur-Mer in Picardie, where he began to sketch out a mass for choir and orchestra, which he dedicated to the composer, organist and director of the Paris Conservatoire, Théodore Dubois (1837–1924). It was Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937), Vierne's "boss" at St Sulpice, where he was still assistant at the time, who pointed out that this instrumentation would limit the practicality of the work, commenting that one could not always count on having an orchestra available. How true! Instead, Widor recommended writing it for the two organs commonly available in many large Parisian churches. The first performance in fact took place at St Sulpice on 8th December 1901, by which time Vierne was well ensconced as *Organiste Titulaire* at Notre Dame. Nevertheless, Charles-Marie Widor played the Grand Organ, while at the Choir Organ was the composer himself.

This is followed by the setting of *Sicut cervus* by Palestrina (1525–1594). The words are from Psalm 42: *Like as the hart desireth the waterbrook, so longeth my soul after thee, O*

God. In Palestrina's day, these words would have been sung on the way to the font for the renewal of the baptismal waters and the paschal baptism of candidates at the service. This setting is in fact just the first part of a longer piece that is often now sung as two separate pieces, the second being *Sitivit anima mea (my soul is athirst for God)*. *Sicut cervus* is its composer's best-known motet and an elegant example of his most developed style. Peter Phillips, Founder and Director of The Tallis Scholars – who have performed so much of Palestrina's output – writing in *The Musical Times* in 1994, drew attention to the way that Palestrina's music, for all its serene and balanced elegance, is nevertheless thoroughly imbued with joy. He observed that most composers get more mileage out of an anguished musical vocabulary, and yet Palestrina – without trivializing his response to serious matters in any way – manages to radiate a genuine joy in life, in God, and in the liturgy. Of course, it is easier to feel this with performances that do not make him sound austere, remote and chilly. *Sicut cervus* is a good example of exactly what Peter Phillips meant.

Victimæ paschali laudes is one of only four medieval sequences that survived a series of musical revisions determined by the Council of Trent. The authorship of the text is usually attributed to Wipo of Burgundy, who lived in the early eleventh century and was chaplain to the German Emperor Conrad II. *Christians, offer your thankful praises to the paschal victim*, it begins. The setting is once again by Victoria, who almost turns parts of it into a kind of dance of joy at the good news of the Resurrection.

The Offertory Motet is *Surrexit a mortuis* by Charles-Marie Widor, whom we have noted already as having been Vierne's "boss" at St Sulpice. This dramatic work was written originally for both organs of the church, as was the case with Vierne's mass, but the motet adapts similarly well to a single instrument and our relatively confined space. *He rose from the dead, Christ, the Son of God, the good shepherd, the shepherd whop, for his flock, laid down his life. As a victim for us he was sacrificed, the Christ, as a victim for us he rose from the dead. Alleluia.*