

Music Notes 2018 – Lent V: Passion Sunday

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the so-called *Missa Brevis* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). “So-called” because it actually isn’t particularly *brevis*. In fact, it is quite hard to see what might distinguish this work from many other Palestrina masses in terms of length or musical intensity. One distinctive aspect of this work is that it is not a parody mass – that is, it is not based on a pre-existing motet that is being used as the jumping-off point for the compositional process. Nor is it a *cantus firmus* mass – that is, one that uses a pre-existing plainchant as thematic material by making it part of the choral texture throughout. It is indeed a completely original composition. Although most masses at this time *did* use either parody or chant as their basis – thereby knitting the work firmly into the liturgical calendar, or at least providing some theological reference – it was by no means unknown to start from scratch like this. Indeed, masses of this kind were quite useful precisely because they had no particular calendrical or theological anchor, and so could be used more flexibly throughout the church year. However, it was more usual to refer to such works as, for example, *Missa sine nomine* (*Mass without a name*). In this case, *Missa brevis* may just be a convenient alternative term being pressed into service, since Palestrina produced at least four *sine nomine* (without name) masses, not to mention three *Missæ sine titulo* (*Masses without title* – there seems to be no detectable distinction in meaning between these) and a few others with completely non-specific titles.

One of the advantages of both the parody and *cantus firmus* techniques is that they give the composer an automatic unifying principle for a setting. This appears to work even if the listener does not, or cannot, track the plainchant as it recurs in each of the movements of the mass. To some extent, the human brain subconsciously checks off familiar material, recognizing points of continuity in what it receives through the ears. Perhaps even more importantly, the composer is disciplined by the material, which encourages a uniformity of approach that generates a sense of stylistic unity within and between the movements. When, as in this case, that automatic unifying principle is absent, the composer has to generate it *ex nihilo* from nothing – or else the music simply won’t cohere. In the case of this setting, Palestrina does this with the little phrase with which the *Kyrie* begins. The alto line sings a long first note, then drops a third and then goes up a note. This tiny little motif then recurs throughout the rest of the setting, and, curiously for something so small, is extraordinarily effective and noticeable.

While this setting is not as concise as its name suggests it should be, it is elegantly and precisely constructed and the overall effect is of compactness without actually being short. Perhaps this is where the name makes sense: it has a perceived brevity because it does not weary the listener at any point with the slightest suspicion of musical waffle. All the way through, that little inward-bending motif keeps recurring, – so simple a thing, and yet the whole work seems to grow out of its beguiling little curl of a line.

The motet at the Offertory is the beautiful miniature *Drop, drop slow tears* by the British composer William Walton (1902–1983). You may recall that Walton’s musical life almost didn’t get off the ground when his mother’s attempt to have him accepted as a chorister at Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford was almost derailed by his

father's drinking away the price of the train tickets down from the family home in Oldham in Lancashire. Still, with the help of a loan from the local greengrocer, Mrs Walton managed to make the journey, with son in tow, and browbeat the Organist into testing William, and he was duly accepted. In fact, his Oxford career, which continued from chorister to undergraduate, was not a complete success, and, in spite of his unquestioned genius, he failed his exams repeatedly, and eventually went down without a degree.

Nevertheless, Walton had learnt a great deal during the many years he spent in and around Christ Church, and was what can only be described as a determined composer from an early age. *Drop, drop slow tears* began as a piece for four treble voices, and a minor third higher in pitch than the version we know today. Nevertheless, it is recognizably roughly the same work we know today, and the extraordinary thing is that this was written at Easter 1916, roughly the same time that Hubert Parry (1848–1918) was writing what we know as the hymn *Jerusalem*. *Drop, drop slow tears* begins with a somewhat astonishing discord. We mustn't overstate the conservatism of English musical language at the time, but the most inventive and acoustically challenging work of the period was mainly to be found in mainland Europe and the United States – for example, Charles Ives's (1874–1954) iconoclastic *Fourth Symphony* was written the same year – so this discord is only so unexpected because it was an English schoolboy creating it. Benjamin Britten would be doing much the same kind of thing ten years later, so the seeds were being sown here of a British musical language that would simply germinate here somewhat later than elsewhere.

The following year, the now fifteen-year old Walton revised *Drop, drop slow tears*, changing the choral texture to that of a conventional four-part choir, and bringing the pitch down a minor-third. He was to go on revising the piece from time to time – a very characteristic process for him of slow refinement – and the final version (known as “the third version”) that is now published as the definitive one dates from 1930.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong is from the *Sixth Service* by the British composer Thomas Weelkes (1576–1623), who was organist of Winchester College and then Chichester Cathedral as well as being a Gentleman Extraordinary at the Chapel Royal. Many people think of him as the composer of rather charming madrigals, and, indeed, he was busy with that activity from a young age, publishing his first volume, a critical success, when he was just 21. However, he also wrote a great deal of church music, including ten settings of the evening canticles. There is, however, a very clear division in his church music between pieces written for smaller and larger works, and it seems likely that this is because Chichester only ran to a “half choir”, while the Chapel Royal managed a full-scale choral operation. The *Sixth Service* belongs in this case to the works for Chichester.

British composers of this period appear to have experimented with writing more interconnected service music. They would often, of course, link the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* either melodically or by a stylistic mirroring, and Weelkes took this a little further in some of his settings by using the same *Gloria* at the end of both canticles – as he does in this case, although this was a relatively unusual procedure at this time. However, this seems to have gone further, with the canticles and possible anthems to be used in the same service also being linked together by

quotation. In the case of the *Sixth Service* there is a clear quotation in the opening sections of the *Magnificat* from Weelkes's own verse anthem *Why art thou so sad?* as well as a further quotation later from *Give ear, O Lord*. Of course, he may just have been one of those composers who likes a passage he writes so well that it also turns up in a different context, but there are examples of this procedure in other composers of the period, suggesting that this may have reflected a music selection practice common in churches and cathedrals at the time.

Weelkes also provides the anthem, *When David heard that Absalom was slain*. The story behind the piece concerns Absalom, the third son of King David, reportedly the most handsome man in the Kingdom. Popularity and ambition turned his head and he raised a revolt against his father. In the battle of Ephraim Wood, he was accidentally caught by his head in the branches of a tree and, being found helplessly hanging there by his father's defending forces, was slain by them. The text of the motet takes up the story: *When David heard that Absalom was slain, he went up to his chamber over the gate, and wept: and thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!*

Weelkes sets these words most emotively, and, of course, it is not difficult to sympathize with King David, who evidently wanted to put down the rebellion, but had not counted on this meaning the death of the son he loved dearly in spite of everything. But there is more to this. Robert Quinney, formerly an organist at the Priory Church and now Director of the choir of New College, Oxford, has noted that this setting, together with 21 other extant settings from the same period by various composers of this text or its parallel account of David mourning Jonathan, had no obvious liturgical purpose in the early seventeenth-century English church. So, why were they written? The answer is that they were a response to the death in November 1612 from typhoid fever of the eighteen-year old Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, heir to King James I. A spectacularly popular figure, in spite of his austere outlook on matters of conduct and religion, his death was regarded as a national tragedy as well as a massive personal one for the King and his family. The Prince was, in fact, a considerable patron of the arts, including particularly musicians, obviously explaining why so many composers took up their pens on hearing of his sad demise. Right at the outset of Passiontide, our sympathies are engaged by a motet about a father mourning the death of his son, written as a sign of respect for a father mourning his son.

This is what is known as a "full anthem" – that is to say, not a verse anthem that alternates sections of solo with material for the choir, but rather one in which the choir sings throughout. This helps to give this the character of a sacred madrigal, and Weelkes, who was a fine secular madrigalist as well, seems to have taken his cue from this genre, imbuing the setting with music that gives stronger tugs on the emotions that might have been considered usual in sacred music, as well as many simply illustrative musical gestures. For example, right at the start, David hearing the news is illustrated by four of the six voices singing the phrase *When David heard*, followed by another composition of four voices of the six answering with a hushed echo: *when David heard*. As the news of Absalom's death is described, the harmony becomes ever more tormented. When David goes up to his room above the gate, two music illustrations are provided: an upwards leap on the word "up", and an overall arch shape to the line, rising and falling, describing the arch of the gate.

The music comes to a brief rest, and then we hear David's words, at first hesitantly, as though he can barely speak between sobs. The first soprano begins alone with the word "O", and after a momentary hesitation, the rest of the choir joins in with a chord also setting the single syllable "O", and then it all seems to break down and come to a momentary standstill. The second soprano tries to get it started again with another "O", and the rest of the choir joins in after another hesitation, and they try to get through the entire text of the section. Again, the music seems to come to a stop, to be restarted by the tenor, and then by the bass, in a painfully halting progress. The tenor leads off an imitative section of painful cries that passes all the way through the choir with the words *Would God I had died for thee*. The end of this section leads to a final series of almost inarticulate phrases from the choir stumblingly repeating the King's words: *O Absalom, my son, my son, my son*.

There are some rather annoying recordings of this piece available that smooth it all out, aiming to make it all rather languorously beautiful. They certainly make the agony in the harmony audible, but by aiming for beauty and "flow", completely fail to "get" the drama of the setting. The great conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt once said in an interview: *For me, security and beauty are not compatible. When you seek beauty, you have to forget security, and you have to go to the rim of catastrophe. There you find the beauty. If a musician makes a mistake, a crack, because he risks everything to get the most beautiful thing and he fails, then I thank him for this failure because it is only with this risk you can get the beauty, the real beauty. The real beauty is not available at all. If you seek security, you should make another profession.*

The world is treated to rather a lot of choral music these days that sets out simply to be beautiful, and by doing so completely fails to deliver the drama that composers endeavoured so diligently to create, even trying to force beauty on music designed deliberately and knowingly to illustrate ugliness and suffering. Weelkes never expected his music to be sung with the burnished elegance certain current professional ensembles employ as a substitute for real engagement with the music, and not just with the music, but more importantly with the meaning of the piece.

Perhaps this phenomenon is reflective of a society that has become so alienated from the meaning of what will occupy us over the next two weeks that the ability to engage with the composer's intentions in writing such music becomes difficult, and even rather embarrassing. Perhaps people who find themselves unable or unwilling to believe also subconsciously refuse to engage properly with religious subject matter in music – although they would happily engage with being a fictional character in an opera. Whatever the reason, the result is that the gap in understanding, sympathy and engagement with the subject matter is filled in with endlessly elegant and beautifully articulated sound, which may simply obscure what the composer was expressly trying to communicate in the first place.

Passiontide and Holy Week are not about beauty: they are in part about facing up to the price of our salvation and our own role in this eternal drama, and responding to it as it is laid out in all its painful reality before us in various ways. For us, the music of the next two weeks is a vital part of how we experience this.