

Music Notes 2018 – The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Count Hieronymus von Colloredo, Prince Archbishop of Salzburg from 1771 to 1803 (continuing as a mere Archbishop until his death in 1812 after the position was secularized following a rather humiliating self-imposed military defeat in the Napoleonic Wars) was the employer of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) for four and a half rather unhappy years from 1773–1777. Colloredo was a great believer in the reforming policies espoused by the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II. Some of these concerned religious matters, and among these was the question of the length and complexity of services. Colloredo was firmly of the opinion that three quarters of an hour was quite sufficient for even a high-powered mass celebrated by the Prince Archbishop himself, and let it be known that this was what he wanted from his court composers. Mozart's letters make it clear that he found this a severe restriction. Moreover, in 1768 and 1769, he composed two masses, both in C (K.139 and K.66), each lasting over a thousand measures or bars. He had actually written substantially shorter masses prior to working for Colloredo alongside the lengthy works, but it is notable that all the masses written in those four and a half years are much shorter than K.139 and K.66.

In fact, you can see what happened to Mozart's compositional approach by looking at the years concerned. In 1768 he wrote a *Missa Brevis* that would have met with Colloredo's approval at 489 bars. Then came the two larger works: 1,010 bars in the same year, and 1,110 in 1769. Then there is a pause, during which Mozart and his father were travelling abroad. Back in Salzburg, Mozart re-opened his batting with 863 bars, surely too many for the Prince Archbishop. Probably he was told this because his two settings in 1774 were 458 and 569 (K.192, this week's setting) bars respectively. Perhaps K.192 earned him a rebuke for drifting upwards in length, because 1775 sees a single setting with just 360 bars. Then there are no fewer than five settings in 1776, at 374, 437, 523, 666, and 884 bars. Had anyone been counting, they might have deduced that his employment was not going to last much longer.

In fact, the term *Missa Brevis* doesn't necessarily just mean a "short mass": it can also mean a mass lacking one or more of the full complement of movements, especially the Creed, which might be sung to chant on a Sunday, and omitted altogether on other occasions. But the German-American musicologist and music editor, Alfred Einstein, a great writer on Mozart (but not on relativity – that was Albert, who *may* have been a distant relative: the link is very unclear), also saw the term *Missa Brevis* as covering works where the longer texts – i.e. the *Gloria* and the *Credo* – were each treated as a single movement and not split up into individual contrasting movement sections. He further thought that if the soloists were simply integrated into the musical texture rather than having separate movements, that, too, made it a *Missa Brevis*. He even thought that if it were not written for performance at a specific event, it also was quite likely to count as a *Missa Brevis*.

This week's setting, the *Missa Brevis in F*, K.192, is a mid-length mass in terms of Mozart's output of this kind, and it certainly does have the characteristic of integrated soloists and a continuously composed *Gloria* – and *Credo* for that matter, although we don't hear that movement in our service. In fact, Mozart's extraordinarily fertile imagination is well up to making even something relatively short and terse interesting and memorable. The final movement, *Agnus Dei*, obeys an important Colloredo principle that turns up again and again in Mozart's masses of this period: the serious nature of the *Agnus Dei* text is maintained all the way until we get to the words *Dona nobis pacem*. Here, Colloredo explicitly wanted something upbeat and positive so that the mass ends on a high note; and Mozart obliges.

The motet at the Offertory is *O God, who by the leading of a star* by Thomas Attwood (1765–1838), an English composer and organist, who was in fact a favourite pupil of none other than Mozart. He had been sent abroad by the then Prince of Wales, who later became George IV, who thought him a remarkably gifted young man, and put his money where his mouth was by paying for four years of study on the mainland, the latter part of which was spent in Vienna, where his studies with Mozart took place. This considerably expanded his horizons, not surprisingly, and certainly set him on the road to a successful career in music. He was appointed organist of St Paul's Cathedral in 1796, and numerous other positions of importance came his way. He now lies buried beneath the organ in the cathedral itself.

There was briefly a fashion in the early 1800s for using the Prayer Book collects as texts for anthems, triggered probably by a collection of thirty such compositions by one John Garth (1721–1810) towards the end of the eighteenth century. Attwood used three collects in 1814 as texts, and *O God, who by the leading of a star*, the Collect for the Epiphany, was one of them. Collects tend to fall into three sections: 1. God is addressed, often drawing attention to some aspect of the divine nature or to God's actions in some way; 2. a petition that forms the heart of the prayer; and 3. a closing formula. Attwood reflects this structure in his composition with three distinct sections of music that pick up on the structure of the text. When he wasn't busy composing church music, Attwood wrote quite extensively for the theatre, and when he wasn't doing that, he wrote glees. These, usually rather jolly and usually not very consequential pieces of music, are characterized by quite briskly moving inner as well as outer vocal parts, by a certain degree of internal imitation between the voices, and by short contrasting sections of music. It isn't therefore much of a surprise to find that this anthem contains all these elements – you might like to listen out particularly for the slightly hysterical alto part at the start. Its very first line includes a dramatic swoop upwards and then a run downwards, perhaps indicating the motion of being led by the star. As if this were not enough, at its next entry, the soprano part has already commenced a firm upwards line for the words *at the leading of a star*, and the alto comes in off the beat, and is then dragged – or should one say, led – upwards in a matching syncopated version of the line. It may be rather obvious

word-painting, but it is also great fun, and one suspects that some of Attwood's light-hearted and quirky approach to music might have been picked up from teacher Wolfgang's equally cheeky example.

At Evensong, we will hear one of the *Three Choirs Services* by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), this one being for Worcester Cathedral and written in 1951. In 1919, Howells had met Lady Olga Montagu, the sister of the Earl of Sandwich at a musical evening in Westbourne Terrace and a strong friendship developed between them. The 27-year old Howells was still at the start of his career, and Lady Olga evidently decided he needed a helping hand. Among other generous gifts, she equipped him with a piano, and a gold watch, and even made it possible for him to buy the house in Barnes in which he and his family lived from 1946 until the end of his life.

At the beginning of August 1951, Lord Sandwich wrote to him to tell him that Lady Olga was seriously ill. Howells immediately wrote to her, but by the time the letter arrived, she had already died, and Howells received the news on what was also his thirty-first wedding anniversary. He was already committed to write a set of Evensong canticles for Worcester Cathedral, and he started composing them immediately, completing them the next day. While he did not specify a dedication, it is unthinkable that so great a loss would not have been substantially on his mind while composing.

The *Magnificat* opens with a quite lengthy and decorated passage for sopranos alone, and it is difficult not to feel that in some way this represents Olga. The rest of the choir joins in eventually, and there is certainly much vivid characterisation of the text. There is also something of a sense of an underlying darkness, a “smiling through the tears”, as it were. The *Nunc Dimittis* begins with the choir singing together the poignant words *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace* to an unusually extended, even slightly tortuous phrase, evoking a similar feeling.

The anthem is an excerpt from the first oratorio composed by Edward Elgar (1857–1934), *The Light of Life (Lux Christi)*. By the time he composed this, although still young, Elgar was already an established composer, and it was no surprise, therefore, that he was commissioned to write a major choral work by the Three Choirs Festival for performance in their 1896 season, which was held that year in Worcester, Elgar's home territory. Still, although he had written choral music, oratorio was a new genre for him. He was indeed soon to compose *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*, all much more substantial pieces. In fact, lists of Elgar's works tend just to regard *The Light of Life* as some sort of cantata, as they do his other work on a similar scale, *The Music Makers*, which dates from 1912. Nevertheless, the orchestral scale of both works really makes it difficult not to regard both as “small oratorios”.

Elgar, a Catholic with a determination not to be ashamed of his faith in a country that still felt very ambiguous about the Roman church, wanted to call his work *Lux Christi*. His music publishers, Novello, were alert to the commercial implications of such a choice and prevailed upon him to give it primarily an English title, with the result that it was published as *The Light of Life* with *Lux Christi* in brackets as a subtitle.

More than one movement from this work has found its way into fairly regular performance, even if the whole work is only rather rarely performed or recorded. The orchestral *Meditation* that opens the work is among these, and so is the choral movement *Seek him that maketh the seven stars*, which has sometimes been performed at our Epiphany Carol Service. The final movement is known as *The Light of the World* from its first line of text, and this is the music that will form our anthem. The text of the work is largely derived from John's Gospel, but with what www.elgar.org refers to as some rather unsatisfactory additions by the Reverend Capel Cure, who was then Vicar of Bradninch in Devon, and a friend of Elgar's. Edward Capel Cure, incidentally, came to be sufficiently prominent, such that a portrait of him hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, while the Royal Collection holds a copy of his sermon for the funeral of John Winston Spencer-Churchill, 7th Duke of Marlborough, (1822–1883), with the snappy title of *Sudden Death: Is It To Be Depreciated?* If you wish to know his conclusion on this point, you will be happy to learn that a "print-on-demand" copy of the sermon can be purchased from Amazon for £16.95 in hardback and £13.99 in paperback.