

Music Notes 2014 – Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

The setting at this week's Solemn Eucharist is one of the best known of those by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), *Missa Aeterna Christi Munera*. One might think that the better regarded masses would be the more florid and complex versions, but in fact, it is for the very directness and conciseness of this setting that it is particularly highly valued. One might also think that this makes it an early work, on the assumption that a more florid setting would require more developed skills. However, it was first published in 1590, only four years before the death of the composer, and the level of skill required to write flowery music and more direct, concise music tends (but only tends) to be counter-intuitively in inverse proportion. It is rather akin to Mark Twain's famous comment *I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead*. Concision matched nevertheless with superb quality comes only with the greatest skill level in composition, and Palestrina was by this time at the summit of his abilities.

As the basis for the setting, Palestrina uses material from a hymn from the Matins of Apostles and Evangelists, reworking its melodic ideas in various ways for each of the movements. As so often in his masses, there are two polyphonic settings of the Agnus Dei, the last of these containing an extra tenor part in order to have an enriched and more exciting texture as the final climax of the work. Of course, he expected there to be an additional plainchant Agnus Dei between the two polyphonic versions, so that the triple Agnus Dei would match the Kyrie-Christe-Kyrie tripartite structure at the start of the mass. We tend not to do that in our slightly more attenuated liturgical practice today, but it is interesting that the ordinary (i.e. regular) parts of the mass were intended to begin and end with these triple structures. An obsession in the Church with threes hardly needs explaining...

More Palestrina at the Offertory: his motet *Venit Michael Archangelus*. This is from his first book of motets published in 1563 – so this is early music – and it is set for five voices. He is clearly interested in lending Michael an other-worldly character, and he starts the motet off in a deliberately angular way in order to emphasize that this Archangel is inclined to do unpredictable things. We are used to Palestrina's somewhat smooth lines of adjacent notes that flow around so languidly. When he does make a leap, it generally has a word-painting point to it. In this case, the initial melody involves starting with a note from which he leaps down (well, Archangels have to come *down* to earth) a fifth followed by an immediate leap back up to the original note. These aren't short notes, but even so, the angularity of the line stands out compared with his usual sonorous lines. It continues in the same vein: the line goes down one note, and then up a fourth. This motif has actually done something quite odd here, because (in the top part) in a very short space of time it has gone from a low G up to a top F, describing a rather athletic and unusual seventh by Palestrina's standards. This is replicated more or less in all the parts, and although

the motet continues with lines built of more adjacent notes (with many little upward runs, again drawing attention to the Archangel's more usual sphere of activity), every now and then, we get another angular moment towards the end to remind us with whom we are dealing. It is a delightfully evocative piece for S. Michael's Day, which falls this year on Monday. More about angels at Evensong.

The voluntary at the end of the Solemn Eucharist is *Les anges* by Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992). The angels in this case are the ones who visited the shepherds in the fields in the Christmas narrative. The piece is the sixth movement of Messiaen's suite *La Nativité du Seigneur*, written in 1935 in Grenoble and first performed the following year at La Trinité in Paris. The unusual system of composition that Messiaen had derived from his own study of Indian music makes this sound like very modern music, and it must have knocked listeners backwards at the time. Nevertheless, although Messiaen can seem initially very challenging, only a little patience in listening to his music can suddenly result in his distinctive patterns of melody and harmony and their vivid colours suddenly emerging and quickly becoming surprisingly familiar. In this case, he sets them to work in a wild ecstatic dance as the angels swoop around the skies and over the manger until they vanish up into the sky and out of sight.

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 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, something that seems hard to understand.

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 so distraught, and – let us not forget in an age which is now 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 mere nonsense about timetables, and, having clearly 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 had been alongside the Sitwells (with whom he created *Façade*), and louche or even outrageous figures such as Stephen Tennant, Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler, and 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 at least in some sense more affectionately or humorously meant than spiteful. The Dean in question was Walter Hussey, who had asked him for a work previously while 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 when he became its Dean. When Walton turned down Hussey at Northampton, he commissioned Benjamin Britten instead and received *Rejoice in the Lamb* in return, a magnificent and valuable addition to the choral world. This time, Walton was not going to ignore the call, and on receipt of a very generous cheque, he did indeed feel obliged to deliver the goods. In spite of his negative remarks about the inspiration 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 *Plebs Angelica* by Sir Michael Tippett (1905–1998), a composer whose origins lie at the other end of the country from those of Walton, his family coming from Cornwall. Nevertheless, he was born and grew up in London (arguably, even further away from Lancashire than Cornwall). He also was commissioned by Walter Hussey, in his case for a fanfare that opened the festival service that included the first performance of *Rejoice in the Lamb* mentioned above. Britten and Hussey were both reticent about their sexuality – it is a measure of Walton’s comfort with the subject that he was so evidently in on the secret at a time when it was not possible to talk about it openly. Tippett was far more “out there” at a time when this was still not theoretically possible. *Plebs Angelica* was the result of a commission from Canterbury Cathedral in 1943, when his name was still not at all well-known. This was also the year in which he was imprisoned for being a conscientious objector who also refused non-combat duties on the grounds that they also served the purposes of war. This makes it especially interesting that so “establishment” an institution was willing to commission him at that time.

The decision to do this was the choice of the Revd Joseph Poole, the then Canon Precentor, who met the composer when Tippett was visiting Alfred Deller, the celebrated countertenor, who was then a lay clerk at the Cathedral. Tippett was very critical of the Church and had scandalized his school by professing a loud and no doubt tiresomely adolescent atheism as a boy – although he stuck with it later on in life. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that his output of liturgical music is almost vanishingly small. In fact, apart from a set of evening canticles for St John’s College Cambridge, this is more or less it. He added an element to this work that in its time would have been additionally alienating to a good Anglican congregation, even if it doesn’t strike us as such today: the text is in Latin. For an Anglican cathedral – arguably, *the* Anglican cathedral – this was a potential stumbling block for listeners at a time when English texts still denoted proper Protestant piety and most great works written in the past to Latin texts had often poor quality English texts forced upon them instead. James O’Donnell, who has recorded this work, draws attention to the way that Tippett makes allusion in this highly effective motet to its Tudor antecedents in its imitative and polyphonic style and the choice of unaccompanied double choir writing. Nevertheless, as he asserts, this is not pastiche, but rather a reworking of core elements from the past into a new kind of musical language. You know what is being referred to, but without ever thinking that the composer is pretending to write that kind of music.

The voluntary at the end of Evensong is *Alleluyas* by the great British organist Simon Preston (b.1938). His educational story is a little like that of William Walton, but with a Cambridge twist. In his case, he went to King’s College Cambridge as a chorister and then later returned as an undergraduate, although in his case it was as organ scholar. His time there under David Willcocks was followed by a spell at Westminster Abbey as Assistant Organist, and then a magnificent spell (personal

prejudice and experience showing through here) as Organist at Christ Church Oxford (cementing the William Walton connection by wonderful performances of his music) before he returned as Organist and Master of the Choristers back at Westminster Abbey. He left the Abbey for the second time in 1987 and has been a freelancer ever since. Throughout, his career has been marked by dual talents as one of the greatest organ exponents in the entire world – certainly one of those with the greatest technical security – and as a choral director producing the most precise and disciplined results. Nigel Short, who sang under his direction at the Abbey, can attest to the latter. His output as a composer has not been vast, but the works that have been published are distinctive, very high quality, and extremely exciting in every case. This organ work is often described by tiresome critics (there is rarely any other kind) as being *in the style of Messaien*. Well, it is true that one wouldn't have written this piece as it is without knowing Messaien's music, but it is so boring to damn with faint praise in this way. It is rather like saying that Bach was influenced by Buxtehude, but it is very difficult to see how useful this is. Critics of this kind think themselves so clever by being able to comment on the obvious. This kind of swiping criticism misses the fact that music that does not grow organically out of the previous musical language invariably leaves its audience high and dry with no points of reference to hang on to, and ultimately is simply ignored. In other words, the lineage is essential. The interesting thing is following the direction a composer takes from the jumping off point.

In Preston's case, he infuses the piece with a dynamic energy that is all his own – he is, at 76, a person who still radiates an extraordinary aura of dynamism. Forty years ago, to be in his presence was like standing too close to a lightning conductor at the moment of electrical discharge, and not much has changed since. That kind of energy can be felt through this work. At its head in the printed score there is a quotation from the hymn *Let all mortal flesh keep silence* which goes as follows: *At his feet the six-winged Seraph; Cherubim with sleepless eye, Veil their faces to the presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry, Alleluya, Alleluya, Alleluya, Lord most high.*