

Music Notes 2016/2017 – Advent IV

The setting of the Mass this Sunday, *Missa Ave Maria peregrina* is by the Spanish composer, Francisco de Peñalosa (1470–1528). He belongs to that period of Spanish history, where the visual and performing arts flourished, political stability reigned, and the Catholic Church was a dominant force. The burgeoning mood of optimism inspired composers to be more innovative and establish a more distinctive approach to music. Later composers of the Spanish school became exponents of a richer style, and they were less afraid of emotion than their Roman contemporaries. At this stage Peñalosa, it appears, looked still further afield to the austerities of the Franco-Flemish composers, with whom the Spanish court was already building a relationship. Is it a coincidence that he shared with the Flemish Josquin des Prez (1440–1521), some twenty years his senior, a fascination for musical puzzles and contrapuntal tricks, such as making a line of one melody work harmoniously with a backward version of another melody?

Peñalosa had a long, if rather quirky, association with Seville Cathedral, and held several positions there, although not without controversy. Somewhere in his career he had made enemies, and his first Cathedral appointment to a canonry was actively opposed by the Chapter, but to no avail, and he was duly inducted into his new position in 1505. His difficulties were not over, however, and one can see his opponents' point: in 1517 he departed for a visit to Rome, and – beating Bach's absence visiting Buxtehude, which only amounted to stretching his agreed absence to four times the planned length – came back eight years later, having held down his position in Seville and its associated stipend throughout. Of course, it helped that no less a figure than the Pope intervened on his behalf to encourage the authorities to be lenient. Throughout, he seems to have known how to get on with the “right people”.

This was a long time before Counter-Reformation principles of sticking to sacred source material came into general practice, and Peñalosa's Mass settings are all based on secular melodies apart from this Sunday's setting, which is largely based on plainchant. It is composed for four voices until we get to the climactic *Agnus Dei*, for which he adds a voice to make a richer five-part texture. The chants he predominantly uses in the first four movements are those for the Marian antiphons *Ave Maria* and the *Salve Regina*. However, when he comes to the climax of the piece, he draws on a secular source, a famous French song called *De tous biens plaine* attributed to Hayne van Ghizeghem (c. 1445–somewhere between 1476 & 1497). The text of the chanson is: *My mistress possesses every virtue. Everybody pays her homage, for she is as full of worth as ever any goddess was.* By using this, he introduces the idea of a love song from the faithful to the Blessed Virgin. He is also clever enough to conceal it decorously, because this is the tune running backwards referred to above, while the chant of the more obviously appropriate *Salve Regina*, also used elsewhere in the setting, runs against it in a forward direction. It is a very clever piece of writing. It is

just about conceivable that the odd person other than, say, the singers might have worked this out. But surely this is an example of the composer imbuing his work with his own personal response of faith, expressed here in a technical trick, but nonetheless amounting to a personal statement embedded into the texture, and primarily intended to be just between God and him. He didn't require other people to slap him on the back to say how clever he had been.

The motet at the Offertory is *Auxilium meum* by Pierre Passereau (1509–1547), a setting of Psalm 121: *I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help*. Passereau is chiefly famous today for having written the ditty *Il est bel et bon*, which includes syllables designed to replicate the clucking of chickens. In fact, much of his output is secular, and how! He revelled in word games, syllabic nonsense that indicates sounds made by animals, and a great deal of positively obscene verse. Naturally, his *chansons* were enormously popular. This motet is a rare example of his more sober side, and perhaps all the more heartfelt for that! The music is clearly informed by the madrigalist in him, and it is a delightful work.

The evening brings us to our most traditional carol service, the *Nine Lessons & Carols*, which the Anglican Church has inherited from King's College, Cambridge, where it was introduced in 1918, having itself inherited it from a tradition started in Truro Cathedral in 1880.

By tradition, the first carol sung by the choir is a setting of *Adam lay y-bounden*. This is really the fault of Boris Ord (1897–1961), formerly Director of Music at King's College, who came up with the musical ideas behind his very famous setting of this 15th century macaronic (i.e. written in more than one language) text while taking a bath. We perform this version each year in the Advent Carol Service, and so ring the changes of settings by other composers in *Nine Lessons & Carols*. This year, we are once again hearing the version by Howard Skempton (b. 1947), which we last heard in 2011. This was included in volume 5 of the crucially important Oxford University Press series, *Carols For Choirs*, published in 2011. This was the fiftieth anniversary publication that celebrated the extraordinary influence this series has had on the musical celebration of Christmas across the English-speaking world, ever since the first volume appeared in 1961. The setting has a kind of neurotic intensity to it, as though the subject of the Fall and Redemption is preying on the mind – as it should, especially at this time of the year.

The *Sussex Carol* – also known as *On Christmas Night all Christians sing* – is an example of the work of Cecil Sharp (1859–1924) and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) in taking down at dictation traditional songs from across the British Isles. In this case, they heard the *Sussex Carol* at Monk's Gate, which is near Horsham in Sussex (hence the title). While they collected both text and melody there, the former was in fact first published by a 17th-century Irish Bishop, Luke Wadding, although it

is unknown whether he was its author or merely another collector of the work of others. David Willcocks created an extremely successful arrangement of the music that appeared in the first volume of *Carols for Choirs*, and – as with so many items in at least the first two volumes of the series – quickly became the default version. When Philip Ledger took over from Willcocks as Director of Music at King's, Cambridge, as well as introducing new descants for *O come all ye faithful* and *Hark! The Herald Angels sing*, which doubtless seemed a means of stamping his own mark on the *Nine Lessons & Carols* tradition – but unsuccessfully, since the Willcocks versions have remained completely dominant – he also created a new setting for the *Sussex Carol*. While this has not really displaced the Willcocks approach – and, in truth, ploughs a remarkably similar furrow in its approach – it has become increasingly popular and is now quite often performed.

Isaiah's prophecy is followed by *This is the truth sent from above*, arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It is sometimes referred to as *The Herefordshire Carol*, because that is where it came from, having been transcribed by Vaughan Williams in 1909 from someone called Ella Leather, who liked to collect Herefordshire folk music. Her source was a certain Mr W Jenkins, who is usually described as *a folk singer from Kings Pyon*. In fact, Cecil Sharp collected a somewhat different version of the same carol in Shropshire, finding there eight verses, but noting that longer versions existed locally. Vaughan Williams only found four verses in Herefordshire, although his music is now generally also used for the longer version of the text. Its text tells of the creation of humanity, the fall, and the promise of redemption, both summing up what we have heard read so far in Genesis and Isaiah, and paving the way for the specific Christmas narrative that is about to start with Micah's prophecy regarding Bethlehem.

Micah is followed by *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, opening the door to the Annunciation narrative. Before we hear this from Luke, the choir sings *The Coventry Carol* in a setting by the American composer Doug Andrews (b. 1951). He is often described on websites as being a *composer, arranger, and clinician*, the last being a term often used in the United States for experts in (for example) choral technique, who are able to offer valuable and constructive comment and training to musicians. Andrews trained in Pennsylvania before moving to the University of Florida. Since 1982, he has been Dean of Cultural Programs at South Florida Community College. This apparently straightforward academic career conceals an active life as all three of the things mentioned above: composer, arranger, and clinician. This carol, which has a somewhat uniquely mournful tone derived from the approach taken by Sir John Stainer (1840–1901) when harmonizing the 16th century melody. The name – the third bit of geography we have had in this service – is because the carol was part of one of the Coventry mystery plays, *The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors*.

The birth itself is introduced by *A babe is born* by the Welsh composer, William Mathias (1934–1992). This is a particularly thrilling carol, playing on the modally-inflected harmonic language that particularly characterizes Mathias's works. This is mixed with a vigorous rhythmic quality that conveys an urgent excitement about the birth of the baby Jesus. After the birth narrative has been read, we hear in response *O my dear heart* by the English composer Peter Aston (1938–2013). Born in Birmingham, he studied there and at the University of York, where he subsequently spent time as a Lecturer. However, it is for his lengthy tenure as Professor of Music at the University of East Anglia that he is chiefly remembered. A very influential figure, especially in that part of the world, he included regular spots performing in the Aldeburgh Festival each year.

Just before we hear the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds, the choir will sing an arrangement of the Welsh lullaby *Suo gân* by our own Director of Music, Rupert Gough. The composer of the original tune is now unknown, but the lyrics date from around 1800. For the third time in this service, we must be indebted to a folklorist, in this case Robert Bryan (1858–1920), who collected the text for future generations to enjoy. This could, in fact be a text about any mother and child, but the references to angels make it particularly apposite to the Christmas story.

The story of the three wise men – a slightly premature intrusion into the season of Christmas by Epiphany – is followed by the motet by the great Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (c. 1548–1611). This was published (in one of the legendarily highly polished editions in which all his music appeared while he lived in Rome) in 1572, still 13 years before he was to return to Spain to work as Chaplain and Chapelmaster of the Barefoot Nuns of St Clare in Madrid, more or less the private chapel of Dowager Empress Maria, sister to Philip II. The words are from a Christmas Responsory. The motet falls into three sections: the first and longest comments with wonder that the animals in the stable of Bethlehem are able to see the new-born Lord in the manger. There is then a change of atmosphere as the words contemplate the Blessed Virgin: *O blessed is the Virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord*. Victoria sets this with great stillness and affection. Then, another big change, switching the metre into triple time for a graceful but agile *Alleluia*, which eventually cascades down through the voices to an elegant close.

The final carol from the choir is *The Star-Song*, by the English composer Jonathan Dove (b. 1959), who lives in the Bethnal Green area, not far from St Bartholomew the Great, and who has often been present at events at the church. Jonathan is now one of the most successful composers this country has produced. His operas, especially *Flight* and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, are in regular production around the world, and his choral music has become a staple of choirs everywhere. This carol – which was written in 2008 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the celebrated conductor Philip Brunelle as organist and choirmaster at Plymouth Congregational Church in

Minneapolis – may not be an opera, but it is a small-scale drama. The text is by Robert Herrick (1591-1633), and involves a kind of discussion between the Star of Bethlehem and a group of travellers to the stable. The poem is upbeat and energetic, and the composer rises to the challenge, with an equally vigorous and energetic musical setting. The organ is as twinkly a picture of the star as you could hope for. The ending, as Paul Spicer remarks in the notes to a recording made by Wells Cathedral in 2010, *simply flies into the air*.

There is, incidentally, a further opportunity to hear this programme of music on Tuesday, 20th December, at 18:00, the last service in which the present Rector will be officiating before he retires from the parish. There is pressure on spaces, because we welcome to this service many members of the livery companies with which the Priory Church is associated.