

Music Notes 2017/2018 – Second Sunday of Advent

At the Solemn Eucharist this week, we will hear the remarkable *Mass for Double Choir*, op. 44, by Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988). Leighton was a Yorkshireman through and through. He wrote of himself: *Any natural composer is a product of his background, experience and training, and I like to think that my music has the characteristic qualities which have been described as vigour, forthrightness, and emotionalism tempered with common sense.* Leighton used slightly different musical languages according to the context for which he was writing, but never tips over into leaving his audience unable to cope with his musical language.

This mass setting was written in 1964, and was dedicated to Herrick Bunney (1915–1997) and the Edinburgh University Singers and first performed by them at a university chamber concert in St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, in February that year. For a good while, Bunney was the organist and choir master at the Cathedral, and a conductor for the Singers. The mass is set for *a capella* double choir throughout, apart from in the *Credo*, in which the organ makes a very distinctive contribution – although not in our service, since we sing the Creed congregationally to chant. In addition to the two choirs, there are four soloists. Leighton has made my job easier, because he has provided a very useful programme note of his own, and here it is:

Kyrie: the first Kyrie are sung by women's voices (both choirs); the Christes begin on men's voices but soon the full choirs join to build up a central climax. The final Kyries are for both choirs, this time with a single unison melody in first choir and a chordal accompaniment in second choir.

Gloria: The opening paragraph uses an antiphonal treatment of the two choirs, but they come together on Laudamus te. Benedicimus te starts a new section, with three of the soloists singing a very simple melody against a soft choral accompaniment. Gratias agimus tibi is for both choirs, partly antiphonal and partly imitative. The quieter middle section (Domine fili) employs all four soloists, and predominantly the soprano solo in the Misereres.

Quoniam tu solus sanctus marks a return of the previous material and texture, but there is also a final paragraph in slower tempo starting with Cum sancto spiritu. Here soprano and alto soloists sing above the 'processional' choral accompaniment.

Sanctus: A soft interweaving texture first on women's then on men's voices. In the third paragraph the interweaving texture is joined by a sustained chorale-like theme (Sanctus Dominus) rising up from the bass and gradually dominating. Pleni sunt coeli is a fast seven-part fugue, and the Hosannas a kind of quiet dance in irregular rhythm.

Benedictus: Soprano, alto, and tenor soloists sing the melody above a slow-moving choral accompaniment.

Agnus Dei: Here the melody is closely related to that of the Kyries. The first Agnus dei is given to the four soloists alone, rising from the bass and culminating in a choral outburst of Miserere. The second Agnus is for full choirs - a more extended version of the first Agnus and ending with second cry of Miserere at a higher pitch. The third Agnus is very short and for soprano solo; below this the choirs sing Dona nobis to a simple rising motive distributed in eight parts, and culminating in the word pacem, which is repeated four times in soft chords.

The motet at the Offertory is a setting of *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, a text from the United States, found in *Divine Hymns, or Spiritual Songs* compiled by Joshua Smith (1760–1795), a Baptist lay minister and hymn compiler, who lived in New Hampshire. Several of the poems included in this volume were set by the New England composer Jeremiah Ingalls (1764–1838), including this one. But the text became famous in modern times on account of its beautifully elegant setting by the British composer Elizabeth Poston (1905–1987). She was a remarkable figure, active not only in composition, but as a performer, academic and writer. She was also one of the crucial people behind the creation of *The Third Programme* – now known to us as Radio 3 – and worked extensively at the BBC as both a composer for programmes on the radio and television and as a producer. From 1914 onwards, she and her family lived in Rooks Nest House, formerly the home of E.M. Forster, and immortalized by him later as *Howards End*, which coincidentally is enjoying televised fame at the moment.

Unfortunately, a great deal of Poston’s delightful music has disappeared from our collective consciousness apart from this carol, which is firmly in “the Canon”. The slightly curious matter is that the poem, which is a gentle hymn of praise using, obviously, the metaphor of Jesus Christ as an apple tree, has nothing specifically Adventish or Christmassy about it, and there is, in fact, no reason why it should be more frequently performed in this season than in others, and yet this tends to be so.

The evening brings our Mid-Advent Carol Service, which has the subtitle *Tomorrow I will come*. This links Advent to Christmas using the Antiphons that are part of the office of Vespers on the seven days prior to Christmas Eve. Each of them starts with the vocative *O*, followed by a synonym for the coming Messiah, and so they are known collectively as the *O Antiphons*. Each synonym adds a dimension to the overall picture. In this service, each Antiphon is followed by a reading and at least one piece of music that amplifies the relevant theme.

The first is *O Sapientia – O Wisdom* and we answer this with *O where shall wisdom be found* by William Boyce (1711-1799). He studied with Maurice Greene (1696–1755) after being a chorister at St Paul’s Cathedral and later succeeded him as Master of the King’s Music. Greene had started a compilation of the highest quality anthems and other music for the English church, which he did not finish before his death. Boyce took up this project and, when published, this substantial tome had an extraordinary effect up and

down the land, establishing a canon of works for the Anglican Church, and, in doing so, kicking off what is referred to now as “The Anglican Choral Tradition”. Showing considerable restraint, none of the three volumes of this collection contains a single work by Boyce or Greene. The text of this anthem is from that cheerful Old Testament book, Job, but Boyce makes much of it. It is like a miniature dramatic cantata, with many contrasting sections for soloists and full chorus.

The second Antiphon, *O Adonai – O Lord* is answered by Psalm 136 to an Anglican chant. The third is *O Radix Jesse – O Root of Jesse*, and the musical response to this is *Es ist ein Ros’ entsprungen*, which employs the well-known German hymn and tune (which we know in English as *A great and mighty wonder*), in an arrangement of a tune composed by Prætorius (1571–1621) by the Swedish composer Jan Sandström (b. 1954). One of Sandström’s other claims to fame is his *Motorbike Concerto*, for trombone and orchestra, of which you may have heard tell – or even have heard. In the case of this choral piece, he weaves a complex texture of chords in one choir, which the other enters occasionally to sing the German carol in four-part harmony against this background.

The fourth *O Antiphon* is *O Clavis David – O Key of David*, and the musical response to this is a setting of *Remember O thou man* by Arthur Oldham (1926–2003), an English composer and choral director. He was a serial founder of choirs, having brought into being the Edinburgh Festival Chorus in 1965, the Chorus of the Orchestre de Paris in 1975, and the Concertgebouw Orchestra Chorus in Amsterdam in 1979. Not satisfied with these achievements, he was also active with the Scottish Opera Chorus from 1966 until 1974 and directed the London Symphony Chorus from 1969 to 1976. There are several versions of the text that he could have chosen to set for this carol; Oldham chose words from William Sandys’s, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, published in 1833. One of the verses that refers to the angels of Christmas is used in his hands as a cheerful refrain to the somewhat downbeat verses that remind us to consider our position in the light of Adam’s fall and our nature as dust.

The fifth *O Antiphon* is *O Oriens – O Daystar*, and the choral response to this is from *The Vespers* by Rachmaninoff (1873–1943), specifically, the movement called *Vechernyaya Pesn – otherwise known as O serene Light*, or, more prosaically, *Evening Hymn*. The text is one we know as the hymn *Hail, gladdening Light*, and a literal translation would be as follows: *Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal One, the Heavenly Father, holy and blessed, O Jesus Christ. Now that we have come to the setting of the sun and behold the light of evening, we praise the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God. Thou art worthy at every moment to be praised in hymns by reverent voices. O Son of God, thou art the giver of life; therefore all the world glorifies thee.*

The sixth *O Antiphon* is *O Rex gentium – O King of the Peoples*. This is followed by a reading comprising the first six verses of Psalm 24, which begins in the psalter: *The*

earth is the Lord's and all that therein is. Verse 7 brings us to *Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.* It is at those words that the choir takes over, singing the setting of those words from *Messiah* by Handel (1685–1759). This is an assertive piece in the middle of the second part of the oratorio, immediately after the solo *But thou didst not leave his soul in hell.*

The seventh and last of the *O Antiphons* is the culmination of the sequence: *O Emmanuel*, the greeting to the incarnate Word of God or *God-With-Us*. Rather than sing this to chant this year, the text will be sung instead to a setting by the Lithuanian composer Vytautas Miškinis (b. 1954), who is a highly respected university professor and choral director. He has been Choir Director of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre conservatory since 1985. He has also been active all over the world, lecturing, teaching, training, and, of course, composing. Miškinis began setting all seven of the *O Antiphons* in 1995, and completed the last in 2003.

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day, the setting of which is by John Gardner (1917–2011), is our first real Christmas Carol this year. This is, reportedly, one of the most popular carols in the country, and mines a seam of energetic rhythm and catchy melody that is characteristic of Gardner's appealing music. The emphasis for us is, of course, on the *Tomorrow* aspect that fits the title of the service. However, the carol takes us as far as the Baptism of Jesus, glancing forward to the Nativity and beyond, so in fact this is the first real carol of Christmas. Much more of that, however, next week! This is merely a teaser for now – a trailer along the lines of *next week on this channel...* The full poem goes all the way to the Resurrection, in fact, but Gardner doesn't take us quite that far.

We then sing together the well-known hymn that is based on the *O Antiphons*, and that is *O Come, O come, Emmanuel*. We have tinkered with the order of the verses because the one we know as the first verse is actually the one derived from the last Antiphon. So, we're going to sing this once at the start and once again at the end, while the intervening verses are on this occasion sung in the order that they occur during the days before Christmas.

If you take the first words of each *O Antiphon* and line them up in the order they occur, you see the following:

O Sapientia
O Adonai
O Radix
O Clavis
O Oriens
O Rex

O Emmanuel

Then, if you read the first letters of each noun in upward order, you get EROCRAS or *ero cras*, which is the Latin for *Tomorrow I will come*, the title of this service.

One final item from the choir: the *Vesper Responsory, Advent Sunday* by Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962), which we also heard towards the end of our Advent Carol Service. It was commissioned by the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral for its Director of Music, Michael Nicholas, and the Cathedral Choir. The text reminds us three times: *Tomorrow go ye forth, and the Lord, he shall be with you*, as good a Mid-Advent admonition as you could possibly want.