

Music Notes 2017 – Easter II: Low Sunday

The title of this Sunday's mass setting is *Missa Quarti Toni*. This refers to the *fourth tone*, part of the system that musicologists refer to as *modes*, which pre-dated the major/minor key system with which we are familiar today. The fourth tone is known as the hypophrygian mode in circles where these things are important. We could go into a lot of theory here, but, for the time being, let's just say that today, whereas we only have two main ways to construct scales – major and minor – earlier composers used a much larger number of types of scale from which they constructed musical lines. Many of these sound rather like minor keys to our ears now, but that's largely because our brains try to cram this music into "boxes" that fit the way music is written and heard today. It's a pity that we can't get the same sense of light and shade from this that earlier composers and their appreciative audiences used to hear, but for most of us, the prevailing music around us is just too dominant to make this possible.

So, the title is the equivalent of something like *Mass in E minor* in modern parlance – a dry description indeed. Most mass settings are named after the text of the pre-existing plainchant that is often woven into a composition, or the motet that has been used as a jumping-off point of inspiration for the work. Referring to the piece by its mode or "key" effectively suggests that this is just a free composition with no underlying liturgical thread coming from a pre-existing work. It tells us that, while the Church has gone to a lot of trouble to ensure that there are texts, and therefore music, for just about any specific occasion, from time to time, even at the highpoint of the Renaissance, it was sometimes still useful to have a generic mass to perform.

There are several *quarti toni* masses in existence. One of the best known is by the great Spanish composer, Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), a setting that we hear most years in the Priory Church. This Sunday, however, we are going to hear a different setting that was lost as far as European libraries were concerned, but which emerged in Guatemala Cathedral, where collections brought over by missionaries from, especially, Spain had been copied out and used extensively during the Church's great expansion in that part of the world. It is extraordinary that South America, rather than Europe, has turned out to be one of the most important sources of Renaissance music. In some cases, seemingly sole extant copies of works lost in the great disaster that befell the Royal Library during the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 have emerged intact in South America. Ironically, a part of the collection now held in Guatemala Cathedral was in fact lost, but turned up in the aftermath of another dreadful earthquake which occurred there in 1976. This largely demolished the cathedral, but, in the process, dislodged some material from whichever unknown location it had been hiding. The cathedral, carefully rebuilt, is, therefore, now home to an even larger and more important collection, referred to as the *Musica Colonial Archive*, than it was before.

The manuscript, copied in Guatemala, bears the attribution of *El Maestro Alegre*, and because it is not stylistically impossible, and the dates are reasonably plausible, this has been taken to refer to the Italian composer Gregorio Allegri (1582–1652), the composer of some parts (but only some parts) of what we know today as Allegri's *Miserere*. The attribution of this mass to Allegri is, to be honest, slightly thin, but let's go with it for now.

Allegri began his musical life as a choir boy in the Roman church of San Luigi dei Francesi. Whether he had much say in the matter or not, it was decided that he should enter the Church. He was duly to be found as a young man in a clerical position at Fermo Cathedral, a hill-top location on the Adriatic coast, about half-way up on the right side of Italy as you look at the map with your head tilted to the left. But Allegri was also a prolific composer of very attractive motets in what you might call a post-Palestrina style. In fact, Palestrina (1525–1594) died when Gregorio was just twelve, but his influence was inescapable in Roman musical circles. Anyway, Allegri's motets caught the attention of Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644, Pope 1623–1644), who decided that Allegri should be brought to join the Sistine Chapel Choir, in which he sang as an alto, and to which he continued to contribute compositions. The choir was not always an easy collection of men, and it is interesting that Allegri was described at the time as being an unusually pure and benevolent individual. Goodness knows what this says about the rest of them! Allegri's music covers quite a range – not just liturgical compositions, but also quite a lot of string music. Indeed, as a useful piece of trivia, you might like to know that he is considered to have been the composer of the first-ever string quartet.

The setting is clearly derived from the Palestrina school of imitative counterpoint, so if it is not by this "Alegre", it is certainly by someone with the same kind of musical orientation. The movements are stitched together thematically by starting either with the same opening motif, or a variant on it, as in the case of the two *Agnus Dei* movements. Of course, the expectation would have been that a plainchant *Agnus Dei* would have been sung between the two composed movements in the setting. This triple aspect to the *Agnus Dei* is an important structural element in a mass setting: the *Kyrie* is in a triple structure (more accurately, three sections, each with three statements of the text), the *Gloria* and the *Credo* also fall into three sections each quite naturally, and the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* are also really three sections, of which the second section is often repeated in full or abbreviated form after the third section in the structure A-B C-B. So, to perform a single or double *Agnus* without bulking it up to create its own triple shape rather fights with the Trinitarian structures of the rest of the setting.

The motet at the Offertory is by the Flemish composer Orlande de Lassus (1530–1593), *Christus resurgens*, a setting of text drawn from Romans VI, verses 9 and 10:

Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more: death hath no more dominion over him. In that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Alleluia. Lassus has no intention of leaving us in any doubt as to what has happened to Christ: the initial melodic idea leaps up strongly by a fifth and then immediately by another fourth, an overall octave. This is imitated by each of the successive voices to come in, confirming unquestioningly that resurrection is the subject. At the idea of living unto God, a strongly upward motif begins, again taken up by each voice in turn, and culminates in a dramatic series of Alleluias to bring the piece to a close.

The canticles at Evensong are by the English composer, Alan Ridout (1934–1996). He was born in London and studied at the Guildhall School of Music and the Royal College of Music. Ridout was a very prolific composer, starting at a very early age; by the time he was 12 years old, he had already composed over 100 works. He was also devoted to musical education. He taught at several universities as well as at independent schools. A key moment for him came in 1964, when he was commissioned by Allan Wicks, then Organist and Master of Choristers at Canterbury Cathedral, to write a work for the cathedral choir. This led to a burgeoning relationship with the cathedral musicians, and an increasing involvement with the choir school, at which he eventually became a member of staff. When the school was closed some nine years later (a matter of bitter regret to many, including Ridout), he joined the staff of the King's School, Canterbury, and remained there until his retirement in 1990, this being forced on him by increasing ill health. In 1994, following a spell staying in Ampleforth with his music publisher, he converted to Roman Catholicism, and was received at Ampleforth Abbey, soon thereafter becoming an oblate of the Order of St Benedict. When Ridout was told that he had only a few more years at most to live, he moved to France, where he had always wished to live for a while. He succumbed to his final heart attack two years later. Ridout's contribution to British music-making, especially for younger musicians, but also very much for mature performers, was immense.

The canticles by Ridout that we will be hearing this Sunday evening are known as *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis of Twelve Notes*. They were written in 1966, and constructed in such a way that they can be performed by four different arrangements of performers – for example, upper voices, or four-part choir. The “twelve notes” refer to the so-called serial school of composition, in which a melody using all twelve notes of the chromatic scale is used in various ways as the underlying organizing principle for the entire piece. While this sometimes evokes the description “squeaky gate” from those who do not enjoy this approach, there is a faint echo here of the system of modes that was mentioned above in the section on the *quarti toni* mass setting. The difference between the modes is that each has a unique sequence of tones and semitones between the steps of the scale, so that each gives a slightly different effect. There's just a touch of serial composition about that. As it so happens, Renaissance composers fondly imagined that, with their modes,

they were using the system of scales original developed and used by the ancient Greeks. Alas, their scholarship was not quite up to the challenge, and the Renaissance modes have only a rather hazy connection with the scales they adopted. The real Greek modes sound very unusual to our ears today. Ridout experimented with all kinds of avant garde music earlier in his life, but by the time he composed the canticles he was essentially a tonal composer. So, this is only a nod in the direction of this kind of music, rather than a real serial work. Nevertheless, Ridout does manage to use the full twelve chromatic notes in each section of the work by means of deft and interesting harmony.

In an article featured in 1988 in *The Choral Journal* (published by the American Choral Directors Association) Ridout's *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis for Twelve Notes* happens to share space with a review of a *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis* for two sopranos and an alto composed in 1962 by our Brian Brockless (1926–1995). This creates a neat little "bridge" for these music notes. The meaning of "our" will become clear if and when you go to the Cloister in our church, where you will find three slate plaques on the wall that are placed in memory to three earlier Directors of Music of the Priory Church, Paul Steinitz (1909–1988), Brian Brockless, and David Trendell (1964–2014); his plaque was fixed to the wall a couple of weeks ago. Brian was, in fact, Organist of the Priory Church on two non-consecutive occasions – you can think of him as akin to Grover Cleveland, who was both the 22nd and the 24th President of the United States, a uniquely bifurcated presidency. Brian served at St Bartholomew the Great first between 1961 and 1969, being then succeeded by Andrew Morris (b. 1948 – a recent Master of the Worshipful Company of Musicians, and very much still with us), who was Organist from 1969–1978. Brian then returned in 1979 and remained until the end of 1995. Already in very poor health, and unable to take part in the final services of his tenure, he died the day after he formally retired. When a memorial Evensong was being arranged, poignantly, the preacher chosen was Newell Wallbank (1914–1996), the 22nd Rector of St Bartholomew the Great between 1944 and 1979, and long since retired himself. Alas, during Evensong, seated in the clergy stalls and fully robed, before the service reached the sermon, Wallbank suffered a heart attack, and died immediately.

The reason for telling you all this is that the anthem at Evensong this Sunday is by Brockless: *Christ is now rysen agayne*. It begins with a strong unison statement, before branching out vigorously. There is a striking mixture of edgy twentieth century harmonic procedures with consciously modal glances back into a kind of medieval musical language based, of course, on modal harmony. Brian wasn't hugely prolific, but he did leave a legacy of excellent anthems that are well worth hearing.