

Music Notes 2017 – Fifth Sunday after Easter

The mass setting this Sunday is the *Missa Papæ Marcelli* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). Over many years, this setting became encrusted with a mythological belief that it “saved” western music virtually singlehandedly. The German composer Hans Pfitzner’s (1869–1949) opera, *Palestrina*, explored this myth in great depth. Alas, although the myth does not absolutely bear up in truth, there is some substance in it. Indeed, the myth has been cheerfully disparaged in these notes several times.

The legend appears to have started with comments written by the composer Agostino Agazzari (1578–1640) thirteen years after Palestrina’s death: *Music of the older kind is no longer in use, both because of the confusion and babel of the words, arising from the long and intricate imitations, and because it has no grace, for with all the voices singing, one hears neither period nor sense, these being interfered with and covered up by imitations...And on this account music would have come very near to being banished from the Holy Church by a sovereign pontiff [Pius IV], had not Giovanni Palestrina found the remedy, showing that the fault and error lay, not with the music, but with the composers, and composing in confirmation of this the Mass entitled Missa Papæ Marcelli.* Jesuit musicians found this a particularly engaging idea and perpetuated it enthusiastically.

Finally, in the first attempt at a definitive biography of Palestrina in 1828, the author – also a composer – Giuseppe Baini (1775–1844) supported the verity of the myth, describing the composer as “the saviour of church music” and speaking of the Council of Trent as having intended to “ban all polyphonic music”. It is conceivable that Cardinal and Archbishop of Milan Carlo Borromeo asked Palestrina to compose the mass to demonstrate that it was possible to have polyphonic music in which the text was still intelligible, or else Palestrina performed this feat off his own bat, and Borromeo was, so to speak, knocked over by what he heard and stayed the musical executioner’s hand. Of course, Agazzari simply said that Palestrina’s mass demonstrated that it was possible to create an intelligible, polyphonic setting, although he clearly believed that the Pope was minded to limit compositional freedom. Nevertheless, the documented history of the Council doesn’t really support the supposition that it was ever determined to ban the polyphonic treatment of text in sacred music.

The first mystery with this setting is *when* it was written. Pope Marcellus II reigned for a mere three weeks in 1555. The Council of Trent ran from 1545 until 1563, and initially Marcello Cervini degli Spannochi (he was the last of the Popes to use his own name as his papal name) was one of its three Presidents. This, of course, strengthens the idea that Palestrina was making a reference to the Council by naming the setting after one of the people charged with managing its affairs. Marcello

was elected in succession to Julius III, the former Bishop of Palestrina, who had brought Giovanni Pierluigi to Rome in the first place. Julius proved something of a scandal-ridden Pope, in fact, not least because he had an “adopted nephew”, Innocenzo Ciochi Del Monte, whom he elevated to “Cardinal-Nephew” after his accession, and who was said to *share the Pope’s bed “as if he were his own son or grandson”* – although it was evidently not the questionable familial relationship that bothered his critic! What we know is that the first historical appearance of the mass is when it was copied into the manuscript book at the Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome in 1562 or 1563, when Giovanni Pierluigi was the Director of Music.

Interestingly, 1562 is also the date of the Council’s declarations on music. This said that compositions should be *constituted...in such a way that the words be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of the listeners be drawn to desire of heavenly harmonies, in the contemplation of the joys of the blessed*. Giovanni Pierluigi undoubtedly was aware of this, and perhaps legend and reality do cross over here, in that he may have reacted by composing a work that really was his interpretation of this instruction, and named it for the President of the Council who subsequently became Pope

On 28th April 1565, the Papal Choir’s records state that the choir members assembled at the request of the Most Reverend Cardinal Vitellozzi at his residence to sing some masses and to test whether the words could be understood, *as their Eminences require*. We only know of the identity of one of the settings that were performed, and it isn’t this one. However, it is plausible that it was also sung on this occasion, because it was entered into the papal choir’s codex that same year, and published formally two years later. This, perhaps, is the starting point of the legend, and, if it is correct, what it tells us is that those present agreed that Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina had really hit the nail on the head.

In Palestrina’s day, Rome was the epicentre of the world of sacred music. To see what came next, however, we must look north to Venice. Andrea Gabrieli (ca. 1533–1585) was probably born in Venice, and certainly spent his career there. In his mid-30s, he went on a trip to what we now call Germany and made the acquaintance of the Flemish composer Orlande de Lassus (1532–1594). The composers hit it off extremely well and became lasting friends. When Andrea returned to Venice, he was imbued with the very best influences that he could have hoped for. It wasn’t long before he was offered the post of Organist at San Marco, Venice’s remarkable Byzantine cathedral, distinguished *inter alia* by an astonishingly resonant acoustic, and a somewhat sprawling layout that allows for two choir galleries, each equipped with an organ. The Flemish *Maestro di Cappella at San Marco*, from 1527 until 1562, Adrian Willaert (1490–1562), had seen the possibilities of using this physical layout to advantage. The Flemish tradition had already explored the pitting of two or more

choirs against one another to produce spatially exciting effects, and Willaert recognized that this technique would be perfect for San Marco. It was more extreme, in fact, because the greater space between the choirs necessitated writing music in which it wouldn't necessarily matter that they couldn't be perfectly synchronized. This sparked interesting collisions and demanded quite a degree of flexibility.

Of course, the musicians didn't know that they were supposed to aspire to the cut glass timing and accuracy of 21st century British consort choirs, and positively revelled in these flexible effects that rarely feature in modern recordings of this repertoire. Within a century or so, the high German Baroque movement would have ironed out these effects from its music – although you can still see their legacy in Bach's use of the two separate choirs in the *St Matthew Passion* – just as it also ironed out the collisions between notes caused by two lines in the choir following separate rules about whether to sing a flat, natural or sharp version of a note. Neither the polychoral rhythmic flexibility nor the acceptance of harmonic astringency would reappear as so acceptable in music again until the twentieth century.

Andrea's nephew, Giovanni Gabrieli (1557–1612), was probably only related to his uncle by marriage, but he referred on several occasions to Andrea having been like a father to him. Today, we see him as the more developed and successful of the two of them, but he was sufficiently self-effacing to have been in awe of his uncle's greatness as a composer. No later than 1584, Giovanni was principal organist at San Marco, with Andrea still playing the other organ for the last year of his life. We are going to hear his motet *Cantate Domino* for antiphonal choirs at the Offertory; and it will not be difficult to imagine them competing with one another across the church.

There is more Palestrina at Evensong, when we will be hearing the canticles in two settings by him. The first, a four-voice setting referred to as *Magnificat Primi Toni*, gets its name from the mode in which it is written, Mode I – also known as the *Ionian* Mode – which happens to match exactly our modern major scale, making it sound quite like familiar territory to our ears. Palestrina splits the text into plainchant sections alternating with four-part imitative polyphonic music. The *Nunc Dimittis* is an eight-part setting that is, in effect, a polychoral work, a foreshadowing of what would develop in Venice, with two choirs of four voices each, mostly singing in blocks rather than fully worked-out polyphony.

With the anthem, we find ourselves in the UK, with *Laudibus in sanctis Dominum* by William Byrd (1539–1623). The anthem comes from his second book of *Cantiones Sacrae* from 1591. This was produced by Thomas East, a renowned London music printer, retailer and publisher whose premises were, as it so happens, in Aldersgate Street, near the Priory Church. Byrd and Thomas Tallis (1505–1585), were granted exclusivity as music publishers by Elizabeth I, and, until 1596, when Byrd's patent expired, this represented quite a limitation on East's work. While he could engrave

and print – and Byrd used him exclusively to do this with his works between 1588 and 1596 – he could not act as the actual publisher, except by licence. Nevertheless, he engraved, printed and sold a great deal of music in what cannot have been ideal circumstances. “Engraving”, as the word suggests, was a manual process (taken over in more recent years by computers, but often still known by the same – now inappropriate – word) of incising notes into stone or metal plates. But even by Byrd’s time, music was capable of being set in “type”, where the different notes were assembled together from individual note “units” that were clamped together to form the musical “text”. This was how East produced nearly all of Byrd’s music, an example of the industrialization of the production of music as mechanisation progressively took over from the artistry of the human hand.

Byrd’s monopoly actually began in 1575, but for whatever reason, he took minimal advantage of this until 1588, when, quite suddenly, he began to make the most of it, and East was deeply involved. This was an important relationship: East distinguished himself from other printers partly by being willing both to print and distribute music, and by making English composers a focus of his attention. Importantly for Byrd and for Catholic worship in Britain, East was also willing to bring out uncompromisingly Catholic works in print.

Laudibus in sanctis is a motet in three sections and its text is a paraphrase of Psalm 150. Although a sacred work, Byrd cheerfully incorporates secular madrigal-style word painting within the music. In fact, he seems almost to relish doing this, as if he was determined to ensure that the secular world doesn’t have all the best music. The Psalm invites the listener to praise God in various ways: with the sound of the trumpet, lute and harp, with strings and pipe, and with cymbals and dances. Such a text is a gift to a composer with an imagination, and Byrd goes for it, most obviously when it comes to praising God in the dances, when he switches into triple time, and gives us a boisterous courtly dance.

It would be interesting to know when this work was first performed in the Priory Church, and at the hands of which Director of Music it premiered. It is, of course, most likely that its first appearance within our walls was with an English text acceptable to the Protestant world, something known as a *contrafactum* (the substitution of one text with another without substantial changes to the music), which might or might not have some connection with the original text (usually not, as it so happens). But somebody must have been the first to have this piece sung within our walls to the original text, with the word painting doing the job Byrd intended, and so completing what was a rather protracted journey from Aldersgate Street to St Bartholomew the Great.