

Music Notes 2017 – Feast of Dedication of the Priory Church

Following last week's celebration of our Patronal Festival, we move on this week to mark the Dedication of the Priory and its Church by our founder Prior Rahere's friend and supporter, Richard de Belmeis I, Bishop of London. This is likely to have been just the dedication of the site. Although preparations for the building work began in March 1123, it is likely that the dedication took place later on in the year. You may have noticed in maps that the church does not face due east, as reckoned today, but rather north east. It was usual to define the alignment of a church by the point where the sun rose at the time the site was laid out, compasses and GPS being somewhat elusive in the twelfth century. The church's alignment is 37.76° north of east, and if the layout was prepared using this method, then the sun rose, more or less exactly at this point on May 27th or July 4th that year (depending on which side of the equinox the dedication took place). Interestingly, the church was built on the site where previously the gibbets stood, on which criminals were executed, these being relocated to a spot where a part of the Victorian meat market buildings stand today, outside the walls of the Priory. Given that Jesus was also executed with common criminals, this seems poignantly appropriate.

The mass setting is by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), and is known by the Latin name of the institution for which it was written: *Collegium Regale – King's College* in Cambridge. Actually, church musicians refer to both this setting and works by other composers written for the college simply as *Coll Reg*. You may be familiar with the Evensong Canticles that come from this complete Service, which are often used at the Priory Church. You may also be familiar with the *Te Deum* from its Matins Canticles, not least of all because we have heard it several times at past Easter Vigils. If you do know any of these, then the *Communion Service* will strike a familiar chord on several occasions – a statement that is more literally true in the case of Howells than most composers, because his harmonic “colouring” is so very distinctive. Moreover, he deliberately re-used material from the earlier settings in order to unify the later works in the set with those composed much earlier.

The chronology of the creation of the overall work is quite interesting. You may remember this story from previous music notes. The composition of the morning canticles, and of the *Te Deum* in particular, was the result of a bet over an afternoon tea in 1941. Eric Milner-White, then Dean of King's (from 1920 until 1941), but about to be translated to become Dean of York – and, let us not forget, the one who introduced the Service of Nine Lessons & Carols to King's with momentous results for Christmas music the world over – laid a guinea on the table and bet the two composers present, Howells and Patrick Hadley (1899–1973), that they could not write a *Te Deum* for the college chapel. The men had been talking about how few settings of the *Te Deum* there were, hence the challenge of the wager. Hadley, later Professor of Music at Cambridge, failed to deliver, but Howells took up the

challenge with magnificent results. Mind you, even making allowance for the change in the value of money, the one guinea he received was a modest commission fee for such a stupendous work. It was performed together with its companion *Jubilate Deo* in the college chapel in 1945. By 1945, Howells had added the evening canticles to the collection. (<http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/files/services/music-notes-20131110.pdf>) (<http://www.allmusic.com/composition/te-deum-and-jubilate-for-chorus-organ-collegium-regale-mc0002396862>) According to Michael Keale, once a chorister at Kings under Boris Ord, who delivered the music notes for Remembrance Sunday at King's College Chapel in 2013, *That one guinea and the Te Deum in question, kick-started music for the Anglican church into a new phase of existence, for specific buildings, choirs and individuals. "You have opened a whole new chapter in church music,"*, Milner-White wrote to Howells.

The *Communion Service* was to wait a further eleven years for its composition to be started in 1956. Paul Spicer, in his excellent book on Howells (*Herbert Howells, Seren, Bridgend, 1998*) points out that *it is unusual in being a rare example of a twentieth-century 'parody' Mass, which takes other music as its starting point, in this case his own Collegium Regale settings, and builds a new work around it.* We are used to the parody masses by the composers we more often hear at our Solemn Eucharists – Palestrina (1525–1594), Victoria (1548–1611), Lassus (1532–1594) – where the composer starts with music from a motet that either he himself had written previously, or from a piece by someone else whose work he admired. It is not, however, a procedure that is so familiar after the Renaissance period, and certainly not in the twentieth century. Of course, Howells had a sound reason for doing this, completing, as he was, a set that had had its first sections composed eleven to twelve years previously. By borrowing liberally from those works, he stitched them into a musical unity, rather than just composing another set of unrelated pieces printed together under a common title. The result is a powerful and atmospheric setting – and the harmonic language, together with the unexpectedly but characteristically stretched-out textual phrases, make it unmistakably a work that could only have been written in these islands at this time.

The Offertory brings that indispensable motet for Feasts of Dedication, *Locus iste*, by the Austrian Anton Bruckner (1824–1896). Published – by Edition Peters, although it is now out of copyright and so also available now from other publishers – as one of a set of four motets, this piece was written in 1896 for the dedication of a votive chapel in the newly built Linz Cathedral. You may have it on good authority that this group of motets became one of its publisher's highest-selling choral titles, and still doesn't do at all badly, even if it is now out of copyright. Bruckner's approach in this piece is replete with emotional intensity and makes great use of his capacity to capture, by very simple means, a moment of significance. The church – The Church, a church, any church, our church, all churches – is, or are or can be, depending on which of those two-word

combinations you are referring to, often astonishingly complex and even perilous place for working out our relationships with God and one another. One often begins at a church in a relative state of grace – perhaps one could call this the honeymoon period – where one simply bathes in the liturgy, and has very little concerns or worries. But churches are not emotional or even spiritual spaces dedicated solely to making one feel good. They can also be, from time to time, crucibles, testing-grounds, challenging environments and, yet, places of opportunity, in which one’s underlying human nature is confronted by the exhortation to love God fully, and one’s neighbour *exactly* as if he or she were oneself – not, of course, requiring one necessarily to like them. Then there is that admonishment to *judge not, that ye be not judged*. Bruckner seems to have understood it this way, because this motet seems like a profound attempt to bring us back to the basics of what a church is fundamentally about. It is like a re-anchoring in music of our understanding of “church”.

At the opening of the piece, the words *Locus iste (this place)* begin with a plain C major choral chord that at first seems set in place, almost unmovable in its serene but solid stability. When eventually it does move, it is simply with a downward soprano line accompanied by the same chord. The text moves on to *a Deo factus est – made by God*, and this excites a tiny bit of increased emotional fervour as the bass pushes the harmony up to a D minor chord. Even here, the energy seems simply to drain from the music with a little rhythm that is like a ping pong ball’s little patter of bounces before coming to rest. It is a beautifully simple little musical image of the solidity and substance of many a holy place, easy for us to relate to within the massive walls of the Priory Church. After a pause for the image to sink in, Bruckner re-starts the opening music with the D minor chord we had reached, but this time it is as if the *made by God* concept takes over and there is more movement and a significant increase in emotional intensity. In the middle section, Bruckner turns up the colour considerably, first with two phrases that grow up from the bass into declamatory chords, and then with a potent brief falling pattern, almost pernicky in its precision, that works its way down chromatically until, after another atmospheric break, we return to the opening music. This time it ends differently, with a sudden break-off into an almost chaotic yet ecstatic chordal progression. Then, a surprisingly long pause for reflection, and a final quietening and settling closing phrase.

Evensong begins with a different setting of the same text. This time, it is by the British composer, Howard Skempton (b.1947). He was part of a school of experimentalist composers in the UK, led by the radical socialist and one time teacher of Skempton Cornelius Cardew (1936–1981) – another composer published by Edition Peters – and Michael Parsons (b.1938). Together, Cardew and Parsons formed the Scratch Orchestra, a large ensemble that specialized in experimental music, and for which Skempton wrote several works. Although the orchestra, musicians and composers associated with the ‘school’ embraced a very wide stylistic range, Skempton is

especially associated with essentially tonal music, and this motet, the first of a group of three that includes settings of *Beati quorum via* and *Ave Virgo Sanctissima*, is a good example of his musical language. It also displays his interest in a kind of pared-back simplicity of musical expression. It begins with three of the voice parts singing *Locus iste a Deo factus est* in octaves – i.e. the same melody just at different “heights” of the vocal spectrum. These are then joined by the fourth voice in another octave statement of the same melody. Then, in a typical procedure for him, the melody is repeated a further two times, but with an increasingly complicated harmony underneath. It is almost as though we are seeing a musical picture in which we zoom in on the massive outline of a building, at first only seeing its broad shape. But as we become closer and closer to it, so the detail and richness of the architecture begin to emerge.

Having achieved quite some harmonic complexity, Skempton moves on to *inæstimabile sacramentum, irreprehensibilis est*, still maintaining a rich chordal texture for these words, which mean *a priceless sacrament, it is without reproach*. It seems as though we have now been allowed to look within this tabernacle and seen the glowing wonder that is at its heart. And then the camera seems to begin to dolly backwards again. The opening music returns, but at a lower pitch, and at first with the same rich approach to harmony, the sacrament indistinguishable from the structure that contains it. Again, as at the opening, it repeats three times, but on each repetition, the complexity reduces, until the last time round, when the texture is reduced once more just to the melody itself. In another Skempton “fingerprint”, the piece does not slow down to a sedate ending, but – as it were – ploughs into the buffers, and just abruptly stops, leaving the rest to our imagination.

The canticles are the *Evening Service in G* by Francis Jackson (b.1917), who will celebrate his 100th birthday on 2nd October this year. He is very much a Yorkshireman, having been born in Malton, and having been a chorister at York Minster when Edward Bairstow (1874–1946) was Organist and Director of Music. When Bairstow died in office, Jackson was perfectly placed to take over, which he did in 1946, then remaining in post until his retirement in 1982. It’s the sort of lengthy period of service that has more often happened in French cathedrals, so rather refreshing to find that we can also manage such long and dedicated tenures here as well. It also implies a rather successful relationship between cathedral authorities and Organist, which are not always a given. These canticles, which moved quite briskly into being mainstream cathedral-type repertoire after their publication on 7th August 1969, have an endearing, slightly modal quality, but great elegance as well. Incidentally, Jackson has continued to compose and perform since his retirement. He is regarded with enormous affection by those who know him, and his contribution to the life of the Anglican choral tradition has been immense. It is astonishing to think that Jackson was born when the First World War still had more than a year to run.

The anthem is – appropriately – by Jackson’s predecessor at York Minster, Edward Bairstow. It is *Blessed City, Heavenly Salem*. Born in Huddersfield, Bairstow studied at Oxford, in London, and at Durham University. After appointments in London, Wigan, and Leeds, he became organist of York Minster in 1913, four years before his successor was born, and remained there until his death in 1946. The music of this anthem is based on the plainchant *Urbs beata*, a hymn originally written in the 7th Century for use at a church dedication. Bairstow takes the melody and finds numerous different ways in which to manipulate it, so that each of the contrasting sections is in effect a variation on the chant. As with many of these large-scale anthems of the period, this is a vividly drawn work, using the fullest resources of the organ and exploring widely the different textures and atmospheric effects that can be obtained from the choir. The expressive and emotional range of the piece is impressively wide, taking us on a real journey and evoking a vivid image of the Church as the truly Blessed City of the title, a safe dwelling place for us all.