

Music Notes 2017 – Founder’s Day

Oh, the pain of being eclipsed and pushed into second place! One of the cruelties of life visited upon the prodigiously talented is the fact that there could be someone else who is just that little bit more talented and whose legacy will, as a result, prevail. If you do happen to occupy a similar space on the historical bookshelf, then you will especially understand how personally meaningful it is to be and feel differentiated and noticed to great acclaim, and how this all affects one’s sense of self-worth.

For some people, there is an eternal conflict between Mozart (1756–1791) and Haydn (1732–1809)) as to which is the greater composer. A highly skilled and musical friend loathes Haydn with a passion that is quite astonishing, while believing Mozart to be the absolute peak of composing perfection. Meantime, another believes Haydn to be the greater creative genius, a more inventive, more engaged explorer of the musical landscape – although, as is usual, he cannot bring himself actually to dislike Mozart’s work, which he nevertheless believes to be somewhat undermined by too much formal perfection. Two people in need of getting a life, you may feel. Still, it is the fact that they are remarkably unlike one another that means that both Mozart and Haydn are the profoundly respected and loved figures they are today. Their distinguishing musical qualities allow for differing musical tastes to be satisfied.

This Sunday’s mass setting, however, comes from a composer who has had the misfortune to have been outshone by one contemporary in particular. Our obsession with the “canon” of great composers means that we consequently tend to miss out on most of the very great music he left to us. The composer in question is the Austrian Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837). He gets a rather rum press, sometimes even from his fans. A website devoted to the promotion of his music, set up by real enthusiasts, nevertheless draws attention to his physical appearance, saying: *Hummel was physically not attractive, he was short, increasingly fat from late teenage years and his face had a slightly twisted look.* Well, one has to acknowledge that the portrait record is mixed, although there is a most impressive likeness from 1820 by the German portraitist Joseph Karl Stieler (who also painted what is probably the most famous portrait of Beethoven) that shows Hummel as a noble-looking and thoughtful, well-attired gentleman. Still, Stieler’s approach to portraiture did lend a certain ennoblement to all his sitters, unless he was just exceptionally fortunate in the appearance and demeanour of those who sat for him!

In many ways, Hummel had every advantage. His father directed the Imperial School of Military Music in Vienna as well as conducting at Schikaneder’s (1751–1812) famous Theater auf der Wieden, where Mozart’s *Magic Flute* received its first performances (although not at Papa Hummel’s hands). Hummel was an outstanding

musician even at an early age, so much so that Mozart, who knew a thing or two from his own experience about being a child prodigy, took him on as a pupil, housing him under his own roof for two years. It is hard to imagine a better start in life for a composer or performer. Later, his father brought him to London for a four-year sojourn, where Johann added to his already remarkable education by studying with the celebrated pianist, composer, and theorist, Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), while rubbing shoulders with Joseph Haydn, who was also on sojourn over here. When, eventually, Hummel returned to Vienna, he then began to study with Albrechtsberger (1736–1809), Haydn himself (on the organ – which he advised Hummel to avoid because it would damage his piano playing!), and Salieri (1750–1825) – yes, *that* Salieri. What more could one have asked for in the musical world of the period? In the end, Hummel, who was taken on at the Esterházy court while Haydn was Kapellmeister, progressively took over more and more duties as his former teacher aged, and then succeeded him – although he was also later fired from the position for not paying enough attention to his responsibilities.

However, we are ahead of ourselves! By the time Hummel returned to Vienna from his London years, there was already a major challenge on the horizon: Beethoven! Many years later, Hummel confessed to his own pupil, Ferdinand Hiller (1811–1885), that Beethoven's appearance on the scene had substantially rattled his confidence. Beethoven's genius and imagination was self-evident and his skills beyond competition. Hummel decided simply not to compete, determining *It is best that you remain true to yourself and your nature*. It is said that this is why he never composed a symphony. We see Beethoven today as the pivotal figure whose works are generally divided up into three periods, early, middle, and late, each with its own compositional fingerprints and interests. Hummel and Beethoven started out pretty much from the same point, but it wasn't so long before Beethoven was exploring a musical language into which Hummel did not significantly venture. In the end, the older composer left the younger behind, and the rest is, as they say, history.

It's a pity, because Hummel – who died well respected, honoured, and famous, only to be quite rapidly eclipsed by everything new that was going on around him, but without him – wrote an immense amount of wonderful music. This Sunday's mass setting, the *Mass in Bb, Op. 77*, is a very good example. It is fluent, thrilling and very imaginative. There is nothing not to like about it; but, alas, it is not well-known, although some recent recordings have done their best to put this right.

The motet at the Offertory is by Hummel's great teacher, Mozart, and is one of his best known pieces: *Laudate Dominum*, a movement extracted from the *Vesperae solennes de confessore K.339 (Solemn Vespers for a Saint's Day)*. In fact, the title is not Mozart's – someone else has added the *de confessore* to the manuscript, although this may have been done with knowledge of the composer's intentions or the work's actual use. The setting was written in 1780, the second time Mozart had written such

a work. The comparably structured *Vesperae solennes de Dominica K. 321 (Solemn Vespers for a Sunday)* was composed the year before.

This setting of Psalm 117, *Laudate Dominum*, for accompanied soprano solo and choir is one of the most frequently performed works in the choral repertoire. It is written in a gently flowing 6/8 time signature, and its many arch-like melodic elements, starting with the opening phrase, emphasize its beautiful, undulating structure. After the soloist has sung the text of the psalm – the shortest in the Psalter, with just two verses – the choir repeats the soloist’s music, but this time singing the words of the *Gloria patri*, the soloist entering at the very end to decorate the *Amen*. It is one of those pieces that one might well dread hearing yet again, so well-engrained is it in our subconscious. Yet, experience tells us also that almost at once, even the most jaundiced listener will often be overwhelmed by the beauty of Mozart’s melodic imagination and the gentle, subtle, yet powerful emotion that it evokes.

Evensong begins with a choral introit from the choir. Our music list for September refers to this as *Domine Jesu Christe*, but it is more often known as *The Founder’s Prayer* or *The Prayer of King Henry VI*, for it is he who is said to have written it. *Domine, Jesu Christe, qui me creasti, redemisti, et preordinasti ad hoc quod sum; tu scis quæ de me facere vis; fac de me secundum voluntatem tuam cum misericordia. Amen. – O Lord Jesus Christ, who hast created and redeemed me and hast foreordained me unto that which now I am; thou knowest what thou wouldst do with me; do with me according to thy will, in thy mercy. Amen.* Henry VI was the founder of both Eton College and King’s College, Cambridge – this being the reason why a representative from Eton reads one of the lessons each year at the BBC broadcast Christmas Eve carol service. The music is by Henry Ley (1887–1962), who had a career that somewhat reminds one of a small-scale version of Hummel’s gilded path, albeit in an Anglican context: chorister at St George’s Chapel, Windsor, Organ Scholar at Keble College, Oxford, Exhibitioner at the Royal College of Music, organist of St Mary’s Farnham Royal, organist of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, Precentor at Radley College, and then at Eton, and Professor at the Royal College of Music from 1919 – among numerous other accomplishments. This setting of Henry VI’s prayer is undoubtedly his best-known composition, although he wrote much more than this. It is very effective and fits a Founder’s Day admirably.

The canticles are known as *Collegium Regale in F* by Charles Wood (1866–1926) – in other words, they were written for Henry VI’s foundation, King’s College, Cambridge. Wood is something of a problem for anyone writing regular music notes for a church, because he is so thoroughly urbane, elegant and, in every sense charming, rather like a guest who is very well-mannered and perfectly turned out, that it is difficult to latch onto the personal qualities that should make the person seem human, not so idealistically ‘perfect’. Well, he is not in fact such a blank page. He is quite a core figure of the Anglican choral tradition; and he seems to have

captured the core Englishness of that tradition so well, that it comes as a slight surprise to realize that he hailed from Armagh in Ireland. But Wood is not unique among composers for the Anglican choral tradition in his Irish origins: that absolute pillar of the church music community, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), came from Dublin. The fact is that two absolute giants of the Anglican choral tradition, profoundly respected and seen as having produced the musical distilled essence of the Church of England, were not from England at all. Of course, this is no different from other aspects of English culture, which is such a rich and promiscuous mix of influences from *everywhere*, a fact that seems to be entirely forgotten as we undergo one of our periodic and unattractive bouts of national xenophobia. The music contributed by the non-English Stanford and Wood contributes significantly to making the Church of England what it is. Of course, this principle applies *mutatis mutandis* to more than just the church.

This setting was written in 1920, one of a sequence of astonishing works that King's College has inspired. Composed for two four-part choirs, it reveals the antiphonal possibilities of this structure.

Ernest Bullock (1890–1979) was variously Organist at Exeter Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, and it is indeed as an organist and educationalist that he spent most of his career, rather than as a composer. In 1941 he became head of the Scottish National Academy of Music and Professor of Music at Glasgow University, and he was from 1953 to 1960 Director of the Royal College of Music. The anthem *Give us the wings of faith* is undoubtedly his best-known composition. The text is by the visionary Isaac Watts (1674-1748), a great writer of hymns and similar texts. There is something edgy and restless about this setting. The use of slightly syncopated rhythms and dramatic effects, such as the sudden upward rush to illustrate the words *Give us the wings of faith to rise within the veil, and see the Saints above*, and the abrupt blast when the text says the saints ascribe *their triumph to his death*, leave the sound and words to resonate and hang in the suddenly quiet air, before subsiding to a peaceful conclusion. It is appropriate that we hear this sung on the day that we celebrate Prior Rahere, who was inspired by our Patron S. Bartholomew to build the Priory, the Hospital and our remarkable church, where each Sunday we embrace a musical heritage inspired by composers from all over the world.