

Music Notes 2017 – Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Last year, Rupert introduced the music of Stanley Vann (1910–2010) to the Priory Church. These week, we are to hear again his *Missa brevis in A* at the Solemn Eucharist.

Stanley Vann was born in Leicester, and took to music early in his life, starting with the piano at six years of age, and the organ rather later, at 17. Nevertheless, by the time he was 20 he had both of the highest diplomas in the instrument from the Royal College of Organists already under his belt. A year later, he was Assistant Organist at Leicester Cathedral, after which he took on several sequential positions as organist in various parishes. After the Second World War, he became Organist at Chelmsford Cathedral and a Professor of Harmony & Counterpoint at Trinity College in London in 1949. Four years later, in 1953, he took up the position with which he is most associated, Master of the Music at Peterborough Cathedral. He remained there until he retired in 1977 – although he was remarkably active in the musical world until after his hundredth birthday in 2010, when he was carried off by the consequences of a fall at home, rather than running out of steam in any other sense.

During this long life, Vann composed many outstanding works, with an harmonic language that is uniquely his. It is not so much that he did what nobody else had done, but it is the characteristic way that he assembled chord progressions, and especially the sense he revealed for spacing the voices in a chord for maximum effect, that marks out his “voice”. There is a chant he wrote for Psalm 51, which is especially associated with Ash Wednesday, that illustrates this perfectly, the voices knotted together at the outset in a tense cluster of sound that illustrates and communicates perfectly the tension behind the psalmist’s words: *Have mercy upon me O God after thy great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies, do away mine offences*. It is an amazing miniature that in many ways sums up Vann’s language in its short span. You can hear a rather curious recording of this directed by Vann by following this link: <https://open.spotify.com/track/5ljOr8pUcHOMRNO0972zvf>.

In fact, the psalms were of especial importance in his work at Peterborough. Recordings that were made while he was there show clearly why his approach had an enormous influence on an important strand of Anglican music making. The singing of psalms in choral establishments tends to be done in two main ways: in one of these, the psalms are something to be got through – they sound rather as though they are just a necessary evil of Evensong. They are presented somewhat uniformly, and the structure of the chant tends to dominate the sense of the words. In the other – and you will have guessed already that this is the tradition that Vann exemplified – the psalms are brought vividly to life. Dynamics and changes of pace are deployed as illustration, and the chant’s structure is never allowed to dominate the meaning of the words. The performances are deft and elegant and never

remotely trivial. It is possible to follow a line of inheritance from Vann's approach through some of the very best psalm singing in the Anglican tradition, and certain Directors of Music in cathedrals and churches across the country have absolutely grasped this and run with it. You can also follow the other "tradition" and hear psalms simply "gone through" in numerous establishments, with little apparent thought given to shaping their structure and illuminating the meaning. The loss here is not just musical: these are some of the greatest works of poetry the human race has produced, and bringing them to life – really communicating the sense of them – for the congregation is profoundly important. Talking to Roderick Dunnett in 1992 in *The Musical Times*, Vann said of this part of the service: *You can get such a lot out of the psalms. We strove to bring out the colour and dramatic content, but in a restrained way, without exaggeration. If you "go to town" too much, it makes a travesty.* The recordings certainly show that he knew where to draw the line.

In the same article, Vann expanded on how he had tried to mould the attitude of the choir: *I tried to instil into our boys the belief that they were worshipping God, singing directly to Him, rather than putting on some kind of "performance". One tried to convey a sense of reverence and get the choir to project itself wholeheartedly into the spirit of the service. Some of the best moments were in the depths of winter, perhaps with snow or high winds outside, when a candlelit service might be attended by just the choir and clergy. It gave a unique feeling that you were singing to God, and somehow brought out the whole purpose of what divine service was about.* This was helped by his approach to rehearsal, which was to encourage the choir to see itself as involved in the worship of God from the moment they stepped into the cathedral precincts. This was religion taken very seriously, but not for the sake of pompous piety or play-acting. It was saying that what we do in church is real and warrants being treated as such. Vann expected his choir to behave on the basis that what they did was powerful and significant.

This mass setting was written when Stanley had already retired and was past his 80th birthday, which fell on 15th February 1990. That occasion was marked by a special Evensong using almost entirely his music at Peterborough Cathedral. The next month, the mass was given its first performance. It is set for a normal four-part choir and organ with soprano and tenor soloists. Of course, those arranging the performances in 1990 could not have known that there was in fact still a full 20 years of composition and active music-making in Stanley's life yet to come. It really was a century of music-making and especially of commitment to church music. His is an example well-worth studying and following.

The Motet at the Offertory is by another important figure in the history of British church music. It is a setting of *Ave Verum Corpus* by Colin Mawby (b. 1936). He began his musical education at Westminster Cathedral Choir School and, by the time he was a teenager, was already assisting the then Director of Music, George Malcolm, at the organ. After a spell at the Royal College of Music, he returned to the

Cathedral, first as Assistant and then, from 1961, as Director of Music. He remained there until 1976, when he moved to Dublin, in due course becoming choral director at Radio Telefís Éireann. His retirement has been a somewhat complex matter. To quote Wikipedia: *Mawby retired to East Anglia in 2001 but returned to County Dublin in Ireland briefly but moved to London, then Dublin again and now is living in London.*

This setting of the well-known text of *Ave Verum Corpus* was in fact composed after Mawby's move to Dublin in 1978, rather than at the Cathedral. Unlike the Byrd, Elgar, and Mozart settings, all of which are more shaped by quiet and reserved wonder and awe, Mawby gives us an unexpectedly dramatic approach across a wide range of dynamics, picking up on the text's allusions to Christ's agony in the Crucifixion and to the full drama of this part of the story of Salvation. It is a powerful and highly emotional piece, in which the choir splits into up to eight parts, giving an especially rich texture, and supported throughout by the organ. In fact, there is also a version in which the organ part has been re-written for full orchestra, but for technical reasons we are unable to bring you that version on this occasion... Like a lot of French "Gothic" church music from the end of the nineteenth century onwards through the whole twentieth century, this is music that demands that we take the whole business of church and church music utterly seriously. In this case, written from a Roman Catholic perspective, it intersects perfectly with Anglo-Catholic sensibilities.

At Evensong, we will hear one of the *Three Choirs Evening Services* by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), this one written in 1951 for Worcester Cathedral. In 1919, Howells had met Lady Olga Montagu, the sister of the 9th Earl of Sandwich at a musical evening in Westbourne Terrace in West London, and a strong friendship developed between them. The 27-year old Howells was still at the start of his career, and Lady Olga evidently decided he needed a helping hand. Among other generous gifts, she equipped him with a piano, and a gold watch, and even made it possible for him to buy the house in Barnes in which he and his family lived from 1946 until the end of his life.

At the beginning of August 1951, Lord Sandwich wrote to him to tell him that Lady Olga was seriously ill. Howells immediately wrote to her, but by the time the letter arrived, she had already died, and Howells received the news on what was also his thirty-first wedding anniversary. He was already committed to write a set of Evensong canticles for Worcester Cathedral, and he started composing them immediately, completing them the next day. While he did not specify a dedication, it is unthinkable that so great a loss would not have been substantially on his mind while composing.

The *Magnificat* opens with a quite lengthy and decorated passage for sopranos alone, and it is difficult not to feel that in some way this represents Olga as well as also

being one of Howells's characteristic ways of drawing attention to the fact that these words are said by the Blessed Virgin Mary. The rest of the choir joins in eventually, and there is certainly much vivid characterisation of the text. There is also something of a sense of an underlying darkness, a "smiling through the tears", as it were. The *Nunc Dimittis* begins with the choir singing together the poignant words *Lord, now lettest thou thy seroant depart in peace* to an unusually extended, even slightly tortuous phrase, surely a clear reference to the loss of his dear friend and supporter.

The anthem, *I am the Light of the World*, is by David Bednall (b.1979), and dates from 2009. After studying at The Queen's College in Oxford, he was an organ scholar at Gloucester Cathedral, and then in 2002 until 2007 was Sub-Organist and then Assistant Organist at Wells Cathedral, where our own Rupert Gough was Assistant Organist from 1994 until 2005, the latter year or so of which Rupert was also Acting Organist. David's PhD work was undertaken at the University of Bristol, and he is Sub Organist at Bristol Cathedral and Organist at the University. You will forgive me for repeating the delightful information that his CV includes having been a "stunt organist" on Dr Who, a claim to fame that is probably unique. Many of us have also been stunt organists, but not on Dr Who, and so are merely also-runs in the hagiography of the role.

David's own website contains a helpful commentary on his compositional style, and rather than paraphrase it laboriously in order merely to appear not to be cheating, here is what it says:

David Bednall's compositional language is a result of a number of diverse influences. His love of late-romantic and 20th-century music is very apparent, as is his interest in emotive and evocative effects to communicate the text fully to listeners. Much of his recent music has been for choirs and his exceptionally wide field of musical tastes combined with considerable experience in the Cathedral Choral Tradition make for an exciting and reinvigorating approach to liturgical choral writing. Major inspirations include R. Strauss, Puccini, Ravel, Vaughan Williams, Howells and Cochereau. However, his writing is no pastiche of these styles, but a distinctive and varied synthesis of these harmonic and rhetorical characteristics. Within his distinctive harmonic language there is considerable variety, from dense and evocative mysticism to innocent exuberance to timeless serenity. He is always interested in finding something distinctive and new in texts while never resorting to mere novelty or effect.