

## Music Notes 2017 – The First Sunday of Lent

There are several ways that one could mark the change into the season of Lent. A lowering of the musical temperature is one obvious approach, with more austere mass settings from Renaissance composers, downbeat motets that bewail our wickedness and unworthiness, and so on. This Sunday, however, we are going on a different journey, with one of the great works from a French tradition that uses a church's acoustics and the sheer power of the organ to paint an auditory picture of the grandeur and awe-inducing majesty of God, against which our own selves are put into a proper perspective. The mass setting is the *Messe Solennelle* by Louis Vierne (1870–1937).

Vierne was born with very limited eyesight and yet developed a great love of that most intricately physical of all instruments, the organ, of which virtually every example is radically different from all others. Preparing to play any organ for the first time is a matter of detailed discovery, and one that would be that much more rigorous and demanding for someone with impaired sight. Eventually, though, by dint of sheer hard work, Vierne became assistant organist to Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937) at St Sulpice, and then organist at Notre Dame from 1900 until 1937. He toured all over the world as a celebrity performer, and, famously, died at the organ console, towards the end of his 1,750th recital at Notre Dame, with Maurice Duruflé (1902–1986), who had been assisting him with stop changes, at his side. It was, in fact, exactly the death that he had often stated that he wanted for himself, and his wish – or even prayer – was granted him.

The origins of the *Messe Solennelle* lie in a summer holiday Vierne spent in 1899 in Cayeux-sur-Mer in what was the region of Picardie (now part of the region of Hauts-de-France), where he began to sketch out a mass for choir and orchestra, which he dedicated to the composer, organist and director of the Paris Conservatoire, Théodore Dubois (1837–1924). It was Widor, Vierne's "boss" at St Sulpice, where Vierne was still assistant at the time, who pointed out that this instrumentation would limit the practicality of the work, commenting that one could not always count on having an orchestra available. How true! Instead, Widor recommended writing it for two organs. Many large French churches have a "Grand Organ" that dominates the building physically and acoustically from the west gallery, while there is also a separate "Choir Organ" at the other end of the building, a smaller instrument that is there primarily to provide accompaniment and support to the choir, who are positioned adjacent to it.

St Sulpice is an impressive building, baroque and dramatic, and the liturgy in Widor's day was a vivid and thrilling affair. Widor, as *Organiste Titulaire*, presided (he himself used the word "reigned") from the console of the Grand Organ in the gallery for sixty-four years. The space was richly carpeted and elegant. Behind it was a room that Widor had converted into a "salon" where he would receive guests

before and after mass, and sometimes also during the sermon. We have yet to identify a suitable place for this to happen in the Priory Church. Meanwhile, down at the far end of the church was the *Maître de Chapelle*, who trained and conducted a professional choir of about forty boys and men supported by the Choir Organ, which was played by its own organist. The music of the liturgy involved a great deal of interplay between the Grand Organ in its imposing west gallery, and the choir and its organ at the other end. There are riveting descriptions of what it was like to experience this interplay.

Vierne generally uses the Choir Organ for its usual function in a church with this arrangement, which is to say it supports the choir, playing its music and thereby keeping it on track as a by-product of the process. Nevertheless, there are places in the work where the Choir Organ is given a chance to shine as a solo instrument as well. This role, however, is mainly left to the much more dramatic and colourful Grand Organ, which is boisterous in a suitably overwhelming manner, playing especially between the choral sections, or providing illustrative material at points in the text. Incidentally, now that we are in Lent, we lose one of the best movements of this mass setting, which is the *Gloria*. Rupert Gough, our Director of Music, is careful, however, to ensure that it is not lost totally, as it is this setting that we will hear at the Easter Eve Vigil, once Easter has been proclaimed in the *Exsultet*.

The motet at the Offertory is *O quam amabilis es* by another French composer, Paul Vilette (1926–1998). Born in Normandy, Vilette studied with Duruflé and then went to the Paris Conservatoire. Modernism was all the rage there, but Vilette found himself out of sympathy with this, preferring a romantic tradition that saw its French connection as being through the musical impressionists such as Debussy (1862–1918) and Fauré (1845–1924). The composer settled in 1967, for the rest of his life, in Provence, where the climate particularly suited his always rather fragile health, becoming Director of the music academy in Aix-en-Provence. Altogether, he wrote fifteen unaccompanied motets that have come down to us, including this one. Curiously, Vilette is better known outside rather than within his native France. This is partly because he lived in the provinces, rather than Paris, and because his music was disparaged for its conservatism, unlike that of his Conservatoire contemporary (and friend), Pierre Boulez, who took a quite different path, one widely seen as the real way forward. Nevertheless, Vilette's music was taken up here, especially by Donald Hunt (b.1930) at Worcester Cathedral in the 1970s, and since then, has been increasingly recorded and performed on both sides of the Atlantic.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong is the *Fifth Service* by Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656). A prolific and successful composer, Tomkins was born in St David's in Wales, but moved at some point in his teenage years with his family to Gloucester, where he very likely studied with William Byrd (1540–1623). Tomkins is known to us as much for his madrigals and other secular music as for his church compositions.

He was a force to be reckoned with on the ecclesiastical music scene, and managed to be in the right place at the right time when his superior and friend, Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), died suddenly under the strain of arranging the music for the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles I. Tomkins stepped up and, with the help of some useful re-scheduling of events, accomplished superbly all that was asked and needed of him. Nevertheless, the end of his life was not easy. While the composers of the preceding generation had to struggle with the chopping and changing ecclesiastical politics of their time, Tomkins found himself badly hit by the Civil War, which effectively deprived him of his living when Worcester Cathedral, a Royalist enclave – where he had become Director of Music many years beforehand – was closed as a result of the hostilities. This cruelly truncated his work as a church musician, and although he survived by switching to different kinds of composition, and by having a son, Nathaniel, who married well at just the vital moment, and welcomed him into his home, the personal sense of loss must have been devastating.

Tomkins is often described as having been very conservative in his music, the same criticism levelled later at Villette. Yet, Tomkins's music is full of magical touches that were to disappear from the general musical language during the austere years of the Commonwealth. By the time of the Restoration, Thomas was long dead. However, good old Nathaniel came up trumps again and took the opportunity of the new political circumstances to publish a book in 1668 of his father's works called *Musica Deo sacra*. This had the effect of bridging the period between his father's most productive work as a church composer and the new generation of Restoration composers such as Henry Purcell (1659–1695). As a result, even if the music was formally conservative, those magic touches found a ready response in the younger composers, and it is not difficult to trace a direct line between some of Tomkins's ideas and the extraordinary musical language developed by Purcell. *Musica Deo sacra* contains five of Tomkins's complete tally of seven services, and at Evensong we shall hear the fifth of these.

The earlier services in the collection are rather straightforward, but by the fourth and fifth, Tomkins's approach had developed quite markedly. Both are written as "verse" settings – that is, they are in sections that present the text in sections using contrasting forces. Tomkins obviously had access to a decent bass soloist, because he often writes interesting solo sections for that voice, and in fact, both the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis* start with one of these. This is followed in the *Magnificat* by a section for full choir, and then for a semi-chorus of solo voices, and so on – each part of the text with a different texture. This, of course, opens possibilities for word-painting – and a composer with the madrigal credentials of a Tomkins is always going to be prone to this – on top of the usual range of compositional methods of bringing the text alive. For example, when it comes to *throughout all generations*, the choir breaks into imitative polyphony, repeating the text several times to illustrate the many generations of which the text speaks. The other quality that is particularly

different about the fourth and fifth services is that, whereas in the first three, the organ (which is definitely expected to be there and sounding) simply plays the vocal lines, services four and five have an independent organ part that contributes significantly to the texture. Of course, this is more likely anyway in a “verse” setting, because solos need accompaniment, but Tomkins writes more than just a continuo part to provide harmonic underpinning, and one sees here an accompaniment starting to make a really significant and distinctive contribution to the music.

The anthem is *Salvator Mundi* by John Blow (1649–1708), easily his most celebrated work. Blow was born in Newark, near Nottingham, and began his musical studies there before becoming a chorister in the Chapel Royal in London. He was quite a prodigy in his own right, and became organist of Westminster Abbey at the tender age of 19, just the first of many posts he was to hold – often concurrently – during the rest of his life. In due course he became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, and Master of the Children (i.e. choral trainer and supervisor) in succession to the late Pelham Humfrey (1647–1674). Among his charges in this latter position was a young Henry Purcell, and in a sense, this was Blow’s misfortune. He recognized Purcell’s genius and encouraged it considerably, and Purcell’s star has shone ever-brighter since. Indeed, Blow made way for his former pupil to succeed him at the Abbey, only returning to his position after Purcell’s untimely death. The two men are buried close to one another within the Abbey itself. The upshot of having had so extraordinary a pupil and been so self-effacing is that Blow, while not unknown, is not seen by most as the important figure he truly was.

Blow’s (known) output includes some one hundred anthems, ten Services, two Latin choral motets, no fewer than thirty odes for royal occasions, fifty secular songs, fourteen catches, and one full-scale opera. *Salvator Mundi* is one of the two Latin motets in a sea of otherwise English texts, and, alas, there is no extant explanation for why he suddenly decided to write in the language of the older church. It cannot really have been for church use, such a thing being unthinkable at the time, so it was perhaps the fulfilment of a personal request and strictly for private use. Whatever the reason, it drew from Blow the most extraordinarily evocative music, with an astringent and powerful harmonic language, almost as though the use of Latin gave him permission to explore an emotional religious side that the more ascetic contemporary English church would have disdained.

At Benediction, the *O Salutaris* is a setting by Vierne’s former boss, Charles-Marie Widor. Meantime, the *Tantum ergo* is by Jean-Baptiste Fauré (1830–1940), who is not to be confused with his contemporary, Gabriel Fauré. Oh dear me no! Wikipedia describes Jean-Baptiste as *a celebrated French operatic baritone and an art collector of great significance. He also composed a number of classical songs.* This setting, presumably included in that somewhat generic description, is a very charming miniature that captures the spirituality characteristic of this period in French church music.