

Music Notes 2017 – The Second Sunday of Lent

The mass setting this week is the *Missa Si ambulavero* for six voices by the Flemish composer, Philippe de Monte (1521–1603). Now, you might quite reasonably wonder why this composer had a very obviously Italian name, and yet he is described as Flemish. Indeed, it was speculated in the past that he might have been from Mons, the capital of Hainaut, in what is now Belgium. As this is the Latin for “mountain”, he would then be “de Monte” – i.e. coming from Mons, expressed by using the ablative form of the third declension (natch!). Alas, this is too neat. He actually came from what is today Mechelen. If you were to have the time and inclination, you could read up on a rather entertaining spat that took place in 1931 and 1932 in the pages of *The Musical Times* between the organist Dr Arthur T. Froggatt (1857–1944) and The Revd Canon Jules van Nuffel (1883–1953), a Belgian priest, musicologist, organist, and composer, who was Kantor of Sint-Romboutskathedraal (which surely should have a special ministry to coffee roasters) in Mechelen, and a strong and enthusiastic promoter of de Monte. In the kind of reserved, long-winded, and pompous tones in which such discussions were held then, Froggatt tried to extract from van Nuffel evidence that de Monte indeed came from Mechelen and not Mons. It’s very jolly in a “watching paint dry” sort of way. Today, this has been settled beyond question. His real name was most probably Van den Berghe, Flemish for “from the mountains”, and was subsequently latinized when he went to Naples after an upbringing that included singing in the choir of Sint-Romboutskathedraal.

After Naples, de Monte went on to work in Rome, where Palestrina (1525–1594) was working, but there is no extant evidence that the two men ever met. Indeed, de Monte was also around when Lassus (1530–1594) was there, but there is also no evidence that Lassus and de Monte knew each other either. Had there been some certainty about this, it would have been rather neat. Palestrina is often described as having a rather austere style of translucent and clear musical lines, highly disciplined, while Lassus is said to have a more intense, highly-coloured, and dramatic approach to musical expression. De Monte’s music is often said to fall neatly between these contrasting styles. The composer and musicologist, Fabrice Fitch (b.1967) has commented, however, that it is never a good sign when composers are defined more by whom they are unlike, and this might explain why de Monte’s music is less well-known than one might expect.

Well, this is our opportunity to judge this for ourselves. You will perhaps hear something of what Fabrice means about the music falling between Palestrina and Lassus: it does have *something* of the flow and elegance of Palestrina, but also *something* of the fire of Lassus. To my ears, this doesn’t mean at all that it is a dull averaging out of the two – in fact, very far from it. But what does jump out is the way that the *Sanctus* begins, because it is remarkably similar to the same moment in the *Mass for Four Voices* by William Byrd (1539–1623). This is, in fact, not quite as odd

as it may seem, although it clearly also means far less than it might. The *Missa Si ambulavero* is based on a motet of the same name, also by de Monte, from which he derives much inspiration for the melodic material of the mass. This makes it what is known as a “Parody Mass”. De Monte’s was published in 1587, whereas Byrd’s Mass was published in 1592. Of course, their stories have been geographically very separate, with Byrd confined to England, and de Monte busy in Italy, the Netherlands, Vienna, and, ultimately, Prague, where he ended his days as Kapellmeister at the Hapsburg court.

However, along the way, de Monte spent some time in England, having come over as part of the musical entourage of Phillip II of Spain when he was married to Queen (“Bloody”) Mary I, and hence King of this country – although non-regnant, meaning he had to stand down upon her death. In the current enthusiasm of some people here for “sovereignty”, it is easy to forget that our story is one of sovereigns whose line extends almost everywhere *except* Britain. Their origins have been Saxon, Jute, Danish, Viking, Norman, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Scottish – James I having also been James VI of a then independent Scotland. Well, while the daughter of the Spanish Catherine of Aragon was on the English throne and married to the King of Spain, de Monte was also here for rather over a year in 1554 and 1555, during which time he became acquainted with both William Byrd and Thomas Tallis (1505–1585). Of course, it is ridiculous to think that the fact that they chose roughly the same motif for their settings of the *Sanctus* therefore means something; and yet, how tantalizing that they knew one another. As the saying goes, the similarities don’t end there. Yet, if one tries listening to this music as though it were an unknown piece by Byrd, up to a point, the comparison seems not so absurd.

The motet at the Offertory is *Salva nos, Domine* by the French composer Jean Mouton (c.1459–1522). We often encounter him in Epiphany, because he wrote a very good Christmas motet called *Quaeramus cum pastoribus* which was used by the Spanish Renaissance composer Cristóbal de Morales (c.1500–1553) as the model for a parody mass setting of the same name. In common with many composers of this period, the name by which we know him today was not his real name, any more than de Monte was – well – really de Monte. Jean Mouton was not Jean Mouton at all, but rather Jean de Hollingue. We can really only go into one of these cases per week, so let’s just take this at face value here! Pleasingly, we are going to be able to get in another reference to Henry VIII’s reign, because there is a very plausible theory that Mouton was musical director on the French side for the 17-day summit between Henry and Francois I referred to as “Field of the Cloth of Gold”. No doubt, the musicians competed as much as did the other members of the respective courts.

There is now yet another questionable comparison between composers to consider, because Mouton is often spoken of in comparison with his Flemish contemporary Josquin des Prez (1450–1521). What they certainly did share was a fascination with

musical puzzles. In Josquin's case, this often came out in musical acrostics and similar compositional games. One of these tells us the "correct" spelling of his name, although it is often still written out in other ways, even today. The "trick", of course, is to make these compositional games work out without detracting from the quality of the music and the experience of the listener. Both composers were brilliant at this. The real divergence comes in their approach to melodic ideas. Mouton likes shorter, rhythmically regular phrases, which give his music an elegant structure that works very well. Under the surface, however, he is often setting himself real challenges.

In the case of this motet, *Salva nos, Domine (Save us, O Lord)*, Mouton chooses to use a plainchant melody in a canon. This is rather like singing a round such as *Frère Jacques*, but singing it through just once per voice and then stopping. In other words, the same tune is used in different voices, but starting a fixed distance apart, then ploughing on, with the composer responsible for ensuring that they do not collide hideously. The motet is written for six voices in all, and Mouton starts four of them off in turn with a version of the plainchant, but only using the opening idea in each part. Then the third voice down starts the plainchant melody in long notes, joined exactly four beats later by the top voice singing from the beginning of the melody, but a fifth apart in terms of pitch. This keeps going all the way to the end, and yet one is never painfully aware of this internal compositional procedure and the working out of a technical challenge.

The gorgeous texture stands out as a Mouton footprint. The first voices in the whole piece are bass and baritone singing together, joined eight beats later by a tenor, and then eight beats after that, by an alto, producing a rich and resonant texture against which the canon is played out. There is always a danger with lower voices being used together that you actually get musical mud. But not with Mouton! Of course, this is to some extent in the hands of the performers, but his writing, even with these relatively densely packed voices, is amazingly translucent and beautiful.

The canticles at Evensong are from the *Fourth Service* by Adrian Batten (1591–1637). His mature career was mostly spent at Westminster Abbey and then at St Paul's Cathedral, where he worked both as a singer and organist. We know from contemporary texts that Batten was a prolific composer, but, alas, much of his music is now lost to us. Charles Burney (1726–184), who might be described as a kind of "proto music historian", and who had a great deal to say about everybody – generally expressed from quite a personal perspective – wrote of him in his *A General History of Music, From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, (produced in four volumes between 1776 and 1789): *He was a good harmonist of the old school, without adding anything to the common stock of ideas in melody or modulation with which the art was furnished long before he was born. Nor did he correct any of the errors in accent with which former times abounded. So that his imitations of anterior composers were entire. He seems to have jogged on in the plain, safe, and beaten track, without looking much about him, nor if he had, does he seem likely*

to have penetrated far into the musical terra incognita. Apart from being slightly surprised that the use of the word “jogged” was common in the eighteenth century, this really doesn’t seem fair to Batten, whose works may well have trod safe territory, but which nevertheless are charming, this setting being a good example. Of course, we only have a very few pieces, so perhaps Burney’s swipes were directed at works that we are now mercifully spared. Nevertheless, you won’t be disappointed by this one. The setting alternates between accompanied solo sections and choral textures. It is effective and elegant writing, with a slight hint of melancholy lurking under the surface.

The anthem is *Lord, let me know mine end* by Maurice Greene (1696–1755), who was at one time Organist of St Paul’s Cathedral. In his meteoric rise, he moved from there to be Organist of the Chapel Royal and from there to be Professor of Music at Cambridge University. Not content with that, he eventually became Master of the King’s Musick for the last twenty years of his life. Some people have attributed the creation of the Anglican choral tradition to him, but not because of his own compositions, but rather because he initiated the work of assembling a formal collection of anthems eventually published as *Cathedral Music*. Alas, Greene died before he could finish the project, which was completed by William Boyce (1711–1779). This collection was so influential that it can be said to have formed the indispensable basis for our tradition of Anglican choral music.

Greene’s own contributions to the genre are, however, only modest in their scope. Today he is still known for a rather breathless Rogationtide/Harvest verse anthem, *Thou visitest the earth*, which in the wrong hands can sound as though its effect on the crops was so successful that half the choir now has advanced hay fever. However, his one real masterwork is this Sunday’s anthem, a setting of Psalm 39, which really brought out the best in him. The score is marked for sections to be taken separately by each side of the choir, and there is also a central section that is a duet between two treble soloists.

What is so magical about this piece is the bass line of the accompaniment, which later generations would refer to as a “walking bass”. There is an inescapable impression that this constantly moving line, changing note exactly on every beat from beginning to end, represents the ticking away of a person’s life. This is especially strong in the duet section, where the text declares that *man walketh in a vain shadow* – and you can hear him in the bass doing precisely that.

This anthem alone ensures Greene deserves a special place among composers of Lenten music. Nevertheless, it is not for his work as a composer that we must be chiefly grateful, but rather for his role in establishing a new direction for music in the Church of England by identifying genius in the works of others.