

## Music Notes 2017 – Lent IV:

### Mid-Lent, Refreshment Sunday, Lætare Sunday, Mothering Sunday

Refreshment Sunday – also known as Mid-Lent, Lent IV, Mothering Sunday and *Laetare* Sunday – gives us an opportunity to relax briefly, allow for a lessening of the austerity of Lent and replenish our resources for the final part of the penitential season, which is the most emotionally demanding part of the church's year. It obviously helps if the music cooperates in lightening the mood, and we do this with the help of the piece known as *Messa di Gloria* by Giacomo Puccini (1854–1924). We say “known as”, because this title was not given to the piece until it was published in 1952, long after Puccini was gone. As far as he was concerned, it was just a *Messa a quattro voci*.

“Our” Puccini was not the first musical Giacomo Puccini in the family. That was his great-great-grandfather, who lived from 1712 to 1781. He was organist of the cathedral of San Martino in Lucca in Tuscany. When the first Giacomo died, the authorities decided to keep the position in the family, and handed the job to Giacomo's son Antonio (1747–1832). Having established a pattern, they saw no reason not to continue in due course with Antonio's son Domenico (1772–1815). By then, they were so far into a musical dynasty that after Domenico, it was only good manners to appoint Michele (1813–1864), “our” Giacomo's father, to the post. Altogether, the family ran the cathedral's music for a century and a quarter, and having consistently managed to produce musical boys, they must have had high hopes that young Giacomo would live up to the family firm's expectations.

Alas, Michele died early in 1864, when his son was six years old, and unable to reach the pedals. Clearly, an interruption in the tradition was inevitable. The matter was squared with the authorities, who agreed to keep the job open until the boy was old enough to assume his rightful place. After Giacomo joined the cathedral choir and his legs had grown sufficiently, he became an assistant organist. All seemed to be going according to plan. However, the young man evinced an unsettling interest in opera, even walking 20 miles on one occasion to see Verdi's (1813–1901) *Aida*. But surely that would be no obstacle: both Domenico, the boy's grandfather, and his father Michele had composed operas alongside their cathedral duties; why should there be a problem?

In due course, “our” Giacomo went to study at the Istituto Musicale Pacini in Lucca. Although his heart was not truly set on composing church music instead of opera, nevertheless, it was a Mass that he presented as his graduation thesis, surely a nod in the direction of the family tradition, as well as being an expression of his own faith. Having already composed the *Credo* in 1878, he expanded this with a further four movements to create the Mass we have now and submitted it in his portfolio. Later, “our” Puccini of *Tosca* fame studied at the Milan Conservatory.

In fact, the Mass very nearly disappeared completely after a well-received first performance in 1880, and although Puccini wrote – surely with self-irony – “my masterpiece” on a copy of the score he gave to his friend, Alfredo Vandini, he also does not seem to have expected much of it. As so often the case with a piece of contemporary music, the enthusiasm expressed at the first performance was not rewarded with a further performance in its composer’s lifetime. With very few exceptions – for example, the little *Requiem* Puccini wrote many years later to commemorate the death of Verdi – the Mass marked the end of his writing church music.

However, there was eventually a “next performance”. This was on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1952 in Chicago’s Grant Park, performed by the Swedish Choir and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Alfredo Antonini (1901–1983). Its revival was the doing of Monsignor Dante Del Fiorentino, a very musical priest who had also been born in Lucca a few years after Puccini, and who, by the time of the Chicago performance, was Rector of St Lucy’s Church on Kent Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. In 1950, he travelled to Lucca to research for a book he was writing about Puccini, his boyhood hero. (This became *Immortal Bohemian: an intimate memoir of Giacomo Puccini*.) While there, he was able to acquire from the Vandini family the score of the Mass that Giacomo had given Alfredo, and, happy as could be, he bore it back home to Brooklyn. Performance was not all he had on his mind: he also approached Mills Music, then one of the biggest music publishers in the United States. They duly brought it out, giving it the snappy title *Messa di Gloria*, and then a real kerfuffle broke out.

It transpired that, although the Vandinis had given Fr Fiorentino a copy of the score, the original manuscript had gone to Puccini’s publisher, Ricordi. The copyright actually belonged to Puccini’s Estate and could only be “exploited” (as the charming technical expression is) by those appointed by that Estate. Lawyers were consulted, threats issued, principles stood upon, and huffy poses with hands on hips struck on all sides. Ultimately, it was settled by a division of the rights between the two publishing houses, but one cannot help feeling that Puccini’s Estate and Ricordi really did owe Fr Fiorentino and Mills Music for having given an unexpected new life to a student work they had ignored. After 1880, even its own composer simply mined parts of it for his operas, re-using material in *Edgar* and, especially, *Manon Lescaut*, where the bored heroine sings the whole music of the *Agnus Dei* (to different words) while performing her toilette – perhaps a somewhat awkward reference for this moment in our own service.

There is, in fact, a great deal of nascent opera in this music, and it would be a great mistake to perform it as though it were an honorary part of the Anglican tradition, or had ever been even in the same country as a teapot. Good Tuscan wine lurks

under the surface from the word go, together with a lightness of spirit and a touch of the town band in places. Puccini's "masterpiece" is just what one needs on Refreshment Sunday.

The Mass is paired with an offertory motet by another great Italian opera composer, Giacomo Rossini (1792–1868). This is a setting of *O salutaris hostia*, the Benediction canticle that is drawn from the much longer hymn by S. Thomas Aquinas written for the Feast of Corpus Christi. While we also associate Rossini primarily with opera, he did write a certain amount of more or less religious music. There is a setting of the *O salutaris* in the *Petite Messe Solennelle* that he wrote towards the end of his life and described as "my last sin upon earth", but the setting we will be hearing this Sunday is a rather earlier work for four-part choir. It is comparatively simple and straightforward, but still highly effective.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in G minor* (not to be confused with the later *Evening Service in G major*) by Francis Jackson (b.1917), who will celebrate his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday on 2<sup>nd</sup> October this year. He is very much a Yorkshireman, 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, remaining in the post until his retirement in 1982. It's the sort of lengthy period of service that has more often happened in French cathedrals, where it implies a rather successful relationship between the cathedral authorities and the Organist, which cannot always be taken for granted. So, it is rather refreshing to find that we can also manage such long and dedicated tenures here as well.

These canticles, first published in 1958, are very different from the later set in G major, which are rather better known. This is perhaps because the influence of Herbert Howells (1892–1983) shines through them slightly more vividly than might be expected, making them – as it were – "Howells Lite". The characteristic fingerprints are all there: a little, somewhat circular repeated motif that runs through the piece, the unexpected sideways shifts onto unexpected chords, elongated vocal phrases that "land" later than anticipated, stretching one's perception of the musical line, and so on. It is very potent, and certainly rather easier to deliver than some major Howells originals. However, you need a church that embraces a wide repertoire of settings to think it is worth performing this work, because there is otherwise the reasonable argument as to why you would do this rather than doing – oh, I don't know – say, a real Howells setting instead. Fortunately, the Priory Church certainly falls into the category of those churches with the musical scope to be slightly more adventurous and appreciate this lovely work, in which Howells's procedures are welded to Jackson's own sense of melody and drama.

Jackson has continued to compose and perform since his retirement. Well into his nineties, he gave a recital at the Ryedale Festival in North Yorkshire. 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.

The anthem is *Geistliches Lied* by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), a remarkable early work (dating from 1856), and his first accompanied choral work. The title means *Sacred Song*, and the text is by the German doctor and poet, Paul Fleming (1609–1640): *Do not be sorrowful or regretful; Be calm, as God has ordained, and thus my will shall be content. What do you want to worry about from day to day? There is One who stands above all who gives you, too, what is yours. Only be steadfast in all you do, stand firm; what God has decided, that is and must be the best. Amen.* The organ provides an undulating, flowing background to what is, in fact, very clever choral writing. The technical term for this is a “double canon”, and his motivation for doing this came from Brahms’s determination in the 1850s to study and perfect his contrapuntal technique. On completion, however, he was so happy with the resulting work that he decided that it could be published. But what is a “double canon”?

A “canon” is familiar to everyone who has ever sung a round, such as *Frère Jacques*, although in a canon, it comes to an end after the music has been sung through just once. You could say that, in its most simple version, it is a system in which two voices sing identical music, but one of them begins and ends after the other, the music being so constructed that they nevertheless fit together properly. In *Geistliches Lied*, Brahms sets the soprano going, and then has the tenor come in with the same music one bar later. However, upping the ante somewhat, he has the tenor begin one note lower than the sopranos, but within the tenor vocal range. Had it been exactly the same notes, we would call this a canon “at the octave” – i.e. exactly eight notes lower. As it is, this is a canon at the ninth. Interestingly, this is hard to hear, because when the tenors enter, it sounds as though they have sung the right note, and the ear is “kidded” into thinking they must therefore be singing the same notes as the sopranos. A little tweaking by the composer enables the voices to end at the same time, but otherwise, the canon proceeds strictly.

However, for Brahms, that was not enough of a challenge for this exercise in contrapuntal skill. So, he added a second canon with completely different music, this time between the alto and bass. The alto begins one bar after the tenor, and the bass a further bar after the alto, and also a ninth lower in pitch than its partner-voice is singing. This is undeniably very clever, but obviously risks sounding like just a technical exercise. It is the genius of a great composer, however, to be able to take such a formally constructed structure and make it still a work of great beauty and emotional power, which is exactly what Brahms does. Indeed, Jeremy Summerly, well-known to us from his appearances as a deputy Director of Music at the Priory Church, and now Director of Music at St Peter’s College, Oxford, aptly describes it as

“sublime” in his programme notes for the Westminster Cathedral Choir recording of the work.

One could ask, why would a composer go to the technical effort involved in this endeavour rather than just compose a “sublime” work in the first place? This brings us to the interesting question of the relationship between art and craft. It is, in fact, the technique that makes this piece work. Repetition is important in the creation of music. This is reflected in larger scale works, such as symphonic movements or piano sonatas, by structures that require the literal or modified repetition of whole chunks of music. The ear clearly enjoys and appreciates gentle repetition. Canon simply brings the repetitions much closer together. All this is in part the same effect that lay behind the Teletubbies’ use of literal repetition, introduced by one or more of them bobbing up and down exclaiming “Again! Again! Again!”. Not only do small children particularly enjoy literal repetition, so do adults, partly because we intensify our experience by hearing or seeing something more than once.

In the case of canon, this human aspect is amplified. Not only do we hear the music coming around again hot on the heels of its first statement, but we also recognize, consciously or unconsciously, two other aspects that are important to human beings. First, one voice appears to follow the other, as though accepting its “leading”; second, a canon gives the impression of one person taking up and reinforcing supportively what another has first stated. This is a strong aspect of “community”, which is, of course, very important in the church. It is part of what makes choral singing such a psychologically satisfying experience: multiple voices raised in shared expression. Canonic music strengthens this sharing by making it more overt, by concentrating on the sharing of melodic material. While we often speak of the way that humans fall out with one another as discordant, canon, together with its related forms, such as fugue, is imbued with concordance, and we warm to it, consciously or unconsciously. We appreciate its capacity for cooperating, sharing, reinforcing, supporting and bonding that enables the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. Brahms may have started out by writing a technical exercise, but this undoubtedly clever interweaving of the voices, and the passionate way that he presents it, make this indeed a sublime and powerful work.