

## Music Notes 2017: Palm Sunday

This Sunday, the start of the climactic week that brings us to the moment of Christ's death on the cross on Friday, we are presented with the first of the three betrayals that will occur on the way to that moment. The people in the crowd greeting him as he enters Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, will cry out words of praise for Jesus and strew their garments and branches on the path before him. Later, confronted by the choice to free Barabbas or Jesus, these same people will betray him by crying out *Barabbas!* Pilate will succumb to the will of mob rule and have Jesus crucified. But first, before the crucifixion, Judas will betray him with a kiss, and, afterwards, most poignantly, Peter will betray him with his denial of knowing Jesus at all.

It is with the enthusiastic welcome of the crowd that we begin when we meet together in St Bartholomew the Less at 11am. The English composer Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623) sets the mood with a vigorous setting of a paraphrase of their acclaim, *Hosanna to the Son of David*. He intertwines the six voices of the choir and passes faster moving passages around between them to give a musical impression of the bustle of a crowd, culminating in a flourish (which is not part of the paraphrase text, and so must be Weelkes's own idea) in the words *Hosanna in Excelsis*.

The delicate setting of the antiphon *Pueri Hebræorum portantés ramos olivarum...* (*the Children of Israel, bearing olive branches...*) is by the Austrian composer, Franz Schubert (1797–1828). It is for a very straightforward four-part choir, with a kind of rustic quality to the harmony. One may not expect this kind of music from Schubert, whom we associate so strongly with Lieder, symphonies, and piano music, but, in fact, he wrote many pieces of liturgical music in the Catholic tradition, and this is a delightful example of one of his small-scale works. The second sentence in this sequence, *Pueri Hebræorum vestimenta prosternebant in via...* (*the Children of Israel spread their garments on the way...*) is sung this year to plainchant.

The Palm Procession then takes us singing cheerful hymns to the Priory Church. Here the setting will be something rather new for us. This is the *Communion Service in E (Collegium Regale)* by the English composer Harold Darke (1888–1876). On the whole, we have not often used English language settings at our Solemn Eucharists over the past two decades, although a few have very occasionally crept in. The result of this, however, is that we have been missing out on some of the best-loved settings in the repertoire. Darke wrote the setting for King's College, Cambridge, where he had deputized for Boris Ord from 1940 to 1945, while Ord was away on military service. The rest of his entire career as an organist from 1916 onwards was otherwise spent at St Michael's, Cornhill, serving a total of 50 years in post – and, indeed, there have only been two organists there from his retirement to the present day. In 1916, Darke started a series of organ recitals at St Michael's that still continues, and this is famously the longest continuous series of organ recitals in the world.

Darke's first published communion service, which was in F, written in the mid-1920s for Cornhill, is one of the best-loved and most often performed settings in the country. It is clearly aimed at decent parish church choirs in terms of difficulty, and "Darke in F" is one of those titles that church musicians use with one another with no further explanation needed. He went on to write two other communion service settings, both of them in the 1960s, one in A for St Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo, New York, and the other in E for King's College Cambridge, the one from which this Sunday's *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei* will be taken. The service in E is clearly written for a significantly more able choir than the setting in F, and in writing for King's, he obviously knew what a choir in the premier league of choral institutions could achieve.

The reading of the Gospel is replaced in this service by the singing of the Passion narrative. Victoria (1548–1611) wrote two settings of this, one following St Matthew's account (for Palm Sunday), and the other that of St John (for Good Friday). In both cases, the story is told by a narrator singing in recitative, with character parts in the story taken by other soloists. The voices of the crowd, known as *turba* – from which we appropriately derive the word "turbulent" – and occasionally the voices of some of the other characters, are sung by the choir. This musical presentation of the Passion should leave us feeling quite emotionally drained, the whole story having been brought vividly to life in the same way that radio is more effective than television: because the pictures are better.

Our evening service, *Into the Hands of Sinners*, weaves together a diverse set of readings and musical works into a kind of "trailer" for Holy Week, although this description belies the charged emotional and spiritual atmosphere this sequence always generates. The choice of music zigzags across the centuries, reminding us in its temporal scope that the Church has been treading this path to Good Friday annually for some two thousand years.

We start at the same point as in the morning with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and the crowd's blithe acclamation in Weelkes's *Hosanna to the Son of David*. Three and a half centuries later, Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) wrote a series of *Quatre Motets pour un Temps de Pénitence* for this season, and among them is *Vinea mea electa*. Poulenc's faith somewhat withered during his first 36 years. However, it sprang back into vivid life following the disturbing death of his friend, the composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud (1900–1936), in a road accident, and blossomed especially after a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Black Virgin of Rocamadour, France, where he was powerfully affected by the statue. These were for him life-transforming experiences. (The statuette incidentally, has turned black because of the effect of candle smoke and oxidation.) Thereafter, Poulenc began to produce a series of intense and clearly

deeply-felt religious musical works. This motet is written in his characteristically edgy musical language made up of a kind of mosaic of short, almost breathless phrases, often repeated with subtle variation, that taken together create a musical picture. This was the last of the four motets to be composed, although it comes second in the published sequence. The translated Latin text runs: *I planted you as my chosen vineyard, yet you have turned from sweet to bitter, crucified me and set Barabbas free. Yet I protected you and took stones from out your way and built you a fortress.* It reminds us afresh of how the crowd's warmth towards Jesus turned cold, and they betrayed him by abandoning him in favour of Barabbas, leaving him in the hands of Pilate to be crucified.

The institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, which we mark at the Maundy Thursday evening mass, is illustrated by the choir singing the antiphon to the *Magnificat* from the Vespers of Corpus Christi, *O sacrum convivium*, a text most probably written by St Thomas Aquinas. The setting is by the French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). Messiaen was a prolific composer of organ music, having written some 63 pieces lasting more than seven hours in total in performance. This is his only sacred vocal piece. Written in 1937, it was commissioned by Abbé F. Brun (a noted authority on Gregorian chant at the time). It was first performed in an arrangement by the composer for solo voice and organ at a concert organised by Les Amis de l'Orgue (a kind of guild of organists and supporters of the instrument, with numerous chapters across France) at the La Trinité, Paris where Messiaen was organist, on February 17, 1938. The setting is hushed, but intense, with a rhythmic flexibility that catches the ear slightly unexpectedly. Its harmony is not challenging in the way that you might expect from this composer, but it has a marvellous sense of other-worldliness.

We move on in our sequence to Good Friday, and to the motet *O vos omnes* in a setting by Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613). Prince of Venosa and Count of Conza alongside his musical activities, Gesualdo is remembered as much as for having savagely killed his first wife and her lover, the third Duke of Andria and seventh Count of Ruovo, when he caught them *in flagrante delicto*, as for his music. In something that tells us much about the times and the prevailing attitudes towards the aristocracy and a husband's rights, he was acquitted of any wrong doing. This story is set into further relief by the fact that Gesualdo was the nephew of a real-life saint, St Carlo Borromeo (1538–1584). In fact, Gesualdo went on to marry again, but not very happily. His second wife found him shockingly depraved, but was also evidently committed to her marriage vows. As the Scottish composer Cecil Gray (1895–1951) and the English composer Peter Warlock (1894–1930) wrote in their book about Gesualdo, published in 1926: *She seems to have been a very virtuous lady ... for there is no record of his having killed her.* In a way, it is a pity that what we know about Gesualdo tends to get in the way of making a straightforward assessment of the music (although, of course, it is a great pity that his behaviour caused so much

tragedy). His music has a very intense and even shocking quality, with an approach to harmony and rhythm that was unique for its time.

As we come to the crucifixion narrative itself, the choir sings a *Cucifixus* by the Italian composer, Antonio Lotti (1667–1740). He was born in Venice and sang there in the choir of the Basilica of San Marco before becoming Assistant to the Second Organist, then Second Organist, then First Organist, and finally *Mæstro di Cappella*. He reached the top position in 1736, remaining in post until his death only four years later. From 1717 until 1719, he worked at the court in Dresden, where he wrote a number of operas, all of which have only been rarely performed. A recent concert programme note surprised me by saying that the *Cucifixus* we will hear in this service is the only piece of Lotti that is still performed today. Fortunately, there is a growing, if still modest, interest in his music, and a number of his other sacred pieces have been recorded in recent years. Lotti in fact composed numerous settings of the *Crucifixus*, for all combinations from four to ten voices. It is the famous eight-voice setting that we will be hearing in this service. While this is a powerful work, it is worth noting that it sounds almost as though it could have been written some 50 years earlier, perhaps shortly after the death of Palestrina (1525 - 1594). Yet Lotti was a contemporary of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), who was also considered very old-fashioned in his day. So this piece was already retro, even then!

Next comes part of the final section of Victoria's setting of the Passion narrative, which we will have already heard in the morning. Following a hymn and prayers, we hear the last part of the story, sung to a particularly anguished passage of plainchant. This brings us to the securing of the entrance to the tomb with stone and the setting of the seal lest the disciples steal away the body and claim Jesus has risen from the dead. The story from the journey into Jerusalem to the Last Supper, the betrayal, crucifixion, and laying to rest in the sorrowful tomb is now complete.

The final music, sung as the ministers prostrate themselves before the High Altar (where they will be found again in the same posture at the beginning of the Solemn Liturgy on Good Friday) is *Civitas sancti tui* by William Byrd (1539 –1623). The text is from Isaiah: *Your holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation*. The music is the second half of a motet published by the composer in the first volume of a collection of his sacred works known as *Cantiones Sacrae*. The first part (which we do not hear in this service) is a restrained plea to God to withhold his anger. This second part, however, starts delicately, but becomes ever more emotional. There are some moments in Byrd's music that are just heart-breaking: the *Agnus Dei* of the *Four Part Mass* is an example, and the second part of this piece, with its repeated cries of *Jerusalem desolata est*, another. It calls to mind the passage in Luke's Gospel that comes just after the people have thrown their cloaks on the path for Jesus to pass over as he approaches Jerusalem: *He beheld the city and wept over it*.

We end where we started this service, poised at the start of Holy Week, when Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem to embrace what lies ahead. When we come together again on Thursday, it will be for those precious moments in which we mark the washing of the disciples' feet at the founding feast that has played a central role in the worship of the Church ever since: the Last Supper. We will experience the stripping of the altar of all its ornamentation and the darkening of the church, in expectation of the great tragedy that is soon to unfold.