

Music Notes 2017 – S. Bartholomew the Apostle

Our summer programme is over, and this means the return of choral music to the Solemn Eucharist on Sunday mornings, though this is, indeed, no ordinary Sunday morning, because it is the day we celebrate our Patronal Festival. The day itself fell on the Thursday of this week, but we mark it on the day when we are all able to come together.

Thirty-nine years after Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) death, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) travelled to Leipzig and played the organ in the *Thomaskirche*, where Bach had been Kantor. There had been, surprisingly, sharply divided opinion at the church concerning Bach's personal and musical suitability for the job. Today, of course, we would wonder how anybody could have missed Bach's surely self-evident genius and the profound spirituality with which his music is imbued. Surprise as well could strike many when they learn that Mozart was an organist. He is usually mainly thought of as a composer only. However, between 1773 and 1777, he was employed as a court musician in Salzburg under Prince-Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo, and his wide ranging duties included composing and directing music for the liturgy, as well as playing the organ. Life is full of unexpected revelations, even some including our most revered composers.

Mozart resigned his post without difficulty in 1777 in order to try his fortune elsewhere, but by 1779 was back as court organist – a step up, in fact. But Colloredo had decided views on how matters should be conducted in church, and these extended to a degree of prescriptiveness about the music that was difficult for someone like Mozart to accept graciously. By 1781, Colloredo's directions so grated on Mozart's nerves that he decided to resign again. This time, he was refused leave to do so. When he finally insisted on going, he was rewarded by a physical kick in the rear from the Prince-Archbishop's steward – although he did at least get away in the end. Like the clerical authorities at the *Thomaskirche*, who questioned Bach's suitability for the position on offer, the Prince-Archbishop clearly did not appreciate the brilliance of Mozart's musical talent and potential.

Fortunately, difficulties of this kind never seem to have sapped Mozart's own spirituality. He poured out his unfailing personal piety in letters to family and friends and continued to write liturgical music, notoriously leaving an unfinished *Requiem* (among other incomplete works) at his death. In fact, he wrote a considerable number of masses, of which 15 are extant. Many of these were in the consciously constrained form of a *Missa Brevis*. Colloredo was very keen on brevity in liturgy. Mozart responded with great imagination to this challenge. He also, for some reason, often wrote masses in the key of C major. This is so noticeable that it surely must have some significance. For those who have been spared scales and arpeggios, the point about C major is that it has a blank key signature, and makes no

use of the black notes on a keyboard, using exclusively the white ones. This colourless quality can sometimes seem to leak into the psychology of music for which this is the central key. Was this Mozart subtly commenting on a colourlessness in an attenuated liturgy? The trouble is, were this to have been his intention, his innate creativity rather let him down by nevertheless creating fresh, appealing music. Or was it an attempt to strive for simplicity by writing in the key least likely to inspire a composer to over-colour the musical language?

Actually, it is tempting to think that Mozart was quite a naughty boy – there is much compelling evidence for this anyway – and many of the masses written for Colloredo's regime seem to have jokes at the Prince-Archbishop's expense concealed within them. Writing in C allowed Mozart to claim a kind of tonal simplicity that he then went out of his way to subvert subtly. This Sunday's mass setting, *Missa Brevis in C*, K.220 in the first version of the catalogue of his works – or K.196b, if you prefer the catalogue's later revision – is a good example of just this. It is known as the *Spatzenmesse*, or *Sparrow Mass*. The name results from some unmistakable bird-like "chirps" on the exposed violin at the start of the *Hosannas* to both the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* – indeed, he really goes to town with it in the latter case. The *Sanctus* itself is a stately waltz and the *Hosannas* are sung to music that the Mozart scholar Cliff Eisen describes as like a "drinking song". The final joke comes in the *Agnus Dei* as we approach the words *Dona nobis pacem*. The music has until this point been pretty clearly C major, with only the occasional hint of chromatic colour. Suddenly, Mozart throws in a series of "diminished chords" – among the most colourfully vivid chords you could get away with in the harmony of the day. It seems so surprising in the context – a kind of "having the last word".

There are other technically interesting aspects of this mass. It had become usual to end the *Gloria* and the *Credo* of a mass setting with at least some kind of fugal section as they came to their close: this appears to intensify the music by use of a denser texture as the climactic conclusion of the movement approaches. Mozart, however, eschews this procedure in both movements. The other relatively unusual quality is that the *Dona nobis pacem* section at the end of the *Agnus Dei* is a re-write of the music from the *Kyrie* – although this is not unprecedented in Mozart's output: the *Krönungsmesse* (*Coronation Mass*) does something similar – so that the work as a whole starts and ends with the same music, giving a neat sense of a gracious arch structure.

The motet at the Offertory is by a rather confusingly named composer, often known just as Jacob Handl (1550–1591). To get one potential issue out of the way, he is not related in any way to the more famous George Frideric Händel (1685–1759). He has more name variants in the various historical sources than is strictly decent (take a deep breath if you read this out loud): Jacobus Gallus Carniolus, Jacobus Gallus, Jacob Hähnel, Jakob Gallus, Jakob Petelin, Jacobus Handelius, Jacobus Carniolus,

Jacob Hänel, Jakobus Gallus, Iacobo Handl, Jacob Haendl, Jacob Haendel, Jacob Handl-Gallus, Jacobus Händel, Jacobis Carniolanus, Iacobus Handl Gallus, Iacobus Gallus, Jakob Handl; and in Slovenian, Jakob Petelin Kranjski. The latter is because 'Whatever his name really is' did indeed come originally from Slovenia, although he is usually associated with Vienna and Prague, where most of his working life was spent.

In spite of being a walking identity crisis, Jacob/Jakob/Jacobus/Jakobus/Iacobus was a very successful composer in his day. While we are pretty sure about his Slovenian origins, it is simply not quite clear where in Slovenia Jakobus was born, but the Carniolus and related versions of his name really just identify him as coming from Carniola, similar to the way that "da Palestrina" tells us that Giovanni Pierluigi (1525–1594) came from that city, rather than it really being anything like a modern surname. In about 1565, Iacobus left home for Austria, and by 1574 had become part of the musical establishment at the Court Chapel in Vienna. His final position was as organist in the rather charmingly named *Church of St John on the Balustrade* in Prague – more correctly *Kostel Svatého Jana na Zábřadli*.

Jacob's output as a composer is dominated by a collection of 374 motets, which were published in 1587, in six volumes. These he named *Opus musicum*, and their purpose was to create a complete cycle of Propers – the parts of the Mass that are unique to each Sunday or Feast Day – for the entire liturgical year. The particular one we are to hear is appropriately called *Sanctus Bartholomaeus*, and is written for four voices. It is an elegant miniature, and makes much use of imitative entries by each of the voices, a slightly old-fashioned procedure by Iacobus's time, but one he embraces. In fact, his style was more generally heavily influenced in other works by the Venetian polychoral style – where different choirs sing "against" one another – but demonstrating that will have to wait for another day.

Evensong begins with an Introit, *Holy is the true light*, by the English composer, William Harris (1883–1973), who served as organist at New College, Oxford, then at Christ Church, Oxford, and finally at St George's Chapel, Windsor, where one of his duties was to tutor the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose in music. Harris was also, notably, for several years each, Professor of Organ and Harmony at the Royal College of Music and then President of the Royal College of Organists. The anthem is relatively brief, written around 1947 as a memorial to Evelyn Ley, who was the wife of Henry Ley (1887–1962), a Precentor at Eton College (i.e., in charge of music at the College Chapel), and, in common with Harris, also a former organist of Christ Church, Oxford, a fellow composer, and a good friend to Harris. Harris's contact with the royal family may be one of the reasons that the Queen Mother, whose attention to detail when it came to planning her own funeral is famous, included this anthem among the musical contributions to her own obsequies.

The canticles are the well-known *Evening Service in Bb* (part of his complete Service in Bb) by the Dublin-born Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). Stanford was undoubtedly quite conservative harmonically – he considered his hero Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) to have established definitively the acceptable boundaries of modern music – but he was also a jolly good tunesmith, and went out of his way to make his settings varied and un-repetitive, so that each of the seven Evensong settings that he wrote is markedly different from the others. Oddly, only four of them – those in A, B flat, C, and G – are regularly performed, but the other three – in E flat, F, and one based on Gregorian modes – are also well-worth performing and hearing. The B flat setting has quite a rollicking character. It was written in 1879 while Stanford was organist of Trinity College, Cambridge, a post he obtained while technically still an undergraduate. There is one of those father-son stories here: his father wanted him very much to go into the law, but reluctantly agreed that he could try a career in music, provided he first study Classics at Queens' College in Cambridge (where he was also an organ scholar). To say that the son prioritized his musical activities over his Classics studies would be a significant understatement. But so successful was he with the former that in the end he secured the organist position at Trinity in 1874, two days before sitting his final exams. He came 65th out of the 66 students examined in that year, earning a robustly third-class degree. Nevertheless, eight years later he was one of the founding professors of the Royal College of Music, and five years after that he was back as Professor of Music at Cambridge – quite a good way of saying “So there!”.

One of the most important aspects of Stanford's approach to these settings is the way that the organ breaks free from mere continuo support of the singers. He wasn't the first to do this. Nevertheless, in Stanford's hands, this procedure is intensified, with each successive setting that he composed providing an increasingly independent organ part. The Bb setting also exhibits a more patchwork approach to the development of the work, with the many shifts of emphasis and mood that are found in the text illustrated in short sections of illuminating music, before moving into the next section and textual idea. At one moment, we are dealing with the holiness of God's name, a little while later we are putting down the proud and sending the rich empty away. Each section has its own characterization. This idea was not new, but Stanford raised it to new heights of explicitness and colour.

The anthem is *St Bartholomew's Prayer* by the British composer and former Master of the Queen's Music, Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016), who died in March of last year. “Max”, as he was almost universally known in the music business, lived predominantly in the Orkneys from 1971. In 1988, the Mayfield Singers, a small chamber choir, was founded there by Neil Price. His intention was to create a choir that would be capable of performing any repertoire that would suit a choir of that size and character and would stretch its abilities.

In the year 2000, the Mayfield Singers found themselves forming a relationship with a community in the Italian Dolomites called Moena on the basis of this town being the home of the architect Domenico Chiocchetti, creator of Orkney's Italian Chapel, who had died the previous year. The choir went there to give various concerts both in Moena and en route, and Max composed a special work for them to take with them, called *Una Balena Azzura – A Blue Whale* – with a text by his regular collaborator, the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, which had been translated into Italian.

The church where *Una Balena Azzura* was first performed was, alas, subsequently severely damaged by fire, and the Mayfield Singers resolved to raise money towards its restoration by holding a concert in St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, Orkney on 18th May 2007. The cathedral was founded by the Vikings in 1137, so a period with which we are familiar in the Priory Church, which was only 14 years past its own founding at the time. For this concert, Max composed *St Bartholomew's Prayer*, taking the text from the *Liber Usualis*, an indispensable collection of useful texts and chants compiled by the monks of the Abbey of Solesmes in France. The piece is for a choir of two soprano lines, alto, tenor and bass.

Prior to the composition, however, Neil Price, who directed the Mayfield Singers until 2009, and conducted the first performance of this piece in Orkney, met up with a friend of his in London, who happened at the time to be our then Senior Churchwarden, the late Philip Hollins. Both men were professional accountants; Neil was a past President of the Association of Accounting Technicians. (This convergence of music and accounting shows once again how noble a profession accounting is.) According to a brief programme note provided on Max's own website, Philip mentioned to Neil Price "wistfully" *how nice it would be [for us] to have a "house piece" written by the Master of the Queen's Music. Neil reported back and it transpired that Max knew the famous Norman church well.*

So, while this piece was written for a choir and an occasion in the Orkneys, it also has a direct connection with us. It was performed in the composer's presence in the Priory Church with the late David Trendell conducting our choir later in the same year. This is therefore a real "house piece", and indeed, a very special contribution to the Feast.

While Neil Price is still with us, it is sobering to note that all three of the others most involved in this story, Max, David, and Philip, have all departed this life within the past few years. Last time this was sung at the Priory Church in 2015, Max and Philip were still with us. While this music is obviously eminently appropriate for the Feast of S. Bartholomew, it also serves this Sunday as a memorial to the people who brought this music to life for us at the Priory Church.