

## Music Notes 2017 – Sixth after the Epiphany: Septuagesima

There is a group on Facebook called *I'm fed up with bad church music*. It is very popular, and allows people with a role in church music to ask questions of one another or else – as is the custom in these things – to lay down the law about how things should be done. Some time back, the question of *Alleluias* and the *Gesimas* arose. The *Gesimas* are the three Sundays before Lent. They mark the start of a period of very roughly seventy days to Easter. Septuagesima represents obviously the seventy day-ish mark. Next week we will have *Sexagesima*, theoretically sixty days, although the sharp-eyed will notice that some Relativity creeps in here and three days vanish into thin air. *Quinquagesima* actually is fifty days to Easter, except when there is a leap year. Those of a strongly traditional inclination give up using the word *Alleluia* during the *Gesimas* as well as in Lent – some of them also give up using the *Gloria* as well during this period – and it is clear from Facebook that there are some strongly held views on this subject. No matter how one feels about such detail, the church sees the *Gesimas* as a time of preparation for Lent – although one contributor from West Virginia pointed out that Lent is itself a preparation for Easter, so preparing for Lent put him in mind of *the Southern lady who said she was "fixin' to get ready to go out."*

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the so-called *Missa Brevis* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). “So-called” because it actually isn’t particularly *brevis*. In fact, it is quite hard to see what might distinguish this work from many other Palestrina masses in terms of length or musical intensity. One distinctive aspect of this work is that it is not a parody mass – that is, it is not based on a pre-existing motet that is being used as the jumping-off point for the compositional process. Nor is it a *cantus firmus* mass – that is, one that uses a pre-existing plainchant as thematic material by making it part of the choral texture throughout. It is indeed a completely original composition. Although most masses at this time *did* use either parody or chant as their basis – thereby knitting the work firmly into the liturgical calendar, or at least providing some theological reference – it was by no means unknown to start from scratch like this. Indeed, masses of this kind were quite useful precisely because they had no particular calendrical or theological anchor, and so could be used more flexibly throughout the church year. However, it was more usual to refer to such works as, for example, *Missa sine nomine* (*Mass without name*). In this case, *Missa brevis* may just be a convenient alternative term being pressed into service, since Palestrina produced at least four *sine nomine* masses, not to mention three *Missæ sine titulo* (*Masses without title*) and a few others with completely non-specific titles.

One of the advantages of both the parody and *cantus firmus* techniques is that they gives the composer an automatic unifying principle for a setting. This appears to work even if the listener does not, or cannot, track the plainchant as it recurs in each

of the movements of the mass. To some extent, the human brain subconsciously checks off familiar material, recognizing points of continuity in what it receives through the ears. Perhaps even more importantly, the composer is disciplined by the material, which encourages a uniformity of approach that generates a sense of stylistic unity within and between the movements. When, as in this case, that automatic unifying principle is absent, the composer has to generate it *ex nihilo* or else the music simply won't cohere. In the case of this setting, Palestrina does this with the little phrase with which the *Kyrie* begins. The alto line sings a long first note, then drops a third and then goes up a note. This tiny little motif then recurs throughout the rest of the setting, and, curiously for something so small, is extraordinarily effective and noticeable.

While this setting is not as concise as its name suggests it should be, it is elegantly and precisely constructed and the overall effect is of compactness without actually being short. Perhaps this is where the name makes sense: it has a perceived brevity because it does not weary the listener at any point with the slightest suspicion of musical waffle. All the way through, that little inward-bending motif keeps recurring, so simple a thing, and yet the whole work seems to grow out of its beguiling little curl of a line.

The motet at the Offertory is *Cantate Domino* by the Italian composer, Giuseppe Pitoni (1657–1743). He was a busy church composer and organist, with several very prestigious appointments in a very active musical career. These included a lifelong appointment as what we would consider to be Director of Music at the Basilica of San Marco in Rome, alongside further appointments in Rome from time to time at the Basilica dei Santi Apostoli, St John Lateran, the Julian Chapel at St Peter's, and at the German College, where he lived. These bespeak both a great deal of work and a rather high profile resulting from it. They also drew from him an astonishing body of work. His biography has come down to us in some detail thanks to a pupil of his, Girolamo Chiti, who ensured that his late master should not be forgotten by becoming his biographer. From his writing on the subject, it is possible to deduce that Pitoni composed more than 3,500 works, including something in the region of 300 mass settings. Precise calculations vary, but we might also note that Chiti himself is often described as having written some 3,000 works, so the pupil's apple – in this sense – fell not that far from his master's tree. Pitoni shared the interest of many of his contemporaries in polychoral music – where multiple “choirs” of voices are ranged against and with each other – and there are plenty of examples of this in his output. Indeed, when he died, he was only part-way through composing a further mass setting for twelve separate multi-voiced choirs.

In contrast with such complex music, this motet is quite straightforward. It is, however, delightfully upbeat, not to say boisterous. The text is also used for the *Alleluia* this Sunday – we fear no Facebook wrath for continuing to sing *Alleluias*

during the *Gesimas* – so a cheerful and upbeat approach, before Lent calls us to order, is all the more appropriate.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong is the *Evening Service in F minor* by Alan Gray (1855–1935), who was born in York. He studied the Law Tripos at Cambridge University, being admitted in due course as a solicitor in 1881. A bare two years later, however, music proved too potent compared with the mere law, and he became the first Director of Music at Wellington College, where he worked from 1883 until 1892. His musical studies had begun with Edwin Monk (1819–1900), the Master of the Choristers at York Minster. During his time at Wellington, he continued to pursue his studies, obtaining a Mus.B. in 1886 and a Mus.D. in 1889 from Trinity College, Cambridge. The son of the headmaster at Wellington wrote to *The Observer* after Gray's death with an appreciation in which he noted that Gray was one of many outstanding musicians working at the school in those days. He also noted that Gray, who was unusually tall for that time at 6 foot 6 inches – 1.98 metres in modern money – when sitting at the piano accompanying, was still as tall as most singers.

Going back in time for a moment, in 1873, while Gray was still a law undergraduate at Trinity, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), who started his own academic life at Queens' College, moved to Trinity and became Deputy Organist. Then in 1874 the organist died, and Stanford succeeded him, remaining in post until 1893. When Stanford's departure was announced, Gray applied, and was successful. He remained back at his old college until 1930, when he retired and became an honorary Fellow there for the rest of his life. He wrote music, if not prolifically, very effectively. One of his most moving works is *What are these that glow from afar?*, set to a text by Christina Rossetti. Gray composed this in 1916 in memory of his own two sons, who both perished in the First World War. But it is his service settings for the Anglican liturgy for which he is chiefly remembered today, and this *Evening Service in F minor* is a fine example of that late Victorian and Edwardian style, perfected unquestionably by Stanford, but beautifully articulated also in this case. It is written for eight voices arranged as two choirs, often working antiphonally with one another.

The anthem is the beautiful setting by Herbert Howells (1892–1983) of *Like as the hart*, the words taken from Psalm 42. This is now published just as one of *Four Anthems*, but the set was originally known as *Anthems In Time of War* and was first published in 1941. Howells and his family had been bombed out of their house in Barnes, only surviving by the good fortune of having been away at the time. *Like as the hart* was written at a single sitting by its composer on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1941, when he and his family were snowed in while staying at a house in Cheltenham. The text, with its melancholy longing for God in the midst of oppressive attack by enemies, was only too appropriate for the situation in which Howells, and, indeed, the whole country,

found themselves. The other three anthems explore related themes: *O Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem*, *We Have Heard With Our Ears*, and *Let God Arise*, pleas for peace, for deliverance, and for God to exert His power.

*Like as the hart* has become one of the most loved anthems of the Anglican choral tradition. There is no doubt that some people in our part of the world are currently experiencing a range of emotional responses to an apparently complete upturning of what were considered political certainties. Dire predictions as to the results of such changes are commonplace. They could turn out to be justified, completely unwarranted, or just the usual muddle somewhere in between. Whatever the outcome, the level of brutal political invective has rarely been so high. This anthem encourages one – us – in our quest for peace and understanding, to put our faith in God, to be athirst for the divine, and to know that He will help us overcome our tears and the taunts of our enemies.

Interestingly, although the text of the setting ends with the anguished question *When shall I come before the presence of God?*, the choir landing on a chord of E minor, Howells subverts the mood he has just created by adding a very short organ coda that, a little surprisingly, but unquestionably optimistically, ends the piece in a reflective but significant E major. As always with this composer, we can be sure this is redolent with meaning.