

Music Notes 2017: Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

The setting this Sunday morning is by a composer who knows St Bartholomew the Great well, having been to many events at the church. It is the *Missa brevis* by Jonathan Dove (b.1959), resident of Bethnal Green; so, he lives relatively close to the church as well. It would only be right to declare an interest here, because his music is published and represented by Edition Peters – the company for which your devoted and bashful author happens to work.

Dove is one of the most prolific and widely performed composers of our times. As a contemporary composer, his musical language is found by most people to be distinctive and original, and yet not as challenging and “difficult” as the work of many contemporary composers can seem. It is not hard to find a connection with Dove’s work. He has contributed to many areas of musical genre: song cycles, *concerti* for various instruments, chamber, oratorios, and, above all, operas of various shapes and sizes, including “community operas”, which tend to be specific to a place and occasion, and the grander “traditional” operas. Something of a cross-over work was his recent *The Monster in the Maze*, performed under Simon Rattle’s direction in three different languages, in three different cities, Berlin, Aix-en-Provence and London, in the Barbican, where our own PCC member Roy Sully took part in the UK premiere. Dove also composed two operas that were commissioned and transmitted by Channel 4, one focussing on the first Apollo moon landing (*Man on the Moon*) and the other concerning the reactions of people to the death of Princess Diana (*When She Died*). Dove’s two major stage operas are *Flight*, which revolves around the same basic idea as Tom Hanks’ 2004 movie *The Terminal* - a refugee living in an airport. The opera was written for Glyndebourne, seven years before the film appeared. The other is *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, written for Opera North. Both are frequently staged somewhere in the world, as is Dove’s most recent smaller-scale chamber opera, *Mansfield Park*, which has just been seen in an outstandingly fine production at The Grange Festival in Hampshire.

Dove’s *Missa brevis* was commissioned by the Cathedral Organists’ Association for a conference that was held in Wells Cathedral in 2009. It was first performed there by the cathedral choir under the direction of Matthew Owens, the Cathedral’s Director of Music. In light of Dove’s achievement, Paul Spicer (b.1952), music critic and educator, composer and organist has commented that there were a number of hurdles set in the composer’s way: the work had to be challenging, while still within reach of a good parish church choir; it should be interesting, and yet “accessible” – a code word for not squeaky-gate difficult for most people to listen to; it should be economical in its proportions (rather hinted at by the *brevis*, surely); and, it had to be in Latin and accompanied by the organ. The result is eloquent testimony to how very well the composer managed to fulfil these requirements. One of the rules of the commission was that this had to be the first liturgical mass the composer had

produced, so it was quite an interesting challenge for the imagination as well. Spicer reports that twenty-five of the cathedral organists signed up then and there to perform the new work, and that they were joined by others soon afterwards. So, the piece has gone quickly into general repertoire. By means of turning on my work computer and looking up the sales figures, I can tell you that the *Missa brevis* has sold over 13,500 copies in just the past few years, which is pretty good going for any work, especially one with a somewhat specific liturgical function such as this one has.

The motet at the Offertory is a setting of *Ave verum Corpus* by Colin Mawby (b.1936). He began his musical education at Westminster Cathedral Choir School and, by the time he was a teenager, was assisting the then Director of Music, George Malcolm, at the organ. After a spell at the Royal College of Music, he returned to the Cathedral, first as Assistant and then, from 1961, as Master of Music. He remained there until 1976, when he moved to Dublin, in due course becoming choral director at Radio Telefís Éireann. His retirement has been a somewhat complex matter. To quote Wikipedia: *Mawby retired to East Anglia in 2001 but returned to County Dublin in Ireland briefly but moved to London, then Dublin again and now is living in London*. One 'fine matter' is that in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI awarded Mawby the Knighthood of the Order of St Gregory "in gratitude for past and continuing services to church music".

This setting of the well-known text of *Ave verum Corpus* was composed after Mawby's move to Dublin in 1978, rather than at the Cathedral. Unlike the Byrd (1539–1640), Elgar (1857–1934), and Mozart (1756–1791) settings, all of which are shaped by quiet and reserved wonder and awe, Mawby's setting gives us an unexpectedly dramatic approach across a wide range of dynamics, picking up on the text's allusions to Christ's agony in the Crucifixion and to the full drama of this part of the story of Salvation. It is a powerful and highly emotional piece, in which the choir splits into up to eight parts, creating an especially rich texture, and supported throughout by the organ. In fact, there is also a version in which the organ part has been re-written for full orchestra, but for a few practical reasons we are unable to bring you that version on this occasion... In common with much French "Gothic" church music from the end of the nineteenth century onwards through the whole of the twentieth century, this is music that demands that we take the whole business of church and church music utterly seriously. In this case, which is written from a Roman Catholic perspective, it intersects perfectly with Anglo-Catholic sensibilities.

The canticles at Evensong are sung to the *Evening Service in B minor* by Hugh Blair (1864–1932), formerly organist of Worcester Cathedral. He was a good friend of Edward Elgar, who composed *The Black Knight* for the Worcester Festival Choral Society, which Blair also conducted. When Blair later requested an organ voluntary to play when some visiting American organists would be at the cathedral, he received Elgar's *Organ Sonata*, which was perhaps a little more than he had

bargained for. Indeed, Elgar had very little time to prepare it, and it is – well – difficult, as Blair proceeded to demonstrate to his listeners. Fortunately, the *Sonata* survived the experience. Blair was less successful in that respect. Having been appointed “organist in sole charge” at the Cathedral under the wonderfully complete Dr Done, in 1887, he became acting organist in 1889, and then Organist in 1895, when Done was done, but remained as such only until 1897. One may wonder at the delay. The clue to the brevity of his appointment may lie in the fact that Blair was sacked for being found on Christmas morning 1897 *in a drunken stupor in the organ loft by the Dean*, a rare event in Anglican musical circles. After a brief spell at Bangor Cathedral, Blair moved to London and managed to become organist of Holy Trinity, Marylebone and – a vital and delightful detail – conductor for Battersea Borough Council. These Evensong canticles date from his younger days at Worcester, having originally been composed in 1887. The version we know today was edited in 1892 by the indefatigable Ivor Atkins (1869–1953), who helped many composers, including especially Elgar, to make the best of their music. On Blair’s ejection from Worcester, it was Atkins who succeeded him, remaining there all the way to 1950 before retiring.

The anthem is *Give unto the Lord*, written a century ago in 1914 by Edward Elgar. Dedicated to Sir George Martin, the then organist of S. Paul’s Cathedral, it was written for the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy, an annual event at the cathedral to this day, and was performed there in April that year in its orchestral and choral version. The text is drawn from Psalm 29, and ends with the psalm’s words: *The Lord sitteth above the water-flood; and the Lord remaineth a King forever. The Lord shall give strength unto His people; the Lord shall give His people the blessing of peace.* The start of the First World War was still six months away when Elgar finished the composition. Yet Elgar seems anxious to reinforce the prayer for peace at a time when anxiety about the prospect of war was already thick in the air. One result of the uncertain environment in which we appear to be living today is the difficulty of knowing whether we should be equally as anxious at the moment. But, alas, this prayer never appears inappropriate or redundant – sadly.