

Music Notes 2017 – Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757) is best known for having written 555 remarkable keyboard sonatas of extraordinary inventiveness, in which, with unrestrained glee, he sets many technical challenges for the performer. He was an exact contemporary of Bach (d.1750), born in the same year as he – as was Handel (d.1759), incidentally. What an amazing year! There the similarities end. Bach concentrated on refining and perfecting the high school of counterpoint that he had inherited, although it was already seen as old-fashioned by then. Scarlatti, on the other hand, was much more forward-looking stylistically, and his music helped to forge what we now refer to with marvellous inaccuracy as the musical language of the “classical” period. He was born in Naples, but eventually moved to Rome, where he was *Maestro di Capella* (i.e. Director of Music) at St Peter’s for several years. His later life was spent in Portugal and Spain, where he flourished and composed much of his keyboard music.

This Sunday’s mass setting, known as *Missa breve “La stella”* for reasons now unknown to us, was most probably written early in his time in Rome for the stunning church of S. Maria Maggiore where he was assistant to his father, who was *Maestro di Capella* for the basilica. Not surprisingly, therefore, it reflects his earlier compositional style rather than his more mature approach. Nevertheless, it is an unusual and beautiful work. The *Kyrie* is in a rich chordal style, and is followed by a *Gloria* that is unexpectedly restrained and thoughtful, especially at the start. This is followed by a jollier section for soloist and answering chorus that in an irreverent moment one might compare to a kind of Gilbert & Sullivan aria. After another more serious middle section, the tone lightens at *Quoniam* before the movement ends with a fugue (albeit not one that Bach would be likely to have written). The *Sanctus* is another piece of thoughtful, but exquisite writing. Unexpectedly, instead of the *Benedictus*, it is followed in the score by a setting of the text *Cibavit eos* (*He fed them*), derived from the Introit for Corpus Christi. It is replaced here in our service by a plainchant *Benedictus*. The *Agnus Dei* repeats the music from the opening of the *Sanctus*, helping to knit together these movements that span the consecration at the heart of the service.

The motet at the Offertory is *Laudate Dominum* – a setting of Psalm 150 – 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 hard work and a high profile. 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 (1679–1759), thus ensuring that his late master should not be forgotten. From Chiti's writings, 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 reported 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 relatively straightforward, and delightfully upbeat, not to say boisterous.

At Evensong, the canticles will be the *Evening Service in E minor* (transposed in our edition into F minor) by the English composer, Pelham Humfrey (1647–1674). Humfrey lived an unfortunately short life, dying at 27 years of age, but in his early life, he was among the first boys to serve in the Chapel Royal once the monarchy had been restored in 1660. Those must have been somewhat heady days for church (and other) musicians, with the restraints of the Commonwealth removed and richly expressive music once again encouraged – albeit within a reformed religious context. Those of Humfrey's works that have survived his brief compositional career are very affecting, and one can but speculate what he would have achieved had he lived longer.

In 1665, Humfrey travelled to the French court in order to find out what they knew about music, and when he returned home in 1667, it was with a veritable feast of fresh thoughts, ideas, and plans. It pains me to have to tell you that Samuel Pepys wrote rather disagreeably about him at this stage of his life, criticizing him for the way he dressed – which Pepys evidently deemed full of vanity – and generally viewing him as bumptious and conceited. So Humfrey was probably pretty typical of a gifted young man, still rather full of himself, and stimulated by new thinking from outside the insular bubble of his own familiar environment.

This setting of the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* is a little constrained by the simple fact that they are canticles. There are numerous examples of composers of this kind of work seemingly feeling somewhat confined within a more formal musical language than they use elsewhere in the comparative free-market world of anthems and other less formal liturgical texts. Humfrey seems to have followed this tendency, but still produces a marvellous result. This is a “verse setting” – that is to say, an antiphonal exchange between a group of soloists and the full choir (made up of two soprano lines, two alto lines, one tenor, and one bass). In its original performances – most likely at the Chapel Royal – the chances are high that the vocal lines would have been duplicated by a string orchestra. But then, it is likely that little music was

performed unaccompanied in those days, and our contemporary obsession with *a capella* music is just one example of a claimed authenticity that is anything but.

The anthem is one of the most remarkable works by Henry Purcell (1659–1695): *O sing unto the Lord*, written in 1688, according to the manuscript collection amassed by John Gostling. He was an Anglican priest, but also a bass singer of great fame, whose remarkably flexible voice was said to have a surprising evenness over a very wide range. It is believed to have been the intended instrument for several of Purcell's works with unusually strenuous bass solos. This particular verse anthem (i.e. one that has sections for soloists and for chorus) shows the influence of the contemporary Italian school on Purcell's music, with dramatic exchanges between the choir and the accompaniment (written for an orchestra of the time, but rendered on the organ for us, of course). The music is broken up into different sections that bring to life the text from Psalm 96, verses 1–6, 9 and 10. Solos, choruses and orchestral interjections explore an expressive range of textures with vivid word painting. It is not clear for which occasion this was composed, but clearly it was a significant occasion, because the resources required to present it in its fullest version are not inconsiderable. However, it also works extremely well on a smaller scale with organ accompaniment – oh, and extremely good singers, especially someone who can match the skills of Mr Gostling when required.