

## Music Notes: Second Sunday of Advent – 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018

This week, we return to the music of Stanley Vann (1910–2010) at the Solemn Eucharist with his *Missa Brevis in A*. Vann was born in Leicester, and took to music early in his life, starting with the piano at 6 years of age, and the organ rather later, at 17. Nevertheless, by the time he was 20 he had both of the highest qualifications in the instrument already under his belt. A year later, he was Assistant Organist at Leicester Cathedral, after which he took on several sequential positions as organist in various parishes. After the Second World War, he became Organist at Chelmsford Cathedral and a Professor at Trinity College in London in 1949. Four years later, in 1953, he took up the position with which he is most associated, Master of the Music at Peterborough Cathedral. He was to remain there until he retired in 1977 – although he then remained remarkably active until after his hundredth birthday in 2010, carried off in the end by the consequences of a fall at home rather than running out of steam in any other sense.

During this long life, he composed a large number of works of very great quality, and with an harmonic language that is really uniquely his. It is not so much that he does things that nobody else had done, but the characteristic way that he assembles chord progressions, and especially the sense he has for spacing the voices in a chord for maximum effect, that marks out his “voice”. There is a chant he wrote for Psalm 51, which is especially associated with Ash Wednesday, that illustrates this perfectly, the voices knotted together at the outset in a tense little cluster of sound that illustrates and communicates perfectly the tension behind the psalmist’s words: *Have mercy upon me O God after they great goodness: according to the multitude of thy mercies, do away mine offences*. It is an amazing miniature that in many ways sums up Vann’s language in its short span.

In fact, the psalms were of especial importance in his work at Peterborough., Recordings that were made while he was there show clearly why his approach has been enormously influential on an important strand of Anglican music making. The singing of psalms tends to come in two main kinds in choral establishments: in one of these, the psalms are something to be got through –, they sound rather as though they are regarded as a necessary evil of Evensong. They are presented somewhat uniformly, and the structure of the chant tends to dominate the sense of the words. In the other – and you will have guessed already that this is the tradition that seems to have followed Vann’s example – the psalms are brought to life with drama and vividness. Dynamics and changes of pace are deployed as illustration, and the chant’s structure is never allowed to dominate the meaning of the words. The performances are deft and elegant and never remotely trivial. You can follow a line of inheritance from Vann’s approach through some of the very best psalm singing in the Anglican tradition. You can also follow the other “tradition” and hear psalms simply “gone through” in numerous establishments, with little apparent thought

given to shaping their structure and illuminating the meaning. The loss here is not just musical: these are some of the greatest works of poetry the human race has produced, and bringing them to life – really communicating the sense of them – for the congregation is profoundly important. Vann himself said of this part of the service: *You can get such a lot out of the psalms. We strove to bring out the colour and dramatic content, but in a restrained way, without exaggeration. If you "go to town" too much, it makes a travesty.* The recordings certainly show that he knew where to draw the line.

Speaking to Roderick Dunnett in 1992 in the *Musical Times*, he expounded on how he had tried to mould the attitude of the choir: *I tried to instil into our boys the belief that they were worshipping God, singing directly to Him, rather than putting on some kind of "performance". One tried to convey a sense of reverence and get the choir to project itself wholeheartedly into the spirit of the service. Some of the best moments were in the depths of winter, perhaps with snow or high winds outside, when a candlelit service might be attended by just the choir and clergy. It gave a unique feeling that you were singing to God, and somehow brought out the whole purpose of what divine service was about.* This was helped by his approach to rehearsal, which was to encourage the choir to see it as being involved in the worship of God from the moment they stepped into the cathedral precincts. This was religion taken very seriously, but not for the sake of pompous piety or play-acting, for that matter. It was saying that what we do in church is real and warrants being treated as such. One of the great figures of the music publishing world has just received an OBE and will be going to the palace in a few weeks' time to be invested with it. His sense of excitement and nervous anticipation is obviously there whenever the subject comes up. If that's how we react for a merely mortal monarch, how curious that we are so laid back in our approach to the King of Kings each week. Vann was having none of that, and his choir was expected to behave on the basis that what they did was important and significant.

This mass setting was written when Stanley had already retired and past his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, which fell on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1990. That occasion was marked by a special Evensong using almost entirely his music at Peterborough Cathedral, and the next month, the mass was given its first performance. It is set for a normal four-part choir and organ with soprano and tenor soloists. Of course, those arranging the performances in 1990 could not have known that there was in fact still a full 20 years of composition and active music-making in Stanley's life yet to come. It really was a century of music-making and especially of commitment to church music. His is an example well-worth studying.

The motet at the Offertory is by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), and is his well-loved carol *A Spotless Rose*. This is one of a set of three carols published together, of which the others are *Sing lullaby*, and *Here is the little door*. Howells himself wrote: *This one I set down and wrote after idly watching some shunting from the window of a cottage which overlooked the Midland Railway. In an upstairs room I looked out on iron railings and the*

*main Bristol to Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging. I wrote it and dedicated it to my mother – it always moves me when I hear it, just as if it were written by someone else.* Somehow, he managed to exclude the bumping and banging of the railway entirely from this mellifluous and beautiful carol.

Last week's notes for the Advent Carol Service noted the history of comparing the Blessed Virgin to a beautiful rose. The text of this carol picks up on this idea as well, stressing her nature kept spotless from sin which, according to the teaching of the Immaculate Conception, was the desirable precondition for giving birth to the sinless Son of God. In fact, all the doctrines concerning Mary are not fundamentally about her, but about Jesus: the Assumption shows his love for his mother that leads to her being brought directly from earth to heaven as a kind of "preview" of how his love will be meted out also to us; the Immaculate Conception is a way of drawing attention to his sinlessness; the Virgin Birth marks out his arrival in our world as unique and outside the ordinary while still involving the pains of birth.

Howells's friend and colleague, the composer Patrick Hadley, Professor of Music at Cambridge, was especially moved by the extraordinary final cadence of this carol on the words *cold winter's night* and wrote to Howells saying *I should like, when my time comes, to pass away with that magical cadence.* In fact, the entire harmony of the work is remarkable for a piece written in 1919, as is the metre which, most unusually for the day, switches around regularly to allow for Howells's characteristic word stresses to be felt most perfectly.

The Canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in Bb* by the contentedly Protestant Henry Purcell (1659–1695). Modern choirs find this a bit low if sung as written, and so modern editions are usually transposed upwards, in case your perfect pitch reveals that these pieces are not being sung in the advertised key. In fact, these are part of a set of ten pieces that together make up a complete group of the canticles needed by a cathedral or large parish church. They include the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*, but also their alternatives in the prayer book, *Cantate Domino* and *Deus misereatur*, (in practice, virtually never done, so deeply are the "Mag & Nunc" engrained these days). There are also settings of the *Te Deum*, *Benedictus*, *Benedicite* and *Jubilate* for Matins, and a *Kyrie* and *Nicene Creed* for use at a Communion Service. This set is not unique in its completeness, but there are not many others. It will have been incredibly useful to church musicians at the time, just one of the reasons why the set spread quickly all over the country and survives in so many contemporaneous copies to this day.

Purcell's anthems go in more for complex harmony and word painting than his canticles. The function of these texts in a relatively formal and repetitive role in the services seems to evoke from him a more formal structure and language – but they are none the worse for this. They are outstandingly good, beautifully structured and elegant to a fault. As a rule, Purcell alternates sections for full four-voice choir with

contrasting sections for soloists that are usually either three upper or three lower voices.

The anthem at Evensong is *Prepare ye the way* by Michael Wise (1648–1687). The mere 39 years of his life were not the result of illness, but rather of an unfortunate encounter with the Night Watchman in Salisbury, where he (Wise) was organist at the Cathedral. The story has been told in these notes before, but it is a good one, so let's have it again.

Wise spent the evening of 24<sup>th</sup> August 1687 – our Patronal festival as it so happens – drinking with chums in a hostelry, after which he went home, it by then being the 25<sup>th</sup>, doubtless anticipating a warm welcome from Mrs Wise. Unfortunately, this was not the first time he had come home in a less than ideal condition, and the charm of dealing with him at the wrong end of such frequent evenings had long since begun to pall for her. She expressed herself somewhat forthrightly, he replied more hotly than was strictly warranted under the circumstances, he said, she said, and then suddenly he was off down the street, threatening loudly to kill the first person to get in his way. Unfortunately, this proved to be the Night Watchman, who was evidently not in the best of tempers himself. More bruising and unkind words were exchanged, Wise perhaps questioning some detail of the other's ancestry, at which point the Night Watchman hit the inappropriately named Wise on the head with his staff, killing him outright. Of course, afterwards everyone was sorry, but it was much too late.

This story, which you may feel is recounted in somewhat preternatural detail, is preserved for us thanks to research by the composer Francis Pott (b. 1957), born felicitously on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1957 exactly 270 years after Michael Wise was shuffled off into the hereafter. Thirty years later, when searching around for a subject for a commission, he came upon this history and used it as the basis for a short, comical music theatre piece, *Wise after the Event*, for baritone and soprano soloists, with two trumpeters who double as chorus, and a pianist who is also narrator.

Michael Wise's death has served as an object lesson for church musicians, who have reacted to his bad example ever since by ruthlessly eschewing all forms of alcoholic intoxication.

The text of the anthem – this is about the anthem, you may recall – will be rather familiar to you if you know Handel's *Messiah* at all well. As you listen to the music, you may also feel that it too is familiar, and for the same reason. Although Wise died soon after Handel's birth in 1685, this anthem remained in use, and Handel obviously came to know it. Although some people have gone so far as to say that he parodied sections of Wise's anthem in *Messiah*, it seems safer to say that there are flashes of recognition that may occur as we hear the piece sung.