

Music Notes: Third Sunday of Advent – 16th December 2018

Choosing the right music for the liturgy each week may appear to be a straightforward matter. What's the season? Choose a piece of music written for the season! However, there is much more to it than that. The music can either act as a mirror to themes found in textual aspects of the service – perhaps most obviously, the readings – or it can be a way of extending the references in the service by dealing with aspects that are not contained within the specific readings or other material used in the service. This is one of those Sundays. The parable of the foolish and wise virgins from Matthew's Gospel does not in fact appear as a reading in Advent at all in our cycle, and, indeed, the Lutherans are the only main denomination to assign it to this season. In one of three years in the Anglican cycle, it turns up in early November – so, some distance away from now. Nevertheless, with the virgins falling asleep as they wait for the coming of the bridegroom, it is not hard to see the applicability of the story to Advent. Wisdom is also a theme for the season, referred to specifically in one of the *O Antiphons* that form the basis of this Sunday evening's Mid-Advent Carol Service.

The first comes at the Solemn Eucharist, when the setting is the *Missa Prudentes virgines – the Mass of the Wise Virgins* – by the Spanish composer, Alonso Lobo (1555–1617). He was especially associated with Seville Cathedral, and, more briefly, Toledo Cathedral. He was a choir boy at Seville, where the music was directed by the highly influential composer Francisco Guerrero (1528–1599), whose assistant he later became. In fact, Lobo came to be considered by his contemporaries to be as significant a composer as the great Tomás Luis de Victoria, but history has remembered them rather differently, with Victoria considered now one of the trio of top Renaissance composers alongside Lassus and Palestrina. Alonso meantime is remembered – unfairly – for relatively few pieces; we should not overlook the especially gorgeous motet *Versa est in luctum*.

Lobo's respect for the director of the choir in which he served is shown in his quotations from Guerrero in several works, and this mass is an example of this, being a parody mass (i.e. one that quotes from another work as a kind of "jumping off point" for the rest of the composition), based on a motet by the elder composer. The setting is for five voices throughout. Our late Director of Music, David Trendell (1964–2014), wrote fascinatingly about it in the *Musical Times* in 1996, pointing out that the extremely rich and successful counterpoint used by the composer is doubtless a reference to the title: he wants to be counted as among the wise, not the foolish, and he is determined therefore to show off his skill. In the secular world, boasting of one's own skills and abilities may be unattractive but perhaps understandable for want of a reason to give the glory to anybody else. In the church – where one should say with Paul of myself *I will not glory, but in mine infirmities* – less

so. Perhaps, then, Lobo was just glorying in what God had accomplished within him.

One of the greatest ways to demonstrate your musical technical prowess in Lobo's time was by the use of canon (i.e. something like *Frère Jacques*), and there are four substantial examples in the setting. The first of these we shall miss, because it is in the *Credo*, which we instead sing together in a plainchant setting. However, the sharp-eared might pick up the second canon in the *Osanna* to the *Sanctus*. These days, we write out all of our music so that you can pretty much see it as it will be performed. In this case, Lobo gives a written instruction telling the second Cantus part to take the notes of the first Cantus part (but only the ones that are long notes), and sing them while the tenor sings the same thing, but backwards. Then they are to change places, and the tenor must sing it the right way round, with Cantus II singing it backwards. At the end of the *Benedictus*, its *Osanna* is also given a complex written instruction: the tenor and bass have to sing from the same music, but the tenor sings all the notes twice as long as the bass and a fifth higher in pitch. You had to have your musical wits about you to perform this music!

At the start of the *Agnus Dei*, the tenor sets off with the words *Prudentes virgines* rather than *Agnus Dei*. Putting in the words of the plainchant or motet on which the setting was based had been quite common a generation earlier. In the case of Lobo it was really an archaic practice that had already died out elsewhere. Nevertheless, Lobo was evidently comfortable with this, from which we can deduce that composers in his – Iberian – part of the world were happy to retain elements from the past (there are others in his music) alongside “modern” counterpoint. David Trendell describes this in his very readable article as Lobo having his cake *and* eating it – an interesting image just now in the UK.

The motet at the Offertory is *Jerusalem Surge* by the Flemish composer, Heinrich Isaac (1450–1517). He was a contemporary of Josquin des Prez (1450–1521), and while he is not thought of in quite the same breath as the better-known Franco-Flemish composer, he was a very important figure and extremely influential, especially in Germany, where he had extensive links with the Hapsburg court. He wrote a very considerable number of works in all (at that time) possible forms, and is really only surpassed in terms of output by the quite extraordinarily prolific Lassus, who beats everybody else in terms of output. The text of this motet is derived from the Communion Proper for the Second Sunday of Advent, which is itself taken from two verses in the book of Baruch: *Arise, O Jerusalem, and stand on high, and behold the joy that comes to thee from thy God*. Isaac sets the text partly in block chords (especially at the beginning), but loosens up into a more contrapuntal texture as the piece proceeds.

The evening brings our Mid-Advent Carol Service, which has the subtitle *Tomorrow I will come*. This links Advent to Christmas using the Antiphons that are part of the office of Vespers on the seven days prior to Christmas Eve. Each of them starts with the vocative *O*, followed by a synonym for the coming Messiah, and so they are known collectively as the *O Antiphons*. Each synonym adds a dimension to the overall picture. In this service, each Antiphon is followed by a reading and at least one piece of music that amplifies the relevant theme.

The first is *O Sapientia – O Wisdom* and we answer this with *O where shall wisdom be found* by William Boyce (1711-1799). He studied with Maurice Greene (1696–1755) after being a chorister at St Paul’s Cathedral and later succeeded him as Master of the King’s Music. Greene had started a compilation of the highest quality anthems and other music for the English church, which he did not finish before his death. Boyce took up this project and, when published, this substantial tome had an extraordinary effect up and down the land, establishing a canon of works for the Anglican Church, and, in doing so, kicking off what is referred to now as “The Anglican Choral Tradition”. Showing considerable restraint, none of the three volumes of this collection contains a single work by Boyce or Greene. The text of this anthem is from that cheerful Old Testament book, Job, but Boyce makes much of it. It is like a miniature dramatic cantata, with many contrasting sections for soloists and full chorus.

The second Antiphon, *O Adonai – O Lord* is answered by Psalm 136 to an Anglican chant. The third is *O Radix Jesse – O Root of Jesse*, and the musical response to this is *Es ist ein Ros’ entsprungen*, which employs the well-known German hymn and tune (which we know in English as *A great and mighty wonder*), in an arrangement of a tune composed by Prætorius (1571–1621) by the Swedish composer Jan Sandström (b. 1954). One of Sandström’s other claims to fame is his *Motorbike Concerto*, for trombone and orchestra, of which you may have heard tell – or even have heard. In the case of this choral piece, he weaves a complex texture of chords in one choir, which the other enters occasionally to sing the German carol in four-part harmony against this background.

The fourth *O Antiphon* is *O Clavis David – O Key of David*. The musical response to the following reading from Revelation is the seventeenth-century setting of *Remember O thou man* by the English composer Thomas Ravenscroft (c. 1582–1635), who also wrote the words. His main claim to fame is as an early collector of folk music (somewhat like the much later Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharp), of which the most famous is *Three Blind Mice*. He didn’t write a great deal of liturgical music, keeping himself mainly to rounds and catches, but the salutary admonition of this setting has become very well-known.

The fifth *O Antiphon* is *O Oriens – O Daystar*, and the choral response to this is Thomas Tallis’s small-scale, but powerful masterpiece, *O Nata Lux*. This is a setting

of two verses from the hymn at Lauds on the Feast of the Transfiguration. As befits the ecstatic nature of the feast, the music is vibrant and powerful, full of surprising harmonically confusing sounds that continually transfigure the music itself.

The sixth *O Antiphon* is *O Rex gentium – O King of the Peoples*. This is followed by a reading comprising the first six verses of Psalm 24, which begins in the psalter: *The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is*. Verse 7 brings us to *Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in*. It is at those words that the choir takes over, singing the setting of those words from *Messiah* by Handel (1685–1759). This is an assertive piece in the middle of the second part of the oratorio, immediately after the solo *But thou didst not leave his soul in hell*.

The seventh and last of the *O Antiphons* is the culmination of the sequence: *O Emmanuel*, the greeting to the incarnate Word of God or *God-With-Us*. Rather than sing this to chant this year, the text will be sung instead to a setting by the Latvian composer, Ēriks Ešvalds (b.1977). We are not the only British religious establishment to have shown an interest in the *O Antiphons*. The Chaplain of Merton College Oxford, the Revd Dr Simon Jones, had the brilliant idea of commissioning different composers to set each of the Antiphons, and chose Ešvalds to provide the setting of the culminating, final Antiphon of the original seven. The plainchant suffuses this setting, being sung first by a solo voice, and then taken up by all the altos. Ešvalds is one of a group of Baltic composers whose distinctive musical language is taking parts of the choral world by storm. This setting of the seventh Antiphon illustrates why this music is finding such resonance around the world.

This have I done from true love is a setting by the Cheltenham-born and educated composer, Gustav Holst (1874–1934), of a version of the text that we know otherwise as *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day*. The initial verses are well-known from Christmas Carol services, albeit to the older traditional melody or John Gardner's upbeat (in every sense) version, but Holst wants to go further. He elects to set the entire old Cornish poem, not just the Christmas part of it. This tells (in potted form), the whole story of Jesus's life and ministry. So we get the entire arc of the narrative that will run from where we are now to Ascensiontide. Of course, in doing so, it does take in Christmas as well, so in fact this is the first real carol of Christmas. Many more of these in the coming week!

We then sing together the well-known hymn that is based on the *O Antiphons*, and that is *O Come, O come, Emmanuel*. We have tinkered with the order of the verses because the one we know as the first verse is actually the one derived from the last Antiphon. So, we're going to sing this once at the start and once again at the end, while the intervening verses are on this occasion sung in the order that they occur during the days before Christmas.

If you take the first words of each *O Antiphon* and line them up in the order they occur, you see the following:

O Sapientia
O Adonai
O Radix
O Clavis
O Oriens
O Rex
O Emmanuel

Then, if you read the first letters of each noun in upward order, you get EROCRAS or *ero cras*, which is the Latin for *Tomorrow I will come*, the title of this service.

One final item from the choir: the *Vesper Responsory, Advent Sunday* by Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962), which we also heard towards the end of our Advent Carol Service. It was commissioned by the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral for its Director of Music, Michael Nicholas, and the Cathedral Choir. The text reminds us three times: *Tomorrow go ye forth, and the Lord, he shall be with you*, as good a Mid-Advent admonition as you could possibly want.