

**Music Notes:           Fourth Sunday of Advent – 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2018**  
**Midnight Mass, and Christmas Day**

The setting of the Mass this Sunday, *Missa Ave Maria peregrina* is by the Spanish composer, Francisco de Peñalosa (1470–1528). He belongs to that period of Spanish history, where the visual and performing arts flourished, political stability reigned, and the Catholic Church was a dominant force. The burgeoning mood of optimism inspired composers to be more innovative and establish a more distinctive approach to music. Later composers of the Spanish school became exponents of a richer style, and they were less afraid of emotion than their Roman contemporaries. At this stage Peñalosa, it appears, looked still further afield to the austerities of the Franco-Flemish composers, with whom the Spanish court was already building a relationship. Is it a coincidence that he shared with the Flemish Josquin des Prez (1440–1521), some twenty years his senior, a fascination for musical puzzles and contrapuntal tricks, such as making a line of one melody work harmoniously with a backward version of another melody?

Peñalosa had a long, if rather quirky, association with Seville Cathedral, and held several positions there, although not without controversy. Somewhere in his career he had made enemies, and his first Cathedral appointment to a canonry was actively opposed by the Chapter, but to no avail, and he was duly inducted into his new position in 1505. His difficulties were not over, however, and one can see his opponents' point: in 1517 he departed for a visit to Rome, and – beating Bach's absence visiting Buxtehude, which only amounted to stretching his agreed absence to four times the planned length – came back eight years later, having held down his position in Seville and its associated stipend throughout. Of course, it helped that no less a figure than the Pope intervened on his behalf to encourage the authorities to be lenient. Throughout, he seems to have known how to get on with the "right people".

This was a long time before Counter-Reformation principles of sticking to sacred source material came into general practice, and Peñalosa's mass settings are all based on secular melodies apart from this Sunday's setting, which is largely based on plainchant. It is composed for four voices until we get to the climactic *Agnus Dei*, for which he adds a voice to make a richer five-part texture. The chants he predominantly uses in the first four movements are those for the Marian antiphons *Ave Maria* and the *Salve Regina*. However, when he comes to the climax of the piece, he draws on a secular source, a famous French song called *De tous biens plaine* attributed to Hayne van Ghizeghem (c. 1445–somewhere between 1476 & 1497). The text of the chanson is: *My mistress possesses every virtue. Everybody pays her homage, for she is as full of worth as ever any goddess was.* By using this, he introduces the idea of a love song from the faithful to the Blessed Virgin. He is also clever enough to conceal it decorously, because this is the tune running backwards referred to above, while the chant of the more obviously appropriate *Salve Regina*, also used elsewhere in the

setting, runs against it in a forward direction. It is a very clever piece of writing. It is just about conceivable that the odd person other than, say, the singers might have worked this out. But surely this is an example of the composer imbuing his work with his own personal response of faith, expressed here in a technical trick, but nonetheless amounting to a personal statement embedded into the texture, and primarily intended to be just between God and him. He didn't require other people to slap him on the back to say how clever he had been.

The motet at the Offertory is *Auxilium meum* by Pierre Passereau (1509–1547), a setting of Psalm 121: *I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help*. Passereau is chiefly famous today for having written the ditty *Il est bel et bon*, which includes syllables designed to replicate the clucking of chickens. In fact, much of his output is secular, and how! He revelled in word games, syllabic nonsense that indicates sounds made by animals, and a great deal of positively obscene verse. Naturally, his *chansons* were enormously popular. This motet is a rare example of his soberer side, and perhaps all the more heartfelt for that! The music is clearly informed by the madrigalist in him, and it is a delightful work.

The evening brings us to our most traditional carol service, the *Nine Lessons & Carols*, which the Anglican Church has inherited from King's College, Cambridge, where it was introduced in 1918, having itself inherited it from a tradition started in Truro Cathedral in 1880.

By tradition, the first carol sung by the choir is a setting of *Adam lay y-bounden*. This is really the fault of Boris Ord (1897–1961), formerly Director of Music at King's College, who came up with the musical ideas behind his very famous setting of this 15<sup>th</sup> century macaronic (i.e. written in more than one language) text while taking a bath. We often perform this version each year in the Advent Carol Service (although not actually this year, when we used Matthew Martin's wonderful setting), and so ring the changes of settings by other composers in *Nine Lessons & Carols*. In recent years, we have heard settings by Howard Skempton, Bob Chilcott, and Philip Ledger, the latter also a former Director of Music at King's. However, what is arguably the second most famous setting is by Peter Warlock (1894–1930), written for a solo voice and organ. In fact, this setting pre-dates that of Ord, having been written in 1922 for the Oxford Book of Carols that came out in 1923. While that published version was for the original combination of solo voice with organ, we have copies of the somewhat elusive arrangement of this piece for choir that was made for Louis Halsey and the Allegri Singers in 1961 by Laurence Davies, and this is what we will be hearing.

Warlock, whose real name was Philip Heseltine, was a somewhat rum character who worked mainly as a music critic and author. The "Warlock" of his chosen pseudonym undoubtedly was a direct reference to his interest in the occult. He

became a good friend of the composer Frederick Delius, and indeed wrote an early biography of him. In his persona of Peter Warlock, he was a prolific composer of carols (for example, the beautiful *Bethlehem Down*, which earned him a great deal of money) and solo and part songs.

The next carol is a setting of the *Wexford Carol* by the British composer, Ben Parry (b.1965). He was born and raised in Ipswich, Suffolk; his father was an organist and a music teacher. Ben went on to sing in the choir of King's College, Cambridge. One of his most important career breaks was with the Swingle Singers, which had been founded in 1962 in Paris by the jazz musician, composer and singer, Ward Swingle (1927–2015). (Lest you think his surname was made up for the purposes of his career, Swingle was in fact directly descended from the Swiss religious reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), who established the Reformed tradition in Zürich.) Ben was first a singer, then an arranger, and then music director of the Swingle Singers after Ward Swingle eventually retired. Today, he is Director of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, Music Director of the resident choir of the Aldeburgh Festival, Assistant Director of King's College, Cambridge, and co-Director of London Voices. This is a relatively straightforward but very elegant setting of the familiar Irish folk melody.

It is an appalling fact of musical history that the role of composer has historically been dominated by men to the almost complete exclusion of women. Even when they were outstanding in their own right, they were eclipsed all too easily: for example, Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of Felix, and Clara Schumann, wife of Robert, are only now beginning to get the recognition their music self-evidently deserves. In our time, the balance is improving, but still has a long way to go. This country has, however, done much to move this process along, and there is a remarkable number of women composers now writing and being performed. Among the most remarkable is Sally Beamish (b.1956), who was born here in London. Her website reports: *Initially a viola player, she moved from London to Scotland in 1990 to develop her career as a composer* – and she continues to be based there. Her carol *In the stillness* is a setting of words by the poet Katrina Shepherd. The Gonzaga Music website says of this wonderful miniature: *This short carol beautifully captures the hushed rapture of a small parish church in a snowbound landscape, just before Christmas.*

John Rutter (b.1945) has been one of the key figures in the creation of the modern choral Christmas tradition. There is still a tedious strand of the choral world that likes to disparage Rutter's music as being too trite or too formulaic and aims to have carol services or Christmas concerts expressly without a note of Rutter in them. The fact is that his music is enduringly popular with congregations and audiences alike. It is also a fact that he writes very much for the occasion or performers whom he has in mind. When asked to write some background music for an American television programme many years ago, he produced one of the most perfectly aimed pieces of

Christmas music that is now known as *The very best time of the year*. Heard out of context, there is no doubting the amount of sugar he has put into the mix, but it is exactly what would have been required by the television company. On the other hand, his carol that was one of Stephen Cleobury's early commissions after taking up the reins at King's College Cambridge, *What sweeter music*, was equally well-aimed and entirely different, and has justly become one of the most popular and enduring choir carols. We are going to hear Rutter's setting of the French carol, *Il est né, le divin enfant*. The text was published for the first time in 1862 by R. Grosjean, who was organist of the Cathedral of Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, in a collection of carols that he called *Airs des Noël's lorrains*. Rutter's treatment of the melody in this setting is deft and elegant, thoroughly well-aimed!

Next comes a setting of one of the less familiar tunes for *Away in a Manger* by Darius Battiwalla (b.1966). Darius comes from just up the road in Islington. His mother came from Lancashire, while his father from a Parsee family in Bombay. As he says on his website: *He began to play the piano by ear at a very early age, later taking up the cello and finally the organ, becoming organist at St Mary, Islington when he was 13. He was educated at William Ellis School in Highgate, and later went to Leeds University to study music. After graduating with first-class honours, he completed his studies with postgraduate diplomas in organ (with distinction) and piano accompaniment from the Royal Northern College of Music, where he won prizes on both instruments. He also completed a MusM in performance at Manchester University.* Having once broken the bounds of Islington, he has not returned, but now lives in Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire, where the chances of snow at Christmas are somewhat enhanced. The tune he elegantly sets here is called *Normandy*, so named because it is an old tune from Normandy, which became one of the possible settings of these familiar words (for which dozens of different tunes have been used down the ages) following its arrangement by Reginald Jacques, who was co-editor with David Willcocks of the first volume of the highly influential OUP series *Carols for Choirs*. The editors included it alongside the more familiar tune in this country, which is called *Cradle Song*, but which was confusingly written by an American composer, William J. Kirkpatrick (1838–1921) – confusing because a different tune for these words is more or less dominant in the United States.

The carol, *Quem vidistis pastores dicite*, by Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), takes us back to the shepherds. Poulenc wrote *Quatre Motets pour un temps de Pénitence* in 1939 – four beautiful pieces for Lent. It wasn't until November 1951 that he turned his attention to Christmas and began work on *Quatre Motets pour un temps de Noël*, finishing them in May the following year. This, the second of the set, sets the upper voices (which evidently represent the angels) against the bass. In a middle section, the voices unite in their demand that the angels tell them the glad tidings before the music from the opening is reprised, the last part taking a slightly different turn to bring it to a conclusion. The structure throughout has that slightly breathless quality of endless short sections stitched together that is rather characteristic of Poulenc's

choral music and which in the hands of an inadequate choir and director can have the listener hyperventilating in sympathy without enjoying it. Put together sympathetically (as they certainly will be), however, this comes across as a brilliant atmospheric jewel of Christmas devotional music.

This brings us to *Illuminare Jerusalem* by the current Master of the Queen's Music, Judith Weir (b. 1954). The text is from an anonymous fifteenth century poem in medieval English, to which the Latin refrain *Illuminare Jerusalem* is added. The poem begins: *Jerusalem reioss for joy: Jesus the sterne of most bewte In thee is rissin, as ryghtous roy.* Judith Weir's setting was one of the first commissions that Stephen Cleobury made for the Carol Service at King's College, Cambridge. The first was Lennox Berkeley in 1983, then came Peter Maxwell Davies in 1984 (this carol is being repeated in their Christmas Eve service this year), and then came *Illuminare Jerusalem*. The broadcast carol service this year, described on the King's College website as both the "centenary" carol service (correct) and the hundredth carol service (incorrect, as it is the hundred and first, since the first one in the college was held on Christmas Eve 1918) will also be Stephen Cleobury's last, as he is retiring at the end of the current academic year, and Daniel Hyde will be in charge next year. Stephen has left behind an extraordinary legacy of commissions during his 36 years as Director of Music. As always with these things, some have not found their way into the repertoire, but an enormous number have, including *Illuminare Jerusalem*, even though it is not without its challenges for singers! The piece is unaccompanied throughout, apart from five brief chords on the organ, with the instruction in the background, soft but weighty, just for the word *Illuminare*. It is complete genius in its understatement.

Our final piece is by Hans Leo Haßler (1564–1612). The ß in his name, which is intended to indicate a longer vowel beforehand, stands in effect for a double-s for English readers, and, indeed, is generally written out as "ss" by German speakers in Switzerland, who love not the ß. Haßler came from a musical family, and his father was also a church musician. When he was 24, he decided to go to Italy, and in particular to Venice, where he met and befriended Giovanni Gabrieli (1557–1612), leading to a period of study with the famous Andrea Gabrieli (1532–1585), Giovanni's uncle. This exposure to the Italian/Venetian school was substantially to affect his own compositional style after his return to the Germanic states a year later.

Haßler, who was a Lutheran, spent some time working for a nobleman in Augsburg, even though it was a strongly Catholic area. Rather as with Byrd (1539–1623) and Tallis (1505–1585) in England, he made the usual musician's compromise with context, and duly wrote much Catholic music, as evidenced by his collection, *Cantiones sacrae de festis praecipuis totius anni – Sacred songs for the principal feasts of the whole year*, published in Augsburg in 1591. The piece we will hear comes from this collection, and is a setting of *Verbum caro factum est – the Word is made flesh*. As with

many of his pieces, it is a very colourful work, with many changes of texture and rhythm, which keep it vibrant and exciting.

### **Midnight Mass**

The setting at Midnight Mass (which begins this year at 23:00 – 11pm, NB) is the famous *Messe de Minuit pour Noël* by Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1634–1704), one of the most familiar settings written especially for this special service in the year. Apart from writing a *Te Deum*, the introduction to which forms the musical identifier of the European Broadcasting Union – heard before such vital events as the Eurovision Song Contest and the New Year’s Concert from Vienna – Charpentier was a prolific French composer in the Court of the Duchesse de Guise, writing exactly at the point where older modal harmonic forms of music were changing into the diatonic system with which we are still familiar.

The setting was composed somewhere around 1690. Charpentier was then the *Maître de Musique* at the Jesuit Église Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis. An important element of this piece is somewhat lost on us these days: Charpentier had the clever and entirely novel idea of basing his setting on a series of *Noëls* – arrangements for organ of well-known Christmas folksongs, which were extremely popular in France in the season. He drew on eleven of these in all, and used them as the melodic basis of much of the setting, albeit with some newly composed material for sections where the folksong provided no suitable music. Of course, to a contemporary congregation this would have been a delightful experience of recognizing all these disparate references to utterly familiar Christmas melodies. For us, it is a little less self-evident, and we generally just accept the work for what it is, although we also might note how much of them are derived from dance-like material. Once you know of the origin of the melodies, one suddenly picks up the folk-like “atmosphere” with which they are imbued. Indeed, it is part of Charpentier’s genius that, even when he has newly composed music, he manages to make it sound as though it knits perfectly with everything else. At the same time, his contrapuntal writing manages very elegantly to make melodies that started in a very different context to sound perfectly acceptable for their comparative formality of liturgy.

During the Communion, the choir will be singing the Rutter setting of *Il est né, le divin enfant* that is also part of the Nine Lessons and Carols service, alongside a setting of *Stille Nacht* by our Director of Music, Rupert Gough.

### **Christmas Day**

At the Solemn Eucharist on Christmas, the setting, *Missa Sancti Nicolai*, is by the Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), one of the most interesting figures in musical history. His real big break in life came when he was employed by Prince

Paul Anton Esterházy in 1861, and from then on, his life – *pace* an unhappy marriage – improved dramatically. Well, up to a point, perhaps.

Not long after Haydn was employed by the prince, the princely family built a new magnificent palace in rural Hungary that was called *Esterháza*. Their time was thereafter divided between this new, exotic, but fundamentally rural, establishment, and Schloß Esterházy in Eisenstadt, which was at least a little closer to Vienna, the centre of much vibrant artistic activity. The upshot of this was that Haydn spent the next thirty years of his life as an increasingly respected, and even revered, composer, and yet was obliged to work in almost complete artistic isolation in rural Hungary and fairly rural Austria. A lesser composer might have withdrawn into safe, familiar musical language, but not Haydn. Instead, almost every successive work he produced pushed at the boundaries, whether he was writing string quartets, symphonies, or piano music.

In 1772, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, who had succeeded his late brother the year after Haydn was employed, found the hunting season at Esterháza especially beguiling, and the date at which the court would have returned to Schloß Esterházy in Eisenstadt came and went without the prince showing any sign of wanting to leave. The staff became restive, not least of all because this was also the first year that it had been decided there was no room for their families to accompany them because of the relatively cramped quarters at the Hungarian palace – clearly an architectural oversight. Finally, Haydn – who had a particularly good relationship with the prince – sat down and wrote a somewhat pointed *Farewell Symphony*, at the end of which each group of musicians in the orchestra successively came to the end of their music, snuffed out their candles and left the performing area. Finally, just two violins and Haydn were left to end the music. The prince took the hint and laying his hand on Haydn's shoulder is reported to have said: *My dear Haydn, I take the point. The musicians long to go home. Very well, we'll set off tomorrow.* You can just imagine the panic on the part of those who then had to do the necessary packing!

Haydn seems to have been very appreciative of Prince Nikolai's broadmindedness and willingness to take a hint. Later that same year, he composed the *Missa Sancti Nicolai* for performance on 6<sup>th</sup> December, the Prince's name day. Whether this was, as some have surmised, a specific thank you for the Prince's understanding attitude or not, the two events are evidence of the warm relationship that existed between them. The Mass itself is a charming setting, with a first movement in a lilting pastoral style that would immediately have evoked shepherds and the countryside in the ears of contemporary listeners. Haydn reinforces the point by bringing this music back right at the end of the *Agnus Dei* after a rather solemn opening. The *Gloria* is unashamedly exuberant and jolly, the *Sanctus* again a pastoral piece followed by a boisterous *Osanna*, and the *Benedictus* a beautiful movement for solo quartet.

At the Offertory we hear another piece by Peter Warlock (whose *Adam lay y-bounden* is in the Nine Lessons and Carols mentioned above). *Benedicamus Domino*, written in 1918, avoids his usually rather chromatic approach to harmony, perhaps making a point through a persistently sunny C major tonality throughout about simple faith in the season of Christmas. He himself struggled with traditional Christianity, but when it came to the business of writing something suitable for this season, he knew exactly what he was doing!

During the communion, the choir will sing *This lovely Lady sat and sang* by the British composer Bryan Kelly (b.1934). In a wide-ranging career, partly in academic music, and partly as a composer, he has lived in various parts of the UK, Paris, Umbria, Washington, and Cairo, and has played an important role in the development of western-style classical music in Egypt. Now, there's a biography for which we need more space than we have here!

*This lovely Lady sat and sang* is a beautiful miniature, elegant and charming. Having lulled us into a false sense of simplicity at the beginning, the harmony is significantly enriched in the latter part of each verse.