

Music Notes: Advent Sunday – 2nd December 2018

Welcome to the Church's New Year's Day!

This Sunday's Mass setting is *Missa Conditor Alme Siderum* by the Italian composer Giovanni Animuccia (c.1500–1571). He was a slightly older contemporary of Palestrina (1525–1594), Victoria (1548–1611) and Lassus (1532–1594), and so brushed shoulders with the very greatest composers of the period. Nevertheless, he is not spoken of in quite the same breath, although that should not be disheartening. It is true that he was somewhat less revolutionary than the three 'greats' were in breaking new ground; he was more of a trend follower than a trend setter. It is notable, for example, that when he published a set of masses, he went out of his way to draw attention to the fact that they conformed to the liturgical musical principles of the Tridentine Council (The Council of Trent, 1545–1563), a point that Palestrina, perhaps, would have thought unnecessary to articulate.

His main claim to fame is as S. Philip Neri's music director. Neri was an extremely interesting character, ministering in Rome during the great upheaval caused by the Reformation. Although attracted to the new religious orders – he met Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits in 1544 – he founded instead a religious organization for secular clergy (i.e. those not members of a monastery or similar religious house and who live together as a community bound by the bond of charity rather than formal vows) called the Congregation of the Oratory. Cardinal Newman's Oratory in Birmingham and the Brompton Oratory in South Kensington are descendants of Neri's initiative. His Oratory, at the Chiesa Nuova in Rome, began as a rather low-key endeavour, but then grew rapidly into a sizable body. Animuccia became involved quite early on and was duly appointed as Maestro di Capella, composing music for the meetings and services and directing its performance. So successful was the entire venture that, as Neri was able to attract the great and the good to the Oratory, Animuccia was able to induce the great composers such as Palestrina and Victoria to write for it. It is notable that the first set of music for use at Oratory meetings that he published is relatively simple, and appears to have been intended to be sung either by amateur contributors or the assembled congregation. By the time the second book came out however, the music is clearly intended for the competent and probably professional singer, so, in a sense, one can trace the development of the organization itself in a musical context by considering the seven-year period between the books' respective appearances.

It is a rather nice detail that the composer Victoria lived in S. Philip Neri's house for some five years, which makes one wonder what it was like to cohabit with a living saint. It is certainly interesting to consider how the experience of being so close to someone like S. Philip would have affected Victoria, who was himself ordained to the priesthood in 1574.

The mass we are to hear is, as Animuccia's works tended to be, a *cantus firmus* mass, based firmly on the relevant plainchant. The text for the chant is from a 7th-century hymn used at Vespers during Advent. We know it in translation as *Creator of the stars of night, Thy people's everlasting light, Jesu, Redeemer, save us all, and hear Thy servants when they call*. Animuccia was, as already mentioned, concerned to follow Tridentine principles. However, seen from the enormously pompous heights of hindsight, one wonders to what extent he really managed to do this compared with, say, Palestrina. He wanted the words to be clear, and yet he knew that the greatest beauty in music at the time could only be provided by polyphony. His solution was to alternate the approaches, with blocks of homophony (like a hymn) followed by sections of interleaved polyphonic (i.e. interwoven voices) writing. Actually, it all seems very clear when the words are as familiar as is the case with the liturgy. Still, one can see that he couldn't quite work out how to square the circle, and perhaps that is what makes Palestrina, Victoria, and Lassus the great composers that they were, because this is exactly what they did with such great success. Still, Animuccia's music is beautiful and highly effective, and his creation is, anyway, such a great setting for Advent.

The motet at the Offertory is a setting of the text *Conditor alme Siderum* by an anonymous composer from around 1400. It is structured as a presentation of plainchant in alternation with a three-voice free setting. So, the first verse is sung to a chant (familiar to us from our hymn books as the Advent hymn *Creator of the starry height*), and then the second to the setting, and so on. The setting has the familiar rather "bouncy" triple metre quality that is familiar to us from music of this period. We tend to consider rhythm to be a fairly flexible matter, chosen relatively freely by the composer to suit whatever he or she wants the music to do in relation to the text. But in the 14th-century, rhythm was subject to some strict rules, to which this setting fully conforms. There was a "vocabulary" of rhythmic units that were considered acceptable for composers to use, and you strayed from it at your peril. It seems very strange to us now, but it was so.

During the Communion, we are going to hear *Dominus dabit benignitatem* by the Scottish composer, James MacMillan (b. 1959). He is one of the United Kingdom's most successful and prolific composers. He is particularly upfront about his Roman Catholic faith – indeed, he is a lay Dominican – and has composed a considerable amount of liturgically-related music alongside his orchestral and other larger-scale and secular works. This motet is one of a set called *The Strathclyde Motets* and is dedicated to the Parish of St Columba's, Maryhill, Glasgow. The intention behind the entire set was that they should be within the reach of decent church choirs, and they certainly deliver on that goal, with music that is approachable but also quite demanding for the performers. The text is one single verse from Psalm 84: *The Lord will bestow his loving kindness, and our land will yield its fruit. Amen*. MacMillan uses the plainchant melody as the basis for the setting, although he fractures it so that it is not a literal sequential quotation. This is an intense, thoughtful work.

The evening brings us to the first of the eleven (or twelve including Epiphany) carol services presented this year by Great St Bartholomew, and which take place between the start of Advent and the Epiphany. We so hope you will join us at some of them. (The brochure is on our website.)

We begin with *The Advent Prose: Pour down, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness*. This text – known also by its Latin incipit *Rorate Cæli* – has various possible liturgical uses in Advent on various days and festivals, and sums up the themes of the season as an introduction to this service.

The first lesson concerns the prophet's vision in the Temple, which is filled with smoke, and in which the voice of the Lord is heard saying Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? To which the prophet replies Then said I, Here am I; send me – surely one of the most thought-provoking and challenging passages in the Old Testament. The choir immediately sings the Matin Responsory, well-known through its use at King's College, Cambridge on the First Sunday of Advent. The text comprises the first Responsory for Matins of the day, but the music, which would normally have been a straightforward chant, is here an adaptation of a Magnificat by Palestrina. Since 1970, many churches have used a version put together by the editors of the second volume of Oxford University Press's *Carols for Choirs*, David Willcocks (1919–2015), at that time Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge, and John Rutter (b.1945). It became well-known through its annual use in the King's Advent Carol Service and by being included in the most successful series of carol books ever sold. Stephen Cleobury, the present Director of Music at King's, has tidied up some of the rhythmic presentation of this piece for a more recent Oxford University Press publication, and this is the version we will be hearing.

A reading from Isaiah prophesies that a young woman will conceive a son whose name shall be Immanuel – which means God is with us. This is a crucial stage in the undoing of the sin of Adam, which, in the narrative of salvation, kicked off the whole thing in the first place. The choir therefore answers with a setting of *Adam lay y-bounden*. Usually at this service, we have always heard the famous setting by Boris Ord (1897–1961), one-time Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge. In due course, his approach – perhaps together with Britten's use of the text in his *Ceremony of Carols* – led to a range of composers providing their own versions. This time, we are going to hear the setting by Matthew Martin (b.1976), who is currently Director of Music at Keble College, Oxford where he conducts the choir and teaches academic music within the College and University. This setting, which was first performed by the Choir of Westminster Cathedral on December 19th 2006 at St George's, Hanover Square. Many of the composers who have set this text have recognized its medieval origins in the style of music they have written for it. Martin is no exception, although his medieval references really are allusions, rather than any sense of pastiche. His melodic lines have a plainchant-like liquescence, and he drives the point home by

introducing touches of one of the chants used for the eighth-century Marian Vespers hymn, *Ave Maris Stella*, into the music.

More prophecy from Isaiah, in this case using the words that later will be quoted by John the Baptist in the seventh reading of the service: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. The cumulative effect of these readings is to increase the longing for the Advent of the Lord to take place. In response, the choir sings *People look East* in a setting by Barry Ferguson (b.1942). This is also sung sometimes as a hymn – it is in our hymnbook, in fact – but it is far from easy for congregations and works much better as a choral piece. Ferguson studied at Peterhouse in Cambridge before going to be Assistant Organist at Peterborough Cathedral. Later he was organist at Wimbourne Minster and Rochester Cathedral before departing cathedral music to concentrate on working as a composer, university lecturer and performer. He treats each verse of this strophic song (i.e. it is arranged in verses) slightly differently to give it a very satisfying and brisk dance character.

A reading now from Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, in which the prophet foresees a forerunner who will prepare the way for the Christ. The choir responds with a setting by John Joubert (b.1927) of *There is no rose*. Born in Cape Town, Joubert has lived in the UK for many years and produced works in a wide range of genres. This setting, his Opus 14, dates from 1954. Thanks to being successfully anthologized during the substantial growth in Christmas choral music books since OUP's *Carols for Choirs* series began in 1961, it has become very well-known.

The way that the church and its theologians have dealt with the Blessed Virgin Mary, let alone the many other high profile women who people the Gospel story, is a long, interesting, and sometimes dispiriting subject. Nevertheless, in the case of the Blessed Virgin, the medieval church was in no doubt as to her special qualities, even if they sometimes seemed rather to diminish her humanity – the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (the feast of which occurs next week) needs to be handled with care, lest it make Mary appear as less than human, and therefore the child that will be born of her also less than human. Still the imagery of these words, in which Mary is likened to a beautiful and virtuous rose is compelling, as is the observation that he who was responsible for the creation of the entire heavens and the earth was for a time contained within this rose.

This is followed by the story of the Annunciation in the fifth reading, to which the choir replies with a setting of *Ave Maria* by the German composer Franz Biebl (1906–2001). Biebl was born in Pursruck, in Bavaria. He studied composition at the Musikhochschule in München. He was Choir Director at the Catholic church of St Maria in München-Thalkirchen from 1932 until 1939, then becoming assistant professor of choral music at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, beginning in 1939, where he taught voice and music theory. He was a prisoner of war from 1944 to

1946, being detained at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan. After the war, he moved from Austria to Fürstenfeldbruck, back in Bayern, where he served as director of the town chorus. Ironically, his time in America foreshadowed this piece becoming especially well-known in the United States thanks to the advocacy of the choral group Chanticleer. This piece became the subject of a Supreme Court action in 2009–2010 over the issue of whether it could be sung at a high school graduation ceremony due to its religious nature. The court refused to hear the case, so the lower court's decision that it was legitimate for the school district to ban it was effectively upheld.

The story of the Annunciation to Mary is followed by the appearance of an angel to Joseph in a dream. It has always seemed to me that we don't quite give the somewhat shadowy figure of Joseph enough credit for the way that he deals with the unanticipated pregnancy of his betrothed. It strikes me further that Matthew shows quite a degree of human understanding in deciding to include in his Gospel the story of the angel warning Joseph of what is going to happen. This is reflected in a setting of the carol *Joseph and the Angel* by our Director of Music, Rupert Gough (b.1971).

In the seventh lesson, John the Baptist finally comes to the fore. This involves a little dislocation of the timeline, because in fact this takes place many years after the events of Christmas – but forming theological structures sometimes does that to your sense of time. John's message is undoubtedly an Advent theme: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord*. Our musicians respond to this with the great verse anthem *This is the record of John* by Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625). The story is recounted in the first instance by a soloist, with the main force of the final part of each section repeated and reinforced by the five-voice choir. The copy of the manuscript that is now held at Christ Church in Oxford includes the text: *This Anthem was made for Dr. Laud, President of Saint John's Oxford, for St. John Baptist's day*, and one imagines that it was therefore first performed there in the chapel. Gibbons created here one of the most elegant works in the whole Anglican choral tradition, one with disarming apparent simplicity that conceals a wealth of subtleties. For example, at the point that John laments that he is the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, the harmony shifts unexpectedly into a (for the times) remote minor key, and yet at the words make straight the way of the Lord the harmony instantly returns to the home key. It is just one example of wonderful word-painting.

A final reading from Thessalonians sums up the themes of this service, and the choir answers with words of the *Vesper Responsory*, set by Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962). *Tomorrow go ye forth, and the Lord, he will be with you. Stand ye still, and ye shall see the salvation of the Lord.*

The service ends with the Marian Antiphon *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, one of the four that we sing at Evensong throughout the year according to the season. Their proper role is to be used at the end of Compline, if Compline there be. Hermannus

Contractus (1013–1054), who was beatified in 1863, is generally believed to have written the text, drawing on a variety of earlier sources among the saints. It is sung in the Priory Church from the First Sunday in Advent until the Feast of the Purification, or Candlemas, on February 2nd, and so delineates the entire span of the narrative that dominates our December and January each year.