

Music Notes: Midnight Mass and Christmas Day 2018

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 1761, 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 6th 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.