

Music Notes 2018 – Easter Day

The Mass Setting at the Solemn Eucharist on Easter Day is the *Coronation Mass* (*Krönungsmesse*) by Mozart (1756–1791). It was written in 1779 and first performed that year in Salzburg Cathedral, where Mozart had just been appointed organist and composer, on Easter Sunday, April 4th, 239 years ago. So, this is really an Easter work, and the “Coronation” nickname is a later embellishment. Indeed, it is likely that the first time the work was used for a coronation was the year after Mozart died, when the new monarch concerned was Francis I (originally Francis II) in Prague. The choice of C major as the principal key of the setting tends to position the music in such a way as to give a fresh and open sounding quality to the choral ensemble, imbuing the work with a joyful quality. Indeed, Mozart evidently identified C major as especially suitable for the liturgy, because this was the eighth setting he had written in this key.

In fact, there are some musical politics lurking under the surface of the *Coronation Mass*. Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, Hieronymus von Colloredo, had made the stipulation that the music of the liturgy should be kept brief and to the point. We know from his letters that Mozart was appalled by this ‘edict’, but he knew very well that if you took the Prince Archbishop’s florin, he it was who called the tune. Yet, there are some marvellous signs of pushback by the 23-year old composer. He starts the *Kyrie* with a portentous and, indeed, slow statement, and follows this with an almost indecently jolly and brisk presentation of the text. Nevertheless, before he is done, the slow music suddenly bursts back in and makes a final six (!) statements of *Kyrie eleison*. Mozart has, as it were, the last word in this, the first movement.

However, this is as nothing compared with the joy that is the *Benedictus*. Mozart sets the first sentence to a pretty melody, repeats the text quite often, and, having perhaps slightly pushed his luck, brings it elegantly to the point of a restatement of the boisterous *Hosanna in excelsis* that we heard at the end of the *Sanctus*. Then, blow me down if he doesn’t break off, returns to the music and delicate texture of the *Benedictus*, and repeats the text one final time, before giving us *another* burst of the *Hosanna* and sitting back (as one might see him in one’s mind’s eye) with a satisfied smirk at having made his point so charmingly. Mozart does seem, though, to have gotten away with his mischievous oeuvre. Of course, church musicians and clergy long ago gave up playing such games at each other’s expense.

At the Offertory, we are going to hear *Easter* (also known by its first words: *Rise, heart!*), the wonderful first movement from the *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). The set of five pieces is drawn from four poems by the metaphysical poet, orator and Anglican priest George Herbert (1593–1633) – Herbert’s *Easter* is split into two movements by Vaughan Williams. The set was first performed in 1911 at the Three Choirs festival in Worcester. Four of the movements are set for a baritone soloist, who is joined by the choir for three of them, including *Easter*, while the last, *Antiphon* (*Let all the world in every corner sing!*), is for choir alone. In *Easter*, the accompaniment expands in its first bar from a single

pitch to a chord over which the soloist enters: *Rise heart; thy Lord is risen*, at which point the choir bursts in with the same text. It is like a miniature yet rousing musical depiction of the moment of Resurrection. The text continues: *Sing his praise Without delays, Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise With him may'st rise: That, as his death calcined thee to dust, His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.* Choir and soloist repeat the opening motif thrillingly before we move to the second verse, praying that we might be enabled to praise God for our redemption adequately in our music: *Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part With all thy art. The crosse taught all wood to resound his name Who bore the same. His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key Is best to celebrate this most high day. Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song Pleasant and long; Or since all musick is but three parts vied, And multiplied; O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part, And make up our defects with his sweet art.* The upper and lower parts of the accompaniment drift apart in glowing modal chords, settling finally in a beautiful resolution that feels exactly as though the “blessed Spirit” has indeed repaired any defects in this only just earthly music.

The setting of the canticles at the Festal Solemn Evensong for Easter Day is the *Evening Service in D* by Sir George Dyson (1883–1964). Dyson hailed from Yorkshire and was the son of a blacksmith. The family had a great love of music, and although they had very little money, they did all that they could to encourage Dyson in his studies as an organist. In due course, he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. There, in 1904, he was also awarded the Mendelssohn Scholarship, which was established by some of Mendelssohn’s friends in London after his death. This enabled Dyson to spend some time studying in Italy and Germany. It was while he was in Dresden in 1907 that he composed this setting of the canticles. Although Dyson did endure harrowing experiences in the trenches of the First World War, he also wrote a *Manual of Grenade Fighting* that was officially adopted by the War Office – an unusual side-line for so warm and humane a figure.

After the War, Dyson went into public school music education, working at a succession of establishments very successfully. In due course, he added teaching at the Royal College of Music to being Director of Music at Wellington College, and then at Winchester College. When Sir Hugh Allen retired as the Royal College of Music’s Director in 1937, Dyson was well-placed to be appointed in his stead, although this then meant giving up his parallel career at Winchester. He saw the College through the Second World War, even sleeping on the premises to try to ensure their protection, and eventually retired – to Winchester, in fact – in 1952.

There are two settings of the evening canticles by Dyson in the repertoire. The other is the lyrical and deft set in F, written in 1945, and very much the product of an older composer’s experience and insight. This setting in D, written when Dyson was only 24, is vivid and dramatic, but no less remarkable for its comparative brashness. Its harmonic language must have seemed rather daring in Anglican choral circles at that time. Today it seems more familiar and comfortable, but still it remains an exciting and very valuable contribution to the canticle repertoire, and just right for the brightness of Easter.

The anthem is *My beloved spake* by Patrick Hadley (1899–1973). He was born in Cambridge, a city that dominated a large part of his life. During the First World War, he was a second lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. The title of John Lewis-Stempel's book, first published in 2010, *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War* (an Amazon best-seller and very moving) points out one of the most salient facts about what a subaltern faced at the front: a mere six-week average life expectancy once he arrived there. Regardless, Hadley led a charmed existence right until the very last weeks of the War. Then his luck ran out, albeit only to the extent of sustaining a severe right-leg injury, but the result was amputation below the knee. While he wasn't over-sensitive about what this meant for him – and, indeed, once he had become used to a wooden substitute for the missing part of his leg, would be seen striding over moor and mountain as if nothing had ever happened – he is said to have soothed the almost constant pain with a more than wise amount of alcohol. Nevertheless, he went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge – perhaps helped by the fact that his father was now Master of the College – and then on to the Royal College of Music in London. While at Pembroke, he was lucky enough to study with Charles Wood (1886–1926) – a truly massive influence on the Anglican choral tradition – and Cyril Rootham (1875–1938), who really ought to be a better-known composer than he is. At the Royal College, he studied with no less a figure than Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), while his conducting tutors were Adrian Boult (1889–1983) and Malcolm Sargeant (1895–1967). So, Hadley experienced quite a rather astonishing contrast of extreme flashiness (Sargeant) and extreme un-flashiness (Boult), while he was learning about conducting. One wonders how he managed to synthesize those lessons into his own coherent style; he was certainly a very effective conductor.

After a period of teaching at the Royal College, back Hadley went to Cambridge, this time as a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, while also lecturing with the Faculty of Music. Just after the Second World War, he was elected to the Chair of Music at Cambridge, and remained there very successfully until he retired in 1962. His last eleven years, which might have been very productive, were consumed with an ultimately unsuccessful battle with throat cancer, which consumed a great deal of his energy, and meant that he did much less composing than he had intended.

Today, Hadley's music is not widely remembered. Perhaps its time is yet to come and there will be a revival of music from this period. In general, however, it is in church circles that composers of his kind still have some traction, and his reputation now rests mainly on two pieces, the carol *I sing of a maiden* for two upper voices, much loved and very moving, and this anthem, *My beloved spake*. Its origin lies in a music appreciation class that he gave while teaching at the Royal College of Music. Among this class in the mid-1930s was one Ursula Grotrian. In April 1936, she wrote to Hadley about her own wedding, asking him if he could recommend some music for the service. He replied that he might, if she liked, *try to knock off something if you would choose me some suitable words*. She responded with a suggestion from the somewhat steamy Old Testament book, *Song of Songs*. Hadley was

clearly impressed with the text (*I had forgotten its strangely moving beauty*) and, within a week, the anthem was composed and a first draft already on the way to its dedicatee. Hadley followed this up with a letter in which he asked her to pay special attention to the organ part, over which he had some concerns. He was especially worried about the pedal part because, he said, he was *all but totally ignorant of the ways of the organ (it would have been useless for me ever to have taken it up after the war, at any rate until they insert foot muscles in wooden legs!)* The organ part is, indeed, quite tricky. For reasons not quite apparent in the documentation, the anthem became known between Grotrian and Hadley as *Spook* – presumably, *My beloved “spook”* – you might need to imagine some plummy 1930s English choral singing to see why that might have happened. We know all this because in 1974, Mrs Ursula Watson – as she became upon her wedding – donated the letters to Gonville and Caius College on the occasion of the College’s memorial service for Hadley on 16th February that year, during which this anthem was sung by the college choir.

This is one of those anthems that likes to grab your attention with bright harmonic shifts at key moments. It is exciting, as well as passionate and warm, as befits a work designed for a wedding. There’s a particularly impressive piece of harmonic writing starting with the lines *The fig tree putteth forth her green figs and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell*, when Hadley takes us on a surprisingly rapid journey through all twelve notes of the scale in what is perhaps a slightly showing-off wave in the direction of twelve-tone serial music. He uses the impetus of this to drive into the final section of the piece. In all, it is three and a quarter minutes of very powerful music, and makes one wonder if we are missing out by only knowing two gems from this composer. Might the rest be worth discovering and reviving? If it is of an equal standard, the answer is certainly yes.

The Benediction canticles are set by Marcel Dupré (1886–1971), organist at St Sulpice, where he succeeded Charles-Marie Widor in 1934, and where he remained until his own death in 1971. The *O Salutaris* is first in a sequence of *Quatre Motets*, Op. 9, written in 1916. It is dedicated to his fellow-composer, Philippe Bellenot (1860–1928), Maître de Chapelle at St Sulpice. The *Tantum Ergo*, meantime, is the third in the set (the other two are *Ave Maria* and *Laudate Dominum, omnes gentes*), and was dedicated to L’abbé Renault, who was at the time Maître de Chappelle at Notre Dame. All of the motets in this group are characterized by lyrical and ardent melodic lines against a rich organ accompaniment that seems slightly surprising if you know Dupré’s later music. But these are works that are characteristic of a composer at the age of just 30, with a further 55 years still ahead of him for developing a unique musical language.