

Music Notes 2018 – The Third Sunday after Easter

Nicolas Gombert (1495–1560) was a Franco-Flemish Renaissance composer who was described in 1556 by the German musical theorist and composer Hermann Finck (1527–1558) as someone *who shows all musicians the way, nay more, the exact path to the desired imitative manner and to refinement; and he composes music entirely different from the past.* (trans. Hyperion Records). Finck also maintains that Gombert was a pupil of the French Renaissance composer Josquin des Prez (1450–1521), and, indeed, while this may have been the case, Gombert then took the style of his teacher and developed it so that it took quite a different direction from that of des Prez (see below for more discussion of this progression). Indeed, some see him as being the crucial link between the styles of Josquin and Palestrina (1525–1594). However, Gombert's use of dissonance is much more adventurous than Palestrina's, and he often creates thrilling clashes to illustrate crucial moments in the text. Look out for the way the *Gloria* ends in this Sunday's setting by Gombert, *Missa Tempore Paschali (Mass in the time of Easter)*, as a good example of his adventurous style.

Unfortunately, while we can appreciate Gombert's compositional achievements, his personal biography is another matter, if the story we have received about him is indeed true. We are particularly sensitive to this biographical information in light of the historic cases of child abuse scandals within the church. To explain: from 1538, there are no more references to Gombert in the records of the court chapel of Emperor Charles V, where Gombert was Master of the Children of the Chapel. This is because, as the humanist philosopher, mathematician, astrologer, gambler and physician – quite an Italian polymath! – Gerolamo Cardano or, if you prefer, Hieronymus Cardanus, maintained that Gombert was sentenced to hard labour in the galleys for some six years for, as he put it, violating a choirboy. Cardano does not go into any detail about this, and, indeed, at this distance one really cannot know absolutely whether he got this story right or not. Some scholars have thought that this could have been a trumped-up charge made to remove Gombert from office by someone hostile to his musical genius. On the other hand, suppose the story were to be in fact true, should this make any difference to our appreciation of Gombert's music? We seem to be able to still publicly appreciate the music of the Italian Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613), who murdered his wife and her lover after catching them *in flagrante*. While Gesualdo may have felt provoked, murder is still murder, and do we – or should we – refrain from listening to Gesualdo's music because of his alleged abhorrent behaviour? How many human achievements would have to be binned unquestioningly if the full details of the lives of all their begetters were to be the decision-making factor?

In fact, Gombert got off comparatively lightly: he could have been executed, after all, and the comparative lightness of the sentence could conceivably be a clue to the offence having either been less than Cardano

suggests, or possibly something different altogether. Either way, Gombert found time while in the galleys to compose some works he described as “swan-songs”, which he then sent to the Emperor, who was so moved by them that he not only pardoned him, but also appointed him Prebendary to the cathedral in Tournai. Usually, these “swan-songs” have been identified as being a remarkable set of eight *Magnificats* that Gombert undoubtedly did compose, but there are some reasons to think that these were written at Tournai. If so, then we just don’t know what music, or what else, so moved the Emperor to forgiveness. At any rate, this whole story recalls an episode of the TV show *Rev* regarding forgiveness, which dealt with a very similar subject. “But aren’t we supposed to forgive?” asks the Revd Adam Smallbone of his PCC. “That’s God’s job, not ours,” retorts lay reader Nigel, who appears not to have explored the complementarity implied in the words of the Lord’s Prayer that mentions forgiveness: *And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those that trespass against us.*

So, what about the music? Gombert’s style mixes together two musical constructions that were inspired by two earlier composers. The first was the Franco-Flemish Johannes Ockeghem (1410–1497), who died two years after Gombert’s birth; he wrote music that was in continuous blocks. The second was, as noted above, Josquin des Prez, Gombert’s teacher, who was considerably more interested in highly varied, not to say fractured textures, but laid much store by imitation between the voices. Gombert shared Josquin’s love of imitation (perhaps an indication that he was indeed his pupil), but his textural approach is more like that of Ockeghem. Indeed, we must continue the earlier quotation from Finck, who goes on to say *he avoids rests, and his composition abounds in both full harmonies and imitation.* This is quite true, as you will hear. The voices are given no break: there are more or less no rests. He is a full exponent of the kind of seamless music that we associate with the next generation of composers such as Palestrina, Lassus (1532–1594) and Victoria (1548–1611), and, indeed, may well be the one who inspired them as to how to do it.

Gombert worked before the Counter-Reformation principles regarding clarity of text became generally accepted. As a result, the *Missa Tempore Paschali* gives us an excellent example of a pre-Tridentine mass setting. The incredibly rich, exciting, and, indeed, relentless textures are thrilling, but there is no doubt that the words are comparatively difficult to make out. If you are personally “inclined” to bow at the relevant points in the *Gloria*, good luck with deciding when to do so!

Gombert takes his starting point for the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* from the plainsong for the Easter Mass *Lux et origo*. The *Sanctus*, on the other hand, takes other composed melodic material from the *Gloria* and uses that as its basis. The *Agnus Dei* is in turn related melodically to the *Sanctus*. In its full version, the latter concludes with an especially rich passage in 12 parts – alas, it is not practical for us to hire the extra voices just for this passage!

The motet at the Offertory is *Cantate Domino* by the Italian composer, Giuseppe Pitoni (1657–1743). He was a busy church composer and organist, honoured with several distinguished appointments. He was what we would consider to be Director of Music at the Basilica of San Marco in Rome, for his lifetime, holding alongside further appointments in Rome from time to time at the Basilica dei Santi Apostoli, St John Lateran, the Julian Chapel at St Peter's, and at the German College, where he lived. These bespeak both an astonishing body of work and a rather high profile resulting from it. His biography has come down to us in some detail thanks to a pupil of his, Girolamo Chiti (1657–1743), who ensured that his late master should not be forgotten by means of becoming his biographer. From his writing on the subject, it is possible to deduce that Pitoni composed more than 3,500 works, including something in the region of 300 mass settings. Precise calculations vary, but we might also note that Chiti himself is often described as having written some 3,000 works, so the pupil's apple – in this sense – fell not that far from his master's tree.

Pitoni shared the interest of many of his contemporaries in polychoral music – where multiple “choirs” of voices are ranged against and with each other – and there are plenty of examples of this in his output. Indeed, when he died, he was only part-way through composing a further mass setting for twelve separate multi-voiced choirs which would have put *Spem in alium*, the merely 40-part motet by Thomas Tallis (1505–1585) into perspective! In contrast with such complex music, Pitoni's motet is quite straightforward. It is, however, delightfully upbeat, not to say boisterous. Incidentally, the same text is used for the *Alleluia* in this service.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in Eb* by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). He wrote several settings, conveniently using different keys each time – apart from one duplication prompted by an eight-part *Magnificat* in Bb written in memory of Hubert Parry (1848–1918). This allows church musicians an easy way to catalogue them mentally. Each of the settings demonstrates a very different way of setting the text with remarkable inventiveness. Indeed, one could go so far as saying that these settings are regarded as at the very core of the canticle repertoire, models that one way and another have influenced almost all those that came afterwards. This raises an interesting question as to whether Stanford was aiming at this outcome. How did he ever get going with creating this body of work?

This setting is, in fact, his second essay in this field, the first being the so-called “Queen's Service”, named for Queen's College, Cambridge, where Stanford was studying at the time on a Classics scholarship. It was dated by the composer as having been finished on December 20th 1872. By this time, Stanford had already started to deputize as an organist at Trinity College, where John Larkin Hopkins (1819–1873) had been forced by ill health to stand down. In March, a month before Hopkins's death, Stanford was elected

Assistant Organist at Trinity, and “migrated” as an undergraduate from Queen’s College to Trinity. In February 1874, he became Organist. The setting at our Evensong was, in fact, written in October and November of 1873, but, rather curiously, we have no record of its performance at the College, although this doesn’t necessarily mean that this did not happen. Both of his first two settings, in F and Eb, share a structure in which the text is broken up into different sections reminiscent of the Elizabethan pattern of “verse” settings. This means that it is made up of contrasting sections, especially by means of alternating solo and choral textures. But the Eb setting is much more adventurous in terms of harmony, and is also inventive in the way that it manipulates its material to create melodic cross-connections within the work. It is strange that we do not know of any performance of this setting at the time of its composition. Even more strangely, it was never published in Stanford’s lifetime, and did not ‘appear’ until 1996, seventy-two years after his death, published by the Royal School of Church Music. It is very clearly the bridge between the first, F major service, and the first of the really famous settings, the Opus 10 Service in Bb, which really put the composer on the map, and which has been *the* “parish choir setting” for over a century.

The anthem is *Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem*, also by Stanford, composed in December 1910. It plays a small part in the history of British music publishing. Stanford had allowed his new works to be published by Stainer & Bell, a firm that had opened its doors in 1907. There was, in fact, no Stainer and no Bell: the six partners who originally founded the business chose the name simply because it sounded credit-worthy. By 1910, the firm was struggling financially, as is so often the case in the early years of a business, and the partners were, alas, tapped out. They managed to publish Stanford’s Op. 117, *Songs of the Fleet*, and were exceedingly gratified when it sold like hot cakes. *Ye Choirs of New Jerusalem* was published the following year in 1911, and, lo and behold, lightning struck twice. Sales proved so good that the firm was saved. Indeed, Stainer & Bell is still with us today, with descendants of the original management still running the firm.

The text of the anthem is a translation of a text originally by Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, who wrote some 140 years before the founding of St Bartholomew the Great. He it was who saw to it that the Blessed Virgin Mary’s nativity came to be celebrated on September 8th. Alongside this, he had a plan for developing and enhancing his church, triggered by his cathedral burning down. Alas, his replacement cathedral later burned down as well. Bishop Fulbert was also a great hymn writer; his work is mainly about the Virgin, who was his main theological preoccupation, but also includes *Chorus Novae Jerusalem*, which is presented in English as the text of this anthem. This is primarily about Easter, which is, of course, still the season. One hopes your home is still decorated with rabbits, chicks, eggs, and other paraphernalia associated with the season, which in the western tradition continues until Pentecost on 20th May 2018, after which date, this symbolical decorative domestic enrichment may be safely tidied away until 21st April 2019.