

Music Notes 2018 – Easter II: Low Sunday

The title of this Sunday's mass setting is *Missa Quarti Toni*. This refers to the *fourth tone*, which is part of the system that musicologists refer to as *modes*. This system pre-dated the major/minor key system with which we are familiar today. You might like to know that the "fourth tone" is sometimes referred to as the "hypophrygian mode" in circles where these things are considered important. We could go into a lot of theory here, but, for the time being, let's just say that today, whereas we only have two main ways to construct scales – major and minor – earlier composers used a much larger number of types of scale from which they constructed musical lines. Many of these sound rather like minor keys to our ears now, but that's largely because our brains try to cram this music into "boxes" that fit the way music is written and heard today. It's a pity that we can't get the same sense of light and shade from this that earlier composers and their appreciative audiences used to hear, but for most of us, the prevailing music around us is just too dominant to make this possible.

So, the title is the equivalent of something like 'Mass in E Minor' in modern parlance – a dry description indeed. Most mass settings are named after the text of the pre-existing plainchant that is often woven into a composition, or the motet that has been used as a jumping-off point of inspiration for the work. Referring to the piece by its mode or "key" effectively suggests that this is just a free composition with no underlying liturgical thread coming from a pre-existing work. It tells us that, while the Church has gone to a lot of trouble to ensure that there are texts, and therefore music for just about any specific occasion, from time to time, even at the highpoint of the Renaissance, it was sometimes still useful to have a generic mass to perform.

There are several *quarti toni* masses in existence. One of the best known is by the great Spanish composer, Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), a setting that we hear most years in the Priory Church. This Sunday, however, we are going to hear a different setting that was lost as far as European libraries were concerned, but which emerged in Guatemala Cathedral, where collections brought over by missionaries from, especially, Spain had been copied out and used extensively during the Church's great expansion in that part of the world. It is extraordinary that South America, rather than Europe, has turned out to be one of the most important sources of Renaissance music. In some cases, seemingly sole extant copies of works lost in the great disaster that befell the Royal Library during the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 have emerged intact in South America. Ironically, a part of the collection now held in Guatemala Cathedral was in fact lost, but turned up in the aftermath of another dreadful earthquake that occurred there in 1976. Although this nearly totally demolished the cathedral, it did dislodge some musical material from whichever unknown location it had been hiding. The cathedral, carefully rebuilt, is, therefore, now home to an even larger and more

important collection of music than it was before. This is the *Musica Colonial Archive*.

The manuscript, copied in Guatemala, bears the attribution of *El Maestro Alegre*, and because it is not stylistically impossible, and the dates are reasonably plausible, this has been taken to refer to the Italian composer Gregorio Allegri (1582–1652), the composer of some parts (but only some parts) of what we know today as Allegri's *Miserere*. The attribution of this mass to Allegri is, to be honest, slightly thin, but let's go with it for now.

Allegri began his musical life as a choir boy in the Roman church of San Luigi dei Francesi. Whether he had much say in the matter or not, it was decided that he should enter the Church. He was duly to be found as a young man in a clerical position at Fermo Cathedral, a hill-top location on the Adriatic coast, about half-way up on the right side of Italy as you look at the map with your head tilted to the left. But Allegri was also a prolific composer of very attractive motets in what you might call a post-Palestrina style. In fact, Palestrina (1525–1594) died when Gregorio was just twelve, but his influence was inescapable in Roman musical circles. Anyway, Allegri's motets caught the attention of Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644, Pope 1623–1644), who decided that Allegri should be brought to join the Sistine Chapel Choir, in which he sang as an alto, and to which he continued to contribute compositions. The choir was not always an easy collection of men, and it is interesting that Allegri was described at the time as being an unusually pure and benevolent individual. Goodness knows what this says about the rest of them! Allegri's music covers quite a range – not just liturgical compositions, but also quite a lot of string music. Indeed, as a useful piece of trivia, you might like to know that he is considered to have been the composer of the first-ever string quartet.

The setting is clearly derived from the Palestrina school of imitative counterpoint, so if it is not by this "Alegre", it is certainly by someone with the same kind of musical orientation. The movements are stitched together thematically by starting either with the same opening motif, or a variant on it, as in the case of the two *Agnus Dei* movements.

The motet at the Offertory is by the Flemish composer Orlande de Lassus (1530–1593), *Christus resurgens*, a setting of text drawn from Romans VI, verses 9 and 10: *Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more: death hath no more dominion over him. In that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Alleluia*. Lassus has no intention of leaving us in any doubt as to what has happened to Christ: the initial melodic idea leaps up strongly by a fifth and then immediately by another fourth, an overall octave. This is imitated by each of the successive voices to come in, confirming unquestioningly that resurrection is the subject. At the idea of living unto God, a strongly upward motif begins, again taken up by each voice in turn, and culminates in a dramatic series of *Alleluias* to bring the piece to a close.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in D* by Ernest Moeran (1894–1950). He was the son of an Irish clergyman who had settled as an Anglican priest in England. In spite of being brought up here, Moeran increasingly felt the pull of his ancestral roots over the water, and later in life moved to Kenmare in County Kerry, where he established himself as a strangely accented, strongly pro-Irish member of the local community. Prior to this, he had led a varied life, somewhat disrupted by the First World War, in which he was injured. Arguably, the most unfortunate event in Moeran's life happened when he met Philip Heseltine (1894–1930), who is best known under his "composing name" of Peter Warlock. The two men became very fast friends, albeit chastely: neither was disposed to romance with a person of the same gender, although both enjoyed remarkably catastrophic relations with women throughout their lives. In due course they moved to live together in a house in Eynsford in Kent; indeed, the household was what people who were easily shocked referred to as "bohemian". Now, Heseltine/Warlock could drink like a fish with no appreciable ill effects, and could also leave drink alone when the mood took him. Alas, not so Moeran, who tried to keep up with his chum, but at the expense of becoming a highly dependent alcoholic, a condition that dogged him for the rest of his life.

After Moeran had moved to Kenmare, he became a real feature of the town, albeit one who had to be handled carefully because of his regular bouts of incapacity. Towards the end of his life, he sobered up, largely because he was becoming afraid of his own mental deterioration. His last moments on earth were spent at the end of Kenmare pier, from which he was seen to fall into the sea. Although there was speculation about suicide, an autopsy established that he had in fact died from a cerebral haemorrhage and was gone before he hit the water. So beloved a figure was he in the town that, although it was considered a serious sin for Roman Catholics to attend a Protestant funeral, everybody turned out to see him off. The bar at the Lansdowne Arms Hotel, in which he often based himself, was already known as "Moeran's Bar", and remained so until 2007, when it was, perhaps sadly, renamed "The Poet Bar" as a tribute to Irish poets in general. It now described as "relaxed, bistro-style", the meaning of which can best be provided by your imagination.

This setting of the Evensong canticles is well-known, and highly effective. You can hear some echoes of Moeran's friendship with Warlock – they clearly shared an approach to musical language. It has all the slightly moody modalism of English music of the period, but with a cheerful, upbeat quality that makes the *Magnificat* exhilarating.

If you go to the Cloister in our church, you will find three slate plaques on the wall that have been placed there in memory of three earlier Directors of Music of the Priory Church, Paul Steinitz (1909–1988), Brian Brockless (1926–1995), and David Trendell (1964–2014) – the latter of which was unveiled last

October. Brian was, in fact, Organist of the Priory Church for two non-consecutive periods – you can think of him as akin to Grover Cleveland, who was both the 22nd and the 24th President of the United States, a uniquely bifurcated presidency. Brian served at St Bartholomew the Great first between 1961 and 1969, being then succeeded by Andrew Morris (b. 1948 – a recent Master of the Worshipful Company of Musicians, and very much still with us), who was Organist from 1971–1979. Brian then returned in 1979 and remained until the end of 1995. Already in very poor health, and unable to take part in the final services of his tenure, he died the day after he formally retired. When a memorial Evensong was being arranged, poignantly, the preacher chosen was Newell Wallbank (1914–1996), the 22nd Rector of St Bartholomew the Great between 1944 and 1979, and long since retired himself. Alas, during Evensong, seated in the clergy stalls and fully robed, before the service reached the sermon, Wallbank suffered a heart attack, and died immediately.

The reason for telling you all this is that the anthem at Evensong this Sunday is by Brockless: *Christ is now rysen agayne* – a fitting assertion of faith in the light of the story above. The anthem begins with a strong unison statement, before branching out vigorously. There is a striking mixture of edgy twentieth century harmonic procedures with consciously modal glances back into a kind of medieval musical language based, of course, on modal harmony. Brian wasn't hugely prolific, but he did leave a legacy of excellent anthems that are well worth hearing.