

Music Notes 2018: Fourth Sunday after Easter

The mass setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is the *Missa Brevis* by William Walton (1920–1983). This piece was the result of a commission from the Friends of Coventry Cathedral in 1965, and was first performed there in 1966. The commission came just three years after the Cathedral had first opened in May 1962, having been built alongside the ruins of the bombed-out 14th century church that was destroyed in the Second World War. At the end of May 1962, the *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) was premiered there. Its fruition was the result of another commission by the cathedral for a work to mark the consecration of the new building designed by the architect Basil Spence. Michael Tippett (1905–1998) had also been commissioned to provide a work for the arts festival associated with the consecration, and he provided the opera *King Priam*. So, there was commissioning fever in the air, and William Walton was certainly a key British composer who could rank alongside Britten and Tippett. In fact, he was really rather jealous of Britten's success and resented his seemingly easy access to the upper echelons of the British establishment. He sensed that this was the result of a gay cabal from which resolutely heterosexual composers such as he were unreasonably excluded, all the more unfair, he thought, as the members of his tribe were surely the 'normal' ones. (This is a reasonably accurate paraphrase of several comments he made.) Coventry Cathedral was, as a result of the *War Requiem*, inextricably connected with Britten, so one can just imagine what he felt when he was approached just three years later to provide a work of his own. To be fair, he had written to Britten in November 1963 on the occasion of Britten's 50th birthday and said (one of Britten's biographers, Paul Kildea, says this must have been through slightly gritted teeth) "in the last years your music has come to mean more and more to me", so just possibly this was less of an issue than would have been the case, say, a decade earlier.

In any case, the result is a work that Walton himself described as being *very brevis*. Its entire performance time is something like seven minutes, which leaves room for an entire extra gin and tonic before lunch. It is in effect four terse movements, *Kyrie*, *Sanctus & Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei*, and *Gloria*, the first three of them remarkably austere. The sequence is important here, because this work's concept of the liturgy involves the *Gloria* coming near the *end* of the service after the Communion – in other words, in the position assigned to it in *The Book of Common Prayer 1662*. This is visible not only in the printed sequence of the published work, but also in the fact that the first three movements are all unaccompanied, while the last, the *Gloria* introduces the organ to dramatic effect, making this the climax of the work when performed in the 1662 sequence. Of course, our *Gloria* comes near the start, so we will experience it rather differently.

Incidentally, Walton wasn't totally wedded to the Prayer Book because he did set the *Benedictus* after the *Sanctus*, which does not follow the 1662 pattern. However, this is

because it was Coventry's usage at the time that was driving these decisions, not an especially old-fashioned Anglican feel that is unlikely to have stirred this particular composer's breast.

Given Walton's complicated relationship with Britten – to which we can now add Britten's feeling that Walton was the "Senior Prefect" to his own "new boy" status, which hardly makes it all easier, it is rather amusing that the motet at the Offertory is a setting of the canticle *Jubilate Deo* by Britten. In 1935, at the age of 22, Britten wrote a *Te Deum* in C major for the choir of St Mark's Church, North Audley Street, in Mayfair, central London – he was to write a further *Festival Te Deum* in E for the centenary of St Mark's Church, Swindon ten years later. Although the composer Constant Lambert (1905–1951) wrote that the first setting was "drab and penitential" – and it is certainly much 'plainer' than the 1945 setting – it has remained in the repertoire ever since. Twenty-five years later, the Duke of Edinburgh, rather liking the C major *Te Deum*, asked the composer why there was no matching *Jubilate Deo*, and Britten obliged by writing one, but in his by then much more developed language. It has been described by a musical wag as "a hornpipe for singers who can count", and, indeed, this describes it rather well. It is enormously jolly and high-spirited, admirably suiting the words.

When the Prince of Wales came to The Great to present the Guild of Hackney Carriage Drivers with their Letters Patent from the Queen, which made them into a Livery Company, and which are displayed in the south ambulatory of the church, this *Jubilate Deo* was one of the works performed. At the end of the service, he was led back to just outside the Cloister where there was a slight hiatus into which small-talk needed to be injected. "Did you enjoy the music, sir?" he was asked. "Very much so, he replied politely. "You probably know this already, sir, but Benjamin Britten wrote the *Jubilate* at the suggestion of your father, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh." One hears oneself saying a sentence like that, and realizing too late that he must actually already know that the Duke of Edinburgh is his father, but by then it is too late to stop. "Really?" he said; "you know, I had completely forgotten that, but excellent, excellent! Splendid piece!"

The setting of the canticles at Evensong are by the English organist and composer Basil Harwood (1859–1949). He came from a family of Quakers, but by means of influences mediated through various family members and the schools he attended, he found himself in due course to be an Anglican after all. He had no fewer than seven older brothers, as well as a sister. After studying Classics and Modern History at Oxford, he sensibly decamped for a time to Leipzig (where, by chance, these notes are being completed!), where he studied music at the Conservatory. Back in England, after a brief stint as a parish organist in Pimlico, he became organist at Ely Cathedral, and later at Christ Church, Oxford. When he was just 50, his father died. The convention of the day would have suggested that the eldest son (but never a

daughter, until the line of boys was exhausted) would succeed to ownership of the family estate of Woodhouse in Gloucestershire. Alas, by this time, all seven of his brothers had already died. This misfortune actually made Basil a very wealthy man, and he promptly retired, had an organ built in the library of the house, and then continued to compose energetically. This went on very nicely until at the age of eighty he became weary of quiet country life and, upping stumps, moved with his younger wife into a flat in London. He lasted a mere further ten years, dying just short of what would have been his ninetieth birthday. His wife, in the meantime, lived until she was 102, dying in 1974: so they were both in it for the long haul.

The *Morning, Communion Service and Evening Service in A flat* (which make up his Opus 6), from which the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* are taken, were composed as a complete set during Harwood's time at Ely Cathedral. It is clearly the work of someone with a great mastery of vocal texture, a sound ear for word painting, and a great sense of the dramatic, all of which are put to very good effect here.

The anthem is *Sing ye to the Lord* by Edward Bairstow (1874–1946). Born in Huddersfield, his father was an aspiring amateur musician, while his mother had no particular musical inclinations. When Edward displayed a large measure of talent early on, his parents responded by ensuring that he had music lessons with the best teachers they could readily find. In due course, after first schooling in Nottingham, he eventually joined the school run by the Grocers' livery company in Hackney Downs. Edward responded enthusiastically to its fine musical tradition. In a move somewhat surprising to us today, but easier to imagine then, in 1891, at the age of only seventeen, he became music master at a private school in Windsor. Some two years later, unclear about where his life was going, he consulted the English organist, teacher and composer Sir Frederick Bridge, who told him to go to university. Durham, which allowed non-residentary degrees, eventually welcomed him as a student. For some six years, he worked for Sir Frederick in a variety of capacities, putting much rich experience under his belt. This included, I am very pleased to be able to tell you, being arrested for "furious riding" of his bicycle in Parliament Street, while on his way to collect some urgently required music from the music publishers, Novello. *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* – which belongs to the days when they knew how to title publications – of 1st May 1914, in a substantial laudatory article, reports that he was "offered the alternative of a 14s. fine or ten days' hospitality", as delightful a euphemism for imprisonment as one could wish for. It goes on: "He paid the fine."

Bairstow's career in due course encompassed the post of organist at All Saints, Norfolk Square, then Wigan Parish Church (Leeds Minster), and then Leeds Parish Church, which had a substantial musical establishment of 30 boys, eight male adult altos, eleven tenors and eleven basses. This was, *the Musical Times* reports, larger than any cathedral in the country. In due course, when the composer and organist T.

Tertius Noble (1867–1953) was induced by St Thomas’s Fifth Avenue in New York to join them to create an entirely new choral tradition there, Bairstow took over from him as Organist and Choirmaster at York Minster. Bairstow was to remain there for the rest of his life, dying while still in office.

Bairstow wrote many works during his career, a significant number of which have remained in the repertoire. These include his *Evening Service in D, Blessed city Heavenly Salem, Lord, Thou hast been our refuge, I sat down under his shadow*, and the very atmospheric *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*. Today’s anthem, *Sing ye to the Lord* is a dramatic work. It absolutely needs an organ with a tuba, because the opening fanfare should raise us six inches off our seats before we realize what is happening. The text is from Exodus, specifically the response of the Israelites who have been rescued by the parting of the Red Sea and the swamping of Pharaoh’s chariots by the returning waters rushing back in. A dramatic statement of this hymn of praise for deliverance is followed by a somewhat gentler and more sensitively constructed setting of a verse from Robert Campbell’s poetic translation of a 6th century hymn that we know as *At the Lamb’s high feast we sing*. The third verse runs

Mighty victim from the sky, Hell’s fierce powers beneath Thee lie; Thou hast conquered in the fight, Thou hast brought us life and light; Now no more can death appall, Now no more the grave enthrall; Thou hast opened paradise, And in Thee Thy saints shall rise.

It is this verse that Bairstow sets. This is tremendous choral writing, concluding with a pianissimo upwardly mobile phrase for the words “and in Thee Thy Saints shall rise”. A brief pause, and then the opening fanfare returns, followed by one more phrase belted out by the choir: “Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen, Amen”.