

Music Notes 2018: Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The setting at this Sunday's Solemn Eucharist is *Missa Quæramus cum pastoribus* by the Spanish Renaissance composer Cristóbal de Morales (c.1500–1553). This is a parody mass setting, one where compositional inspiration is derived from taking parts of a pre-existing work and using them as jumping-off points for a new composition. In this case, the inspiration is a Christmas motet by the French composer Jean Mouton (c.1459–1522), and the “jumping off” is done in an unusual and clever way.

Unfortunately, we know very little about Morales's life – apart from the fact that he spent part of it in Rome in the papal choir before returning to Spain, and that he is described by contemporaries as having had a somewhat temperamental personality, frequently getting on the wrong side of people and hence considered arrogant and supercilious. Fortunately, this doesn't come across in his music, although he did have more than enough talent as a composer to give him something about which to be arrogant. This mass setting is an extremely clever piece of music but it wears its cleverness lightly, flowing naturally, its artifice well concealed.

Morales evidently picked up musical influence from wherever he went. Unlike some Spanish composers – for example, the slightly later Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), who seem to use a particularly Iberian musical language – Morales brings together strands from all over the place and unites them in his own way. Obviously, these include that Iberian quality, perhaps slightly stereotyped as being “passionate” in contrast with, say, the more austere and refined Palestrina (1525–1594); however, Morales also adopted a much more relaxed approach to dissonance than other composers of his time, relishing head-on collisions between voices, and evidently he enjoyed that special sense of transitory musical seasickness we call “false relation”, where one voice sings, say, an F sharp at the same – or almost the same – moment that another voice lands on an F natural. For a moment, the entire tonality of the music seems to be in danger before order is restored, slightly as though one has stepped on a paving stone that turned out only to be balanced on a rock beneath it, the world momentarily spinning as your footing wobbles back and forth unexpectedly.

But, as they say, *revenons à nos moutons...*

Quæramus cum pastoribus was an extremely well-known Christmas motet at the time that Morales was in the papal choir. Jean Mouton was himself a very skillful, prolific and successful composer in his own right, some fifty years ahead of Morales and choirs flocked to perform his works. This particular Christmas motet was, as it were, the *In the bleak midwinter* of its day. One of its striking features is that each of the text's four sections ends with the word *Noel* (actually *Noe* in the language of the day),

a minor intrusion of a vernacular word into church Latin. Mouton sets each appearance to the same melodic idea, albeit in a slightly different way on each occasion, and you will be able to identify it as the notes sung at the start of the *Kyrie* of the mass setting by the bass voice.

So, what does Morales do with this little gem? First, he expands the motet's four voices to five by splitting the basses in two, giving a much richer, denser texture. He then manages to derive just about every part of the setting from some part of the motet, not by a crass method of just sheepishly quoting chunks of it, but by taking material from separate parts and finding new ways to fit them together. Of course, he is helped in this by the somewhat restricted harmonic palate of the day, which makes it a great deal easier to herd together lines that are far apart in the Mouton original. Of course, we don't know the motet in the way that Morales's listeners would have done (although perhaps we might think of it for a future carol service – it is *very* attractive), so we probably won't notice the way that he does this in the way that his contemporaries would have done, although one may notice the little motif that comes back again and again throughout: the *Noe* music from the first bar of the *Kyrie* (and the *Gloria*), which turns up repeatedly in most of the movements, and which certainly is both memorable and noticeable.

The final movement of the Mass, the *Agnus Dei* expands the texture to six voices in its third section by now also splitting the sopranos. You may have noticed that this inclusion of an extra voice for the *Agnus Dei* – or at least for the last part of the *Agnus Dei* – crops up again and again in Renaissance music. It is actually a more interesting achievement than it may appear, not just a compositional whim, but a procedure that both tells us something about the significance of the *Agnus Dei* itself in the Renaissance mind and that also reveals something of the composers' attitude to the overall shape of a mass setting. This one is a real compositional *tour de force*.

The motet at the Offertory is *Jubilate Deo* by the Franco-Flemish composer Orlande de Lassus (1530–1594), a fellow-member with Palestrina and Victoria of the great triumvirate of composers at the pinnacle of Renaissance choral music. The text is from the start of Psalm 100, and will be familiar to us from Matins: *O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song. Be ye sure that the Lord, he is God.* Lassus set it originally for the Sunday after the Epiphany, where it is the text of the *Offertorium*. The chant set for this in the Graduale is especially florid – one repetition of the word *Jubilate* gives a phrase of 68 notes to just the syllable *la* – so people would have been accustomed to something relatively dramatic here. Lassus eschews the chant itself as a source of inspirational material, and composes instead a vigorous melodic contour of his own. His penchant for word painting is put to good use: for the section we know as *Be ye sure that the Lord*, he syncopates the tenor against the other three parts as they climb upwards, giving the feeling of having to drag along some element of doubt, before

we get to *he is God*. This little phrase is repeated four times, with the sopranos landing each time on a long note on the word *God* one pitch higher than the one before, while the lower voices bounce around vigorously beneath. Finally, they all come together for a unified and forceful *he is God!* It is not a long piece, but is extremely effective.

The setting of the canticles is the *First Service* by the Welsh-born Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656). He was a prolific and very successful composer, known to us as much for his madrigals and other secular music as for his church compositions. He was in his day a force to be reckoned with on the ecclesiastical music scene, and managed to be in the right place at the right time when his boss and friend, Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), died suddenly under the strain of arranging the music for the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles I. Tomkins stepped up and, with the help of some useful re-scheduling of events, accomplished superbly all that was asked of him. Nevertheless, the end of his life was not easy. If composers of the preceding generation had to struggle with the chopping and changing ecclesiastical politics of their time, Tomkins found himself badly hit by the Civil War, which effectively deprived him of his living when Worcester Cathedral – where he had become Director of Music many years beforehand – was closed as a result of the hostilities.

Tomkins contributed at least seven services to the English church, and at Evensong we shall hear the first of these. As suited the times, his earliest essays in this field are relatively simple and straightforward, serving the somewhat arid purposes of the English church at the time. He links the various items together by means of shared material that creates a sense of unity between the different parts. As one would expect from a master madrigalist, he also introduces a great deal of effective but subtle word painting to bring the text to life.

The anthem is by a composer whose reputation as a “naughty man” – as Andrew Gant calls him in his history of English church music, *O sing unto the Lord* – exceeds that of many others. Of course, it is difficult for us to know at this distance whether these stories are in fact true, or are the result of sustained attacks on their character by those jealous or otherwise disapproving of them. In the case of John Bull (1562–1628), it is just possible that this is the case, but there does seem to be rather a lot of documentary evidence pointing to the reputation being justified. Nobody is quite sure where he was born, but there is good reason to think that it might have been in Herefordshire. In 1573 he was to be found as a boy in the choir of Hereford Cathedral, and at a time when mobility was very limited, that is highly suggestive. He was obviously talented, because in 1574 he was already among the children of the Chapel Royal in London, later returning to Hereford Cathedral as its organist.

Four years later, in a kind of yo-yo career development, he was back at the Chapel Royal as one of the Gentlemen of the Chapel, by which was meant that he was an

adult singer in the choir, although in 1591 he was to succeed the deceased John Blitheman (1525–1591) as the Chapel's organist. Five years on and, having caught the eye of Queen Elizabeth I, he was made the first Professor of Music at Gresham College on her personal recommendation. When the Queen died, he moved smoothly into working for the new King, James I. So far, so meteoric.

There is a marvellous story of his having a problem gaining access to the rooms that went with the job at Gresham's, because the college founder's stepson wouldn't give them up as he should have done. Bull allegedly retained the services of a stone mason who bashed a point of access to the rooms straight through one of the walls. Alas, although the rooms were Bull's in one sense, this did not extend to ownership, and so he ended up in court. Alas, we do not appear to have the records of the case, but it cannot have gone too badly, because he was still in post as Professor of Music ten years later.

At this point, however, another of his weaknesses appears to have caught up with him when it was discovered that he had allegedly fathered a child out of wedlock with one Elizabeth Walter. Today, this sort of thing is simply a story line in *The Archers* in which a father reacts badly about the feckless father-to-be; then, it was a very different story. Although Bull subsequently married Elizabeth Walter (and the jury is still out as to whether this eventuality will also occur in *The Archers*), this was enough to lose Bull his position, and that was that. Luckily for him, Bull seems to have been able to keep body and soul together for several years thereafter. However, it was evidently not such a happy marriage, because in 1613, he was in trouble again, this time for adultery. He still sufficiently high profile for this to rile both the Archbishop of Canterbury and King James to the point where Bull took fright and fled secretly to the Netherlands. Talk about falling on your feet: in 1615, the authorities at Antwerp Cathedral, either unaware of his past or simply not caring about what he had done abroad, appointed him as an assistant organist, and two years later elevated him to be Principal Organist. Of course, they may simply have so marvelled at his undoubtedly outstanding performing abilities – we speak here purely of music – that they preferred to overlook reports of any peccadillos, and allow him instead to enhance the music of the cathedral. It would not be the only example in church history of such a choice being made. Of course, he may simply have undergone a real reformation of character, because the stories of his bad behaviour cease with this early exercising of the principle of free movement in Europe.

The anthem, *Almighty God, which by the Leading of a Star* has come to be known simply as *The Star Anthem* for short. It is a verse anthem setting of the text of the Collect for the Epiphany. By verse anthem, we mean that the text is shared out between soloists and the full choir, who take it in turn to deliver it in discrete "verses" shared out between them. The existence of instrumental parts shows at

least that it was designed to be accompanied by a consort of viols, and undoubtedly would also have had an organ continuo as well. Still, it may not be all it seems. Some scholars think that it was in fact a fantasia for viols, only later having words added to make it into liturgical music. The musicologist, Peter le Huray, was of the opinion in his *Music and the Reformation in England 1549-1660*, that it may originally have been a motet with the text of the prayer found in the Roman breviary *Deus omnipotens*, or that perhaps this was just the name Bull gave to the aforementioned string fantasia. In the manuscript, string parts copied out by John Baldwin of Windsor (1560–1615), our earliest source for this work, these two words appear written in at the start. A Latin motet would have been an interesting work for an English composer to have produced at that time, arguably suggesting a Catholic sympathy – and it so happens that Bull later wrote a letter to the Mayor of Antwerp in which he claimed to have left England in order to escape anti-Catholic persecution. Well, up to a point, Lord Copper!