

Music Notes 2018 – The First Sunday in Lent

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this first Sunday in Lent is the *Mass for Four Voices* by William Byrd (1539–1623). Byrd was born into a Protestant family when Henry VIII was still on the throne. The ultra-Protestant Edward VI was still a boy, indeed aged nine, when he succeeded his father on the throne. His strongly held religious views, and his desire to enforce them across his kingdom made it much more difficult for Catholics to practise their religion openly than had been the case. His reign, however, lasted only six and a half years before the sickly young King died. When Lady Jane Grey, who would have followed her late cousin's strict Protestant rule, had her claim to the throne rejected (which is what the Privy Council did just nine days after prematurely proclaiming her Queen), there must have been a feeling of great relief for Catholics that the Council instead proclaimed the Catholic Mary as Queen, a direction that must have appeared cemented when she married the Catholic Philip II of Spain, in the process making him joint monarch. Interestingly, our relatively small island nation has often had monarchs stemming from mainland Europe rather than from our own country: Norman France, the Netherlands, Germany (as in the case of the current royal family). Most of us know this, and yet forget that for a few years we had a Spanish king. Mary's unexpectedly early death effectively deposed Philip from the English throne. This resulted in the accession of Elizabeth I, and back into the closet went the committedly Catholic population.

Byrd, meantime, was most probably a chorister in the Chapel Royal, an indication that he was seen as having great musical capability at an early stage. There are some references in later joint publications with Thomas Tallis (1505–1585) that suggest that he had been the latter's pupil there, and we can assume that this is where they first became acquainted with one another. They were destined to become close friends and colleagues, and there is good reason to think that it is through Tallis, a lifelong Catholic, that Byrd himself decided to adopt the "old religion". A rather miserable time at the Puritan-inclined Lincoln Cathedral may well have encouraged his Catholic conversion, if it wasn't already under way when he went there as organist.

Elizabeth was a great deal kinder to Catholics than her half-brother had been, and those who were willing to keep her peace could even do rather well during her reign. Tallis and Byrd were unambiguously Catholic, and yet together won from her the very financially attractive monopoly of printing and publishing music in England for a time, as well as writing a considerable number of compositions for the English church. Of Byrd, she said that he was "a stiff Papist but a loyal subject". So, even if his personal peccadillos were to be viewed with some contempt or even disgust by society, under such a monarch one could still thrive, provided one were willing not to frighten the horses.

Not frightening the horses really meant not practising one's faith openly. If one pretended to be "straight" in religious terms – i.e. Protestant – or at least gave no obvious grounds for thinking you were anything else, people might well overlook what they suspected you did in private with other consenting adults. On the other hand, the equivalent of a professional sportsman or professional anything in those days would never have wanted it even hinted that he might be Catholic. It was technically illegal to celebrate the Catholic Mass, although the Queen was said to have rather enjoyed the ritual of it. Masses were therefore only held discreetly or, depending on those among whom one had to live or work, in secret. Furthermore, the musicians available for these celebrations would have to be similar recusants, and were probably rather limited in number. The circumstances under which Byrd's remarkable Latin music was heard were therefore probably difficult, tense, and stressful. Perhaps for this reason, his Latin music tends to a certain directness and economy of means. When one listens to the music of the composers who worked in – say – Rome, at the very heart of the Catholic church, one can sometimes almost sense the stifling heat of the city, the endless round of Masses at scores of churches, the Priests and Religious bustling through the streets, the busy-ness of thousands of musicians all engaged in an endless round of daily performance, and the result is a freedom and expansiveness of musical expression. Byrd's music feels very different. Indeed, when you come across a more expansive mood in the music of Tallis, such as his *Missa Puer natus est*, you can tell at once this was written in Catholic Queen Mary's reign, when the atmosphere and context for performance were very different from what came later.

Byrd set much store by communicating the sense of the words as clearly as possible, irrespective of whether he was writing for the new English church in the vernacular, or for his co-religionists in Latin. Enunciating Catholic doctrine as clearly as possible must have been comforting and pleasing in such times. He not only organizes the voices of the choir in such a way that everything is clearly audible in spite of being multi-voiced, he also organizes his harmonic language to give weight to certain ideas in the text. This Mass setting is full of such moments of illumination, and yet it is concise and direct, as though written for a group of recusants huddled together in a private celebration, perhaps consumed with fear of discovery, who could not afford the luxury of expansive, orotund settings, but needed instead music that gave them a liturgy that was vivid, of the very highest quality in the service of God, and yet moved forward briskly. This was, after all, music for the oppressed and for a people at risk.

The most poignant part of this wonderful setting comes in the *Agnus Dei*, a movement of compelling beauty. In due course we arrive at the text *dona nobis pacem* (*grant us peace*). Here Byrd introduces a very affecting rhythmic idea for the words *dona nobis* and then a little hopeful leap upwards to *pacem*. This little figure passes several times through the whole choir, giving the impression of an ardent longing

for peace that was obviously strongly felt by the community for which this was written. Finally, an elegant cadence brings us to an almost unexpected major final chord that seems like a sudden burst of sunshine, a vision of the prayer being answered at the last.

The motet at the Offertory is *Call to remembrance* by Richard Farrant (1530–1580). Farrant's life reflected the influence of the English Reformation – indeed, one can tell this from the fact that this is an anthem in English. We have very few works by him today, or, at least, far fewer than we used to think we had. Rather like Rembrandt (but only in this respect), we have far fewer works which are regarded as authentic – i.e. as having been written by Farrant – than used to be the case in the past.

In any case, his main claim to fame was not as a composer, but as a trainer of choirboys. Having been a member of the Chapel Royal – and so few of the main names of the period were not – he went on to become Master of the Children at St George's Chapel, Windsor, eventually adding to this responsibility being Master of the Chapel Royal, his former employer. In the meantime, he had been active theatrically, partly by successfully training boys to take musical roles in plays, for which he often provided the music, although none of his work in this area has survived to this day.

A theatrical background clearly stood him in good stead when it came to finding an appropriate way to set text. Farrant picks up on the words "Call to remembrance" by making them a kind of trumpet call at the start of the motet, and moves on to characterize each section of the text in an appropriate manner. The words are from Psalm 25, verses 5 and 6: *Call to remembrance, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindness, which hath been ever of old. O remember not the sins and offences of my youth: but according to thy mercy think thou on me, O Lord, for thy goodness.*

The canticles at Evensong are the *Fourth Service* by Adrian Batten (1591–1637), whose mature career was mostly spent at Westminster Abbey and then St Paul's Cathedral where he worked both as singer and organist. We know from contemporary texts that he was a prolific composer, but, alas, much of his music is now lost to us. Charles Burney (1726–1814), the eighteenth-century proto-music historian, composer and musician who had a great deal to say about everybody – generally expressed from quite a personal perspective – commented in his *A general history of music, from the earliest ages to the present period*, produced in four volumes between 1776 and 1789: *He was a good harmonist of the old school, without adding anything to the common stock of ideas in melody or modulation with which the art was furnished long before he was born. Nor did he correct any of the errors in accent with which former times abounded. So that his imitations of anterior composers were entire. He seems to have jogged on in the plain, safe, and beaten track, without looking much about him, nor if he had, does he seem likely to have penetrated far into the musical terra incognita.* Apart from being slightly surprised that the use of the word

“jogged” was common in the eighteenth century, this really doesn’t seem fair to Batten, whose works may well have trod safe territory, but which nevertheless are charming and elegant, this setting being a good example. Of course, we only have a few pieces, so perhaps Burney’s swipes were directed at a large number of works that we are now mercifully spared from hearing. Nevertheless, you won’t be disappointed by this one if you come to hear it. The setting alternates between accompanied solo sections and choral textures. While straightforward, it is effective and elegant writing, with a slight hint of melancholy lurking under the surface of the music.

The anthem is *Versa est in luctum* by the Spanish composer Alonso Lobo (1555–1617), who was especially associated with Seville Cathedral, and, more briefly, Toledo Cathedral. He was a choir boy at Seville, where the music was directed by the highly influential composer, Francisco Guerrero (1528–1599), whose assistant he later became. Many of Alonso’s works quote from Guerrero’s, so we can assume that he studied formally under him as well and held his teacher in high regard. So often composers’ contemporaries tip the wrong one for long-term influence and for entering the canon of the great composers. For example, Louis Spohr (1784–1859) was considered in his day the superior composer to Beethoven (1770–1827) and was expected to leave a much greater mark on musical history. How wrong that was – at least so far! Lobo was considered by his contemporaries to be as significant a composer as the great Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), but history has remembered them rather differently, with Victoria considered now one of the trio of top Renaissance composers alongside Lassus (1532–1594) and Palestrina (1525–1594).

Alonso meantime is remembered these days – unfairly – for relatively few pieces, but, fortunately, we do remember this one, which is magnificent. It is written in six parts, and its text is for the motet at a Requiem Mass. When it was published in 1602, Alonso included an annotation that it had been composed for a memorial service for King Philip II of Spain, who died in 1598 – the same one mentioned earlier in these notes who, through marriage to Queen Mary I, was briefly King of England and Ireland until the Queen’s early death in 1558.

The text translates as: *My harp is tuned for lamentation, and my flute to the voice of those who weep. Spare me, O Lord, for my days are as nothing.* Lobo shows great control of shifting atmosphere as he navigates this text.