

## Music Notes 2018 – Second Sunday in Lent

The setting at the Solemn Eucharist this week is a *Missa Brevis* by the Hungarian composer Mátyás Seiber (1905–1960). We would almost certainly know a great deal more about this utterly engaging composer, musician and teacher were it not for the tragic car accident in the Kruger National Park in South Africa in 1960 in which he lost his life. This truncated a career in which he had a huge influence on many aspects of musical life, and especially on composers such as Peter Racine Fricker (1920–1990), Hugh Wood (b.1932), Malcolm Lipkin (1932–2017), and our “own” – if I may put it that way – Alan Gibbs (b.1932), who is very much still with us. (We sing Alan’s music from time to time, often with the composer himself present on one of his regular visits to the Priory Church.) Born in Budapest, Seiber studied with Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), with whom he had a kind of Cecil Sharp (1859–1924)/Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) relationship regarding Hungarian folk music, the two of them going on tours round the country to collect local examples.

In 1928, Seiber went to work in Frankfurt as the Director of Jazz at Dr. Hoch’s Konservatorium, an institution that is still there and still providing a wide range of musical education. A formal course in jazz was something rather radical in the 1920s, and Frankfurt was well ahead of the curve in appointing Seiber to create the course. But the 1920s in Germany were rather like that. Once the Nazis came to power, he perceptively quickly saw the writing on the wall. The new government saw Jazz as an example of *entartete Kunst* or *Degenerate Art*, and Seiber’s Jewish heritage, in spite of his complete secularization, was an even greater issue for him. Degenerate art (including films, plays, art, music) was associated – negatively – with modern art and banned on the grounds that it was ‘un-German’, Jewish or communist in essence. Emigration was Seiber’s only sensible course of action, and in 1933 he came to the UK, where he remained.

One of Kodály’s great interests was in Gregorian chant, something he shared with his fellow-countryman Béla Bartók (1881–1945), and Seiber ‘picked up’ this interest as well from both his compatriots. (Bartók was one of his champions, noisily and prominently resigning from a competition jury – on which Kodály also sat – when it rejected Seiber’s *Serenade* for wind sextet after manoeuvrings by conservatives opposed to what they regarded as modernist music.) This interest in chant comes very much to the fore in the *Missa Brevis*, which is clearly underpinned by Gregorian sensibility and lines that sound almost as though they have been drawn directly from the *Liber Usualis*. He achieves a thematic unity between the movements by essentially reworking similar material for each new set of words, so that the whole *Missa Brevis* appears to be almost a continuous piece. There is a great sense of spirituality about the whole work. One cannot help but wonder what other fine compositions Seiber would have created had he lived beyond the age of 55 and how

our musical landscape might now feature him so much more prominently. What a lost opportunity!

The motet at the Offertory is *Első áldozás* (which means *First Communion* – however, the piece is often just known as *Communion* in English). This is a work dating from 1942, by which time Kodály had been writing a great deal of choral music. The inclination to do so appears to have started in 1923, when he wrote his great work *Psalmus hungaricus*, but it is not entirely clear why from this time forward he wrote so much more choral music than he had written hitherto. However, there is a good argument that it was in the expressive possibilities of language and the vocal traditions of his country that he realized he could express himself particularly directly. His interest in chant has been mentioned above, and this piece is essentially an arrangement of chant, with the elasticity of expression that you would expect to be part of this.

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 before in 1596 – was closed as a result of the hostilities.

Tomkins contributed at least seven Services (i.e. composed sets of canticles and other liturgical material) 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 movements of each Service by means of shared material that creates a sense of unity between them. As one would expect from a master madrigalist, Tomkins also introduces a great deal of effective but subtle word painting to bring the text to life.

The anthem is *Salvator Mundi* by John Blow (1649–1708), easily Blow's most celebrated work. Blow was born in Newark, near Nottingham, where he began his musical studies before becoming a chorister in the Chapel Royal in London. He was quite a prodigy in his own right, and became organist of Westminster Abbey at the tender age of 19, the first of many musical posts he was to hold – often concurrently

– during the rest of his life. In due course he became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, and Master of the Children (i.e. choral trainer and supervisor) in succession to the late Pelham Humfrey (1647–1674). Among his charges in this latter position was a young Henry Purcell (1659–1695), and in a sense, this was Blow's misfortune. He recognized Purcell's genius and encouraged it considerably, and Purcell's star has shone ever-brighter since. Indeed, Blow made way for his former pupil to succeed him at the Abbey, only returning to his position after Purcell's untimely death. The two men are buried close to one another within the Abbey. The upshot of having had so extraordinary a pupil and being so self-effacing is that Blow, while not unknown, is not seen by most as the important figure he truly was.

Blow's (known) output includes some one hundred anthems, ten Services, two Latin choral motets, no fewer than thirty odes for royal occasions, fifty secular songs, fourteen catches, and one full-scale opera. *Salvator Mundi* is one of the two Latin motets in a sea of otherwise English texts, and, alas, there is no extant explanation for why he suddenly decided to write in the language of the older church. It cannot really have been for church use, such an endeavour being unthinkable at the time, so it was perhaps the fulfilment of a personal request and strictly for private use. Whatever the reason, it drew from Blow the most extraordinarily evocative music, with an astringent and powerful harmonic language. It is almost as though the use of Latin gave him permission to explore an emotional religious side that the more ascetic contemporary English church would have disdained.