

Music Notes 25 March 2018: Palm Sunday

This Sunday, the start of the climactic week that brings us to the moment of Christ's death on the cross on Friday, we are presented with the first of the three betrayals that will occur on the way to that moment. The people in the crowd greeting him as he enters Jerusalem, mounted on a donkey, will cry out words of praise for Jesus and strew their garments and branches on the path before him. Later, confronted by the choice to free Barabbas or Jesus, these same people will betray him by crying out *Barabbas!* Pilate will succumb to the will of mob rule and have Jesus crucified. But first, before the crucifixion, Judas will betray him with a kiss, and, afterwards, most poignantly, Peter will betray him with his denial of knowing Jesus at all.

It is with the enthusiastic welcome of the crowd that we begin when we meet together in St Bartholomew the Less at 11am. The English composer Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623) sets the mood with a vigorous setting of a paraphrase of their acclaim, *Hosanna to the Son of David*. He intertwines the six voices of the choir and passes faster moving passages around between them to give a musical impression of the bustle of a crowd, culminating in a flourish (which is not part of the paraphrase text, and so must be Weelkes's own idea) in the words *Hosanna in Excelsis*.

The delicate setting of the antiphon *Pueri Hebræorum portantes ramos olivarum...* (*the Children of Israel, bearing olive branches...*) is by the Austrian composer, Franz Schubert (1797–1828). It is for a very straightforward four-part choir, with a rustic quality to the harmony. One may not expect this kind of music from Schubert, whom we associate so strongly with Lieder, symphonies, and piano music, but, in fact, he wrote many pieces of liturgical music in the Catholic tradition, and this is a delightful example of one of his small-scale works. The second sentence in this sequence, *Pueri Hebræorum vestimenta prosternebant in via...* (*the Children of Israel spread their garments on the way...*) is sung to plainchant.

The Palm Procession then takes us singing cheerful hymns to the Priory Church. Here the setting of the mass is the *Communion Service in E (Collegium Regale)* by the English composer Harold Darke (1888–1876). On the whole, we have not often used English language settings at our Solemn Eucharists over the past two decades, although a few have very occasionally crept in. The result of this, however, is that we have been missing out on some of the best-loved settings in the repertoire. Darke wrote the setting for King's College, Cambridge, where he had deputized for Boris Ord from 1940 to 1945, while Ord was away on military service. The rest of his entire career as an organist from 1916 onwards was otherwise spent at St Michael's, Cornhill, serving a total of 50 years in post – and, indeed, there have only been two organists there from his retirement to the present day. In 1916, Darke started a series of organ recitals at St Michael's that still continues, and this is famously the longest continuous series of organ recitals in the world.

Darke's first published communion service, which was in F, written in the mid-1920s for Cornhill, is one of the best-loved and most often performed settings in the country. It is clearly aimed at decent parish church choirs in terms of difficulty, and "Darke in F" is one of those titles that church musicians use with one another with no further explanation needed. He went on to write two other communion service settings, both of them in the 1960s, one in A for St Paul's Cathedral, Buffalo, New

York, and the other in E for King's College Cambridge, the one from which this Sunday's *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei* will be taken. The service in E is clearly written for a significantly more able choir than the setting in F, and in writing for King's, he obviously knew what a choir in the premier league of choral institutions could achieve.

The reading of the Gospel is replaced in this service by the singing of the Passion narrative. Victoria (1548–1611) wrote two settings of this, one following St Matthew's account (for Palm Sunday), and the other that of St John (for Good Friday). In both cases, the story is told by a narrator singing in recitative, with character parts in the story taken by other soloists. The voices of the crowd, known as *turba* – from which we appropriately derive the word “turbulent” – and occasionally the voices of some of the other characters, are sung by the choir. This musical presentation of the Passion should leave us feeling quite emotionally drained, the whole story having been brought vividly to life in the same way that radio is more effective than television: because the pictures are better.

Our evening service, *Into the Hands of Sinners*, weaves together a diverse set of readings and musical works into a kind of “trailer” for Holy Week, although this description belies the charged emotional and spiritual atmosphere this sequence always generates. The choice of music zigzags across the centuries, reminding us in its temporal scope that the Church has been treading this path to Good Friday annually for some two thousand years.

We start at the same point as in the morning with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem and the crowd's blithe acclamation in Weelkes's *Hosanna to the Son of David*. Three and a half centuries later, Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) wrote a series of *Quatre Motets pour un Temps de Pénitence* for this season, and among them is *Vinea mea electa*. Poulenc's faith somewhat withered during his first 36 years. However, it sprang back into vivid life following the disturbing death of his friend, the composer Pierre-Octave Ferroud (1900–1936), in a road accident, and blossomed especially after a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Black Virgin of Rocamadour, France, where he was powerfully affected by the statue. These were for him life-transforming experiences. (The statuette, incidentally, has turned black because of the effect of candle smoke and oxidation.) Thereafter, Poulenc began to produce a series of intense and clearly deeply-felt religious musical works. This motet is written in his characteristically edgy musical language made up of a kind of mosaic of short, almost breathless phrases, often repeated with subtle variation, that taken together create a musical picture. This was the last of the four motets to be composed, although it comes second in the published sequence. The translated Latin text runs: *I planted you as my chosen vineyard, yet you have turned from sweet to bitter, crucified me and set Barabbas free. Yet I protected you and took stones from out your way and built you a fortress.* It reminds us afresh of how the crowd's warmth towards Jesus turned cold, and they betrayed him by abandoning him in favour of Barabbas, leaving him in the hands of Pilate to be crucified.

The institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, which we mark at the Maundy Thursday evening mass, is illustrated by the choir singing the antiphon to the *Magnificat* from the Vespers of Corpus Christi, *O sacrum convivium*, a text most probably written by St Thomas Aquinas. The setting is by the Lithuanian composer

Vytautas Miškinis (b. 1954). A highly respected university professor and choral director, he has been Choir Director of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre conservatory since 1985. He has also been active all over the world, lecturing, teaching, training, and, of course, composing. This setting is for eight voices, and is constructed from a series of remarkably complex chords that generate an astonishingly rich and intense texture. There is a highly technical word, “scrunchy”, that just perfectly describes this kind of harmony: there is barely a “straight” chord in the entire work. Extra notes are added everywhere, and the result is not discord but a vivid, glowing texture. This setting presents a multi-layered sound-world that for all its complexity has a deep radiance at its core, just as at the heart of sacramental theology we find the Presence of God, feeding, nurturing and filling us.

We move on in our sequence to Good Friday, and to the motet *O vos omnes* by the celebrated Spanish Catalan virtuoso cellist Pablo Casals (1876–1973). In a remarkably long life, he was able to play as a young man for Queen Victoria, and yet also see men walking on the moon. His setting of a text from Lamentations is remarkably dark, sombre and intense: *All you who pass by, behold and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow. We are in the same territory as the Reproaches* heard on Good Friday. The intensity of the music is partly accomplished by the voices used by Casals, which are split into two choirs, one with just four male voice parts – two tenors and two basses – the other with the familiar soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices. This preponderance of lower voices lends great richness to the texture.

We return to the Renaissance period and Victoria for one of his Tenebrae Responsories, which is *Astiterunt reges terrae: The kings of the earth arose and the princes assembled together against the Lord and against his Christ*. The Responsories form part of the evening service of Tenebrae which we will have in full at 7pm on the evening of Good Friday, the music largely being by Victoria. It has been one of the surprises of the past few years that this service, which began with a relatively small congregation, has grown and grown to be the most well attended of our Good Friday services. There is something about the darkening church, the extraordinary beauty and intensity of Victoria’s music, the “hearse” of fifteen candles by the High Altar that are gradually extinguished as the service proceeds, and the drama of the final candle being removed, then dramatically reappearing after everyone present is invited to make a great noise in protest, that seems to capture people’s imagination. The atmosphere is quite extraordinary.

Next comes part of the final section of Victoria’s setting of the Passion narrative, which we will have already heard in the morning. Following a hymn and prayers, we hear the last part of the story, sung to a particularly anguished passage of plainchant. This brings us to the securing of the entrance to the tomb with stone and the setting of the seal lest the disciples steal away the body and claim Jesus has risen from the dead. The story from the journey into Jerusalem to the Last Supper, the betrayal, crucifixion, and laying to rest in the sorrowful tomb is now complete.

The final music, sung as the ministers prostrate themselves before the High Altar (where they will be found again in the same posture at the beginning of the Solemn Liturgy on Good Friday) is *Civitas sancti tui* by William Byrd (1539–1623). The text is

from Isaiah: *Your holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation*. The music is the second half of a motet published by the composer in the first volume of a collection of his sacred works known as *Cantiones Sacrae*. The first part (which we do not hear in this service) is a restrained plea to God to withhold his anger. This second part, however, starts delicately, but becomes ever more emotional. There are some moments in Byrd's music that are just heart-breaking: the *Agnus Dei* of the *Four Part Mass* is an example, and the second part of this piece, with its repeated cries of *Jerusalem desolata est*, another. It calls to mind the passage in Luke's Gospel that comes just after the people have thrown their cloaks on the path for Jesus to pass over as he approaches Jerusalem: *He beheld the city and wept over it*.

We end where we started this service, poised at the start of Holy Week, when Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem to embrace what lies ahead. When we come together again on Thursday, it will be for those precious moments in which we mark the washing of the disciples' feet at the founding feast that has played a central role in the worship of the Church ever since: the Last Supper. We will experience the stripping of the altar of all its ornamentation and the darkening of the church, in expectation of the great tragedy that is soon to unfold.