

## Music Notes 2018 – Pentecost Sunday

Pentecost is often referred to as “the Birthday of the Church”. The story that begins with the seeming hopelessness and disaster of the Passion and Crucifixion rebounds strongly with the Resurrection. We spend forty days exploring and appreciating this time, until we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. This period mirrors the seasons of Advent and Christmas that trigger the whole sequence. In Advent, we prepare for the entry of Jesus into the world, as the divine unites with the human. The period after Resurrection and leading to the Ascension is its obverse. During this time, we prepare for Jesus to depart, taking the human into the very Godhead. The disciples, much the richer for experience, but now deprived for the second time of the physical presence of their Lord and teacher, must have wondered what to do next.

It takes a further ten days of the calendar to journey from the Ascension to the fiftieth day of Easter, a number that gives us the word: Pentecost (from the Greek *pentecost*, ‘fiftieth’). On this day, God explodes back into our world in the form of the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost in the old money), firing the disciples with a new energy and mission. That they can now speak in multiple languages, undoing the image of the Tower of Babel, confirming that the message of this mission is for the whole world, not just the select few. From this point on, they are forged into a new Spirit-infused entity: the Church, or – as S. Paul will later refer to it – the Body of Christ. So, this indeed is the birthday of the Church.

The narrative behind the period from Palm Sunday all the way to the Sunday of Corpus Christi is, therefore, extraordinarily rich and involved. One major, cosmically significant event follows another relentlessly, and next week we are going for the most challenging subject of all: the Holy Trinity. Time enough for that then. In the meantime, the challenge is to find a musical landscape that lives up to the sheer scale of the story that we re-live in this pattern each year. No wonder the creators of the calendar give us fully half a year of comparative calm in the seemingly endless Sundays after Trinity. But now we are really getting ahead of ourselves.

The *Messe Solennelle* by the French composer Jean Langlais (1907–1991) is the setting for our Pentecostal Solemn Eucharist. We used to hear this each year at a Sunday evening Solemn Eucharist in the autumn, and the effect then was rather different, with the church’s dark corners looming, and incense writhing through the atmospheric lighting. Some years ago, French church music of late nineteenth and twentieth centuries used to be referred to by some denizens of the Priory Church as “spooky music”, and this mass certainly lives up to this imagery. In fact, the “spooky music” label seems to catch an element of important truth. On the whole, the image of God that we hear most about at our church is one of love, mercy, forgiveness, friendship even – all positive and encouraging images. Yet, you cannot encounter the Almighty Creator without, surely, being driven to at least some degree of awe, feeling

overwhelmed, knocked sideways. This mass taps into this element. It sparks a sense of the majestic, powerful, daunting God, the one who sends His Spirit to appear as tongues of fire, as well as in the form of a dove.

The fascinating truth about “modern music” is that most people listen to it perfectly contentedly if the context is right. In a tense science fiction or horror film, the chances are that the sound track will include music made up of strong dissonance and weird sounds. Yet, in this context, the music seems completely acceptable and even enjoyable. The association with otherworldliness, something so far outside normal human experience, justifies the strange sounds accompanying it. Interestingly, while we tend to associate classical music prior to the twentieth century with a relatively stable social structure and a culture of predominantly elegant high art, with the twentieth century however we find music that speaks instead of unsettling change, a brutality that was certainly reflected in wars, aggressive and cruel political systems, and insecurity about where the human race is headed. Given the politics of our twenty-first century world so far, perhaps such concern is once again justified.

Church buildings in the Western tradition have been deliberately created to have a certain “shock and awe” effect, setting in stone an image of the majesty of God, and aiming deliberately to generate a distinctive emotional response in us. The architecture is intended to put us into a particular frame of mind. By the twentieth century, French church composers had been for some time responding to the Gothic architecture in which they worked, which emphasizes verticality and the interplay of light, such that the buildings appear as stone skeletons draped with wild pointed arches and almost fluidic structural elements. Many composed music that emphasized the otherworldliness built into the liturgy. While Romanesque architecture bespeaks solidity, permanence, and reliability, the Gothic points up the evocative, fantastical, and supernatural, with imaginative, soaring elements abounding everywhere, looking as if they are really trying to reach the heavens.

Langlais was born in Brittany and alas became blind at the age of two; but he overcame his disability such that he was able to become one of the outstanding composers and organists of his generation. Coming from a more or less unbroken Catholic tradition in France (*pace* the Revolution), Langlais wrote music that remains soaked in plainchant. His musical language, while rooted firmly in the traditional and tonal, also responds to the divine by using extraordinary harmonies and melodic lines to stress otherworldliness, mystery, and the extraordinary. We should unashamedly think of this as the soundtrack to a glimpse caught through the lens of the Eucharistic liturgy into the supernatural realm, unfamiliar to the earth-bound, terrifying in some senses, yet suffused with vivid light, bringing us awestruck to our knees. In our Priory Church, Romanesque though it may be, rather than Gothic, this music is very effective, as the shadows bring our solid stone unexpectedly to life, and the building is infused

with a mysterious atmosphere. We cannot help but sense the space between heaven and earth narrowing as we listen.

The motet at the Offertory, *Holy Spirit, ever dwelling* is derived from a hymn tune by Herbert Howells (1892–1983), one of a number that he wrote that were intended to be used in independent school chapels. Howells was himself Director of Music at St. Paul's Girls' School from 1936–1962. This motet was published in *The Clarendon Hymn Book* (published in 1936) – a collection of hymns compiled by a committee of public school masters – with words by Timothy Rees, formerly a monk at the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield in Yorkshire, and later Bishop of Llandaff. Howells called the tune *Salisbury*, and this may well be a reference to the time that he spent in 1917 as sub-organist of Salisbury Cathedral. After this brief skirmish with the possibility of being a cathedral musician, he was to spend the rest of his life engaged either in composition or in teaching. The notes for the CD point out that this is not the easiest hymn tune to grasp, surmising that Howells had depended for its acceptability on the public school penchant for congregational rehearsals to get the pupils up to speed with the trickier corners of repertoire. Actually, the hymn tune is not as hard as it sounds to follow; it carries you through with its energy, and it is absolutely glorious, with a harmonic language that could only come from Howells. It was recorded for a CD called *Christ Triumphant, Great Hymns of the Twentieth Century* by the Choir of Wells Cathedral, directed by Malcolm Archer, and accompanied on the organ by a certain Rupert Gough, now Director of Music of the Priory Church. Perhaps recognizing that this music might need a different context in which to flourish, Malcolm Archer worked up the hymn into an anthem for choir, published by Oxford University Press; and it is in this form that we will hear it.

The canticles at Evensong will be by a composer who served at Bletchley Park for part of the War, even – in September 1944 – conducting four performances of Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas* with the Bletchley Park Musical Society. He is Herbert Murrill (1909–1952), whose life was cut short sadly by cancer. Nevertheless, he packed in a great deal into a relatively short time. His father was a "cork merchant's clerk". Herbert attended Haberdashers' Aske's School before winning a scholarship to the Guildhall and a similar award to study at the Royal Academy of Music. During the 1930s, he worked alongside Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) and Wystan Auden with the General Post Office (GPO) film unit, which was established to produce films about the GPO and its everyday activities. Alas, it tends to be only his collaborators in those projects who are credited for their contributions. After the war, Murrill went to the BBC, where he worked for the great Victor Hely-Hutchinson (1901–1947), composer of, inter alia, the *Carol Symphony*, without which no Christmas is complete. Later, he went to help with the administration of the Royal Opera House, but his health was already on the wane. Nevertheless, in 1950 he had the curious distinction of being asked to harmonize and orchestrate the post-independence Indian national anthem, for which he was particularly well paid!

Murrill's compositional style is heavily influenced by French composers such as Ravel (1875–1937), and this is just discernible in this Anglican Evensong setting which epitomises the music for which he is chiefly remembered today. Murrill was himself an organist; at various points in his life he held positions at St Nicholas's Chiswick, Christ Church Lancaster Gate and St Thomas's Regent Street. He wrote his *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis* in E in 1946, the last year of his service in the Intelligence Corps. This is the same year that Herbert Howells wrote his *Gloucester Service*, but nothing could be more different from Murrill's musical language. Howells's approach is readily traced back to the Tudor period and to the folksong tradition, while Murrill takes his inspiration from a European mainland model, but the result is also highly effective.

The anthem is *The Spirit of the Lord* by Edward Elgar (1857-1934). This is actually a movement from an oratorio – the substantial *The Apostles* – a work that Ivor Atkins (1869–1953) extensively helped Elgar to prepare for its first performance in Birmingham Town Hall on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1903. This was the first of the two biblically-based oratorios he wrote, the other being *The Kingdom*, which appeared in 1906. In fact, Elgar's biblically based oratorios were meant to be part of a trilogy, with the first two being followed up with *The Last Judgment*, but although Elgar seems to have made a start thinking about this – there are a few scraps of musical ideas left behind in his musical notebooks – he never got round to writing it. Of course, he had already produced *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1900, but to a text by Cardinal Newman, rather than to a biblically-based text. It is the influence of Wagner's approach to story-telling in music that is so noticeable in these works. The characters are each given some distinctive musical material – known as a *Leitmotif* (a German word that means literally “a leading motif”) – so that you always know who is, so to speak, “on stage”. Various commentators have observed that it is, ironically, Judas who gets the clearest characterization, but then it is often the baddies in any story that are the most vivid and easiest to delineate.

*The Spirit of the Lord* is, in effect, the prologue to the whole work, and is prefaced by an instrumental (in our case, organ) introduction before the choir enters. The selection of text in this particular movement is very clever. Ostensibly, we hear the words of Jesus following his baptism in Luke's version as found in the King James Bible. Our first instinct is to interpret this as a reference to the third person of the Trinity. Fair enough, given that these words come from the mouth of Jesus and are quoted in a text put together after the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost were long in the past. However, as a matter of fact Jesus is quoting Isaiah, and Elgar picks up this lead. Having quoted Jesus's version, he then picks up on the rest of Isaiah's own text with some convenient emendations and interpolations. The anthem is presented first as Jesus's own commission from God, and then broadened to be in turn his commission to us all to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. This is

tremendous music, of great beauty. It is hard to understand why Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) should have written of *The Apostles* thus: “Is the art of music going mad? You should hear *The Apostles* by Elgar. Ye gods! Such ugliness! And all the papers raving about it. It gave me a bad stomach-ache”. What an extraordinary reaction to such wonderful music! Could there be a touch of envy here?