

Music Notes 14 January 2018 – The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

One of the notable characteristics of liturgical music at the Priory Church is that we adhere most of the time to the rules concerning repertoire that would have been familiar to earlier musical church establishments. We try to choose music for a service that is appropriate for the season that we are celebrating. For example, we don't do Advent-related mass settings or motets during Lent, or an Easter-related work in September. Composers – especially those of the medieval and Renaissance eras - wrote works that belonged to specific times, and marked them as such by basing them on plainchants and other works that belonged to the season for which they were writing. By weaving their works around sacred chant, they imbued them with the liturgical essence of the season, and for many decades, our church has sought to uphold the importance of this tradition, rather than adopting the pick and mix approach that muddles up everything, as though the liturgical season or the composer's intentions are to be disregarded and ignored. Contemporary composers and those of more recent past, writing liturgical music, have also tended to create 'for the season' or 'the day', that is to say with a timely religious focus in mind. In a way, disregarding the season is the musical equivalent of buying Peruvian or Chinese asparagus year round just because it can be flown thousands of environmentally unfriendly miles so as to be able to grace your plate un-seasonably. There is certainly more than enough music for each season simply not to need to do this – and there are assuredly seasonal vegetables too!

We often have music in our services by the great Spanish composer, Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), and this week we will hear his *Missa Gaudeamus* as the setting. This work has two sources, and you may feel that our seasonal rule is being bent a little here, but actually this is not so. One source is the plainchant from which the setting takes its name, a variant of the *Gaudeamus omnes* text that belongs to the Feast of All Saints, but which is also used in one form or another for several feasts, and especially those of the Blessed Virgin.

The plainchant crops up early in the *Kyrie*, and properly ought to be sung clearly to this text rather than the usual words. Here is the phrase in question, with its quite assertive leap up a fifth and its strong inflection up and down at the end of the phrase. Victoria evidently didn't want us to miss the point.



This plainchant element is repeated throughout the work in various guises.

The other source of inspiration is a motet by Victoria's fellow-Spaniard, Cristóbal de Morales (1500–1553): *Jubilato Deo omnis terra – Rejoice in God, all ye lands*, a setting of part of Psalm 98 in the Book of Common Prayer (Psalm 97 in the Vulgate Morales would have used – the numbering is a little different), which conveniently also quotes the *Gaudeamus* plainchant. The introit for this day also quotes the Jubilate Deo text, which gives us our connection between the setting and this day.

Morales wrote his motet in 1538 as a musical celebration of the outbreak of peace between Francis I, King of France (known as *François au Grand Nez*), and Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. The then Pope, Paul III, mediated the cessation of hostilities to general relief, and brought the rulers together in Nice to sign a peace agreement. The sense of relief from the threat of these warring entities must have been considerable. We undervalue in an age of peace in our part of the world – when western countries' involvement in warfare is geographically remote, mainly relying on technological strength – just how powerful the yearning for peace can be among people who live constantly with the imminent threat or reality of war. It is, therefore, no surprise to see Victoria seizing upon the second *Agnus Dei*, with its *Dona nobis pacem* ending, as an opportunity to create some extra sonority by adding an additional lower voice. The practice of adding a part just for this final appeal is not unfamiliar to us – it was a device often employed by composers. However, he adds something extra in doing this by creating a canon between the lower of the two upper parts and the third part up from the bottom (the precise names for these voices depend on how you are performing it) throughout this section. They start by passing between them the *Gaudeamus* line quoted above – and again, surely they should be singing the *Gaudeamus* text, even though this is not part of the words of the *Agnus Dei* – and continue to exchange this line until the very end of the movement.

This use of the *Gaudeamus* music and text in this work is extraordinarily vivid. Most settings seem to go out of their way to embed their plainchant a little deeper within the musical texture, but this one wears it on its sleeve. The invitation to *Rejoice* could not be more pronounced, and it is clear that this concept works as well for the Epiphany as for All Saints.

At the Offertory, the motet is *A New Year Carol* by Benjamin Britten (1913–1976). The story behind its origin starts with the composer's brother, Robert, when he was headmaster of Clive House School in Prestatyn, North Wales. Robert was, perhaps, the one Britten child who was least like all the others, a somewhat stolid and unimaginative fellow, who was perhaps more like Britten's dentist father (also called Robert) than any of the other Britten offspring (which also included two sisters). The other three took after their artistically inclined mother, Edith. Nevertheless, Robert the younger was not without musical training and ability, and he took singing practice with the boys of the school every Friday afternoon. Having a composer in

the family, it was not long before brother Benjamin was writing some relatively simple, but highly effective songs for these sessions. Composed between 1933 and 1935, the collection of twelve songs that resulted from this were published under the very appropriate title of *Friday Afternoons*. The songs are all very effective, but one in particular has achieved a popularity well ahead of all the rest, and is to some extent in the shared consciousness of the musically literate public, and that is *A New Year Carol*.

In fact, this is the simplest of all of the songs, but its very cleverness lies in its simplicity and its momentary subversion, which together pack a considerable punch. The accompaniment begins merely rocking gently from the key chord (chord I) to chord IV in the same scale. The voices enter singing a straightforward, gentle, but oddly memorable melody. The accompaniment continues simply to rock backwards and forwards throughout the first two phrases that comprise the verse: *Here we bring new water from the well so clear, For to worship God with, this happy New Year*. Then the refrain begins, and the same rocking accompaniment continues beneath it: *Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine*; – so far, the entire song has been accompanied by the same two chords throughout. Finally, on the second line of the refrain – *The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine* – the harmony shifts markedly as the melody reaches its highest point, and then runs down a simple scale all the way to the key note. There are three verses in all, and the first two times, when the melody arrives at the key note, it is harmonized with the *second* of the two chords that have dominated, which certainly does not feel like a stable place to land. The rocking motion continues back on the first two chords and the next verse begins. Britten brings the whole song to an end after verse three simply by allowing the downward scale that ends the refrain to land instead on the first of the chords, the key chord.

The whole work is made up of just four chords in total that underpin a mere three short verses, but the effect is quite magical. The simplicity gives the pungency of that simple and brief switch to two different chords astonishing power. To be honest, describing it already overcomplicates Britten's achievement: come and listen to it instead, and you will hear immediately what I mean.

Herbert Sumsion (1899–1995), whose *Evening Service in G* sets the canticles at Evensong this week, wrote no fewer than three sets of Evensong canticles in G: one for a standard SATB choir, one for upper voices only, and one for men's voices. He simply needed music that suited the forces from time to time available to him. When the boys of the choir at Gloucester Cathedral, the place with which he was most deeply and lengthily associated, had their regular evening off, the men alone (that is, basses, tenors, and counter-tenors) would be available. At other times, it was convenient just to have the boys singing. He covered all the bases – so to speak with these three settings – he also wrote further versions in different keys, by the way.

Although the SATB set in G is easily the best-known of all his settings, this lower voice set is also put together in a masterly fashion and is highly enjoyable, making the maximum use of the different textures and sonorities of the lower voices.

The anthem at Evensong is *There came Wise Men from the East* by Percy Buck (1871–1947). Buck – eventually, Sir Percy Buck – was one of those variously skilled and highly competent English composers of his period, who were viewed with some suspicion by the musical establishment in the post-Second World War era because their work was not considered ‘ground breaking’. Fortunately, Buck has enjoyed some reassessment in more recent times. He was, in fact, quite an important figure in British musical circles. He was born in London and then attended the Merchant Taylors’ School before going to the Royal College of Music. From there he went to Worcester College, Oxford, as Organist, before going on to perform the same function at Wells Cathedral (where our own Rupert Gough would much later be Assistant Organist) and finally Bristol Cathedral. In each case, he spent some three to four years in post, so you can see that he was moving smoothly and quite briskly up the ladder of experience. Then, in a sudden change of practice, he went to be Director of Music at Harrow School, and remained there for a whole 26 years, although he added colour to life by being simultaneously Professor of Music at Trinity College, Dublin for a decade in the middle of the 26 years. *The Musical Times* of November 1st 1920 includes a rather charming letter from Dr Buck dated October 9th in which he addresses some gossip about the reasons for his resignation from Trinity. He says that there has been speculation that there may have been “unpleasant reasons” behind it, but assures readers that it was simply his belief that it was time for someone else to have the undoubted pleasure of occupying the position, and he wished his successor the very best.

In fact, Buck’s time freed up sufficiently after this resignation (in fact a few years before he had also quit Harrow), that he was able to become King Edward Professor of Music at the University of London, while also holding a further position at the Royal College of Music, his alma mater. Indeed, after leaving Harrow, he took up one of those marvellous positions: music advisor to London County Council, which sounds so wonderful. His most enduring legacy was, however, the formation of the Royal College of Music Junior Department, which continues to do important work today. In 1937, a grateful establishment conferred a knighthood on him – and he certainly can be said to have earned it.

In between all of this, Buck was a very decent composer – admittedly not perhaps ground-breaking or at the avant garde end of the spectrum Nevertheless, as you will hear in this anthem, his musical language, and especially his sense of harmony, is rich and exciting, and he is undoubtedly one of those composers of the period who, ignored by a music industry that was almost solely interested in the cutting edge, is definitely worthy of much greater appreciation. In fact, his time at Wells Cathedral

has found recognition in a very good Priory Records CD (number 5 in their British Church Composer series) recorded at Wells by the Sheldon Consort. This is directed by our Rupert Gough and accompanied by David Bednall (b.1979). It contains this anthem alongside 23 other pieces, and can be found on Spotify – if you try it out in advance, you certainly will not be disappointed!