

Music Notes: Sunday after Christmas – 30th December 2018

Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611) had the good sense to be born in the same town as a notable saint. Teresa had been born in 1515 in the Spanish town of Ávila – with which her name is now inextricably linked – and by the time Tomás was fourteen, was well engaged in her project of establishing a new Carmelite community there that would avoid all the lax practices that she had found in the Monastery of the Incarnation, where she had been cloistered since the early 1530s. One supposes that they did not know one another – why would they? – but there was certainly enough noise level emanating from her activities for him at least to be aware of her before he left for Rome at the age of seventeen. Teresa died in 1582. It is a rather charming thing about the end of her life that she managed to do it at the same time that the calendar was being switched from the Julian to the Gregorian system. There are differing accounts of her last moments that mean that she either died on 4th October or 15th October, depending on which side of midnight she actually breathed her last. Eleven years after Tomás died, she was canonized by Pope Gregory XV, so he would never have known her as his “home town saint”. Nevertheless, this story does perhaps tell us something about the kind of environment in which he grew up.

It does seem to me that Victoria is himself a kind of musical saint, delving more deeply into the inner spiritual world of the texts he set than even his greatest contemporaries, Palestrina and Lassus. These comparisons are obviously invidious – and probably ridiculous too – but it cannot be by accident that it is his Holy Week music that often accompanies us most through the intensities of the Passion narrative and the liturgy of that whole season. Of course, with the exception of Cecilia, not many musicians have achieved sainthood – pause for ribald remarks as to why – but if there were to be a special class of sanctity for such people, Victoria would certainly be a serious candidate in my book. The works we will be singing this Sunday morning go some way to illustrating this point.

Let's start in a slightly unusual place: the motet at the Offertory. This is *O Magnum mysterium*, a motet published (in one of the legendarily highly polished editions in which all his music appeared while he lived in Rome) in 1572, still 13 years before he was to return to Spain to work as Chaplain and Chapel-master of the Barefoot Nuns of St Clare in Madrid, more or less the private chapel of Dowager Empress Maria, sister to Philip II. The great Bruno Turner, founder of the specialist publisher of early music, Mapa Mundi, who has done so much to illuminate our understanding of music of this period, tells us that the original publication in fact entitles this motet as *Circuncisione Domini*, presumably implying that it was written for that Feast and its celebration on 1st January. Nevertheless, the words are from a Christmas Responsory, and it clearly belongs to that season as a whole (which, let us not forget, runs all the way to Candlemas on 2nd February: it certainly doesn't end with Twelfth Night...).

The motet falls into three sections: the first and longest comments with wonder that the animals in the stable of Bethlehem are able to see the new-born Lord in the manger. There is then a change of atmosphere as the words contemplate the Blessed Virgin: *O blessed is the Virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear Christ the Lord*. Victoria sets this with great stillness and affection. Then, another big change, switching the metre into triple time for a graceful but agile *Alleluia*, which eventually cascades down through the voices to an elegant close. The whole piece is set for what we might regard as a standard four part choir, which has helped this to be one of the most successful pieces from this period sung across the world during this season.

The same voicing is used predominantly by Victoria in the parody mass (i.e. one that uses chunks of a pre-existing work as the compositional jumping-off point for a complete mass setting) that he based on this motet. He uses extensive material from the first and last sections of the earlier work, but leaves the second section regarding the Blessed Virgin as unique to the motet. Of course, given that you will hear the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* first before we get to the Offertory, it will seem as though the motet is imitating the music of the earlier movements, rather than the other way round...

By the time he came to write his *Missa O Magnum mysterium*, Victoria was safely ensconced with the Barefoot Nuns of Clare, and twenty years had passed since he wrote the motet. Of course, he was an even more developed composer at 44 years of age than he had been at 22, and while this setting has all the polish and skill of someone with a wealth of experience behind him, there is still the same directness of expression that you can hear in the motet. The maturity shows especially in the skilful way that he varies textures to great effect on two occasions. He switches off the bass part for the whole of the Benedictus, and creates a beautiful and subtle trio by doing so. This, of course, just makes the triple time *Hosanna* all the more joyously powerful when it reappears with all the forces now re-engaged. In the *Agnus Dei*, he follows the practice of expanding by an extra part to enrich the texture of this movement, sung at the most profound moment of the liturgy, as the Host is fractured and the moment of Communion itself approaches. The extra voice is found by splitting the sopranos into two separate lines. He then uses them to sing a canon at the unison – very much like Frère Jacques – so that the second voice repeats exactly what the first has sung at (in our notation) a distance of two bars, or eight beats. The effect of this kind of repetition is partly to increase the sense of ardency in the prayer, with the same appeal being made in the same words and the same music hot on the heels of the first appeal. Victoria only wrote one *Agnus Dei* for this setting, implying two sections of plainchant, one on either side of it, with the last chant concluding with *Dona nobis pacem*. A triple *Agnus Dei* was usual, matching the triple structure of the *Kyrie* at the other end of the liturgy. Composers sometimes wrote all three settings, sometimes only two, with a chant version in the middle, and just occasionally a single setting surrounded on both sides by chant. No doubt timing considerations played a part in which version seemed appropriate.