

Music Notes 2018 – Sunday of Corpus Christi

On 3rd December 2017 – which was Advent Sunday, and therefore the start of the church's new year – a sequence of seasons and services began that ends this Sunday. Advent was followed by Christmas, and then came Epiphany, Lent, Passiontide (including Holy Week), Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity, and now, finally, the Sunday of Corpus Christi. Especially in urban churches such as ours, it has become increasingly difficult to bring together far-flung congregations to attend celebrations of church Feasts when they fall mid-week, with the result that it has become usual to transfer the celebration of these Feasts to the Sunday following. This is the case in our parish, and therefore we will be observing Corpus Christi this Sunday, a Feast that technically fell on Thursday of this week.

Corpus Christi is the second annual bite at the cherry of the Last Supper and the Eucharist. The first occurs – obviously – on Maundy Thursday, when the Last Supper is commemorated. The disadvantage of making this the sole celebration of the institution of the Eucharist is that it takes place in the undeniably solemn context of the forthcoming Crucifixion and death of Christ. Indeed, that service begins in ebullient form, with the *Gloria* brought back for a last minute “hurrah”, but as the service proceeds, the mood becomes ever more sombre, and in the end, the High Altar is stripped bare. In the early thirteenth century, the idea was put forward by the Belgian Norbertine Canoness, Juliana of Liège (c.1192–1258), that there should also be a more joyful opportunity to celebrate the central act of Christian worship, and, before long, the church at large was also celebrating also the Feast of Corpus Christi each year. In the Counter-Reformation, when something of a bonfire of the festivities took place, this feast was one of two such special events to survive the axe, the other being last weekend's Trinity Sunday.

The title “Corpus et Sanguinis Christi” – the Body and Blood of Christ – raises the question of the so-called Real Presence, which is a code word for the Catholic/Orthodox/Lutheran understanding that in some sense Jesus becomes spiritually present in the Sacrament, although the bread and wine remain physically as they were. Is this the only way we understand “Real Presence”? If the church is – as S. Paul says – The Body of Christ, isn't there also a Real Presence there? If “the Kingdom of heaven is amongst you”, is that not also an example of Real Presence? And, following Pentecost Sunday, if we have each received the indwelling Holy Spirit, is there not a Real Presence within each of us as well? In this sense, the Real Presence in the Eucharist is one of several powerful ways in which our lives are suffused with the presence of the Redeemer in our lives, so much so, in fact, that this last in the sequence of Sundays outlined above is celebrated with an immense focus on the sacramental presence before we go into the six months or so of Sundays after Trinity. The music, of course, plays along with this theme.

The mass setting for this special service is the *Missa O sacrum convivium* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). This is a parody mass (i.e. one that quotes another work and uses it as a jumping-off point for newly created music). Palestrina in fact himself composed a wonderful motet based on the *O sacrum convivium* plainchant. However, that is not in fact the motet that is parodied in his mass setting. Instead, it is a five-part motet of the same name by the Spanish composer, Cristóbal de Morales (1500–1553). Palestrina was evidently much taken with the piece. Rather than just quoting from the work and then leaping off in his own direction, he uses much of the substance of Morales's own music, reworking it into new textures that are denser and richer than the original. Palestrina creates a work that is distinctively new and special under the structure of the material that was there before: a passable image for what happens in the Eucharist itself as bread and wine are transformed into spiritual sustenance for us. The motet has contrasting sections of faster and slower music, and Palestrina cleverly finds ways to combine these sections so that they are heard simultaneously.

The motet at the Offertory is another setting of the text *O sacrum convivium*, this time by Andrea Gabrieli (ca. 1533–1585). He was probably born in Venice, and certainly spent his career there. In his mid-30s, he went on a trip to what we now call Germany. In Munich, he made the acquaintance of a contemporary called Orlande de Lassus (1532–1594). The two composers hit it off extremely well and became lasting friends. By the time Andrea returned to Venice, he had benefitted from some of the very best musical influences that he could ever have hoped to come across. It wasn't long before he was offered the post of Organist at San Marco, Venice's remarkable Byzantine cathedral, distinguished inter alia by an astonishingly resonant acoustic, and a somewhat sprawling layout that allows for two choir galleries, each equipped with an organ.

The Flemish Maestro di Cappella from 1527 until 1562, Adrian Willaert (1490–1562), had seen the possibilities of using this physical layout to advantage. The Flemish tradition had already explored the pitting of two or more choirs against one another to produce spatially exciting effects, and he recognized that this technique would be perfect for San Marco. The physical layout at San Marco was actually more ideal for this than was the case with Flemish churches, because the greater space between the choirs in the basilica necessitated writing music in which it wouldn't necessarily matter that they simply couldn't be perfectly synchronized. This produced extremely interesting collisions.

Of course, the musicians didn't know that they were supposed to aspire to the cut-glass timing and accuracy of twenty-first-century British consort choirs, and positively revelled in a flexibility that rarely features in modern recordings of this repertoire. Within a century or so, the high German Baroque movement would have ironed out these effects from its music – although you can still see its legacy in

Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) use of the two separate choirs in the *St Matthew Passion* – just as it also ironed out the collisions between notes caused by two lines in the choir following separate rules about whether to sing a flat, natural or sharp version of a note. Neither the Venetian polychoral rhythmic flexibility nor the acceptance of harmonic astringency would reappear as so acceptable in music again until the twentieth century.

Andrea was not only an outstanding organist but also an excellent composer. This is one of his most beautiful compositions, and captures an important devotional aspect in being both intimate and ecstatic at the same time, not an unusual response to the sacramental presence, even among well buttoned-up Anglicans. The motet was first printed in Venice in 1565 in the collection *Sacræ Cantiones*. The content of this collection is all drawn from Gabrieli's relatively early style, and are not part of his later fascination with polychoral (multi-choir) music. There is a very reasonable theory abroad that, as he was appointed organist at San Marco in 1566, it may be that the original purpose of the collection and its publication was to help him secure the appointment. This motet alone illustrates very well that it would have been an extremely persuasive advocate for him.

Evensong on this special Sunday takes place in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament on the High Altar. This is known as an "Exposition", and while the monstrance is being positioned, the choir sings the motet *Cibavit eos* by William Byrd (1539–1623), one of the pieces from his second book of *Gradualia* published in 1605. This was part of an extraordinary project in which he aimed to provide choral settings of all the "propers" – that is, the special texts such as *Introit*, *Gradual*, *Alleluia*, *Offertory*, *Communion* (which we usually hear sung to plainchant) that would be needed for the most important Feast days of the year. The text in this case is from the *Introit* for Corpus Christi: "He fed them from the fullness of the wheat, *alleluia*; and sated them with honey from the rock, *alleluia*. Rejoice in God our helper, sing for joy to the God of Jacob. *Gloria Patri*", etc. Although Corpus Christi is clearly a feast associated with sacrifice, Byrd lifts the tone by setting this in what is known as the Mixolydian mode, the medieval precursor to our modern key of G major. Being an English composer, furthermore, he was also inclined to inflect his Mixolydian in the direction of a modern major key, making the music particularly bright and cheerful.

The canticles are the *Evening Service in G* by Francis Jackson (b.1917), who will celebrate his 101st birthday on 2nd October this year. He is very much a Yorkshireman, having been born in Malton, and having been a chorister at York Minster when Edward Bairstow (1874–1946) was Organist and Director of Music. When Bairstow died in office, Jackson was perfectly placed to take over, which he did in 1946, then remaining in post until his retirement in 1982. His service lasted the sort of lengthy period that has more often happened in French cathedrals, so it is rather refreshing to find that we can also manage such long and dedicated tenures

here as well. It also implies a rather successful relationship between cathedral authorities and the Organist, which is not always a given. These canticles, which moved quite briskly into being mainstream cathedral-type repertoire after their publication on 7th August 1969, have an endearing, slightly modal quality, and great elegance as well. Incidentally, Jackson has continued to compose and perform since his retirement. He is regarded with enormous affection by those who know him, and his contribution to the life of the Anglican choral tradition has been immense. It is astonishing to think that Jackson was born when the First World War still had more than a year to run.

The anthem, particularly appropriately, is by Jackson's predecessor, Bairstow. It is his beautiful setting of *Let all mortal flesh keep silence*, written in 1906. Unusually for the works he wrote at that time in his life, it is unaccompanied, but all the more powerful for it. The text is a *Cherubic Hymn for the Offertory of the Divine Liturgy of St James*, and probably first appeared in the fourth century. Its original springboard is a text from the book of Habakkuk. Within the music team at the Priory Church, the term "Anglo-Catholic Central" is sometimes used as shorthand to indicate that a particular hymn, chant, motet or anthem has particular resonance in what might be called "High Church Circles". This is especially true of works with a strongly Eucharistic content, and this text, whether sung as a hymn or an anthem, belongs squarely in the Anglo-Catholic Central category. While we are used to singing this to the majestic French tune Picardy as a hymn, Bairstow gives us an entirely original work of great power, beauty and intensity. He begins with one of his characteristically strong melodic ideas, but sung *sotto voce* in simple octaves. His powers of illustration are strongly in evidence: at the words "above all earthly thought", for example, the upper voices convey us upwards. The music builds constantly, until the "Cherubim with many eyes, and winged seraphim" are declaimed by the top three sections of the choir, while the basses stride around in double time in a dramatically expansive line. Finally, we are there at the powerful block chords that set the repeated *Alleluias* at the end of the text. Then everything subsides once more, and the opening melody and text are repeated, but underpinned by a rich harmonic structure from the lower voices to bring us to a highly atmospheric ending.

The canticles at Benediction (strictly speaking, extracts from hymns by S. Thomas Aquinas) are by two different composers: the setting of *O Salutaris* is by Edward Elgar (1857–1934) while the setting of *Tantum ergo* is by Anton Bruckner (1824–1896), two Catholic composers for whom the words of the settings clearly had a profound meaning. Elgar produced three settings of *O Salutaris*, and this is the third and best known of them. Meanwhile, Bruckner wrote numerous settings of the *Tantum ergo* text. As well as being a composer, Bruckner was also an organist (Yay!) and deeply involved with church music and Christian spirituality, so it is no surprise to see how important a liturgical text of this kind could be for him.