

Music Notes 2018 – The Sunday of the Epiphany

The Epiphany, which commemorates the visit of the gentile wise men to the baby Jesus, falls on the 6th January each year, but for practical reasons, churches with widely distributed congregations – such as ours – tend to celebrate such feast days on the nearest Sunday, which is what we will also be doing on the 7th January, calling this *The Sunday of the Epiphany*. Nevertheless, the Epiphany is really just a period within the overall season of Christmas. Although you should have removed any decorations made of real greenery from your home during the period between sundown on the 5th January and sundown on the 6th January (which explains why most people are confused about whether the crucial day is the 5th or the 6th for this tradition), the season of Christmas lasts until Candlemas, and that is not until the 2nd February. Indeed, some of us may have re-decorated our homes following the removal of the greenery with gold or similarly bright decorative material to mark this subdivision in the season and to call to mind the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The fact that we are nevertheless still within the overall season of Christmas explains the choice of the mass setting this Sunday, which is based on one of the greatest of Christmas motets, while the Epiphany theme is given full reign in the motet at the Offertory.

The setting is the *Missa O Magnum mysterium* by Giovanni Palestrina da Palestrina (1525–1594), just one of the 104 settings he is known to have composed. The title comes from the motet on which the music of the mass is based, which is Palestrina's own setting of the great text drawn from one of the nine responsories used at Matins on Christmas Day. These words have been set by numerous composers down the age, and have fired their imaginations to produce some of their most glorious works. Palestrina was evidently (and history says rightly) pleased with his own setting, because he used it to create a so-called "parody mass", in which the music of the motet is quoted extensively – especially at the start of each section – forming a jumping off point for the composition of the rest of the piece. Palestrina wrote at least 250 motets in his time, and they evidently hit the spot with his contemporaries, because they were virtually entirely published during his own life. The mass settings fared slightly less well in comparison, with some published only after his death, thanks to the efforts of his well-meaning, but somewhat feckless son, Ignio, and some having to wait until Breitkopf & Härtel created the first proper edition beginning in 1862 and drawing in some cases on the original materials from Rome. No doubt we are seeing here in part the difference between motets that are more easily popped into an appropriate point in a range of services, and the more meaty business of an entire setting of the ordinary of the mass – that is, the five texts that form the musical backbone of every mass.

Across the 104 mass settings, Palestrina used a wide range of different styles and approaches. Even if our ears are somewhat jaded by 450 years of compositions of all

kinds since, with the result that it can all just sound like “early music”, after sufficient exposure, one does start to notice how varied they are. We tend to associate Palestrina with a serene but still quite busy pattern of imitative polyphony – i.e. multiple voices that imitate each other’s music – that is undoubtedly a part of his crowning achievement, especially the serene aspect. However, the Christmas motet that concerns us here is actually built rather differently, with a lot of very strongly chordal music – the technical jargon for this is *homophonic* – creating a kind of massive structure for delivering the robust text. Palestrina takes over this quality in the mass, and cannot resist allowing its breadth and upbeat quality to permeate even the normally more serious *Kyrie*. It is, needless to say, still serene.

The motet at the Offertory during the Solemn Eucharist picks up on the Epiphany theme directly: *Three Kings from Persian Lands* by the German composer Peter Cornelius (1824–1874). Cornelius is, in a sense, the poor relation of Liszt and Wagner, not through a poverty of musical imagination, but perhaps because he was too nice for the world in which he found himself. His major success was the comic opera *Der Barbier von Bagdad* in 1858, which Liszt himself conducted for its first run, and which is still performed in Germany today. There was a surprising amount of feeling against what was regarded as the *New German School* at the time – Liszt (not German at all) and Wagner (definitely German) being its leaders – and although Cornelius’s music really only modestly tended in that direction, he still ended up with a major demonstration on his hands at the premiere. He felt a great deal of caution about getting too close to Wagner at first, but to his evident chagrin, was forced by financial need to accept a job as his assistant. There he was pretty much bossed about by Wagner’s more robust temperament, although he did stand up to him sufficiently to insist on (obviously most unreasonably) going to attend a premiere (much deferred) of one of his own works instead of attending rehearsals of *Tristan and Isolde*. He nearly got the sack, but survived. Much involved with the building of the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth, he did at least manage to marry and produce four children while living in Munich, only to deprive Wagner permanently of his services by dying of diabetes at the age of only 50.

This little Epiphany carol speaks of *Drei Könige* – *three Kings* – who come from Persia in the usual English translation, but just from *Morgenland* – *the Orient* – in the German original. The English geographical detail is certainly not in the bible story, but the main problem with the *We three Kings* version of the Epiphany story is that the bible speaks neither of “three” nor of “Kings”, saying only *there came wise men from the east* – which is not necessarily the same thing as the Orient. It is church tradition that makes them Kings, and gives them the names of Melchior, Casper, and Baltazar. Cornelius was unfussed by any such nit-picking, and wrote his own text, setting it for a solo baritone, with the chorale melody (with words by Philipp Nicolai) that we know as *How brightly beams the morning star*, forming an accompaniment. In fact, although we have become used to hearing the chorale sung

by a choir, this was not Cornelius's own intention. He wrote it just for soloist with piano accompaniment, and it was the sometime organist of Worcester Cathedral and good friend of Edward Elgar, Ivor E. Atkins (often, for obvious reasons, known as Ivory Atkins) who had the happy idea of re-forming it to be accompanied by a choir singing the chorale, first in male voices only, and then in full choir, the version that is more or less universally known today. Incidentally, the steady progress of the sung chorale does seem to provide an image, rather missing in the more prosaic piano original, of the steady onward progress of the Kings on their journey, drawn on by the brightly beaming star.

The evening is given over to our Epiphany Carol Service, an annual and wonderful tradition. This begins with *Tribus miraculis* by Luca Marenzio (1553–1599). He is thought of as the epitome of the Italian madrigalist, rather like rolling all of Morley, Byrd, Tomkins, Wilbye, and so on into one, but doing it in Italy. The key to his renown is his vivid (almost too modest a word) approach to word painting. He did not write much church music in comparison with his British counterparts, but those works that we do have, take a similar approach to illuminating the text. This motet includes radically different textures for each section of the text. It opens with a description of the “three miracles” that mark the day set floridly for three voices, the upper two representing the star of the “first miracle”, the visit of the Magi. There is an abrupt change of timbre when we are told of water being turned into wine (the “second miracle”), and then vivid chromaticism brings in the Baptism of Jesus (the “third miracle”). The whole piece is rounded off with a wonderful *Alleluia*.

From the rising of the sun is by Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley (1825–1889). A really fascinating and underestimated figure today, Ouseley found himself having to wrestle all his life with reconciling aristocratic origins with his real callings, which were to the priesthood and the performance and composition of Anglican church music, both considered somewhat beneath someone of his birthright. In a somewhat complex life, he managed to be Professor of Music at Oxford University, as well as Precentor of Hereford Cathedral and Warden of St Michael's College, Tenbury Wells, all at the same time. In fact, he founded and generously endowed St Michael's College himself – thanks to considerable private wealth – as a training college for boys to learn the Anglican choral tradition at the highest level. It managed to maintain its activities until 1985, when financial difficulties led to its closure. The proceeds from the sale of its assets were put into the Ouseley Trust, a charitable body that uses the proceeds to support the Anglican choral tradition, and from which our Priory Church itself has very gratefully benefitted from time to time. Ouseley was very much part of the Oxford Movement – the origins of today's Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England – and this anthem rather relishes saying that in every place incense shall be offered up – so he would have been at home with us! The setting is absolutely straightforward, almost hymn-like, and

particularly direct in *Thus saith the Lord* at the end, with a firmness that brooks no quarrel!

When Jesus our Lord, by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809–1847), comes from the composer's unfinished oratorio *Christus*. Alas, only fragments of the planned work were left behind at his early demise, and this is one of them. It tells the story of the wise men asking *where is he born King of Judea*, for they have seen his star. It begins with a soprano recitative, but then, when the wise men speak for themselves, three male voices take over with a walking accompaniment in the bass that graphically illustrates their long journey. It all depends how fast the piece is taken as to whether they have been on a long trudge or are striding purposefully.

I wonder as I wander is a setting of a well-known American text by the Swiss composer, Carl Rütli (b.1949). Just as we had Ralph Vaughan Williams and Cecil Sharpe rushing around the British Isles collecting folk songs, so the United States had people such as John Jacob Niles (1892–1980) collecting the indigenous songs of Native Americans in the Appalachian Mountains. The text of *I wonder as I wander* comes from his collection *Songs of the Hill-Folk*, and hails from the state of North Carolina. Rütli, meantime, hails from Kanton Zug, a place that is otherwise famous for having such beneficial corporation tax arrangements that innumerable corporations have their legal base there. His path, however, led to the neighbouring Kanton of Zürich where he studied at the Conservatoire, before spending time studying in London. He returned to Switzerland, where he teaches at his Zürich alma mater, and is well known as a piano and organ recitalist. Zug has maintained its pull on him, however (you will need to know some German to get the point of that comment...) and it is an important part of his life that he is the organist of a church in the community of Oberägeri.

You can see the influence of his time in the UK in his many choral works, which owe much to the way things are done over here. Nevertheless, he blends this very effectively with other traditions, especially jazz, and it seems especially appropriate for this to be a feature of this setting of a quintessentially American text. The setting has become rather popular in recent years since it has been featured several times in the annual broadcast of the Christmas Eve Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge.

No small wonder is by Paul Edwards (b.1955). It has the unlikely distinction of having been largely written in a launderette. The text is by Paul Wiggmore (b.1925) who has written many contemporary hymn texts. In 1983, he sent Edwards the text of a new hymn, having also collaborated with him on a number of prior occasions. Edwards was on his way to do his weekly wash, and put the letter containing the poem into his pocket, grabbing a piece of manuscript paper as an afterthought, in case something occurred to him while he was waiting for the wash to complete. This

carol was the result, and apart from some tweaking, appears to have been largely composed between the start of the wash and the completion of the final drying cycles. It appeared in published form in 1986, and began to be widely performed and recorded almost at once. It was included in the King's College Cambridge Carol Service in 2000, which set a certain seal on its canonical status. The text plays with the "no small wonder" concept: the star, the light, the shepherds, none of these is more than a small wonder; but that God should be born in a manger or stable, that is *no small wonder!* Similarly: the love of God, the grace, power and glory, these are in some way small wonders, perhaps just what one expects of God; *but all to redeem my poor heart – no small wonder!*

The final carol is *I am the light of the world* by David Bednall (b.1979), which dates from 2009. After studying at The Queen's College in Oxford, he was an organ scholar at Gloucester Cathedral, and then in 2002 until 2007 was Sub-Organist and then Assistant Organist at Wells Cathedral, where our own Rupert Gough was Assistant Organist from 1994 until 2005, the latter year or so of which Rupert was also Acting Organist. David's PhD work was undertaken at the University of Bristol, and he is Sub Organist at Bristol Cathedral and Organist at the University. You will be as delighted as I am to know that his CV includes having been a "stunt organist" on Dr Who, a claim to fame that is probably unique. Many of us have also been stunt organists, but not on Dr Who, and so are merely also-runs in the hagiography of the role.

David's own website contains a helpful commentary on his compositional style, and rather than paraphrase it laboriously in order merely to appear not to be cheating, here is what it says:

David Bednall's compositional language is a result of a number of diverse influences. His love of late-romantic and 20th-century music is very apparent, as is his interest in emotive and evocative effects to communicate the text fully to listeners. Much of his recent music has been for choirs and his exceptionally wide field of musical tastes combined with considerable experience in the Cathedral Choral Tradition make for an exciting and reinvigorating approach to liturgical choral writing. Major inspirations include R. Strauss, Puccini, Ravel, Vaughan Williams, Howells and Cocherneau. However, his writing is no pastiche of these styles, but a distinctive and varied synthesis of these harmonic and rhetorical characteristics. Within his distinctive harmonic language there is considerable variety, from dense and evocative mysticism to innocent exuberance to timeless serenity. He is always interested in finding something distinctive and new in texts while never resorting to mere novelty or effect.