

Music Notes 2018 – Sunday of the Ascension

This Sunday's setting is the *Missa Brevis* by the Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967). It is unusual, but rewarding, to be able to report that it received its first performance in the downstairs cloakroom of the Budapest Opera House during the Second World War. The composer and his wife were living in the basement there after having been bombed out of their apartment. The *Missa Brevis* was not quite a newly-minted work in the Kodály canon. He adapted it from the pre-existing material in his 1942 work, *Organ Mass*, which was written as an instrumental work with no voices. It was, therefore, a purely musical meditation on the sections of the mass. This is, of course, something of a challenge for a composer, who must imbue the instrumental material with something that “speaks” to the listener of the content of the Ordinary of the Mass (i.e. the regular sections that occur in every mass, such as the *Kyrie*, or *Sanctus*). Arguably, having created such a purely instrumental work, it was rendered only more potent by having a text added when it was re-worked as the *Missa Brevis*.

Kodály was very much a nationalist composer – not in the political sense, but in the sense of being inspired and motivated by the folksongs and dance of his own country, which inspired him to create his own distinctive musical language. An easy comparison might be with Vaughan Williams and his use of old folksongs from around the UK in his music – although sometimes the moving folksong you think he is quoting is in truth his own original composition and just sounds like an old, borrowed melody. So it was with Kodály's distinctive style derived from the folk music of Hungary: sometimes the melody you are sure must be a quotation is his own original idea.

The mass begins and ends with organ movements – a hangover, obviously, from the *Organ Mass* – an *Introitus* and *Ite missa est* (which is the original of our familiar dismissal *Go in the peace of Christ – Thanks be to God*). The latter movement is, indeed, our Postlude at the end of the Solemn Eucharist this Sunday. In between come the usual movements, with a marvellous variety of highly lyrical expression. The *Gloria*, which we at the Priory church used to use every year on Easter Eve during the Vigil, is particularly thrilling. But it is invidious to pick out any movement for special praise: this is a collection of very special settings. The first performance in the cloakroom of the opera house was accompanied by a harmonium for practical reasons. In 1948 the work received a proper premiere, and, perhaps, also unexpectedly, this was not in Hungary, but at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester.

The motet at the Offertory is *Ascendit Deus* by Peter Philips (ca.1560–1628). Philips eventually combined being a musician with being a priest. As a boy, he was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, where the Master of Choristers was a closet Catholic.

It is not known whether it was the Master's influence that led him to convert to Catholicism, or whether he grew up in a Catholic family. Circumstances were not propitious, however, for a young man with such inclinations, and in his early twenties he left England for good, eventually settling in Antwerp. There he married, and the couple had one child. Alas, both wife and child died subsequently, but, by doing so, inadvertently freed the way for Philips to be ordained. This motet is one of a considerable number of works that he composed in what must have been a very difficult life: living in exile, losing his new family, and often maintaining only a precarious existence as a musician – no change there! Nevertheless, this piece is as exuberant as you would hope for this Feast. You might expect that the Ascension would encourage a composer to use a strong upward musical motif. Well, you won't be disappointed in this (in every sense) uplifting work.

In 2016, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued an invitation for Anglicans to spend the period between Ascension Day and Pentecost in a special season of prayer, using the overarching title *Thy Kingdom Come*. In the remarkably short space of time since then, this initiation has grown dramatically and has become both ecumenical and international. We are now also joining in with this, and the pattern that has been adopted in our parish, with the exception of Ascension Day itself, which is anyway marked with a Solemn Eucharist in the evening, is that we will have Compline by Candlelight (although nature will still be competing through the clerestory windows with daylight at this time) at 19:00 every evening between the two feast days of the Ascension and Pentecost. This Sunday evening is included in this pattern, so exceptionally – and also for the first time – Choral Evensong will be replaced this week by Choral Compline, but still followed by Benediction.

This is not as much of a departure as one might think. Evensong is, in fact, a merging together of two old Offices from the pre-Reformation church: Vespers and Compline. The former brought with it (among other included material) the *Magnificat*, and the latter, the *Nunc Dimittis*. It is not, however, the reason that we have the Lord's Prayer twice in Evensong, although this is sometimes wrongly stated to be the case. The opening part of Evensong was originally conceived as a private prayer (known as the Preparation) by the officiant, which included the Lord's Prayer. The service, and the prayer book in which it was contained, went through various revisions, partly following developing custom and practice in the young, reforming Church of England. During this process, the originally private Preparation, with its own Lord's Prayer, became instead public, while the second Lord's Prayer was retained in its accustomed place. Nevertheless, in Compline, it only appears once.

The music for the *Nunc Dimittis* is by the English composer, Gustav Holst (1874–1934), an unaccompanied setting in Latin. Curiously, this was written in 1915, but then lay unperformed until 1974, when the irrepressible Imogen Holst (1907–1984),

the composer's daughter (a good composer herself), revised it for performance, later sending it to Novello for publication in 1979. Back in 1915, (Gustav) Holst had written the piece at the request of Richard Terry, who was organist of Westminster Cathedral at the time, which in those heady far-off days obviously meant that everything would be in Latin. It was used on Easter Sunday that year, and then mysteriously vanished from sight and sound until it was performed again by the BBC Singers at Framlingham Church as part of the 27th Aldeburgh Festival in 1974.

The setting is, perhaps, not without its challenges, but is certainly not impossible for a good choir. Holst was fond of the music of the Renaissance composers. It is not too fanciful (as Rupert Gough has pointed out in his notes for a recording by the Royal Holloway Choir on Hyperion) to see the modal language and the contrapuntal textures of this piece as a nod in the direction of composers of that era, whose music Richard Terry had introduced into the repertoire of Westminster Cathedral.

The music at Benediction for the canticles *O Salutaris* & *Tantum ergo*, is by Fernand (Pierre G.) Laloux (1901–1970). Laloux, while of Belgian descent, was effectively an English composer, albeit strongly influenced by French post-impressionist composers, especially Ravel (1875–1937). He and his parents came to England in 1914 when the Kaiser's troops entered Belgium, and here they remained, Fernand eventually dying in Wandsworth where he had always lived. Along the way he became Director of Music at Farm Street, the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception, in Mayfair, one of the Roman Catholic churches known for good music and wonderful liturgy in London. Both settings were written for use at Farm Street, and are for unaccompanied choir.

The final piece of music in the service is a setting of the Marian antiphon for this period of the year. We are used to the four Marian antiphons being sung at the end of Evensong, but in fact, we have "inherited" these from Compline, so we are hearing this one in a much earlier context this week. The setting the choir will be singing is by Cecilia McDowall (b.1951). Her publisher, Oxford University Press, says the following about this work:

This hymn to the 'Queen of the Heavens' is a glorious work, replete with dramatic changes of mood and texture. The majestic chords of the opening bars quickly give way to a spirited section in which unison altos and basses mimic the insistent flourishes of the sopranos and tenors. This pattern of contrasts is repeated throughout the piece before the final jubilant chords fade away to a modest triple piano.