

Music Notes 2018 – Second Sunday after Trinity

The mass this Sunday is by Josef Rheinberger (1839–1901), who although he spent most of his adult life living and working in Munich, was born in Vaduz in Liechtenstein. When he died, he was buried in Munich, but when Rheinberger's grave was destroyed in the Second World War, his remains were translated back to his town of origin.

Rheinberger is known especially for his two organ concertos and 20 sonatas. The latter were intended to be 24 in number, one for each key in a kind of *Well-Tempered Clavier* structure, but, alas, left incomplete as a cycle at his death. His music is undoubtedly romantic yet balanced with a focus on classic counterpoint and an elegant approach that makes it particularly well-mannered music. This Sunday's mass, his opus 151, bears the name *Missa St Crucis*, but is also known just as his *Mass in G* for four voices. Written in 1882, every bar is characteristic of his measured, well-crafted musical language, unfussy and – as they say – deceptively simple. This can all sound like damning with faint praise, but it does work wonderfully well. The secret is to give oneself over to the music's civilized qualities and let them work their magic.

The motet at the Offertory is *O Nata lux* by the British composer, Ben Parry (b.1965). He was born and raised in Ipswich, Suffolk; his father was an organist and a music teacher. Ben went on to sing in the choir of King's College, Cambridge. One of his most important career breaks was with the Swingle Singers, which had been founded in 1962 in Paris by the jazz musician, composer and singer, Ward Swingle (1927–2015). Lest you think his name was made up for the purposes of his career, Swingle was in fact directly descended from the Swiss religious reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), who established the Reformed tradition in Zürich. Zwingli very much liked music, and played many instruments himself, but thought it not seemly to emphasize the use of music in divine worship (Boo! Hiss!). He even had the great organ of the Grossmünster – the main Reformed church in Zürich to this day – broken up and destroyed to prevent its morally and spiritually damaging effects from being visited on the congregation any further. What he would have made of his much later relative, Ward Swingle, is probably beyond the powers of description. Anyway, Ben Parry was first a singer, then an arranger, and then music director of the Swingle Singers after Ward Swingle eventually retired. Today, he is Director of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, Music Director of the resident choir of the Aldeburgh Festival, Assistant Director of King's College, Cambridge, and co-Director of London Voices.

Ben's deft skill as an arranger is paralleled by his talent as a composer in many genres, including light music, film music, and classical – especially sacred – music.

The motet is a very engaging piece for four voices, with some exhilarating harmonic shifts. The text is as follows: “O Light born of Light, Jesus, redeemer of the world, with loving-kindness deign to receive suppliant praise and prayer. Thou who once deigned to be clothed in flesh for the sake of the lost, grant us to be members of thy blessed body”.

The canticles at Evensong are the *Evening Service in G* by John Blow (1649–1708). A gifted musician from a young age, Blow was writing quite substantial anthems when others would still have been kicking around an inflated leather ball in the yard. His perseverance with his musical studies was rewarded when he became the organist of Westminster Abbey at the age of 20, although we must remember that you just had to get on with things in those days when your life expectancy could be anything from just days to more than 80 years. He was to experience this awful arbitrariness in the person of his star pupil, Henry Purcell (1659–1695). Legend has it that Blow was so impressed with his protégé that he resigned the post of organist in his favour in 1679, by which time he had completed eleven years in the job, only to take it up again when Purcell sadly died at the age of only 36 in 1695. That is certainly the version presented by the Abbey itself, but the evidence is a little sketchy because the relevant documentation from the time is missing. Of course, it may be that he was also fed up with things at the Abbey for some reason from which we are shielded by history.

The satirist Thomas Brown imagined a letter from Blow to the ghost of Purcell updating him on things:

I have no novelties to entertain you with relating to either the Abbey or St. Paul's, for both the choirs continue just as wicked as they were when you left them; some of them duly come reeking hot out of the bawdy-house into the church; and others stagger out of a tavern to afternoon prayers, and hick-up over a little of the Litany, and so back again. Old Claret-face beats time still upon his cushion stoutly, and sits growling under his purple canopy, a hearty old-fashion'd bass that deafens all about him.

Perhaps this is all the explanation we need for Blow's decision. Time did not hang heavy on his hands while he was away: he was composer to the Chapel Royal, and in 1687 he became Master of the Choristers at St Paul's (hence Thomas Brown's comments including the Cathedral) and remained in that post for four years even after resuming duties at the Abbey.

This particular setting, one of fourteen composed by Blow, was included by the composer and organist William Boyce (1711–1779) in the highly influential *Cathedral Music* collection, ensuring not only that it became known in cathedrals and churches with a choral tradition across the land, but also that it has survived in the repertoire to this day. Strictly speaking, this is a verse setting, meaning that it would have been

performed using multiple textures for the different sections of the text: a group of soloists, each of the “sides” of the choir known respectively as cantoris and decani, and the full choir.

The anthem is probably the greatest hit by Henry Purcell if you discount the glory that Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) brought to a rondeau in Purcell’s incidental music for Aphra Behn’s *Abdelazar* when he used it as the main melody of *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*. The greatest standalone hit is, however, the so-called *Bell Anthem*, which gets its name from the descending bass line of the opening *Sinfonia* which is said to sound like bells, as surely must have been his intention. It is also known by the first words of the refrain sung first by the soloists and repeated by the chorus: “Rejoice in the Lord alway”. Various early sources for this anthem show it as having been accompanied by strings. Indeed, the structure of the anthem, with the opening *Sinfonia* and various interpolations of what certainly sounds like string music, makes it seem obvious that this was the original intention. This means that it must have been intended for the Chapel Royal, which was the only place regularly to use strings in services, and even then only when a royal figure was personally present. So, it may be that the piece became famous in spite of initially only having had relatively few and far between performances. The entire practice of using strings stopped anyway in the Chapel Royal in 1691, so even they would have needed an organ arrangement after that time. The fact that this piece spread to become one of the most popular anthems in the country – which remains the case today – makes it clear that this arranging process had probably actually happened quite early on in order that others might use this popular music as well.

The text is from Philippians 4: 4–7, and the various moods in the text are picked up by Purcell in successive sections for soloists occasionally echoed by the chorus, which in any case gets to interject the general and cheerful refrain “Rejoice in the Lord alway”. The text is, in fact, most associated liturgically with the period of Advent, being the Introit for the Third Sunday of that season, and perhaps as a hangover from the old calendar, was usually used in the Chapel Royal for the Fourth Sunday of the same season. However, the anthem has long since escaped any particularly seasonal associations in the Anglican Church, and its comforting, encouraging and uplifting qualities have endeared it to the hearts and voices of choirs all over the world.