

Music Notes 2018: Trinity Sunday

The mass setting this Sunday is by the British composer David Bednall (b.1979). Born not irrelevantly in the charming Dorset town of Sherborne, he began his musical career initially as an Organ Scholar at Queen's College, Oxford, before becoming Organ Scholar at Gloucester Cathedral, where he studied under its then Director of Music, David Briggs (b.1962). He then moved on to be Sub-Organist and then Assistant Organist (these title details are of immense significance...) at Wells Cathedral – succeeding our own Rupert Gough in the latter position. Today, he is Sub-Organist of Bristol Cathedral, Organist of the University of Bristol, Director of the University Singers, as well as being a prolific composer. In 2012, he composed a mass for Sherborne Abbey – an imposing church that he obviously knows well – in memory of a former Head Chorister there, Ben Prance, and this – the *Sherborne Mass* – is what we will be hearing this Sunday. Earlier this year, in *Choir & Organ*, Rupert wrote in a review of a recording of David's music: "Bednall's style is a highly successful fusion of the English school of Howells and Leighton with the mysticism and drama of French organists of the 20th century".

The motet at the Offertory is *O Trinity most blessed light* by the English composer, organist, and conductor, Malcolm Archer (b.1952). His career is a perfect example of how Anglican organists used to rise up through our educational system and musical cathedral hierarchy. After going to school in Lytham, he went to the Royal College of Music as a Royal College of Organists scholar. His teachers were from among the great names of the previous generation of organists: Nicholas Kynaston, Ralph Downes, and Gillian Weir. At the same time, he was studying composition with no less than Herbert Sumsion (1899–1995), who had been a very long serving organist of Gloucester Cathedral and composer of one of the great settings of the evening canticles (*Sumsion in G*). Moreover, his other great teachers were Alan Ridout (1934–1996), himself a student of Herbert Howells (1892–1983), Gordon Jacob (1895–1984), Michael Tippett (1905–1998), Peter Fricker (1920–1990), and Henk Badings (1907–1987). Quite a lineage!

Archer's first post as a cathedral organist at Bristol (predating by some time David Bednall's arrival there), before he went on to Norwich. In 1996, he was appointed as Organist and Master of the Choristers at Wells Cathedral, the focal point of his connections with David Bednall and Rupert Gough. From there he went, in 2004, to be Organist and Director of Music at St Paul's Cathedral, taking over from the great, but sadly late, John Scott. In the kindest possible sense, the job at St Paul's is unbelievably demanding and punishing, and the wonder is that the present incumbent, Andrew Carwood, is still at it, eleven years after he took over from Archer, and with such conspicuous success, despite the pressures of the job. Only three years after he went to St Paul's, Malcom Archer left and went to be Director of

Chapel Music and Organist at Winchester College, a position in which he has remained ever since.

During this career, he has written an enormous number of compositions, most of which are published by Oxford University Press. This anthem is featured in their collection *Epiphany to All Saints for Choirs* (edited by Malcolm Archer and John Scott).

The canticles at Evensong are sung to the *Evening Service in B minor* by Hugh Blair (1864–1932), formerly organist of Worcester Cathedral. He was a good friend of Edward Elgar (1857–1934), who composed *The Black Knight* for the Worcester Festival Choral Society, which Blair also conducted. When Blair later requested an organ voluntary from Elgar to play when some visiting American organists would be at the cathedral, he received Elgar's *Organ Sonata*, which was perhaps a little more than he had bargained for. Indeed, he had very little time to prepare it, and it is – well – difficult, as Blair proceeded to demonstrate to his listeners. Fortunately, the sonata survived the experience.

Blair was less successful at surviving. Having been appointed Assistant Organist at the Cathedral under the wonderfully complete Dr Done in 1887, he became Acting Organist in 1889 when Done was done, only being appointed as Organist in 1895. One wonders, why the delay? The clue may perhaps come in the fact that he was sacked for being found on Christmas morning 1897 “drunk in charge of the organ”, a rare event in Anglican musical circles. Fortunately for Blair, he was able to move to London and become Organist of Holy Trinity, Marylebone and – a vital and delightful detail – conductor for the Battersea Borough Council! These Evensong canticles date from his younger days at Worcester, having originally been composed in 1887. The version we know today was edited in 1892 by the indefatigable Ivor Atkins, who helped many composers, including especially Elgar, to make the best of their music. On Blair's ejection from Worcester, it was Atkins who succeeded him, remaining there all the way to 1950 before retiring.

The anthem is *I saw the Lord* by John Stainer (1840–1901). He is chiefly remembered as the composer of *The Crucifixion*, a work which, in its day, was virtually compulsory in almost every church in the country at Passiontide. In due course the style of musical language that was prevalent at the time, and which he epitomized, came to be considered overly sentimental and labelled disdainfully as “Victorian”. Fortunately, now, Stainer and his contemporaries are being re-evaluated, and this label no longer generates automatic sniffiness.

From time to time we have heard Stainer's *Evening Canticles in Bb* at Evensong, and these music notes have then observed that his canticles are much more restrained and “formal” than is *The Crucifixion* or his anthems, and this is a good opportunity to hear the truth of this.

Having been a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, Stainer eventually returned there as Organist, having built in the meantime an enviable reputation as a masterly choir trainer. The text of this anthem is partly from Isaiah's vision of the Lord "lifted up" in the Temple, the seraphim crying to one another "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory...", while "the house was filled with smoke". To this Stainer adds *Ave, colenda Trinitas*, an anonymous 11th century hymn of praise to the Holy Trinity. The work is for eight voices split into two distinct choirs with an adventurous organ part. It was clearly written with St Paul's Cathedral in mind; this is very big-scale, dramatic stuff. The evocation of the temple filling with smoke is extremely vivid, and it is worth coming just to hear this moment! If we were having Benediction or Solemn Evensong, it would even be possible to demonstrate this phenomenon, but that will not happen until next week and the Sunday of Corpus Christi.