

## Music Notes 2019: The Conversion of S. Paul – 27<sup>th</sup> January 2019

The setting this Sunday at the Solemn Eucharist is the *Missa Brevis* K.275 (or K.272b in the renumbered *Köchel Werkverzeichnis* – the well-known catalogue of Mozart's compositions), also known as *Mass No. 9 in Bb*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). In spite of its brevity, this work of sacred music has something of the atmosphere of an opera in which the chorus just plays rather a large part. There may have been something special about the service for which it was written, because the *Agnus Dei* is astonishingly extended for a setting written in the period in which Prince Archbishop Colloredo presided over the church in Salzburg and laid down stringent rules about the required brevity of the services. Mozart would scarcely have risked the Prince Archbishop's wrath in this way had he not been on safe ground. Not only that, but when we reach the *Dona nobis pacem* section, the mood brightens considerably and we move into a really rather blatant gavotte. While this remains rather decorous, it is still rather extraordinary from a formal point of view in this context. There is no mistaking the light-hearted tone. Perhaps the Prince Archbishop was away that Sunday... However, even more suggestive is the fact that Mozart was just about to leave Salzburg for what he rather hoped would be the last time and embark on a tour to Munich, Mannheim and Paris, places in which he hoped that he might be taken on in permanent paid employment commensurate with his skills. If K275/272b represents his state of mind shortly before his adventure, we can certainly sense the optimism. And just possibly, the long but jolly *Agnus Dei* was his version of having what he hoped (wrongly) would be the last word in Salzburg. *Dona nobis pacem* indeed, but a prayer destined to be thwarted when he was forced back in 1779 to accept a new position for as further two years under the lash of Colloredo's rules. When he did eventually resign in 1781, his resignation was at first refused, and then, following an appeal in person, accepted ungraciously, confirmed with a literal kick in the backside from the Archbishop's steward.

The motet at the Offertory is by Mikhail Mikhailovich Ippolitov-Ivanov (1859–1935) a Russian composer, conductor and teacher, who was director of the Moscow Conservatoire from 1905 until 1924, taking in the somewhat overexciting period of the Revolution. His ability to survive this period, and indeed to continue working as a successful composer to the end of his life, is indicative not only of his considerable gifts of charm, tact, and discretion, but also to his fortune in having a style that embraced musically nationalistic models with which nobody could really take issue. His style had been formed while studying under Rimsky-Korsakov, and apart from adding a considerable interest in folk music to this as a kind of Russian/Georgian version of Vaughan Williams, so he remained. *O Gentle Light, O Holy Glory* is drawn from his setting of Vespers, Op. 43.

Herbert Howells (1892–1983) was a Vice President of the Church Music Society, an organization that ought to have much wider recognition across the musical world,

given its extraordinary contribution to the genre. As it is, the Society manages not even to have a Wikipedia page, which is quite an achievement these days. The Society was founded in 1906, and as 1956 approached, the need to commission something to mark its Golden Jubilee became increasingly pressing. Herbert Howells was the obvious candidate, and he readily set about writing a setting in B minor of the Evening Canticles. They were first performed at an Evensong in Westminster Abbey, (the Dean and Chapter of which is Patron of The Great) , on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1956. While the piece was then available to buy from the Church Music Society, it didn't attract huge sales, and, for a very appealing work – albeit one that is not trivial in its demands on performers – it lay surprisingly dormant for many years. In 1992, in honour of the composer's centenary, CMS again issued an edition of the setting, with Oxford University Press undertaking the publishing on their behalf, as is now always the case. This gave some additional impetus to the work, and it is heard rather more today than in the past.

The somewhat subdued performance record of this setting actually should be a matter of surprise and regret. It was composed around the same time that Howells was completing the famous Collegium Regale full setting for Kings College, Cambridge. This he had begun in 1944 with the Morning Service, going on to write the Evening Canticles in 1945, but not providing the Communion Service until September 1956, a few months after he had completed the B minor Evening setting for the Church Music Society. The Coll Reg setting is easily spoken of in the same breath as the settings for Gloucester Cathedral (1946) and St Paul's Cathedral (1950), because they share not only the characteristic of having been written for expansive and unusual acoustics, but also because they share a certain rhapsodic quality that is easily recognized as “classic Howells”, much imitated, but rarely successfully. The Coll Reg Communion Service needed to be stylistically coherent with the Morning and Evening Services he had already written eleven and twelve years earlier, so Howells was presumably already thinking his way back into that mindset when the time came to write the B minor Service, which – you will have gathered by now – we shall be hearing this Sunday evening. It should, therefore, not be surprising to us that this setting feels very much like “the one that got away”: in fact, pretty much the equal of the “Big Three” settings, and remarkably similar in language, structure, and rhapsodic quality. Simon Lindley, at the time Honorary Secretary of the CMS, drew attention in 2001 to the possibility that it is precisely the lack of an association with a building that has led to this similarly “big” and impressive work from receiving the same recognition as those with whom it seems to share so much otherwise.

As is so often the case with Howells of this period, the *Magnificat* begins with the trebles alone, emphasizing the voice of the elegiac but still surprisingly young woman from whose mouth come the words of this canticle. Eventually, the other voices join in and, apart from *He hath filled the hungry with good things*, for which the trebles are once again deployed solo, this is a setting for the full choir. There is a

really delightful touch at the end of the *Gloria* of the *Magnificat*. The organ and choir arrive on the final chord and hold it – and then the organ stops, leaving the choir suspended magnificently on a chord that still has some time to go. It is as though we are being told that what we have heard is only the story so far, leaving us in a state of musical suspension. It is very effective, and rendered all the more so when, at the end of *Nunc Dimittis*, the organ and choir arrive at the final chord, and this time, the accompaniment remains with the voices robustly to the end. It is a wonderful effect by means of contrast.

The anthem is an excerpt from the first oratorio composed by Edward Elgar (1857–1934), *The Light of Life (Lux Christi)*. By the time he composed this, although still young, Elgar was already an established composer, and it was no surprise, therefore, that he was commissioned to write a major choral work by the Three Choirs Festival for performance in their 1896 season, which was held that year in Worcester, Elgar's home territory. Still, although he had written choral music, oratorio was a new genre for him. He was indeed soon to compose *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom*, all much more substantial pieces. In fact, lists of Elgar's works tend just to regard *The Light of Life* as some sort of cantata, as they do his other work on a similar scale, *The Music Makers*, which dates from 1912. Nevertheless, the orchestral scale of both works really makes it difficult not to regard both as "small oratorios".

Elgar, a Catholic with a determination not to be ashamed of his faith in a country that was ambivalent about the Roman church, wanted to call his work *Lux Christi*. His music publishers, Novello, were alert to the commercial implications of such a choice and prevailed upon him to give it primarily an English title, with the result that it was published as *The Light of Life* with *Lux Christi* in brackets as a subtitle.

More than one movement from this work has found its way into fairly regular performance, even if the whole work is only rather rarely performed or recorded. The orchestral *Meditation* that opens the work is among these, and so is the choral movement *Seek him that maketh the seven stars*, which has sometimes been performed at our Epiphany Carol Service. The final movement is known as *The Light of the World* from its first line of text, and this is the music that will form our anthem. The text of the work is largely derived from John's Gospel, but with what [www.elgar.org](http://www.elgar.org) refers to as some rather unsatisfactory additions by the Reverend Capel Cure, who was then Vicar of Bradninch in Devon, and a friend of Elgar's. Edward Capel Cure, incidentally, came to be sufficiently prominent, such that a portrait of him hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, while the Royal Collection holds a copy of his sermon for the funeral of John Winston Spencer-Churchill, 7th Duke of Marlborough, (1822–1883), with the snappy title of *Sudden Death: Is It To Be Deprecated?* If you wish to know his conclusion on this point, you will be happy to learn that a "print-on-demand" copy of the sermon can be purchased from Amazon for £16.95 in hardback and £13.99 in paperback.