

Music Notes: The Epiphany – 6th January 2019

The mass setting this week is the *Missa Dies sanctificatus* by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594). This is a real Christmas work, and as we know, Christmas continues well past Twelfth Night and the Feast of the Epiphany, running all the way to Candlemas – the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – on February 2nd each year.

The habit of decorating homes with greenery for Christmas (later amplified by the introduction of the Christmas tree as the people of the United Kingdom sought to emulate the practice in this respect of our German royal family, once given a glimpse into the seasonal home life of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert) was an import into the domestic sphere of the customs practised in English churches. On Thursday, 3rd January this year, the Daily Express – not a publication whose existence has ever previously been recognized in these notes – published an article about the confusion between the date of Twelfth Night, drawing attention to the age-old dispute about whether it is the 5th or 6th January on which the greenery should be removed. They were, perhaps, scrabbling around for material, because their article is pretty much a re-write of something that had already appeared in The Independent on Wednesday, a sincere form of flattery, no doubt. Their joint view is that it all depends on whether you regard Christmas Day or Boxing Day as the first day of Christmas. This doubtless is the source nowadays of confusion in people's minds, but we can do better than that. The Independent reports that "The Church of England says it is 5th January", as though there were some part of the Church of England that was regarded as definitive in – well, any particular matter, let alone such a one as this, but even that is only half right.

The confusion comes much more from the fact that we now are inclined to regard days as starting at midnight, and have lost touch with what an "Eve" is all about. In the tradition we inherited from the Jewish roots of Christianity, the day began at sundown. For this reason, Christmas formally begins at sundown on 24th December, and the choir and congregation of King's College Cambridge accordingly sing the "reserved" last verse of *O come, all ye faithful* at about 16:15 in the afternoon of that day as the light finally fades from the sky. So, the first night of the Christmas season is the one that takes us from the 24th into the 25th, and the twelfth night of Christmas is the one that takes us from the 4th January into the 5th. By the time the sun goes down on the 5th, we are beginning the Feast of the Epiphany and the twelve days of Christmas are over. Epiphany used to be a time of feasting and merriment itself, and the identification of this with Twelfth Night in due course is easy to understand.

In the past, the churches of this country certainly understood this development in the season, and greenery was to be removed from the building by sundown on the 5th, and replaced by suitable decorations for the Epiphany, especially anything that

could be construed as golden – and the same was true at home. Some people still do this, removing the greenery from around their homes this Saturday morning during daylight, and replacing it with at least some golden decorations to welcome the season of the Kings or – as the Bible would have it – Wise Men from the East.

But I digress... The mass setting is what is called a “Parody Mass”. This doesn’t mean it is being “sent up” but rather that the musical material on which it is based comes from a pre-existing work – usually a motet – either by the same composer or another. In the case of *Missa Dies sanctificatus*, Palestrina is “parodying” his own joyful motet, *Dies sanctificatus*, which draws its text from a Christmas Responsory: *A day made holy dawns upon us; O come, all nations, and adore the Lord; for today a great light has descended upon earth/on all the earth. Alleluia. This is the day the Lord has made; let us be glad and rejoice in it.*

Now, we must be a little careful here. The temptation is to say that the character of the work that is being parodied is carried into the mass setting. But that cannot be universally true, because prior to the Council of Trent, and occasionally after it, composers used secular works as the basis for their compositions of this kind, some of them ribald and even obscene, and clearly, the settings were not expected to pick up “character” from these sources. In those cases, while we may assume that the composer thought well of the “model” being imitated, we might also assume that its inclusion in a sacred work meant that it was in some sense being “baptized” and “cleansed” of its original associations. But are we free to assume that a parody of a pre-existing, authentically liturgical work, means that the mass is intended to belong to the same season or occasion as the original work? It would be nice to be able to give a tritely precise answer to this, but the truth is most probably that it depends on the composer. “Parody” – which is often also referred to as “Imitation”, is probably best thought of as above all a compositional technique. On the other hand, when you have a composer as liturgically aware as Palestrina, and he imitates a thoroughly liturgical work for a particular season, and the mass bears the name of that work, it is safe to assume that he did indeed see that mass also as a Christmas work, and would expect it to be used at this time of the year.

The motet at the Offertory is *O God, who by the leading of a star* by Thomas Attwood (1765–1838), an English composer and organist, who was a favourite pupil of none other than Mozart. He had been sent abroad by the then Prince of Wales, who later became George IV, who thought him a remarkably gifted young man. The Prince put his money where his mouth was in paying for four years of study on the mainland, the latter part of which was spent in Vienna, where his studies with Mozart took place. This considerably expanded his horizons, not surprisingly, and certainly set him on the road to a successful career in music. He was appointed organist of St Paul’s Cathedral in 1796, and numerous other positions of importance came his way. He now lies buried beneath the organ in the Cathedral itself.

There was briefly a fashion in the early 1800s for using the Prayer Book collects as texts for anthems, triggered probably by a collection of thirty such compositions by one John Garth towards the end of the eighteenth century. Attwood used three collects in 1814 as texts, and *O God, who by the leading of a star*, the Collect for the Epiphany, was one of them. Collects tend to fall into three sections: 1. God is addressed, often drawing attention to some aspect of the divine nature or God's actions in some way; 2. A petition that forms the heart of the prayer; and 3. A closing formula. Attwood reflects this structure in his composition with three distinct sections of music that pick up on the structure of the text. When he wasn't being busy with church music, Attwood wrote quite extensively for the theatre, and when he wasn't doing that, he wrote glees. These, usually rather jolly pieces of music, are characterized by quite briskly moving inner as well as outer vocal parts, by a certain degree of internal imitation between the voices, and by short contrasting sections of music. It isn't therefore much of a surprise to find that this anthem contains all these elements – you might like to listen out particularly for the slightly hysterical alto part at the start. It's very first line includes a dramatic swoop upwards and then a run downwards, perhaps indicating the motion of being led by the star. As if this were not enough, at its next entry, the soprano part has already commenced a firm upwards line for the words *at the leading of a star*, and the alto comes in off the beat, and is then dragged – or should one say, led – upwards in a matching syncopated version of the line. It may be rather obvious word-painting, but it is also very good fun and one suspects that some of Attwood's light-hearted and quirky approach to music might have been picked up from teacher Wolfgang's equally cheeky example.

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, as 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 Wigmore (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.