

Music Notes 2019: Second Sunday after the Epiphany – 20th January 2019

This Sunday we have another chance to experience that remarkable mixture of spiritually driven expressiveness and sheer technical musical mastery that is at the heart of the works of Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611). These notes often speak of a compositional technique known as “parody mass”, in which the composer takes a pre-existing work, either his own or someone else’s composition, and quotes chunks of it as a jumping-off point for the rest of the work. In fact, composers in Victoria’s time were much more willing to recycle than they have been in, say, the past two hundred and fifty years, when the cult of originality has had fuller dominion in the output of composers. Bach and Händel were great re-workers of their own material, both ruthlessly pragmatic about doing so, and they were by no means exceptions. But pragmatism isn’t really what was at the heart of the parody mass, even if it was convenient not to have to come up with new motifs for the composition. Parodies generally start with an earlier motet, whether by the same composer or someone else whose music he (and it was, alas, almost always a “he” in those days) admired. Motets were as often as not based on pre-existing plainchant melodies which, while not perceived as having “magical” spiritual properties as such, nevertheless were closely associated with the Feasts to which they belonged, and so had a totemic significance as the specific musical expression of those occasions. So, a plainchant melody would appear in the motet, which would then be parodied in the mass, transporting its references to the chant and its associations with the Feast to which it belonged on into the setting as part of the quoted material.

This week’s setting is the *Missa Alma Redemptoris Mater*, published by Victoria relatively late in his life in the year 1600. It takes its parody mass status so seriously that it parodies not one but two motets, both earlier settings by Victoria of the well-known seasonal Marian Antiphon of the same name, and both obviously quoting the plainchant extensively. *Alma Redemptoris Mater* is one of the four Marian hymns sung at the end of Compline (in our case, at the end of Evensong) according to the season. Its time runs from the beginning of Advent to the Feast falling on 2nd February and known variously as the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, or the Meeting of the Lord, or the Presentation of the Lord, or variants thereof, but which we tend to call *Candlemas*. It is the real end of the Christmas season as well, and the day by which those of us who like to maintain some sort of tasteful decoration right to the end of the season would have it all packed back into its storage containers until the season recommences. After *Alma Redemptoris Mater* comes *Ave Regina Cælorum* from Candlemas to the Wednesday of Holy Week, and then *Regina Cæli* from the start of Easter until it switches at Pentecost to *Salve Regina*. The *Alma* chant is a beautiful flowing melody, and many composers have created settings of it.

Victoria’s come in two flavours: one for five voices published in 1572, and one for eight published in 1581. It is the latter that forms the basis for much of the setting,

which matches its eight-voice layout with the voices split into two quite distinct choirs. Victoria uses a wide variety of textures by playing the choirs off against each other, but also by grouping the voices together, varying the writing from block chords to flowing counterpoint, and generally exploring all the possibilities having so many voices at one's disposal affords. Apart from a reference in the *Christe* section of the five-voice *Kyrie*, the five-voice motet underpins extensively the *Benedictus* movement, which also reduces to a five-voice texture, even for the *Hosanna*, which is very briefly tacked on to the end, rather than a repetition of the much more dramatic eight-voice version at the end of the *Sanctus*. One senses from Victoria's masses that the liturgy at the monastery of the Sisters of Poor Clare where he spent the latter part of his career, and for which he presumably wrote both last week's and this week's settings, had a more terse liturgy than in other places, because the settings written during that period of his life tend to be remarkably concise.

This particular setting became particularly well-known in the Catholic New World territories – in other words, what we would today regard as Central and South America. If you come to our Midnight Mass, you will know that we often use the eight-voiced setting *Missa Flos campi* by the Spanish composer Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla (1590–1664), who went to live the rest of his life in Mexico at the age of 30. The *Gloria* of that mass is a particularly bouncy rendering, with the voices split firmly into two choirs, one of which continuously responds to whatever the other singers have just sung with repetitive declarations of *bonae voluntatis* or *miserere nobis*. It is very exciting and would almost certainly have been provided with a light continuo running in the background – a practice which was already extensive by the time de Padilla left for the New World. The same is true of this mass. Martin Baker at Westminster Cathedral undertook some extensive research into this question for the recording made by the Cathedral choir of Victoria's music, with the result that they include a continuo organ part (played on the recordings by our former Evensong organist, Robert Quinney). While the atmosphere of the Victoria and de Padilla masses is quite different, they would have shared the use of continuo, and they share *Glorias* that play the two choirs off against each other most effectively in chordal textures, albeit with very different results. Victoria must have been a figure of inspiration for de Padilla, so this is surely no surprise. Research in recent years has uncovered the richness of the Central and South American musical tradition from this period, and Victoria is key to understanding why this flourished so strongly.

At the Offertory, the motet is *Felix namque es* by the Latvian composer Rihards Dubra (b. 1964). Our own Rupert Gough is, in fact, one of the major exponents of his music in this country, and he has recorded a CD of Dubra works for Hyperion with the Choir of Royal Holloway College under the overall title *Hail Queen of Heaven*. At the risk of turning these notes into advertising material, it is worth remembering that this album – which can be downloaded to your PC or other digital device from the Hyperion website, or else bought as a physical CD – is well worth hearing. Rupert

writes compellingly about all the pieces, including this motet, as well as about the composer in general in the CD booklet. Rather than break copyright or plagiarize him here, I shall just give you the link to the booklet online, and recommend you follow it (or copy it into your browser address bar) and read what Rupert has to say. Here's the link: <http://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/67799-B.pdf>.

The setting of the canticles at Evensong is the *Fifth Service* by Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656). A prolific and successful composer, Tomkins was born in St David's in Wales, but moved at some point in his teenage years with his family to Gloucester, where he very likely studied with William Byrd (1540–1623). Tomkins is known to us as much for his madrigals and other secular music as for his church compositions. He was a force to be reckoned with on the ecclesiastical music scene, and managed to be in the right place at the right time when his superior and friend, Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625), died suddenly under the strain of arranging the music for the funeral of James I and the coronation of Charles I. Tomkins stepped up and, with the help of some useful re-scheduling of events, accomplished superbly all that was asked and needed of him. Nevertheless, the end of his life was not easy. While the composers of the preceding generation had to struggle with the chopping and changing ecclesiastical politics of their time, Tomkins found himself badly hit by the Civil War, which effectively deprived him of his living when Worcester Cathedral, a Royalist enclave – where he had become Director of Music many years beforehand – was closed as a result of the hostilities. This cruelly truncated his work as a church musician, and although he survived by switching to different kinds of composition, and by having a son, Nathaniel, who married well at just the vital moment, and welcomed him into his home, the personal sense of loss must have been devastating.

Tomkins is often described as having been very conservative in his music. Yet, it is full of magical touches that were to disappear from the general musical language during the austere years of the Commonwealth. By the time of the Restoration, Thomas was long dead. However, good old Nathaniel came up trumps again and took the opportunity of the new political circumstances to publish a book in 1668 of his father's works called *Musica Deo sacra*. This had the effect of bridging the period between his father's most productive work as a church composer and the new generation of Restoration composers such as Henry Purcell (1659–1695). As a result, even if the music was formally conservative, those magic touches found a ready response in the younger composers, and it is not difficult to trace a direct line between some of Tomkins's ideas and the extraordinary musical language developed by Purcell. *Musica Deo sacra* contains five of Tomkins's complete tally of seven services, and at Evensong we shall hear the fifth of these.

The earlier services in the collection are rather straightforward, but by the fourth and fifth, Tomkins's approach had developed quite markedly. Both are written as "verse" settings – that is, they present the text in sections using contrasting forces.

Tomkins obviously had access to a decent bass soloist, because he often writes interesting solo sections for that voice, and in fact, both the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis* start with one of these. This is followed in the *Magnificat* by a section for full choir, and then for a semi-chorus of solo voices, and so on – each part of the text with a different texture. This, of course, opens possibilities for word-painting – and a composer with the madrigal credentials of a Tomkins is always going to be prone to this – on top of the usual range of compositional methods of bringing the text alive. For example, when it comes to *throughout all generations*, the choir breaks into imitative polyphony, repeating the text several times to illustrate the many generations of which the text speaks. The other quality that is particularly different about the fourth and fifth services is that, whereas in the first three, the organ (which is definitely expected to be there and sounding) simply plays the vocal lines, services four and five have an independent organ part that contributes significantly to the texture. Of course, this is more likely anyway in a “verse” setting, because solos need accompaniment, but Tomkins writes more than just a continuo part to provide harmonic underpinning, and one sees here an accompaniment starting to make a really significant and distinctive contribution to the music.

The anthem is by a composer whose reputation as a “naughty man” – as Andrew Gant calls him in his history of English church music, *O sing unto the Lord* – exceeds that of many others. Of course, it is difficult for us to know at this distance whether these stories are in fact true, or are the result of sustained attacks on their character by those jealous or otherwise disapproving of them. In the case of John Bull (1562–1628), it is just possible that this is the case, but there does seem to be rather a lot of documentary evidence pointing to the reputation being justified. Nobody is quite sure where he was born, but there is good reason to think that it might have been in Herefordshire. In 1573 he was to be found as a boy in the choir of Hereford Cathedral, and at a time when mobility was limited, that is highly suggestive. He was obviously talented, because in 1574 he was already among the children of the Chapel Royal in London, later returning to Hereford Cathedral as its organist.

Four years later, in a kind of yo-yo career development, he was back at the Chapel Royal as one of the Gentlemen of the Chapel, by which was meant that he was an adult singer in the choir, although in 1591 he was to succeed the deceased John Blitheman (1525–1591) as the Chapel’s organist. Five years on and, having caught the eye of Queen Elizabeth I, he was made the first Professor of Music at Gresham College on her personal recommendation. When the Queen died, he moved smoothly into working for the new King, James I. So far, so meteoric.

There is a marvellous story of his having a problem gaining access to the rooms that went with the job at Gresham’s, because the college founder’s stepson wouldn’t give them up as he should have done. Bull allegedly retained the services of a stone mason who bashed a point of access to the rooms straight through one of the walls.

Alas, although the rooms were Bull's in one sense, this did not extend to actual ownership of them, and so he ended up in court for his presumptuous reconstruction of the property. Alas, we do not have the records of the case, but it cannot have gone too badly, because he was still Professor of Music ten years later.

At this point, however, another of his weaknesses appears to have caught up with him when it was discovered that he had allegedly fathered a child out of wedlock with one Elizabeth Walter. Today, this sort of thing is simply a story line in a soap opera. Although Bull subsequently married Elizabeth Walter, this was enough to lose Bull his position, and that was that. Luckily for him, Bull seems to have been able to keep body and soul together for several years thereafter. However, it was evidently not such a happy marriage, because in 1613, he was in trouble again, this time for adultery. He was still sufficiently high profile for this to rile both the Archbishop of Canterbury and King James to the point where Bull took fright and fled secretly to the Netherlands. Talk about falling on your feet: in 1615, the authorities at Antwerp Cathedral, either unaware of his past or simply not caring about what he had done abroad, appointed him as an assistant organist, and two years later elevated him to be Principal Organist. Of course, they may simply have so marvelled at his undoubtedly outstanding performing abilities – we speak here purely of music – that they preferred to overlook reports of any peccadillos, and allow him instead to enhance the music of the cathedral. It would not be the only example in church history of such a choice being made. Of course, he may simply have undergone a real reformation of character, because the stories of his bad behaviour cease with this early exercise of the principle of European free movement.

The anthem, *Almighty God, which by the Leading of a Star* has come to be known simply as *The Star Anthem* for short. It is a verse anthem setting of the text of the Collect for the Epiphany. By verse anthem, we mean that the text is shared out between soloists and the full choir, who take it in turn to deliver it in discrete “verses” shared out between them. The existence of instrumental parts shows at least that it was designed to be accompanied by a consort of viols, and undoubtedly had an organ continuo as well. Still, it may not be all it seems. Some scholars think that it was a fantasia for viols that later had words added to make it into liturgical music. The musicologist, Peter le Huray, was of the opinion in his *Music and the Reformation in England 1549-1660*, that it may originally have been a motet with the text of the prayer found in the Roman breviary *Deus omnipotens*, or that perhaps this was just the name Bull gave to the aforementioned string fantasia. In the manuscript, string parts copied out by John Baldwin of Windsor (1560–1615), our earliest source for this work, these two words appear written in at the start. A Latin motet would have been an interesting work for an English composer to have produced at that time, arguably suggesting a Catholic sympathy – and it so happens that Bull later wrote a letter to the Mayor of Antwerp in which he claimed to have left England in order to escape anti-Catholic persecution. Well, up to a point, Lord Copper!