

Music Notes 2019: Sunday after the Epiphany – 13th January 2019

The mass setting this week is the *Missa Brevis* by the evocatively named British composer Grayston Ives (b. 1948). Until seven years ago, he was the Director of Music – known as *Informator Choristarum* – at Magdalen College, Oxford where he followed (albeit not immediately) in the footsteps of another great *Informator Choristarum*, Bernard Rose, whose *Preces & Responses* are a staple part of our Evensong diet.

The name “Grayston Ives” is capable of generating some confusion in our time too, because he actually goes by the name “Bill” in real life, but composes and otherwise appears as a professional musician as Grayston. In fact, when you use Google to find his personal website www.graystonives.com, it actually comes up and offers you “Bill Ives” as its principal search result. Moreover, if you look up the Magdalen College choir recording of today’s mass on www.allmusic.com, it cheerfully lists the work as being by Grayston Ives, while the performance is conducted by Bill Ives, perhaps thinking them brothers, or that it is all just a coincidence.

His personal website says the following of Bill’s biography: *He was a chorister at Ely Cathedral and then studied music at Cambridge, taking composition lessons with Richard Rodney Bennett. After Cambridge he sang in Guildford Cathedral Choir before joining The King’s Singers, with whom he recorded and performed worldwide. For eighteen years Bill directed Magdalen College Choir, Oxford.* Composition lessons with lamentedly late and great Richard Rodney Bennett (1936–2012) is a very good start to have had as a composer, and the distinctive but approachable musical language you will hear in this *Missa Brevis* is a valuable legacy of those lessons, without being any kind of copy of his teacher’s style.

The *Missa Brevis* was written in 1987 for Magdalen College’s sibling choral foundation in Oxford, New College. The university boasts three such foundations now: Magdalen College, New College and, since 2008, Merton College, the newcomer in this world, in spite of Merton’s being nearly 750 years old. Incidentally, for anybody who wonders at the omission of Christ Church from the list of choral foundations at Oxford, it is actually part of the cathedral, rather than the university, even if the two institutions almost seem to merge in practice.

The motet at the *Offertory* is *O clap your hands* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). First published by Stainer & Bell in 1920, this piece was originally scored for organ, brass and percussion with choir, but was also arranged by the composer to be accompanied by full orchestra for just by organ. Guess which version we are going to hear this Sunday morning... Rather curiously, Stainer & Bell referred to it in their catalogue at the time as *Motet for mixed chorus with...* and then the accompanying instruments. It certainly isn’t on the scale we usually associate today with the word

motet. It is indeed somewhat reminiscent of some of Vaughan Williams's "crash bang wallop" music that you find also in pieces such as his Christmas oratorio *Hodie*, and even in the *Sea Symphony*. To a large extent, the highly extrovert choral part – which does have a single moment of introspection after the tremendous climax at *Sing praises unto our King*, when the texture changes significantly – sings in interlocked triad chords. This leads to some very interesting clashes, and it is in fact an example of a particularly English approach to harmony at the time, explored not only by Vaughan Williams, but also by William Walton and many others. It is a very vigorous piece, energetic, enthusiastic, and confident. It is entirely typical of the twentieth century approach to composition: occasional (in both senses of the word: i.e. sporadic and for a specific occasion), and yet as powerfully meant as music from any period.

The canticles are the well-known *Evening Service in Bb* (part of his complete Service in Bb) by the Dublin-born Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924). Stanford was undoubtedly quite conservative harmonically – he considered his hero Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) to have established definitively the acceptable boundaries of modern music – but he was also a jolly good tunesmith, and went out of his way to make his settings varied and un-repetitive, so that each of the seven Evensong settings that he wrote is markedly different from the others. Oddly, only four of them – those in A, B flat, C, and G – are regularly performed, but the other three – in E flat, F, and one based on Gregorian modes – are also well-worth performing and hearing. The B flat setting has quite a rollicking character. It was written in 1879 while Stanford was organist of Trinity College, Cambridge, a post he obtained while technically still an undergraduate. There is one of those father-son stories here: his father wanted him very much to go into the law, but reluctantly agreed that he could try a career in music, provided he first study Classics at Queens' College in Cambridge (where he was also an organ scholar). To say that the son prioritized his musical activities over his Classics studies would be a significant understatement. But so successful was he with the former that in the end he secured the organist position at Trinity in 1874, two days before sitting his final exams. He came 65th out of the 66 students examined in that year, earning a robustly third-class degree. Nevertheless, eight years later he was one of the founding professors of the Royal College of Music, and five years after that he was back as Professor of Music at Cambridge – quite a good way of saying "So there!".

One of the most important aspects of Stanford's approach to these settings is the way that the organ breaks free from mere continuo support of the singers. He wasn't the first to do this. Nevertheless, in Stanford's hands, this procedure is intensified, with each successive setting that he composed providing an increasingly independent organ part. The Bb setting also exhibits a more patchwork approach to the development of the work, with the many shifts of emphasis and mood that are found in the text illustrated in short sections of illuminating music, before moving

into the next section and textual idea. At one moment, we are dealing with the holiness of God's name, a little while later we are putting down the proud and sending the rich empty away. Each section has its own characterization. This idea was not new, but Stanford raised it to new heights of explicitness and colour.

The anthem is by Bill/Grayston Ives's teacher, Richard Rodney Bennett, who lived in New York for the latter part of his life. *I wonder as I wander* is dedicated to *Jonathan Manners and DeChorum, on the occasion of the Cancer Research UK Carol Service at All Saints Church, Weston-super-Mare – 22 December 2008*. Bennett was a composer of extraordinary versatility. His parents were both professionally involved in different capacities with music, so it was not entirely surprising that he also pursued a career in the same field. Bennett studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Howard Ferguson, Lennox Berkeley and Cornelius Cardew, and later went to attend summer courses at Darmstadt in Germany – home to the most hard-nosed of contemporary music inventiveness. Later, we went to Paris for two years and studied with Pierre Boulez, whose views on acceptable models for twentieth century composition techniques were notoriously free of – shall we say – flexibility. Yet, Bennett's own music, while initially strongly influenced by these experiences, rapidly broadened out stylistically, no doubt extensively affected by his burgeoning interest in jazz, and by his accepting commissions to write film music. His best known score in the latter category was undoubtedly for *Murder on the Orient Express*, in which Albert Finney played Hercule Poirot. Of course, all representations of Poirot pale into utter insignificance in comparison with that of David Suchet, who brings to life the figure described in Agatha Christie's books with uncanny precision – as Joan Hickson died with Jane Marple – but the Finney film has otherwise not been bettered, even in the most contemporary version, and Bennett's music for it beats them all. Bennett's music for *Far from the madding crowd* is also well-worth listening to, as is my personal favourite, *Billion Dollar Brain*, the last of the Michael Caine playing Harry Palmer films of Len Deighton's novels, in this case directed (slightly unexpectedly) by Ken Russell. His musical creativity there is characteristically and excitingly well-judged.

A significant number of Christmas carols feature in Bennett's substantial output. *Out of your sleep arise and wake* and *Susanni* – from the *Five Carols* written for the choir of St Matthew's Northampton – are both well-known, partly as a result of having been included in, respectively, volumes 2 and 3 of OUP's highly influential series, *Carols for Choirs*. But there are plenty more where they came from, and all repay attention. In the end, Bennett wrote two settings of the Appalachian carol collected by John Jacob Niles (1892–1980), *I wonder as I wander*. One is for unison voices and piano, but the one we are to hear is for a four-voice choir in which the altos occasionally split to give a five-voice texture. The music gives an impression of relative simplicity, but this is a characteristic trick of Bennett's writing, slyly misleading the listener into accepting the music at apparent face value, while giving immense satisfaction through its underlying subtlety and manifold charm.