Music Notes 2017 – Trinity IX

The mass setting this week is the *Missa de Angelis*, sung as antiphonal chant between cantor and congregation. If you would like to know more about what this entails please refer to our music notes from two weeks ago; just click here: http://www.greatstbarts.com/Documents/Music/Music_Notes/17/Music_Notes_2017_Trinity_VII.pdf.

The music at the offertory is what might be called a Eucharistic aria, *Ecce sacrum paratum convivium* by Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). Born in Cremona, but largely associated in our minds with the city state of Venice (although he was already 46 years old when he went there to direct the music at the Basilica of San Marco), Monteverdi is credited with being the link between the Renaissance music with which we are so familiar at the Priory Church and the true Baroque. Indeed, he died only 42 years before Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was born, when the Danish-German composer Dieterich Buxtehude (1637–1707) was already six years old, and in the same year that the Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643) also died. Along the way, he substantially shifted musical language away from modal system (a system of eight scales, each with its own distinct structure) towards what we know as the diatonic system (which is essentially just two types of scale, one major, one minor, with the same scalic structure being used for every key). *Diatonic* comes from a Greek expression meaning moving through the tones, and is somewhat easier to manage than the alternative expression, *heptatonia prima*. Essentially, music since Monteverdi's day has always been broadly diatonic up to the early twentieth century, when some (but not all) of it ceased to be. But lest we get lost in that subject, let's get back to Monteverdi. Aside from having a radical effect on our sense of key, he was also an important influence upon the development of musical forms, especially in the genres of opera and oratorio, each freshly departing from their starting blocks during his lifetime.

This particular piece comes from a set of four such arias by Monteverdi that were published in 1625 by a castrato singer, Leonardo Simonetti, in a collection of 44 (some say 45) motets called *Ghirlanda Sacra – A Sacred Garland*. Simonetti was one of Monteverdi's choristers, and, indeed, joined the choir at San Marco at about the same time that Monteverdi arrived in 1613. If you are an aficionado of Monteverdi's operas – today once again part of the oft-performed repertoire, so no reason not to be – you will be familiar already with his reliance on recitative (whereby dialogue and narrative in operas and oratorios are 'sung', imitating the natural inflections of speech). It is not hard to see how recitative grew from plainchant, with which it shares a certain rhythmic freedom and an expressive use of melisma – which means using an entire chain of notes for a single syllable that expresses emotional or other significance. Monteverdi wrote this piece as a series of metrical recitatives with, between them, brisk passages of more aria-like material in a dancing triple time. The

text is somewhat freely written, combining references to the Last Supper with the Mass itself and even allusions to the feasts of Ancient Rome, with the guests reclining on couches at table.

Because this kind of music enjoyed a rather brief flourishing in between the High Renaissance style of Palestrina (1525–1594) and the language of Bach and his successors, it is tempting to interpret its brevity as indicative of a transitional world. But it seems a pity to reduce it to this, because it has a courage, immediacy and vibrancy born of being created in a burst of highly innovative imagination. To the people around him, Monteverdi's music must have had some of the "shock of the new" that the more avant garde composers of the twentieth century produced. He certainly had his detractors who resented what he referred to himself as *seconda prattica – second* or *new practice*. To us, it now seems like more "old music", but it was electrifying in its effect on what came next – and in the end, Monteverdi turned out to be right about the way forward and the advantage of taking it.

The *Magnificat* at Evensong (or rather, *Meine Seele erhebt den Herrn*) is by the German composer Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672). He was one of the most important composers to pre-date Bach (who was born thirteen years after his death). Schütz was born to an innkeeper father in Köstritz, which was important because his big break was when he was heard singing by Landgraf Moritz von Hessen-Kassel (1572–1632), while the latter was staying at the inn. In fact, the Landgraf (who was also a composer) was so impressed that although Heinrich's father initially refused to allow his son to be trained musically at his noble guest's court, the Landgraf pressed the case repeatedly until he obtained Schütz's father's consent. This was the crucial development that set Heinrich on the path he took for the rest of his life. Then, from 1609 until 1612 he studied in Venice with Giovanni Gabrieli (1554–1612), who was not only his teacher but also an important friend. So, we are back with the extraordinary influence of Venice on the development of the German Baroque in music. Back in the German states, Heinrich went to live and work in Dresden in 1615, where Hans Leo Haßler (1564–1612) had been such an important figure until his death three years previously. It goes without saying that the earlier composer's influence must also have been all around him.

Schütz composed six settings of the *Magnificat* that we know about, but only four – one in Latin and three in German – have survived. This one, referred to by the catalogue number SWV426, was probably written around 1625, and was composed for a standard four-part choir with continuo accompaniment. His pupil, Christoph Kittel, who was an organist but also a music publisher, included this setting in his publication *Zwölf geistliche Gesänge (Twelve Sacred Songs)*, which came out in 1657. Kittel described the collection as being *To the glory of God and for use by Christians in churches and schools*.

Meantime, the setting of the *Nunc Dimittis* is by the Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), who spent a significant part of his early productive life living and working in Rome. It is a relatively terse and straightforward work, dating from 1600, and evidently written to provide an efficient delivery of the *Song of Simeon* for an unspecified – and therefore probably general – liturgical purpose. By the time this was composed, Victoria was no longer in Rome, having long since moved to be chaplain to the Dowager Empress María, daughter of Charles V, who lived in retirement at the Monasterio de las Descalzas de S Clara de la Cruz in Madrid. He remained at the monastery for the rest of his life. After Maria's death, he became the organist.

Here's a nice little quirk of timing. Our knowledge of this piece is the result of its publication in 1913 in *Tomás Luis de Victoria: Opera Omnia, Volume 8* by Breitkopf & Härtel, which was founded in Leipzig in 1719. This means the editorial work of the volume was undertaken three blocks south-west of where these music notes have just been written.

The anthem is *Verleih uns Frieden – Grant us Peace,* or, if you prefer Google Translate's gibberish: *Rental peace Us* – by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847). The name "Bartholdy" is often omitted in the UK, but used regularly on the mainland. It was added by Mendelssohn's father when this historically Jewish family, which had, however, hitherto practised no religion in recent memory, decided to be baptized as Lutherans when Felix was seven. His father actually wished Bartholdy to replace the Jewish-sounding "Mendelssohn" as the family name, but Felix resolved firmly to keep both names. In a regrettably short life – Felix continually endured poor health, which was exacerbated by overwork – he packed in a prodigious amount of composing. This anthem was first published after Mendelssohn's death, but written much earlier, along with Opus 23, *Three Sacred Pieces*.

The anthem originated during an extraordinary and exhausting eighteen month European tour Mendelssohn had embarked upon. In the middle of this trip, he found himself in Rome, where he remained for five months, no doubt overwhelmed by the sheer wonder of the city and its many sights and extraordinary musical history. This work for soloist and gradually accreting chorus, a prayer for peace, was composed during this period. In fact, he wrote it with an orchestral accompaniment – which we will have to hear in a reduction for organ – and structured it as three identically worded verses, each adding additional voices. This gives the work an interesting sense of the wish for peace being at first a single voice (the basses in this case) praying on its own, followed by a repetition as a duet, when a further voice (soprano) joins in the plea. Finally, the entire choir, perhaps representing the whole of humanity, joins in. The music journalist, Julian Haylock, writing about the piece in connection with a recording of the work in 2006, says that this is done with "a

generous warmth of expression that leaves one in no doubt that ultimate peace cannot be far away”.

Here’s another nice little quirk: Mendelssohn’s apartment here in Leipzig is one block to the west of where these notes have been written this week. Spurious Links – one might say – ‘R’ Us.