

Music Notes 2017 – Trinity VII

We have now arrived at our four-week summer programme, during which, the Ordinary of the Mass setting, and the music at the offertory for our Sung Eucharists will be provided by solo cantors, sometimes (as in the case of the setting this week) with congregational participation. The setting this Sunday is the *Missa de Angelis*, or *Mass of the Angels*. Its other name is the more prosaic-sounding *Mass VIII*. The number refers to its position within a group of eighteen plainchant settings of the Ordinary (that is, the fixed texts of the liturgy: *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei*) in the book of liturgical chants for the whole church's year that is called the *Graduale Romanum*. Collectively, these eighteen sets make up the section described as the *Kyriale*, a slightly deceptive term that effectively just means "groups of chants for the Ordinary of various masses, each of which begins with a *Kyrie*".

Each of the eighteen settings is intended either for general use or for a particular type of occasion or period of the year. So, there are settings to be used in the season of Easter, for *Solemnities* (that is, feasts of Jesus, Mary, or seriously important saints), Feasts of Apostles, Marian Feasts, Sundays in general, Memorials, weekdays in the Christmas season, weekdays in Ordinary Time (that is, between Candlemas and Ash Wednesday, and between Pentecost and Advent), and Sundays in Advent and Lent – in fact, for every part of the liturgical calendar, were one to wish to use chant for the Ordinary at any point in the year. Well, we do during the Summer Programme. The *Missa de Angelis* is intended for Feasts in general, but it is also the best known and most easily sung congregational plainchant setting, rivalled only by the *Communion Service* by John Merbecke (1510–1585).

The setting was not composed as a single work, or in a single period. The *Kyrie* is probably from the 15th century, while the *Gloria* is from the 16th century. Both of these are in what is called Mode V, the term used to refer to the "scale" in which the piece is written. Meantime, the *Sanctus*, which dates from the 12th century – around the time the Priory Church was being built – and the *Agnus Dei*, which is from the 15th century, are both in Mode VI, which is closely related to, but slightly different from Mode V. It is worth noting that the part from the 16th century does not sound very different in character from the part from the 12th century, demonstrating how very slow the pace of change was when it came to chant. It is also a fact that we have no idea who created these chants; indeed, we know extremely little about the composers of any of the plainchants we use in our liturgy.

At the offertory, we shall hear one of the *Five Mystical Songs* by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958). The "mystical songs" refer to four poems (one is split into two separate songs) by the 17th-century metaphysical Welsh-born poet, George Herbert (1593–1633). Although he originally intended to become a priest, he served for a short while in parliament before being ordained in 1630, three years before his untimely death from tuberculosis at the age of forty. Herbert served in the evocatively named Wiltshire parish

of *Fugglestone St Peter with Bemerton St Andrew*. His influence, however, remains vast, with hymns based on his poems still sung across the Christian world, and his poems relished for their vivid language. Vaughan Williams wrote the settings for baritone soloist and choir between 1906 and 1911, and they were first performed at the Three Choirs Festival, which in 1911 took place in Worcester.

The Call is the fourth of the songs and is for the soloist alone. The melodic line is disarmingly simple and, like many of Vaughan Williams's tunes, sounds as though it were borrowed from a much older tradition. The artlessness of the melodic line sets off the poem's elegant and heartfelt statements of faith in God as Way, Truth, Life, but also Light, Feast, Strength, Joy, Love, and Heart. This setting appears somewhat surprisingly in *Common Praise* as a hymn, in spite of having more than one tricky corner. It is a secret vice to enjoy hearing a congregation struggle through this, especially the last verse in which the key changes abruptly and the melody is stretched out unexpectedly and ecstatically. To say that it goes outside the normal principles of hymnody would be something of an understatement, but the compilers of the hymnbook must have had some justification for including it.

The canticles at Choral Evensong are the *Second Service* by Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656). A prolific and successful composer, he 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. Tomkins is known to us as much for his madrigals and other secular music as for his church compositions. The end of his life was not easy. If composers of the preceding generation had to struggle with the chopping and changing ecclesiastical politics of their time, Tomkins found himself severely disadvantaged by the Civil War, which effectively deprived him of his living, when Worcester Cathedral – 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. He survived by adapting to composing other kinds of composition, and with the help of his son, Nathaniel, who, having married well at just the vital moment, welcomed him into his home, the personal sense of loss must have been cruel and overwhelming.

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 once again, and took the opportunity of the new political atmosphere to publish a book of his father's works called *Musica Deo Sacra*. This had the effect of bridging over the Commonwealth period and creating a link between his father's most productive work as a church composer and a new generation of Restoration composers, such as Henry Purcell (1659–1695). As a result, even if Tomkins's music was formally conservative, those magic touches found a ready response in the next generation of active composers. It is, for example,

not difficult to trace a direct line between some of Tomkins's musical ideas and the extraordinary musical language developed by Purcell.

Tomkins contributed seven services to the English church. As suited the times, his earliest essays in this field are relatively simple and straightforward, serving the purposes of the English church at the time. Nevertheless, as one would expect from a master madrigalist, he also introduces a great deal of evocative word painting to bring the text to life. So, for example, in the *Magnificat*, at *He hath shewed strength with his arm*, the soprano line assertively sings its entire line on a series of B-flats while the other parts rise up underneath as if to try to knock it off its perch. Then, at *He hath scatter'd the proud in the imagination of their hearts*, the bass gets alarmingly separated from the hitherto rather unified choir, which sounds as if it is coming apart at the seams over the next bar. When we are told *He hath put down the mighty from their seat*, the vocal lines plunge satisfyingly, while *the humble and meek are exalted* with a suitably upward burst. Indeed, the description "deceptively simple" is particularly appropriate for this setting. Given the constraints of the day, Tomkins finds many subtle techniques – for example, employing lightly syncopated rhythms – along with a wonderful sense of melody and line, to bring this familiar text vividly to life.

The anthem, also by Tomkins, is *My shepherd is the living lord*. This is a setting of a metrical version of Psalm 23 first published in *The Whole Book of Psalms, Collected into English Metre* by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others in the mid-1500s, although this text is actually Sternhold's work. There was a strong fashion at the time for rendering the psalms in metrical form that had been picked up, more or less, from the Calvinists in Geneva. Prior to the Reformation, singing was not generally done by 'the people', but by choirs, monastic communities, clerics, and so on. Part of the Reformation's whole shtick was a kind of democratizing handing of religion back to the people: so they too must sing. Given the intractability of psalm texts in translation, only partially solved by the mechanisms of Anglican chant – which is simply not musically successful when sung by congregations – turning psalms into what essentially amounted to hymns made a lot of sense.

We have to understand the massive task involved in creating new models for the reformed churches. Part of the trouble was that like ex-smokers – well, incense was out of the question – they wanted nothing or little to do with what had gone before. So, the pressure was certainly on, not only to render everything into the vernacular, but to find new musical structures to support this endeavour. The trouble was that the speed of creation this required – replacing vast amounts of material that had been built up over centuries – did not always lead to what we might call "even quality". The result can seem as if the Jedi Master Yoda from *Star Wars* has taken over control of the translation, as you can see below. Fortunately, Tomkins and his contemporaries had no trouble with these poetic inversions, which were wholly acceptable in his time, and he creates a wonderful verse anthem from the text.

The first verse is sung by the alto soloist: *My shepherd is the living Lord, nothing therefore I need: In pastures fair, with waters calm he sets me for to feed.* The soloist sets off on the second verse: *He did convert* (set rather delightfully to a little figure that turns back in on itself – so, you can hear the converting happening) *and glad my soul, and brought my mind in frame.* As if unable to contain themselves any longer from expressing this thought, the choir joins in: *To walk in paths of righteousness, For his most holy name.* Tomkins now skips all that alarming stuff about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and having a table set in the presence of one's enemies, and goes straight to the last verse. The alto soloist sets off again, but this time is answered after each phrase by a tenor soloist, who mimics the line each time but at a different pitch. It suggests the idea of the individual travelling through life accompanied by God, whose presence can be discerned in the echoes that bounce back from life, if one is prepared to listen for them. *Through all my life thy favour is so frankly showed to me: That in thy house for ever more my dwelling place shall be.* The choir picks up on this and repeats the text from *That in thy house* to the end in a little slew of imitative entries and then brings the anthem to a close.

This is a delightful piece, full of poise, and yet you sense it is also very heartfelt. It presumably belongs to the period of Tomkins's life that was spent at Worcester Cathedral before it all went so sadly wrong for him. We have to be thankful to Nathaniel, who included this piece in *Musica Deo Sacra*, for the fact that we are still able to hear it and perform it today. The irony is, perhaps, that, were it not for the ghastly, humourless period of the Commonwealth, Tomkins might have disappeared without trace, there being perhaps less drive for Nathaniel to go into music publishing on his father's behalf. This might well have meant that Tomkins would not now be seen – as he is – as *the* pivotal figure in the development of a distinctively British compositional school, thanks to having inspired Purcell and his contemporaries, who could only have known Tomkins's music from *Musica Deo Sacra*. Well, we are certainly working on the restoration of his reputation at this Evensong.