

St. George's Church, Bloomsbury

Thursday 14 December 1989

LONDON CONCORD SINGERS

Conductor: Malcolm Cottle

Organ: Graham Owen

Domine, Dominus Noster

Orlandus Lassus

(c 1532 - 94)

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth, who has set your magnificence above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings you have perfected praise because of your enemies, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

When I behold the heavens, the work of your fingers, and the moon and stars which you have made, what is man that you should care for him, and the son of man that you should visit him? For you have made him a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with the glory and honour, and made him to preside over all the works of your hands. All things are in subjection under his feet, all sheep and cattle, and the beasts of the field, birds of the air and fish of the sea, who walk through the paths of the sea.

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth.

Lassus was one of the great composers of the 16th. century. His output of vocal music, both sacred and secular, was prodigious. He was born in Mons and spent much of his youth and early adulthood travelling widely, arriving eventually in Rome where he was appointed to the important post of maestro di cappella at St. John Lateran where he stayed for two years. After further travels in Northern Europe he went to Munich where he became Kapellmeister at the court of Albrecht V until his death.

Domine, Dominus Noster is written in a chordal, declamatory style, with short note values. Syncopation is used freely to point word accents.

Alma Redemptoris Mater

Lassus

Kind mother of the Redeemer, the open gateway to heaven, and star of the sea, help your fallen people who try to rise again; to you we kneel, who bore your son by a miracle of nature. Virgin first and last, who received God's greeting from the mouth of Gabriel, pray for us sinners.

This motet shows Lassus' mastery of the polyphonic style. Unlike the previous piece where he uses the voices in different combinations, here all voices sing throughout with the exception of the words "virgo prius ac posterius" which is sung by the top three voices only. There is some notable word painting, particularly the falling figure on the word "cadenti".

Salvator Mundi, Domine

John Sheppard

(d. 1557)

O Lord, saviour of the world, who came to save us on this day, protect us through the night and guard us at all times.

This setting of the compline hymn for the vigil of Christmas is by the English composer, John Sheppard, who lived in the first half of the 16th. century. He was for a time a fellow and organist of Magdalen College, Oxford, where he

achieved a certain notoriety for his sadistic treatment of the boy choristers. Verses 1,3 and 5 are sung to the traditional plainchant melody while verses 2 and 4 are in 6 parts, SATTBaB with the plainsong melody as a cantus firmus sung by the Baritones.

Parvulus Filius

Blasius Ammon
(1560 - 1590)

A little child is born to us this day: and He shall be called God, the Almighty.
Alleluia.

Ammon was born in Imst, in the Tyrol, in 1560 and died only thirty years later in Vienna. He started his musical life as a choirboy under Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, who sent him to Venice to complete his musical studies. The Venetian influence is notable in that he was one of the first Germanic composers to use the double choir technique. At the age of eighteen he joined the Franciscan order, eventually becoming a priest. His output is small and entirely sacred, his work is, however, vigorous and inventive.

Rejoice in the Lamb

Benjamin Britten
(1913 - 1976)

Soprano solo: Judith Kusel
Tenor solo: Barry Hughes

Alto solo: Margaret Menzies
Bass solo: John Penty

This Festival Cantata was written in the summer of 1943 for the Rev. Cannon Walter Hussey and the choir of his church, St. Matthew's, Northampton. Cannon Hussey had instituted a fund for the commissioning of works of art for the church including the famous Madonna and child by Henry Moore and the Crucifixion by Graham Sutherland, as well as many works by leading British composers.

The words of the cantata are from a long poem of the same name by the 18th. century poet and mystic, Christopher Smart, who was deeply religious, but of a strange and unbalanced mind. The poem was written while Smart was in an asylum and is very chaotic in form but contains many flashes of genius. Britten chose a few of the finest passages to set to music in what must be one of his finest and most characteristic choral works. The cantata consists of ten short sections

- 1 sets the theme of the worship of God by all created things, each in its own way
- 2 gives examples of people being summoned from the pages of the Old Testament to join with some creature in praising God.
- 3 is a quiet and ecstatic Hallelujah.
- 4 (Sop. solo) uses Smart's beloved cat, Jeoffrey, as an example of nature praising God by simply being what it was intended to be.
- 5 (Alto solo) continues the same idea, using, this time, the valiant mouse.
- 6 (Tenor solo) speaks of flowers - 'the poetry of Christ'.
- 7 Smart finds, even in his troubles and madness, occasion to praise God, for it is through Christ that he will find his deliverance.
- 8 is an extract from one of his mystic alphabets.
- 9 speaks of musical instruments and music's praise of God.
- 10 repeats the Hallelujah.

INTERVAL

Wine and mince pies are available at the back of the church.

O Beatum et Sacrosanctum Diem

Peter Philips
(c1561 - 1628)

O blessed and holy day, on which our Lord deigned to be born for our sake of the Virgin Mary. Let the whole world therefore rejoice, and let us sing to Him in the sound of the trumpet, strings, harp and organ. Let us rejoice with the angels ceaselessly singing His praise. Noel, alleluia.

Philips was a choirboy at St. Paul's Cathedral, but fled to the continent as a Catholic exile in 1582. He spent the rest of his life abroad, moving around between Italy, France and the Low Countries, finishing up as organist to the Archduke Albert at the Royal Chapel in Brussels. 'O Beatum' is a splendid motet for 5 voices with several short, contrasting sections. Much use is made of word-painting particularly with imitation of the various musical instruments.

O Magnum Mysterium

Palestrina
(c1525 - 1594)

How great a mystery and how wonderful a sacrament, that beasts should see the new-born Lord lying in their manger. We have seen the baby and the chorus of angels praising God. Alleluia.

Palestrina is the greatest of the 16th. century Italian composers. He held many important positions in Rome, including maestro di cappella of the Julian Choir, St. John Lateran, and Santa Maria Maggiore. His range of published music is immense, including 94 masses, 400 odd motets, 12 lamentations and 30 Magnificats. His setting of 'O Magnum Mysterium' ranks among finest of this moving text. It combines spaciousness with warmth and mystery. The vocal combinations are constantly varied, the six voices only joining all together in the last phrase of the triple time "collaudantes Dominum" section. The piece ends with a delicate sequence of extended alleluias.

A un Nino Llorando

Francisco Guerrero
(1528 - 1599)

To a little child, crying with the cold, came three kings to adore him, for the child had power to give kingdoms, life, glory and heaven.

Being born in such humility, although a powerful king, he gives us a new statute, that it is better to live in lowliness and poverty.

To see this little child.....

Guerrero was one of the greatest and most versatile of the Spanish Renaissance composers. He was born in Seville, the son of a painter, and after various positions in and around that city, he finally became chapel master at the cathedral there. This charming carol is from a collection of villanescos and spiritual songs published in Venice in 1589, although it actually dates from very early in his career. The villanesco was a popular religious popular song in the vernacular, making frequent use of popular dance rhythms: many of them are Christmas carols. This one consists of a verse sung by all, then a 'copla' (a quatrain unit sung by a few voices), followed by a repeat of the verse, with slightly altered words.

Missa Brevis

Leonard Bernstein
(b. 1918)

Kyrie
Gloria
Sanctus
Benedictus
Agnus Dei

Alto solo: Margaret Menzies.

In 1955, whilst working on the score of 'Candide' with playwright Lillian Hellman, Bernstein composed some choruses in French and Latin as incidental music to the play 'The Lark' by Jean Anouilh, which had been adapted from the French by Miss Hellman. As the play was about the trial of Joan of Arc, Bernstein's music was deliberately evocative of the medieval era.

The celebrated American choral director, Robert Shaw, attended one of the first performances and suggested to the composer that, with some changes and additions, the music would make an effective Missa Brevis. Now, at last, some 33 years later, this suggestion has born fruit. Bernstein has made this adaptation to honour maestro Shaw's retirement as Music Director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

The Missa Brevis consists of the usual movements of the Mass, omitting the Credo. It is set for 7 part choir with an important solo part (originally intended for counter-tenor). There are occasional interjections from various percussion instruments, notably tubular bells.

The London Concord Singers is affiliated to the City Literary Institute.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Barclays Bank plc towards the expenses of promoting this concert.

We are constantly on the lookout for new members to join the choir. Anyone interested should contact Malcolm Cottle : Tel. 01-226 1392 (or 01-354 3195).