

Music Reflection for Lent and Easter

“You can’t have one without the other!”

No, I have not completely “lost the plot” in trying to link a line from the 1955 song, “Love and Marriage” made popular by Frank Sinatra, in some way to Lent and Easter. However, in thinking about how to introduce music suitable for such contrasting periods I concluded that the line quoted is in fact bang on target.

Lent is frequently viewed as a time when churchgoers turn miserable, develop guilty consciences, do peculiar things with ashes, and make a good deal of fuss and bother about “giving up” pleasure – rather like an extended “Dry January”. Easter on the other hand is often seen as a time when we are let off the hook of Lent and are again free to occupy ourselves with bunnies, Easter eggs and general jollification. The reality of the situation is however that the whole 40 days of Lent and 50 days of Easter are a continuum and as the song says “you can’t have one without the other”.

There is no denying of course that Lent is a time of solemnity and reflection as we remember the considerable mental and physical hardship that Jesus suffered during the 40 days he spent in the wilderness. We must also remember however that Jesus did not just go off into the wilderness and suffer these things as some sort of act of self-righteous self-flagellation, rather he did it as an essential part of his preparation for his arduous and amazing three years of ministry culminating in his sacrifice on the cross and his assurance to us of salvation by his glorious resurrection at Easter. Jesus could never have undertaken that arduous journey without preparation and without subduing the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Lent gives us the opportunity to follow in the steps of Jesus, to ponder our lives, our indulgences, our weaknesses, and the temptations that we all face but also, like our Saviour, it gives us the opportunity to positively prepare for what is to come. May we find ways of doing that which benefit not only ourselves but others and to do all this with gratitude and thankfulness because we know without any doubt that it is leading us forward to the gift of salvation and eternal life given to us at Easter. You really cannot have one without the other.

“The Lamentations of Jeremiah” is a book of the Old Testament comprising five chapters lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC by Babylon. The poems are pretty depressing by anyone’s standards but because they recognise that sins against God have caused the destruction and emphasise the need for repentance then, in the past at least, the book has been associated with Lent.

A great many early composers wrote musical settings of all or part of the Lamentations the best known being that of Thomas Tallis (1505 – 1585) but I would like to draw your attention to a considerably more modern setting by the American composer Z. Randall Stroope (b 1953) which portrays very clearly some of the raw emotion expressed in the text

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjPeqih9fxc>

For those of you who would feel cheated without the chance to hear the Tallis version here is Part 1 beautifully sung by the Tallis Scholars

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ul8Hx1Fi-e8>

The 4th Sunday in Lent is celebrated as Mothering Sunday although it, incorrectly and unfortunately, is frequently labelled “Mother’s Day”. The origins of the celebration can be found in the middle ages when the 4th Sunday in Lent was also known as Mid Lent Sunday or Refreshment Sunday and a little respite from the rigors of Lenten observance enjoyed with Mother Church and the Mother of God being commemorated. The observance of Mothering Sunday gradually declined until it was energetically revived almost single handedly by the efforts of Constance Adelaide Smith (1878-1938) in the early part of the 20th Century. Constance Smith was the daughter of the Vicar of Dagnall in Buckinghamshire and her four brothers all became High Anglican priests. Constance Smith’s efforts culminated in 1921 with the publication of her pamphlet “The Revival of Mothering Sunday” advocating this as a day for recognizing Mother Church, 'mothers of earthly homes', Mary, mother of Jesus, and Mother Nature.

To mark Mothering Sunday, I have chosen what I think are two lovely pieces by the British composer Sir John Taverner (1944 – 2013) whose works have appeared regularly in these reflections in the past. Taverner wrote a substantial number of works many of them inspired or influenced by the Eastern Orthodox Church to which he converted for several years. Although Taverner’s “Hymn for Athene” is well known to many having been performed at the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, I would like you to hear his **“Hymn to the Mother of God”** sung here impeccably by the Choir of Ely Cathedral.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QW4wgKIBF3E>

Much less well known than the above is the fact that John Taverner wrote a piece of prose for his children which he called **“99 Words To My Darling Children”** in which he sets out for them his guidance as to how to lead their lives. Following Taverner’s death his close family friend Roxanna Panufnik (b.1968), herself a prolific composer, set these words to music – the piece seems so appropriate to Mothering Sunday albeit that the words were written by a father

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-87AbmY3SM>

After Mothering Sunday and before the solemn events of Holy Week we come to Palm Sunday which in itself could merit a whole reflection. Instead of trying to sum up the significance of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in a few words I am simply going to offer you what I consider to a grand rendition of a little-known piece “**Les Rameaux**” (*The Palms*) by Jean-Baptiste Faure (1830 -1914). Jean Baptiste, not to be confused with, nor related to, the rather better-known Gabrielle, studied music at the Paris Conservatoire and went on to become a popular operatic baritone both in Paris and in London. As well as singing, Faure composed several songs of which this is one. Obviously, music proved to be a successful career for Faure who was an avid collector of impressionist art – at the time of his death he possessed no less than 130 works by Monet and Manet.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSZjU26-svw>

Holy Week progresses to Maundy Thursday when we remember both the institution of the Holy Communion at the Last Supper and Christ’s Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. At the Last Supper Jesus insisted he wash the feet of the disciples and the Christian church commemorates that act of love at services on Maundy Thursday each year. The antiphon “**Ubi Caritas**” (*where true charity is, God is there*) has been used since the 6th Century to accompany the washing and I would invite you to listen to this impeccable performance by the French male choir Zero8 of the setting by the Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zckmFxwagOU>

Mention of the composer Howard Goodall (b. 1958) usually prompts thoughts of the theme to “The Vicar of Dibley” although this is only one of several TV themes composed by him others including; Red Dwarf, Blackadder, Mr. Bean, The Thin Blue Line, The Catherine Tate Show, 2point4 Children, Words and Pictures and QI. There is however a more serious side to Howard Goodall’s musical works which include a number of musical stage works and a huge volume of outstanding choral material. Relevant to this reflection is “**Invictus: A Passion**” a 55-minute work for soloists, chorus, and small orchestra, which was commissioned by St Luke’s United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, and premiered there under the composer’s baton in March 2018, with the UK premiere following in May 2018, given by the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford and Stephen Darlington. I have included two movements of this intense work here: “**Invictus and Gethsemane**”, I hope you enjoy them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TK3oRuLdLs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5cNuD1QTR8&list=PLSgQODJ2mfGO0lmP8mx5oylc-6U6f1G6F>

Good Friday is of course the most solemn day of the Christian year but even as we contemplate the horrific events of that day, we must always keep in our minds the fact that they are part of that continuum we have been following and to quote some well-worn words; “without the cross there can be no crown”. Leaving aside the massive J.S. Bach Passions there is no better-known oratorio dedicated to Good Friday than “**The Crucifixion**”

composed by the then organist of St. Paul's Cathedral, Sir John Stainer, to a libretto by the Revd. W.J. Sparrow Simpson. The Crucifixion was written for Marylebone Parish Church and first performed there in Lent of 1887. The work does not require massive resources and thus almost immediately became popular with choirs of all sizes up and down the country, it has been performed almost constantly around Easter ever since. At times The Crucifixion has been criticised as Victorian sentimentality but this is largely unjust as Stainer's music is of the highest standard as is Sparrow Simpson's text which is a masterly weaving of biblical material. The continuing importance of the work was endorsed last year by the RSCM publication of a new edition edited by Jeremy Dibble, Professor of Music at Durham. Almost at the end of the work comes a recit and chorus under the title of **The Appeal of the Crucified**. The principal text is taken from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, Chapter 1. This performance is by the Canto di Lode in the Grote of St. Michaëlskerk, Oudewater.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vU0735hoc_k

On Holy Saturday, Jesus rested in the tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea while his disciples and followers must have been in a maelstrom of grief and confusion as to what was to happen next, despite the teaching he had so painstakingly deliver to them previously

Many churches now use Holy Saturday as an opportunity to renew baptismal vows before keeping a vigil until the dawn of Easter Day. Perhaps for us this is an opportunity to look back not only at the events of Lent but rather at the whole miraculous life, death, and resurrection of our Saviour. In musical terms I cannot find this more succinctly expressed than in the words of the song "**King of Kings**" sung here by Hillsong Worship in Sydney, Australia in 2019. Hillsong Worship is a part of the Hillsong Church which has become an international organisation notwithstanding at times being the subject of some unfortunate scandals. I hope we can simply enjoy and reflect the message given in this powerful song.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQl4izxPeNU>

Louis-James Alfred Lefébure-Wély (1817 – 1869) was a French virtuoso organist and somewhat lesser composer; he was the son of an organist his father being the titulaire at Saint-Roch in Paris. Young Alfred deputised for his father from the age of eight onwards and subsequently succeeded his father while at the same time studying at the Paris Conservatory where he gained a first prize for organ. Alfred formed a close relationship with the renowned organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll whose romantic style organs were in huge demand at the time. Alfred demonstrated most of the Cavaille-Coll instruments that were popping up around Paris at the time and in due course was appointed organist at Saint Sulpice which then as now houses the largest Cavaille-Coll organ in Paris – his successor was Charles Marie Widor.

Although Lefebure-Wely did not have the composition skill of his successor he was recognised as the most outstanding French organist of his time by a considerable margin.

Although his compositions fell into the shadows in the second part of the 20th Century, the music of Lefebure-Wely has seen a resurgence in more recent times when the innovation and sheer fun of some of his works has been better recognised.

Arturo Barba is a renowned Spanish concert organist who figures high in my world top five. Arturo is frequently heard playing early Iberian music on the many amazing historic instruments to be found in Spain and Portugal but I would like you to hear his spirited rendition of “**Sortie in E flat**” by Lefebure-Wely on the modern Monumental Cabanilles Organ, Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús, Valencia. This is I would suggest an ideal concluding voluntary for a joyful Easter Day when we can say “Christ is risen -He is risen indeed” - but don’t forget the celebration goes on for another 50 days!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-M0KvHgfdoE>

Keith Day - March 2024