COR16201: Orazio Benevoli – Missa *Tu es Petrus* – Album Notes

ORAZIO BENEVOLI – Missa *Tu es Petrus*

Orazio Benevoli was French by birth, his father a confectioner from Lorraine who Italianised his surname Venouot on settling in Italy. Orazio was a chorister at San Luigi dei Francesi, the French church in Rome, famed for the sumptuous forces it assembled to perform polychoral music on major feast days. He was presumably taught there by multi-choir composer Vicenzo Ugolini, and became a choir maestro for the first time when only 19, later, in 1630, succeeding Allegri at another Roman church before returning as maestro to San Luigi's (1638-44). He then moved to Vienna to serve as Kapellmeister to the emperor's brother, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, before returning to Rome where after a series of prestigious appointments, he finally became maestro of the unrivalled Cappella Giulia, the Julian Choir at St Peter's. He was the leading composer of what is now called the Colossal Baroque school but a pupil of his wrote that lifelong poverty stunted his reputation (apart from being misattributed with the composition of Biber's massive Salzburg Mass). This has continued until relatively recently with just a few recordings of his music before this new series.

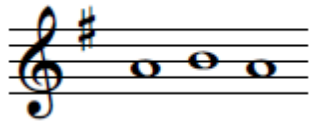
The vast spaces of the new basilica of St Peter's in Rome had originally presented no difficulty to composers, since the eastern arm acted as an enclosed quire. But everything changed in 1634 with the completion of Bernini's massive bronze altar canopy (or baldachin), which stands beneath the central dome and directly above the tomb of St Peter. With the enclosing screens gone, composers had to fill a much greater area with sound. Berlioz, who lived in the Eternal City in 1831-2 as a *Prix de Rome* scholar, mused on the problem of how such a cavernous space could be filled with sound, but thought in terms of massed choirs and huge orchestras, unaware that 17th-century composers like Benevoli had solved the problem in quite another way.

As the Roman Catholic church emerged from the troubled 16th century with the threat of near-annihilation by Protestantism behind it and the root-and-branch reforms of the Council of Trent bearing fruit in the ever-greater triumphalism of the Counter-Reformation, it was to the music of Palestrina that the composers of the greater Roman basilicas turned. Deeply conservative yet attuned to the ideals of the new baroque era, they developed the perfectly poised and ineffably Catholic classicism of the Palestrinian manner beyond anything that Palestrina himself could have conceived, bringing to it a new harmonic expressiveness, and writing for ever greater numbers of choirs. On major feast days in St Peter's these would be mounted on specially erected platforms that surrounded the high altar. Raised above floor level, these were artfully disposed to take advantage of the remarkable acoustical effect that makes tutti passages by multiple choirs of modest dimensions immeasurably more overwhelming than the inflated choruses and orchestras that Berlioz had imagined.

Sometimes a four-choir work would be performed by eight choirs, the four principal and four secondary choirs alternating and eventually coming together in great cataracts of sound that proclaimed the power and majesty of the rejuvenated Catholic Church. Sometimes the number of choirs proliferated: one Ascension Day in St Peter's a [now lost] twelve-choir Mass was performed, each choir representing one of the Apostles, and at a certain point – probably the Offertory – a little ensemble of solo voices and instruments sounded from the internal apex of Michelangelo's mighty dome, representing the ascending Saviour. But four-choir music was also cultivated in much smaller Roman churches. The beautiful little Carmelite church of S Maria in Montesancto of 1662 that adjoins the Piazza del Popolo was specifically designed for such music, with four small galleries overlooking the oval nave, each with its own built-in chamber organ.

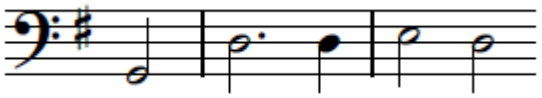
Of all Benevoli's multi-choir settings for Mass and Vespers, none surpasses his **Missa *Tu es Petrus***, based on Palestrina's famous six-voice motet. It is music designed to overwhelm the senses, matching the disciplined splendour of the new Tridentine liturgy, the magnificent vestments of the celebrating clergy, and the vast but restrained magnificence of the finally completed St Peter's. At the same time, there is a lightness and strong forward-moving impetus to it that reflects Palestrina's wonderful motet.

Benevoli was particularly inspired by certain features of his model, whose opening presents the words 'Tu es Petrus' ('Thou art Peter') with the simplest of three note returning figures:



'Petrus' also means 'rock' ('Thou art Peter and upon this rock I shall build my church') and its motif stands static and rock-like over busier accompanying parts. **Kyrie I** starts with a simple iteration of the motet's opening in Choir 1 but the other choirs pick up instead on Palestrina's distinctive accompanying parts. The full four-choir texture is kept until the very end of this first Kyrie. The **Christe** is built on a rising phrase from the motet's 'aedificabo' ('I will build') and is for reduced upper voices, a beguiling sonic tradition in Roman 17th-century multi-choir Masses.

Kyrie II uses the bass part of 'Et tibi dabo' to build each choir's phrase, initiating a more rapid exchange between choirs that culminates in the wonderfully haloed A major chord that Benevoli takes from just before the end of the motet's first half. In the motet this is further crowned with soprano roulades on 'coelorum' but in the Mass these are transposed to basses, just one indication of how Benevoli transformed the 16th-century 'parody' technique into something rather more inventive.

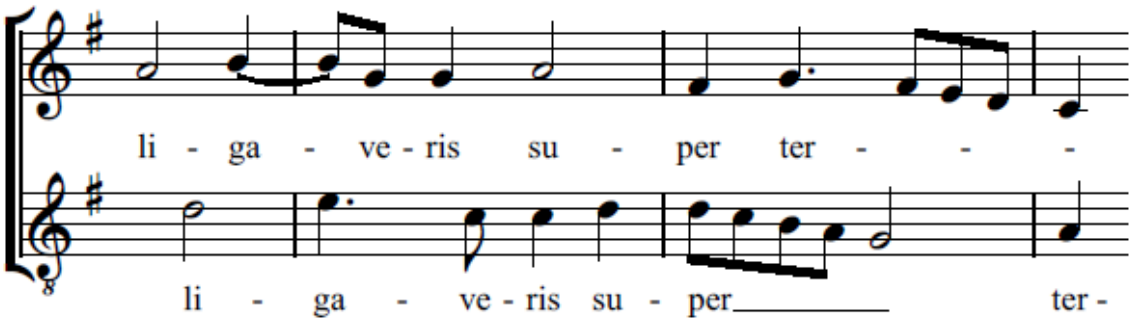


The **Gloria** immediately presents the full four-choir texture, which calls for all Benevoli's contrapuntal skill as he observes the rules of compositional theory (no parallel movement of fifths and octaves between parts). He moves the harmony more slowly here, mirroring Alessandro Striggio's technique (whose 40-voice Mass was written some 85 years earlier), treating the slow-moving chords like the supporting pillars of some vast classical edifice (or perhaps a more accurate analogy is the walking trees from Tolkein's 'Lord of the Rings'), winding around them rhythmically intricate and interlocking melodic lines like entwined ivy.

One of the most surprising aspects of the Tu es Petrus Mass is the way that Benevoli so often changes rhythmic gear, the comfortingly familiar flow of Palestrina's harmony abruptly becoming twice as slow or fast. This occurs at the end of the passage 'Gloriam tuam' and is further decorated by a chain of slow suspensions in the bass of Choir 2. Given the lucid, moderately expressive harmonic language that mostly prevails, such richesse is akin to encountering intrusions of hot Madras curry in an otherwise mild Biryani.

There are no triple-time sections in Palestrina's motet but Benevoli constantly moves between duple and triple to provide variety, with fast exchanges between the four groups (e.g. 'Filius Patris') from which he reverts to solemn duple-time to highlight crucial text such as 'Jesu Christe' (which

the clergy would need to hear clearly, in order to doff their skull-caps in the designated places). The Gloria ends with a striking motif taken from the motet's second half, 'Quodcumque ligaveris super terram' ('whatever you bind on earth').



The close imitation between the parts portrays the idea of 'binding' (Christ gave St Peter the power to lock/unlock with his keys not only the gates of heaven but also the demonic and sinful on earth). Benevoli transforms it into a triumphant motif, and the 3-note 'rock' figure is ceremoniously chanted in turn by the 'altos' (high tenors), before a final super-slow iteration in soprano 1.

The **Credo** begins in 'stile antico' fugal writing in the Palestrinian manner and more triple-time exchanges between the four groups give way to slow duple-time for 'Deum verum'. After this slightly unremarkable start, Benevoli begins to flex his compositional muscles at 'descendit de caelis', where slow-moving harmony is overlaid by pairs of voices that graphically illustrate the key words, flowing downwards on 'descendit' and rising back up again on 'de coelis'. There follows the most extended four-choir passage of the entire work at 'Et incarnatus est'. With 'de Spiritu Sancto' it moves to richer-sounding flatter keys (a Gabrieli trick), the harmonic pulse slowing yet further at 'Et homo factus est'.

In their multi-choir works, Benevoli and his contemporaries enjoyed writing passages (and entire settings) for several singers of a single voice type, typically to provide variety in the middle of the lengthy Credo text. At 'Et resurrexit' four sopranos rejoice, then four altos ascend to their own stratosphere with 'et ascendit in coelum', the singers eventually combining in four pairs to dance their way through the hemiola-strewn 'Et iterum venturus est' like eight circling angels. (Hemiolas are cross rhythms that double the length of each triple pulse: think 'I'd like to / be in A – / me – ri – ca').

Fast joyful peals follow on 'cum gloria', at which point Benevoli again picks up the two-part 'ligaveris' motif that he used at the end of the Gloria and plays with it for quite some time, punning on the notion that God's kingdom 'non erit finis' ('will have *no end*'). Unless Benevoli's Soprano 1 had super-sized lungs and breath control beyond even the fabled norm for 17th-century castratos, the enormously long-held note at the cadence here is surely unsingable in a single breath and is reminiscent of Mozart's jokes at the expense of the hapless hornplayer Leutgeb. On 'simul adoratur' Benevoli reworks Palestrina's setting of the words 'super terram' which in the motet descend to the lowest 'earthbound' chord of the motet. Here it is recast with altos and tenors virtuosically ornamenting against the slow-moving descending harmony. Then comes another Leutgeb-type challenge, a break-neck setting of 'et conglorificatur', made more difficult by the way the singers are constantly treading on each other's heels, entering with the same phrase a fraction of a beat after one another.

At that passage's first run-through for the present recording, the singers – already slightly emotional after a lot of very unfamiliar notes that day – 'needed a moment'. What must it have been like to perform such a piece on little rehearsal in a building as resonant as St Peter's, where the choirs would be placed some distance apart, each on its own platform? The musicologist Florian Bassani suggests that for such repertoire rather different musical skills would have been required from those we value today, prioritising: (a) absolute singing in time, each choir rigorously following its individual time-keeper (payment receipts survive for these crucial sub-conductors) and remaining as oblivious to the other choirs as horses forced to keep their eyes on the road by blinkers; (b) an unvarying beat, with the same mathematical ratio rigorously maintained between duple and triple-time; (c) complete accuracy when counting rests. The efficiency of this approach is attested by an account from 1639 by André Maugars, a highly qualified French musician who attended such a performance in Rome. He wrote, 'These Italian musicians never rehearse, but sing all their parts at sight and [...] never make mistakes, though the music is very difficult [...] All the choirs sing to the same beat without dragging.'

The compositional *tour-de-force* of the whole Mass is the Credo's extended 'Amen', in which the 'binding' figure that rounded off the Gloria is now presented in fast-moving triple time, with interlocking rhythms so complex and dense that a modern conductor trying to bring out all the detail can feel (and look) like an angler struggling to land a particularly slippery eel. Yet the effect is quite glorious, and compositionally without parallel in western music of the time.

There are no surprises or technical *tours-de-force* in the Sanctus and Agnus Dei, which rework some of the more familiar material of Palestrina's motet that has hardly been used until now. There is no Benedictus, perhaps because some features of the old Use of the City of Rome, the sparest of all Christendom, were still observed in St Peter's. Alternatively, non-liturgical motets or instrumental music appropriate to the feast or season may routinely have been inserted or substituted in the later stages of a solemn Mass, Sanctus and Agnus Dei settings being curtailed to accommodate them.

BONIFAZIO GRAZIANI

Graziani was an exact contemporary of Benevoli – and also of Carissimi, being brought up in the same town of Marino, south-east of Rome. He came to central Rome in 1646 to become maestro at the Jesuit Pontifical Roman Seminary and its church, the Gesù. His first publication (motets for 2-6 voices) coincided with the Roman jubilee of 1650 and was successful, being reprinted in Antwerp and Rome, with many copies of pieces from the collection also to be found in manuscript, notably in northern Europe.

The Gesù was designed with polychoral performance in mind, and Graziani wrote much-admired multi-choir festal settings for it which have not survived (or yet been found). The smaller-scale motets of Op.1 could be used outside the liturgy, but their editor, Lars Berglund, writes about their use in the Mass, replacing elements of the Propers on feast days while a work like 'Ad mensam dulcissimi', with textual references to a Sacred Banquet, is obviously suitable for the Forty Hours' devotion, Corpus Christi, etc.

The music is powerfully expressive, in line with the policy of the evangelising Jesuits, famed as the Attack Dogs of the Counter-Reformation: church music, they believed, should be a direct reaching-out to the laity, making immediate emotional connection through passionate reflection of the sacred text. Graziani's motets fulfil this ideal and have several sections of contrasting character that allow the singers ample scope for personal interpretation.

Ad mensam dulcissimi begins with a recitative-like section for one then two sopranos. Later a tenor appears who then joins in quietly ecstatic chromaticism.

Domine, ne in furore, for two sopranos and a bass, may have been designed for the kind of Lenten penitential gatherings so favoured by the Jesuits and Oratorians. The text conflates verses from some of the most deeply penitential psalms, cunningly assembled to allow the composer to treat each vivid poetic image at length. The final line, 'lacrimis meis stratum meum rigabo', depicts the psalmist's watering of his bed with tears, the word for watering being set differently in the two final sections – first in a virtuosic flood of semiquavers, then with the (castrato) sopranos ravishing the senses as they rise thrillingly to the height of their compass.

Venite gentes, for five voices, calls the faithful to Christ, the fount of living water. Another motet for a festal Mass or Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, no doubt, with the most graphic depiction of the overflowing fountain of life. 'Who thirsts/hungers/is cold/warm?' The answers come in highly florid passages, including one for the bass, always more of a rarity. A second invitation to hurry ('properate') is almost undermined by its sheer triple-time sensuality.

The six-voice **Justus ut palma** boasts three sopranos and will have been composed for a lavish Mass on the feast day of one of the two great Jesuit founder-saints, Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier. It sets the complete Gradual and Alleluia at Masses for Confessors who were not bishops, celebrating the righteous who 'shall flourish like the palm tree'. Graziani indulges to the full in gestural writing, notably at the beginning of the Alleluia Verse, 'Beatus vir qui suffert tentationem' (blessed is the man who suffers temptation). Whether the dissonance on 'suffert' was intended by Graziani is unclear, a matter of taste (then and now) and dependent on one's view of how to realise the accompanimental harmony – but there is plenty of precedent for such a clash.

(Biographical information about Graziani from
Lars Berglund's edition of Graziani Op.1)