

1. April. 5 and 26 Chester. Marian Antiphons and Motets
Marian Antiphons and Motets (Palestrina, Lassus, Victoria, Festa,
Rogier, Guerrero, A. Lobo, Vivanco)

Saturday 5 April We had the Centre to ourselves - no pet rabbits,
toy trains or junior indoor football. A row of toys on the
mantelpiece behind Roger's head sat smiling in anticipation of our

concert and a large picture of an Easter Bunny stared down at the soprano section with a startled expression. We enjoyed our usual discussion of guessing which languages were written on the blackboard before we settled down to singing.

There were 21 singers in the morning, the one tenor supported by two recorders and the promise of two more tenors to join him in the afternoon. The other voices were fairly equal numerically, so Roger tactfully reminded the basses that they could easily overpower the rest of us.

Non Timeas, Maria, by Victoria (Fear not, Mary, for you have found favour with the Lord) SATB.

Written while Victoria was in Venice, published in 1572, Roger told us Victoria studied with Palestrina while in Italy and we should regard both of the pieces by him that we would be singing as being essentially Italian rather than Spanish. Also that although Victoria created deeply religious music we should regard him as producing basically cheerful music. We found it a beautiful piece, very rewarding to sing and by the third reading Roger succeeded in coaxing us into listening to our balance. The final section (Et vocabitur altissimi filius) was particularly effective, leaving a warm glow as the repetitions of altissimi filius drew the piece to a quiet conclusion.

Nativitas tua Dei Genitrix Virgo, Palestrina (Thy nativity, O Virgin Mother, proclaims Joy throughout the whole world)

Published Rome 1563 SATB

Roger included this because it was not a very well-known piece, but although we enjoyed singing it, it was not so immediately appealing as the first piece and we moved on fairly quickly.

Gaude Virgo Maria, Victoria (Rejoice, Virgin Mary, you have destroyed all heresies, alleluia)

Bearing in mind the comments Roger made for our opening piece, we found this another very enjoyable setting, which we worked on until it was time for lunch.

Ave Regina Caelorum, Orlandus Lassus (1532-1594) (Hail Queen of Heaven)

Although Lassus was Franco-Flemish, he worked a lot in Italy until 1554. Roger told us that Lassus was renowned for his love of puns, both in music and language also pointed out the recurrence of the opening four notes of the plainsong setting of *Salve Regina*.

The richness of setting for six voices SSATTB was immediately noticeable and we found this another beautiful piece to sing.

Assumpta est Maria, Sebastian de Vivanco (1550-1622) (Mary has been taken up into heaven)

Roger described this less-well-known composer as a music academic. He was Maestro di Capilla at Seville Cathedral from 1602 and professor of music at Salamanca University from 1603. This was written in 6 parts, originally with no parts for tenors or basses, but Roger dropped the pitch so that we could explore the piece. We found it rather a plain setting and after singing it through twice we moved on.

Ave Virgo sanctissima, Francisco Guerrero (1528-1599)

This Spanish composer was briefly a pupil of Morales and succeeded him as choirmaster at Malaga cathedral, then returning to Seville.

Unlike Victoria and Morales, Guerrero worked entirely in Spain and, except for the Vivanco piece this was the only truly Spanish piece that we sang. Roger said that it was regarded as the finest work by Guerrero in a 5 part setting (SSATB). We all agreed that it was a very good piece and thoroughly enjoyed working on it.

Regina Caeli Laetare, Lassus (SSAATTB) (Queen of Heaven, rejoice)

Sadly, we only had time to sing through this a couple of times before it was time to go, with the possibility of returning to it in three weeks time.

Saturday 26 April Once more we had the place to ourselves. (I noticed that the Easter bunny had disappeared, but the toys were still in place and yet another unknown language had appeared on the blackboard).

We had a good turn out again singers, including four tenors, possibly boosted by the necessity of holding the AGM at lunch time. Another room across the corridor from our rehearsal room had been prepared for the AGM in the hope that we would not overrun the length of the normal lunch break. As with most AGMs the hope was not realised, but Roger added another quarter of an hour to the end of the day for those who were able to stay.

The room was arranged for double choir this time as two of the Lassus pieces would require it.

Sancta Maria, succure miseris, Victoria (SATB) (Holy Mary, give succour to the suffering)

This had been written for the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows, to commemorate the unusual event of snow having fallen in Rome on 5 August. It was a very gentle and loving prayer, with the themes passed satisfyingly from part to part, sometimes in thirds, and Roger drew our attention to the use Victoria made of silence to increase effect.

Regina Coeli, Constanzo Festa (c.1490-1545)

Festa probably came from Tuscany, but studied in France before coming to prominence in Italy during the papacy of Pope Leo X. He has been described as probably the most important composer between the periods of Josquin and Palestrina, who wrote mostly secular music and was possibly related to Sebastiano Festa. Roger

had chosen this early piece to show the beginning of the move towards the later more tonal style. Set for SATBB, this also was an enjoyable, gentle setting with a canon between Soprano and Tenor, with effective use of repeated short motifs.

Alma Redemptoris Mater, Lassus (Gracious mother of the Redeemer)

This was our first eight part work and well worth waiting for. Set for two equal 4-voice choirs in a style associated with Munich, then the hub of Humanism, where Lassus worked between 1556-1581, it suited our choirs' close proximity as it was written for two independent choirs that were not spatially separated. It was a very sumptuous setting and we thoroughly enjoyed working at it for the rest of the morning's session.

After our protracted lunch break we settled back to a slight re-arrangement for a setting of: *Ave Maria*, Alonso Lobo (1555-1617)

Lobo was maestro di capilla at Toledo cathedral from 1593 and then Seville from 1603. Written in the style of Palestrina, the two choirs were now divided S1, S2, A1, T1 and S3, A2, T2, B. The four voices of choir 2 sang the Canon with choir 1 singing the Resolutio. Roger pointed out that each line of choir 2 was answered by a different voice in choir 1: Canon 1 sung by B2 was resolved by T1, Canon 2 (T2) by S2, Canon 3 (A2) by S1 and Canon 4 (S3) by A1. Although each choir began singing as an ensemble, the four strands of choir 2 gradually drew apart, each still answered by the relevant voice in choir 1 which was then weaving in with the start of the next canon. This gave the effect of eight independent lines which drew together again as the piece finished. This academic exercise could have been a boring, but it produced very satisfying music and gave this apparently simple setting a further dimension. We could have spent the whole afternoon unravelling it but we had more music to explore.

Regina Caeli Laetare, Philippe Rogier (c. 1561 - 1596) (Queen of Heaven, rejoice)

Rogier was born in Flanders but spent most of his life in the royal chapel of Philip II of Spain in Madrid. Eighty per cent of his compositions were lost in the Lisbon earthquake of 1775 and although he was only 35 when he died he was very highly regarded as a musician. Again for double choir, this had a similar vocal division as the Lobo without the cross responses. It proved a very joyous setting with each of the four lines of text separated by a series of alleluias and, as with the Lobo, we could have spent more time on it but there was one more piece that was beckoning as five o'clock approached and those with trains to catch had to creep away.

Salve Regina, Lassus (Hail Queen, mother of pity) This was for two choirs, this time S1, S2, Al. B1 and A2, T1, T2, B2. The bass line of Choir 2 held the opening of the plainsong setting which we had noticed in his setting of *Ave Regina Caelorum* on the previous Saturday. The text passed from choir to choir, eight parts being used for phrases such as "*et spes nostra, salve*", "*advocata nostra*" "*ad nos converte*" and the final "*O dulcis virgo Maria*". Once again, we could have spent much longer on this piece, but we had been eager to sample as many Marian antiphons as possible and, as Roger said, we could carry on for a year and still not reach the end.

Jeanette Burden