

Bible Journal – Singing the Bible *by Mary Alexander*

The Rector's first, excellent, entry in the Bible Journal made me realise how much of the Bible I know by heart through music. Who else but a clergyman would know instantly the words of Philippians 4.4-7? But as soon as I read the first words I knew the rest from an anthem: 'Rejoice in the Lord alway and again I say rejoice .. be careful for nothing ... let your petitions be made manifest ... and the peace of God ...' The music is not that of Robert's anthem by Purcell, but an anonymous Tudor composer once thought to be John Redford. The computer spell-checker thinks that 'alway' is wrong, but that is how it was translated in 1611. However, comparing the texts shows that the words of my anthem are not from the Authorised Version, which suggests that the motet was written before 1611. Instead of 'your moderation' it has 'your softness', a rather nice concept, and comparable to 'your gentleness' in the NRSV. Tyndale in 1526 also used 'softnesse', but the text of the anthem is not from his Bible. This is one tiny example of the choice of words that translators have to consider.

In the later 16th and early 17th centuries there was a flowering of choral music, both for churches and for singing at home. The church music is called Tudor although it continued into the reign of James I. Perhaps the English Bibles that most of these composers grew up with inspired them, though some, such as Byrd, also used Latin texts. (He was a Roman Catholic.) As some of the composers died before 1611 they must obviously have used other translations, of which there were several.

These Tudor motets show inspired 'word painting' which Purcell, much later, also excelled at. In 'Alleluia. I heard a voice' by Thomas Weelkes (c.1575-1623) the text is from the first few verses of Revelation 19, but Weelkes has picked out only a few words, which have a more dramatic effect on their own. Four of the five parts repeat 'alleluia' in imitation of the many voices heard in heaven, and then the first bass describes a single voice 'as of strong thund'rings' with rolling semi-quavers. The AV has 'mighty thunderings': possibly Weelkes used another translation, or perhaps 'strong' was easier to set to music. The motet continues 'Salvation and glory and honour be unto the Lord our God for evermore', words which actually come before the thundering voice verse in the Bible.

One of my favourite motets which I know by heart is 'If ye love me' by Thomas Tallis (c.1501-1585), from John 14. 15-17. In this case the words are identical to the 1611 version – which is often the case, except for 'bide with you forever' rather than 'abide'. 'Bide' was used by Tyndale, but perhaps Tallis thought it sounded better musically, though he also wrote 'spirit' to be sung as two syllables, as Tyndale used 'sprete of truthe'. The words are beautiful, and the music makes them even more so. 'If we love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter ...'

A long anthem by Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) sets most of the nine verses of Psalm 47, using Coverdale's translation from the Book of Common Prayer, rather than the AV of the Bible. 'O clap your hands together, all ye people: O sing unto God with the voice of melody. For the Lord is high, and to be feared ... God is gone up with a merry noise: and the Lord

with the sound of the trumpet. O sing praises, sing praises unto our God ...' (Actually, Coverdale used 'trump', but the setting certainly sounds better with 'trumpet'.

Another psalm setting is 'Call to remembrance' by Richard Farrant, who died in 1581, using verses 5 – 6 of psalm 25, from the Prayer Book. It is rather different from the 1611 version, and different again from the NRSV. 'Call to remembrance O Lord, thy tender mercies: and thy loving-kindness, which hath been ever of old. O remember not the sins and offences of my youth: but according to thy mercy think thou on me O Lord, for thy goodness.'

Sometimes a phrase has a particular resonance because of the music. An example for me is Gibbon's 'Almighty and everlasting God' with the words 'stretch forth thy right hand'. They are sung with a long note on 'stretch' which somehow seems very powerful. The words are from the collect for the third Sunday after Epiphany, in the Prayer Book. 'Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen'. The composer isolates and intensifies the phrase 'stretch forth thy right hand', making it into a plea.

Of course, when remembering words set to music in four or five parts, one remembers the phrases repeated for musical effect, rather than the straightforward text, but for me, the music gives the words an important extra dimension. Anthems of this period are my favourite music, whether English, Italian or Spanish, which means some of it is in Latin, so I have also learnt Latin quotations by heart, by the simple process of singing them.

Mary Alexander, January 2011.