

A Musical Ramble around Psalm 42

The Psalms of David have been the song-book of Judaism for three millennia; along with the Song of Solomon, all human life is there.

The Christian church has kept the psalms at the centre of its worship for 2000 years. We don't know much about how they would have been said or sung in King David's time, or later in the Temple, but the structure of the Hebrew suggests an antiphonal style of cantor and response may have been used, rather like Plainsong at St Michael's today.

Nearly 50 years of singing in parish church choirs means I am steeped in, and slightly prefer, the harmonised Anglican Chant format which allows both singers and organist more scope for emotion and word-painting.

One of my favourites is Psalm 42. Scholars may dispute whether it was actually written around 990BC in the reign of David or as late as 520BC for the restored Temple in Jerusalem. What seems clear is that it's one of the psalms composed by or for the sons of Korah, a group of professional temple musicians.

This psalm moves from longing and love, through doubt and distraction, to acceptance and affirmation; a journey of faith and a parable of life itself.

My favourite music for it has to be Herbert Howells' anthem, setting the first three verses and completed in January 1941 in wartime Cheltenham. The organ part is rich and smooth with a hint of some blue notes; the long vocal lines more sparse with beautiful melodies and decoration.

Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks;
so longeth my soul after thee, O God.
My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God;
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?
My tears have been my meat day and night;
while they daily say unto me, Where is now thy God?

The Psalter wasn't printed with the Book of Common Prayer until the Restoration edition in 1662. At that time the Readings were updated to the King James Version of 1611, but the psalms and canticles were still taken from the 1535 Bible of Miles Coverdale (briefly Bishop of Exeter from 1551 to 1553), presumably because clergy and choirs had already been reciting and singing that translation for more than a century.

Coverdale had little Greek and Hebrew, so his much-loved English translation, made while in exile in Antwerp, is based heavily on Luther's German Bible. A 16th century example of European cooperation!

My next favourite setting of Ps 42 is the flowing 4-part Renaissance polyphony of Palestrina, "Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum." The words are from the Psalterium Romanum, subtly different from the Latin Vulgate, as, back in the late 4th century, St Jerome had several goes at translating the Psalms into the church's new liturgical language.

Rome, Venice and pre-conquest England kept his earliest version, and their composers followed suit. Others, like Buxtehude in 17th century Lubeck, had "Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ..." to deal with!

Before Palestrina, Ockeghem (c.1410-1497) had set the same words for the Tract in his Requiem, while England's Thomas Tallis (1505-1585) wrote a tune for Psalm 42 for Archbishop Parker's proposed metrical Psalter.

Whether to have a robed choir or a music group is not just a question from recent decades. What you got as a Georgian Christian in England depended on whether your church was rich or poor. The chapel of the Duke of Chandos had professional soloists, choir and orchestra to perform Handel's latest anthem. Such as "As pants the hart" composed in 1717 in 7 movements for various combinations of soprano, tenor and bass plus orchestra.

The poor country church of Rev Pauperibus had a West Gallery Band of amateur musicians helping you to sing Tate & Brady's "New Version" metrical paraphrase of the psalm. Selected verses are still in our hymn books after 300 years.

As pants the hart for cooling streams,
When heated in the chase,
So longs my soul, O God, for thee,
And thy refreshing grace.

In the 19th century, it was Mendelssohn's turn with "Wie der Hirsch schreit nach frischem Wasser," a substantial 7 movement anthem. I'm not aware of any Anglican composer tackling Psalm 42 since the perfectly sculpted emotional intensity of Howells.

However, with teenage enthusiasm and not a little skill, in the 1960s one Gloria Merle Huffman from North Carolina composed an a cappella setting of the entire psalm from the King James Version. Her hymn-like piece has rhythmic drive, nice word-painting and interesting harmonic shifts.

The well-known worship song written by Martin Nystrom of Seattle in 1981 is fine, but like many of its type only has happy verses and omits all the angst of the full psalm.

As the deer pants for the water,
So my soul longs after You.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship You.

The chorus instead alludes to Ps 28:8 (strength and shield), the second verse is the familiar "God/Jesus, you're my best friend" and his third uses Ps 119:72 (gold or silver) and a reversal of Ps 17:8 making God the apple of his eye! I don't find faith that cosy or easy.

Coming full circle, my internet-based ramble brought me to "Sons of Korah", an Australian acoustic Christian band who sing psalms to thoughtful and atmospheric music. The sound of Psalm 42 from their 2008 Album may well be catching the essence of the shepherd boy David.

So, there are many different ways of approaching Psalm 42. Which works for you and which are your favourite psalms?

Richard Barnes. March 2014.