



Pinner Music Festival 2021 7th – 13th June

Writing the Libretti

Sharp-eyed readers will notice that I wrote both libretti for the PMF-commissioned works this year. I have been writing libretti for 10 years, collaborating with **Russell Pascoe**, starting with texts for his ***Secular Requiem***, and including the substantial cantata, ***A Different Child***, based on the Apocryphal Infancy Gospels. The first of these also catalysed my return to writing poetry. But creating a libretto is a bit different.

Obviously, the words and phrases need to be ‘singable’, but there is more. One needs to avoid very strong metres, as they can intrude on the composer’s own rhythms. Russell often told me not to be “too poetic”, as this too can conflict with the role of the music. Topic and length are agreed early, and vocal forces mostly decided. An overall structure must be devised that suits the intended compositional outcome, the words and the music. At this stage, the librettist gets on with things on their own.

I first immerse myself in the topic, reading widely for different angles and ideas for themes and specifics. This absorption stage takes the longest, many months in the case of ***A Brother Abroad***. Gradually, I get a sense of what I want to say and how. Within an outline structure, there needs to be an implicit shape, with development and contrasts. Then it is just a matter of sitting down and writing. If I have done enough preparation, the first draft flows quite quickly, within a few days. Such a pace can help with cohesion and balance, as well as in keeping a sense of direction. Then there are weeks of editing and refinement, constantly revisiting it with fresh eyes. The composer will not see anything until version 3 or 4!

Thereafter, there is an iterative process between composer and librettist, varying in extent. During composition, the text will often need to be tweaked – additions and subtractions, redrafts, or changes in the sequence – as the music takes shape. I remember, on a family outing, getting a call from Russell saying: “I need two extra lines now, as this chorus is building up nicely to a climax ...” The joys of mobile phones!

A librettist might make suggestions about musical aspects, as well as commenting on draft scores, and how they match the words. (I had to clarify for Martin that the phrase “*La Rossa*” referred to Bologna itself, not a local wine - different music required!) Equally, the composer may suggest that words, phrases, or even whole stanzas can be altered to fit the evolving music. Generally, the composer gets their way at this stage. Later, proofreading the score is crucial. The final and very special stage is hearing the first full rehearsal and performance, where one hears one’s words lifted to quite another plane by the music.

With Russell's anthem, *Hymn to St John the Baptist* for PMF 2021, after re-reading the Gospels and the Apocryphal Gospels, I sent him a couple of drafts. He gently but firmly conveyed they were not what he needed, suggesting trying something more like a prayer. The early drafts did however help me to develop the ideas, and some of the phrasing. With his helpful steer, the final text then flowed quite readily.

A Brother Abroad was my first time working with a different composer, which was very enjoyable and valuable. Maybe because **Martin Bussey** has a different style of working (or maybe I have got better?), we needed much less editing of the initial text. The immersion phase was a fascinating journey of discovery about the remarkable subject of our work. I was greatly assisted by two substantial articles written about **Peter of Bologna, Bishop of Corbavia**, and about mediaeval Franciscan Suffragan Bishops, by **Dr Michael Robson OFM** of St Edmund's College, Cambridge. He was very helpful in providing the full articles and responding to queries (e.g., Would Peter have walked or travelled on horseback?), and conveying context. He also kindly reviewed the draft libretto. I gradually gained a sense of a man who – although very much involved in events of the time – rose above them, with a durable and luminous faith.

The 14 stanzas of the libretto open with a quotation of his instruction for the Dedication. Peter then anticipates his day's journey from Greyfriars to Pynnore. Reaching open country, with its attendant dangers, he recalls the time when, as part of a papal peace legation to Robert the Bruce of Scotland, he was ambushed by shavaldours (well-to-do rogues) in the North; despite this, he stayed in England. He reflects on his feelings for this country and for his homeland. He tells of his duties as a Suffragan Bishop, before a pivotal stanza reflecting on his core faith. Glancing at the secular matters that distract the Archbishop, he affirms his obedience to God and, like his close contemporary and fellow-Franciscan, William of Ockham: "cleaving the spiritual from the temporal". The final stanzas mark Peter's arrival in Pynnore, the bells and the crowds, his procession and entry, and the acts of consecration and dedication, concluding with his blessing on the church and all who will worship here.

Martin Bussey sent me sound-files of sections of the music as he developed it; there was again a wonderful sense of how he had taken my raw text and then created something very special. It was in tune with all that I had put into the libretto, but illuminated it and shaped it in a remarkable and imaginative way. It is hard to convey just how special it is to hear one's own (by then half-forgotten) words set to exceptional new music.

When you hear the work at its premiere, I hope that you too will be moved by this fine composition that marks the 700th Anniversary of the Church's Dedication, by our Brother – Peter of Bologna, Bishop of Corbavia.

Anthony Pinching