

Music Reflection - 'A May Miscellany'

After variable March winds and almost completely absent April showers we still have been blessed with some lovely May flowers as we arrive in the “merry” month as May is often described. It does seem that May holds rather more than its fair share of opportunities for jollity and rejoicing indeed long before official Bank holidays the year was marked out with special days be they rent days, hiring fairs, or customary events they marked the time of the passing year. These were days to celebrate, days when people would do things, eat things, or make things that they wouldn't normally do and many of them seem have been in May. In my reflection this month I have taken a stroll through some of the events and occasions associated with May and come up with a miscellany of music linked to these. I hope you will come with me on a stroll through the Merry Month of May.

In Britain, as in most parts of Western Europe, May Day marked the end of the harsh Winter months, and optimistically looked forward to the bright and productive Summer. For our ancestors, largely in rural areas, May Day was the major annual festival, especially with music, dancing, and games. There is some evidence that, the Romans had Floralia celebrations and it is thought that May Day could have its origin in the ancient festival dedicated to Flora, the goddess of fruit and flowers. In Celtic Britain, the festival of Beltane (on the eve of May Day) celebrated the coming Spring and its associations of new growth and fertility. A key point of the agricultural year, Beltane meant “Bright fire” and bonfires were lit at night and animals sacrificed to the sun god. In later centuries people would celebrate by dancing round the fires and would walk through the dying embers for luck. The lighting of such fires survived in Scotland until about 200 years ago. The early Christian Church saw these festivals as unruly and pagan and, in an attempt to counter them the first of May was appointed the feast of St. Philip and St. James, but in spite of this attempt to displace the older feasts May Day continued to flourish and proved to be the most resilient of festivals although it did not become a Bank Holiday in England until 1978.

The dawn of May Day is however not without religious observance and for over 500 years the choir of Magdalen College Oxford have been climbing the College Great Tower at 6.00am to welcome the day by singing the *Hymnus Eucharisticus and the Madrigal “Now is the Month of Maying”* to the delight of large crowds gathered below. In this recording the choir is conducted by the wonderfully titled Informator Choristarum and Organist, Mark Williams and the ceremony is introduced by the College President, Dinah Rose. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhwxo2pvp5s&t=0s>

William Byrd (c.1539/40 - 1623) was one of, if not the, greatest Tudor composer whose musical life spanned the reigns of Mary Tudor, Elizabeth I and James I. Byrd was a Roman Catholic and became a Gentleman of the Chapels Royal during Mary's reign as well as organist at Lincoln Cathedral. Although Elizabeth restored the Protestant faith, she had a love of the traditions and the music of the ‘old religion’ and thus Byrd continued to hold his posts during her reign. In later years Byrd's Catholic allegiance grew and on occasion landed him in serious difficulties including suspicion of being involved in the Throckmorton Plot to depose Elizabeth in favour of Mary Queen of Scots. William was exonerated from involvement in the plot but was extensively fined in his later years for recusancy. Although Byrd composed over 470 works in his long life the majority were sacred pieces for both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. One of Byrd's few secular pieces was the madrigal *“This Sweet and Merry Month of May”*, this was included in Thomas Watson's “The First sett, Of Italian Madrigalls Englished”(sic), of 1590. This description is inaccurate as Byrd did not write any Italian madrigals but that does not detract from the beauty of the music. I have included the text here; you might want to note the popular practice of praising Elizabeth in the text as a means of attempting to retain favour at court. The piece is performed by The Sixteen directed by Harry Christophers.

*This sweet and merry month of May,
While Nature wantons in her prime,
And birds do sing, and beasts do play
For pleasure of the joyful time,
I choose the first for holiday,
And greet [Eliza with a rhyme:
O beauteous Queen of second Troy,]
Take well in worth a simple toy.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGPh2OI_baU

By contrast to William Byrd, Thomas Youell was a comparatively little-known composer and madrigalist active in Suffolk around the same period. "***In the Merry Month of May***" is one of very few published works of Youell to survive and is sung here by Seraphim, an invitation-only, solo ensemble formed in 2014 by the outstanding international choir director and opera chorus master, Vetta Wise. Each of the nine talented singers was an experienced solo or ensemble performer and their concerts thrilled audiences all around Suffolk and at venues in Venice, Jersey, Norfolk and Worcestershire. Vetta is now Musical Director of the Pakefield Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1InWjJfB5M>

As I mentioned at the outset, May is the month much associated with the blooming of a variety of flowers signalling the arrival of brighter and longer days. Even reluctant gardeners like me cannot fail to feel our spirits lift as buds turn into blooms and flowers have inspired so much wonderful music over the years. Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) was born in Zwickau in Saxony and he had a musical upbringing encouraged by his father, sadly on the death of his father when he was aged 16 the young Robert was put under pressure to study law but after hearing a performance by Niccolò Paganini he persuaded his mother and his guardian to permit him to study music in Heidelberg. The young Schumann showed considerable talent as a pianist and was probably destined for a career as such when an injury to a finger necessitated a change of direction. Schumann turned successfully to composition, which until 1839 was almost exclusively for the piano, but in 1840 he wrote at least 138 songs including probably his best-known song cycle (Op. 48). The texts for the 16 songs come from the *Lyrisches Intermezzo* by the poet Heinrich Heine, written in 1822–23 and published as part of Heine's *Das Buch der Lieder*. The first song is entitled "***Im wunderschönen Monat Mai***" (in the beautiful month of May) and all 16 songs contain references to flowers. "***Dichterliebe Op 48***" by Robert Schumann is sung here by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau arguably the greatest ever Lieder singer ever. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaXpiqgpEXk>

Although hauntingly beautiful, not all of Schumann's songs are the most uplifting and this is perhaps reflected in the fact that he sadly died in a mental institution at an early age. Clément Philibert Léo Delibes (1836 – 1891) wrote in a very different style, he was a French Romantic composer best known for his ballets and operas. His works include the ballets *Coppélia* (1870) and *Sylvia* (1876) and the opera *Lakmé* (1883), which includes the well-known "Flower Duet".

Leo Delibes was born to parents who both had an interest in music and Leo was encouraged in his musical ambitions becoming a student at the Paris Conservatory. He had a fine singing voice apparently and an interest in the organ, acting as a church organist for much of his life. Although starting his career as a composer with mainly comic-opera Delibes had increasing success with more serious operas and with ballet which continued until his death age 55. "***The Flower Duet***" (***Duo des fleurs / Sous le dôme épais***) is performed by Natalie Dessay (Soprano) & Delohine Haidan (Mezzo Soprano).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMVFXfoaS3w>

What is almost certainly the most well-known flower show in the world takes place in the grounds of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea in May each year when the Royal Horticultural Society hold their Chelsea Flower Show. Originally called the RHS Great Spring Show the show was launched in 1862 in a single large tent at the now-vanished RHS garden in Kensington. Between 1888 and 1911 it was held in the Temple Gardens on the banks of the Thames before moving to its current site at the Royal Hospital in 1913 from which small beginnings it has grown at such a rate as to cause concern regarding its sustainability at Chelsea in terms of overcrowding.

My Godmother held the quaintly named post of “Whitster” at the Royal Hospital, this being the person in charge of the linen and laundry and in my early years an afternoon walk might take us to the Royal Hospital where I have to confess that I recall being much more interested in the fact that my Godmothers apartment in the magnificent Christopher Wren building had stairs to an intriguing basement, rather than the wonderful buildings themselves, or the rather intimidating elderly gentlemen in strange uniforms who seemed to be everywhere. In the 17th century there was no provision for the care of retired or injured soldiers and thus in 1681, responding to the need to look after these soldiers, King Charles II issued a Royal Warrant authorising the building of the Royal Hospital Chelsea to care for those 'broken by age or war', Sir Christopher Wren was commissioned to design and erect the building.

The Royal Hospital was opened on 29th May 1692 which was the birthday of the King and the anniversary of his restoration to the throne in 1660 following the puritan regime during which of course any kind of May celebrations had been strictly prohibited. The anniversary of the opening is celebrated at the Hospital on Founders Day each year on or near “Oak Apple Day” 29th May, so called in commemoration of the fact that the young king escaped from the roundhead army by hiding in an oak tree near Boscobell House following the Battle of Worcester in 1651.

Although there is only an imperfect record of all the music used at the coronation of Charles II, it is certain that the anthem “***O Lord, grant the King a long life***” by William Child (1606 – 1697) was sung. Child had a lifetime association with St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, becoming first a lay-clerk and, from 1632, Master of the Choristers there until the dissolution of the chapel in 1643. After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, Child was re-appointed to St. George's, became Master of the King's Wind Music and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. The anthem is sung here in the first link as part of a reconstruction of the music used for the service by Psallentes, Oltremontano, under the direction of Wim Becu. I think this music just wonderful and if you are of the same mind the please follow the second link for a lot more.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2cMTw8qWhI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muAiEen3F3M&list=PLYu369BJJTkdJQGPW7WTsktcsi7MIZfqw>

Neither the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 – 1791) nor his opera, “***The Marriage of Figaro***” will need much by way of introduction by me. Considered one of the greatest operas ever written, it is a cornerstone of the repertoire and appears consistently among the top ten in the list of most frequently performed operas. In 2017, BBC News Magazine asked 172 opera singers to vote for the best operas ever written. The Marriage of Figaro came in at No. 1 out of the 20 operas featured. You may be interested to know that the opera was composed in 1786, with an Italian libretto written by Lorenzo Da Ponte, an Austrian Jew who eventually became a Roman Catholic Priest and wrote the libretti of Mozart's three most well-known operas. The libretto is based on the 1784 stage comedy by Pierre Beaumarchais, La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro (“The Mad Day, or The Marriage of Figaro”) which was banned in its stage form as the Emperor Joseph II felt it contained much political material that was “unsuitable”.

Da Ponte skilfully wrote the libretto to avoid or replace the offending material but the text had to receive the explicit approval of the Emperor before Mozart started composing. The opera received its premiere at the Burgtheater in Vienna on May Day in 1786 with Mozart conducting from the harpsichord. Such was the success of the production that the number of encores demanded by the audiences was making the performances unduly protracted to the extent that by the 8th May the Emperor had imposed a limit on the number permitted. The following link will take you to an excellent performance of the much-loved comic opera by the Royal College of Music Opera Studio directed by Sir Thomas Allen – this no limit on how much or how little you hear or how many encores you may enjoy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55ik-PzAXsQ>

And last, but by no means the least, may I reflect on the fact that the 26th May is this year Ascension Day when the Church celebrates the return of Jesus Christ to his Father in heaven following his resurrection at Easter and subsequent appearances to his followers during the intervening period. The Ascension is sometimes seen as a mysterious and slightly odd celebration with images of Jesus ascending into the clouds like a rocket! Some find it curious that we should celebrate Christ being taken away from us which is entirely understandable in the short term, but we always have to remember that while, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared and gave comfort to a very small number of close contacts in a very restricted area of Palestine, this was not the object of his coming to earth. God sent his Son to the earth to suffer and die for the sins of all mankind and by his resurrection to give us all hope of eternal life as well as his constant comforting presence with us by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Had Jesus remained alone with the chosen few, we would be left without that hope and comfort which in these troubled times we need and appreciate more than ever.

William Croft (1678 – 1727) was an English composer and both Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, in succession to Jeremiah Clark and Organist of Westminster Abbey, in succession to John Blow. His most familiar works are perhaps; St. Anne, which is the tune to which we sing the hymn ‘O God our help in ages past’ and secondly his exquisite setting of the Funeral Sentences which he composed for the funeral of Queen Anne and which have been used at the funeral of every monarch since then. ***“God is gone up with a merry noise”*** is a joyful celebration of Ascension sung here to perfection in 2013 by the Choir of Salisbury Cathedral under the direction of Christopher Dearnley <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJfUDCob8yw>

Keith Day