

SERMON IN MUSIC

i) Turn thee unto me, O Lord – William Boyce

ii) Lord, let me know mine end – Maurice Greene

Music in Britain during the 18th century struggled to find an identity after the untimely death of Purcell in 1695, and came to be dominated by Handel, who arrived in England as court composer to the Hanoverian royal family when they acceded to the English throne. However, the work of a few native English composers has survived, including that of William Boyce (1710-1779).

Boyce was active not only as an organist and composer, but also as a collector and publisher of music – his great compilation of the best church music of the previous 300 years, entitled ‘Boyce’s Cathedral Music,’ formed the basis of many cathedrals’ musical repertoire until well into the 20th century. As a composer, Boyce is probably most famous for the hymn-tune normally sung to ‘Firmly I believe and truly’, but several of his anthems are still performed, including ‘O where shall wisdom be found’ and this Lenten anthem, ‘Turn thee unto me, O Lord.’ The text is taken from Psalm 25, verses 15-17 and verse 19, and it has three sections. The opening, for five vocal parts in a minor key, is reminiscent of Purcell’s penitential music, but the following soprano duet has a more graceful, Classical feel, and the final fugal passage, again for five voices, is more optimistic in feel.

Maurice Greene was organist of St. Paul’s Cathedral from 1718 to 1756 (following a brief spell in his youth as organist of our neighbouring church, St Dunstan-in-the West) and was another significant composer of church and organ music during this period. The text of ‘Lord, let me know mine end’ is taken from Psalm 139, verses 5-15 – it is a meditation on the vanity of human life and a prayer for deliverance, again suitable for the penitential mood of the season. This anthem also contains a passage for soprano duet, which moves into the major key, in contrast with the A minor tonality of the outer sections, which are characterised by a steady march-like figure in the organ bass. It is certainly Greene’s most accomplished work, and has kept its place in the Lenten repertoire of many choirs.