

Messe de Minuit

Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643 - 1704)

Marc-Antoine Charpentier was one of the most outstanding musicians in late seventeenth-century France. As a young man he had spent three years in Rome studying with one of the leading Italian composers of the day, Giacomo Carissimi, with whom he acquired valuable first-hand experience of opera and oratorio - both relatively new forms at that time. On returning to his native Paris he put these skills to effective use, composing a number of operas and bringing the dramatic oratorio to France for the first time.

Charpentier's output of sacred music was prodigious, comprising some thirty-five oratorios, eleven settings of the Mass, over two hundred motets and the well-known *Te Deum*, the overture of which is used as the signature tune for the Eurovision Song Contest. (It is rather ironic that the music of a composer who faced a continual struggle to achieve recognition during his lifetime should now be familiar to millions of people right across Europe!)

Charpentier was particularly drawn to writing Christmas music, producing instrumental carols, Latin oratorios on Christmas themes, French pastorales and a Christmas mass - the delightful *Messe de Minuit pour Noël*. This piece dates from around 1690 and was probably composed for the great Jesuit church of St. Louis in Paris, where Charpentier held the important post of *maître de musique*.

The use of popular carols in church music had long been an accepted practice. In England carols were more often sung than played, but in France *noëls* figured prominently in the substantial French organ repertoire. The liturgy of Midnight Mass permitted the singing and playing of these Christmas folksongs, and by Charpentier's time quite complex instrumental arrangements were commonplace. However, Charpentier's idea of basing a whole mass on these songs was completely original. Altogether there are eleven *noëls*, most of which are dance-like in character, reflecting the carol's secular origins. In addition to the carol melodies that he adapted to fit various parts of the mass text, Charpentier also composed new material, such as the slow sections 'Et in terra pax' at the beginning of the Gloria and 'Et incarnatus est' in the Credo. It says much for the composer's craftsmanship that these quite different idioms are so seamlessly and convincingly blended together.

Very little of Charpentier's music was published during his lifetime. In common with a number of his colleagues he suffered greatly from the stranglehold exerted on Parisian music by his illustrious but unscrupulous contemporary, Jean-Baptiste Lully. Only in the late twentieth century has Charpentier's music seen a substantial revival, with a consequent re-assessment of his true place in French music.

programme notes by John Bawden

To those using these notes

You are more than welcome to use all or part of these notes for your choral society or church programme, or for educational purposes. Please would you ensure that my authorship is attributed, and would you also kindly advise me by e-mail - info@directoryofchoralmusic.co.uk. If you wish to use these notes for commercial reproduction, e.g. a CD or DVD liner, please contact me first. Thank you.