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AN ETERNAL HARMONY

The Sixteen

HARRY CHRISTOPHERS

Soprano:
Cecilia Osmond (solo)*, Angharad Gruffydd Jones*, Sally Dunkley*, Ruth Dean, Carolyn Sampson, Carys Lane, Fiona Clarke, Deborah Miles Johnson, Julia White

Alto:
Christopher Royall*, Michael Lees*, Andrew Giles*, Angus Davidson* , Caroline Trevor, Philip Newton

Tenor:

Bass:

List includes singers from all tracks. Those marked * appear on James MacMillan's 'O bone Jesu'.

It is now twenty five years since I brought together a group of singers to delve into the glories of Tudor music, not just to revel in the sumptuous sounds of the music but also to convey to a modern audience the wonders of the text. Today, we are still discovering remarkable compositional feats and, with the advent of our Choral Pilgrimage, we are able to present these to a much wider audience than any of us ever dreamed of. It was also my intention that at some stage we would commission a new liturgical work which would also survive the test of time. I do believe that, in James MacMillan, we have found that lasting voice.

Our programme explores the music of the early 1500s from the royal courts of England and Scotland. William Cornysh was the foremost composer from the English Chapel Royal, whose choristers were once described as "more divine than human". More than four hundred miles away, Robert Carver was proving to be the most outstanding composer of the Scottish Chapel Royal. He would have written his mesmeric nineteen-part setting of "O Bone Jesu" as an ornamentation of the private prayers of James IV. Five hundred years later, Scotland's most remarkable composer, James MacMillan, has cast a modern idiom over that very same devotion on the name of Jesus.

The years around the turn of the 15th-16th centuries marked a period of great splendour in the cultivation of religious ceremonial in the royal establishments of both England and Scotland. Magnificent new buildings as well as educational and musical establishments were generously endowed by a succession of pious monarchs intent on carrying out and being seen to carry out their religious duties with due dedication and solemnity.

In 1501, James IV established his Chapel Royal as a collegiate body consisting of 'sixteen canons and as many prebends skilled in song, with six boy clerics, competently trained in song or fit to be instructed therein'; he also had building works carried out at Stirling Castle where the institution was based. Our knowledge of the music that would have been performed by the Chapel Royal is centred on the great choirbook (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Adv. Ms 5.1.15) believed to have been compiled by the pre-eminent Scottish composer Robert Carver (or Carvor, alias Arnat). It offers a fascinating insight into the likely repertory of the institution, containing a Mass by Dufay, the Salve Regina of Cornysh and a number of other works common to the Eton Choirbook, as well as Carver's own music. It is tempting to speculate that the appearance of the English composers came about through the bond forged by the marriage in 1503 of James IV to Margaret, daughter of Henry VII.

Most of what little is known of Carver's biography is gleaned from two margin notes in the choirbook which describe him as a canon of the Augustinian abbey of Scone, and from which his date of birth can be established as 1487 or early 88. The late Isobel Woods Preece made a convincing explanation for the contradictory dates attached to his Mass Dum sacrum mysterium, concluding that the death of James IV at Flodden and the consequently hurried arrangements for the coronation of his successor in September 1513 would have necessitated making use of a Mass that had already been composed a few years earlier (1).

In this recording the Mass Credo is preceded by the antiphon 'Dum sacrum mysterium' sung in the Sarum version that was widely used in Scotland at this time. The Mass takes both its title and its slow-moving tenor cantus firmus from this antiphon for the feast of St Michael (29 September). Certain technical features of Carver's writing are also found in the music of the Eton Choirbook, compiled 15 years or so earlier in England: the wide overall tessitura of over three octaves, the division of the text into sections for a few
voices which contrast with those for the full ensemble, the use of florid melodic figuration and the omission of part of the Credo text. But Carver’s own voice is distinguished by the kaleidoscope of bold passing dissonances, the persistent shifting between chords rooted to the Scottish trumpeters of that name who there is a possibility that Ramsey was related to the Scottish Catholics. The penitential ceremony performed after Compline and one part of the Devotion of the Name of Jesus, a set of laments. Some, such as Ramsey’s O vos omnes, settings of sacred texts for that were direct tributes while others, notably those by Tomkins, Weelkes and East when David heard, clothed their expressions of grief in texts drawn from the Old Testament, and in particular those lamenting the deaths of Absalom and Jonathan. How are the mighty fall’n also drew from Ramsey an impassioned response, full of affective harmonies and gestures, the boldest one being reserved for the third section, where the words ‘How are the mighty fall’n’ are reintroduced with a daring dissonance.

Two composers named William Cornynsh, probably father and son, were active in London musical circles in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The elder one was appointed Master of the Choristers at Westminster Abbey in 1479, admitted to the Fraternity of St Nicholas (or the London Guild of Parish Clerks) in the following year, lived near the Abbey and was buried in the churchyard of St Margaret’s Westminster in 1502. In addition to his duties as a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (he was recorded as attending the interment of Henry VII and the coronation of Henry VIII in 1509), the younger man achieved renown as a court composer, a leading figure in the plays and entertainments favoured by the young Henry VIII, who accompanied the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520.

Until recently both the secular songs in the Fayrfax manuscript (London, British Library Add.Mss.5465) and the Latin sacred music that is preserved in the Eton Choirbook and elsewhere have been attributed to the William Cornynsh who died in 1523, but a recent re-examination of the evidence has led David Skinner (2) to conclude that the Latin music should in fact be credited to the older man. Several anomalies are resolved by the convincing arguments he presents, not least the presence of what are clearly mature works by Cornynsh in the Eton Choirbook, which was assembled for use at the College between 1490 and 1504.

Founded by Henry VI in 1440 as the
‘College Royal of Our Lady’, Eton supported a highly skilled choir which was required by the foundation statutes to process into the chapel each evening and sing a Marian antiphon ‘meliori modo quo sciverint’ (literally, ‘in the best manner they know’) before the image of the Virgin. The elaborate polyphonic settings of Salve Regina in the Eton Choirbook would have been performed at these ceremonies as part of an act of collective devotion. Cornysh’s exceptionally fine setting is scored for sonorous five-part choir and makes characteristic use of the contrast between full and reduced-voice textures. His Ave Maria, Mater Dei, another votive text, is sung by men’s voices only.

SALLY DUNKLEY © 2002

(1) Isobel Woods Preece, ‘Our awin Scottis use’: music in the Scottish church up to 1603 (Glasgow, 2000)


JAMES MACMILLAN WRITES OF HIS SETTING OF ‘O BONE JESU’

Listening to Robert Carver’s 19-part motet O bone Jesu is always a bitter-sweet experience for me. As well as feeling delight and awe at the complex beauties of this marvellous motet from pre-Reformation Scotland, there is also sadness at how such a rich culture was brought to such an abrupt and violent cessation by the political and theological turmoil of the 16th century.

For various reasons I have always felt an empathy with Robert Carver and for a while I secretly harboured a wish to re-visit this glorious text and clothe it in my own 21st century Scottish musical language. When Harry Christophers offered me a commission for The Sixteen in a programme which would include the early Scottish masterpiece, I couldn’t believe my luck. The new motet does not make any allusions to the old one but I was struck by the possibility, explored in the Carver, of highlighting the repeated word ‘Jesu’ which occurs twenty times in all.

The same two-note falling motif is used for every occurrence of the word, but it is harmonized differently each time and gradually rises semi-tonally in texture, the last ‘Jesu’ being harmonized from above, as it were. All the extra inter-linking text is stitched together with a number of free-flowing, episodic motifs. A whole range of textures from solo voices, sparse two-and-three part and multi-voiced contrapuntal and homophonic combinations are used to bind the text together. Sometimes each note and syllable of a line are sung by a different solo voice, rotating the order through each section of the choir. This is combined with sighing, sliding effects in other voices. The final phrase ‘ dulcis Jesu’ rises slowly from the low voices, gathering the full choir in an eight-part polyphonic texture towards a final ecstatic high ‘Jesu’ on three soprano solo voices.

This motet is dedicated to my twins, Aidan and Clare, who made their first Holy Communion at the time of its completion in the spring of 2002.

JAMES MACMILLAN

PLAINCHANT ANTIPHON - DUM SACRUM MYSTERIUM

Dum sacrum mysterium cerneret Johannes, Archangelus Michael tuba cecinit, Ignosc Domine Deus noster Qui aperies librum et solves signacula ejus. Alleluia.

While John surveys the divine mystery, Archangel Michael sounds the trumpet, O forgiving Lord our God, Who lays open the book and reveals His signs. Alleluia.

CREDO

Credo in unum Deum. Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum, Iesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum, et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum, non factum, consubstantialem Patri, per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui, propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem, descendit de coelo. Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato; passus et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum scripturas; et ascendit in coelum, sedet ad dexteram
O kind Jesus, O most loving Jesus,
O most sweet Jesus, O Jesus, son of the virgin
Mary filled with devotion.
O sweet Jesus, according to thy great mercy
have mercy on me.
O most clement Jesus, I pray thee by that most
precious blood which thou wast pleased to shed
for sinners that thou wash away my sin and
look upon me, wretched and unworthy sinner,
even as I call upon this name of Jesus.
O name of Jesus, sweet name, name of Jesus,
delightful name, name of Jesus, gentle name;
for what is Jesus but our saviour?
Therefore kind Jesus, for the sake of thy name
save me lest I perish, and let me not see ruin
whom thou hast made out of nothing.
O kind Jesus, let not my sinfulness be my ruin.
I beg thee, most loving Jesus, let me not be lost
whom thy goodness has made. O sweet Jesus,
acknowledge what is thine and wipe away all
that is not.
O most loving Jesus. O most longed-for Jesus,
O most gentle Jesus,
O Jesus, permit me to enter into thy kingdom,
sweet Jesus.
O vos omnes
O vos omnes qui transitis per viam, attendite et videte: si est dolor aliquid sicut dolor meus. O all ye who pass by the way, stop and see, if there be sorrow like unto my sorrow.

HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALL’N
How are the mighty fall’n in the midst of the battle. O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thy high places.

O Jonathan, woe is me for thee, O Jonathan, my brother Jonathan, very kind hast thou been to me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fall’n and the weapons of war destroyed.

SALVE REGINA

Hail, O Queen, mother of mercy; our life, our sweetness and our hope, hail!

To you we cry out, exiled children of Eve; to you we sigh as we mourn and weep in this valley of tears. O then, our advocate, turn those merciful eyes of yours towards us; and after our exile here, show us to the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus. Virgin mother of the church, everlasting gateway to glory, be our refuge before the face of the Father and the Son. O gentle! Virgin gentle, Virgin holy, Virgin sweet, O Mary, hear the prayers of all who dutifully cry to you. O holy! Pour out our prayers to your Son, crucified, bruised and scourged for our sake, pierced with thorns, given gall to drink. O sweet Mary, hail!

AVE MARIA, MATER DEI
Ave Maria, Mater Dei, Regina caeli, Domina mundi, Imperatrix inferni: Miserere mei et totius populi Christiani, Et ne permittas nos mortaliter peccare Sed tuam sanctissimam voluntatem adimplere. Amen.

Hail Mary, Mother of God, Queen of heaven, Mistress of the world, Empress of hell:

have mercy on me and on all Christian people, and let us not fall into mortal sin but wholly fulfil your most holy will. Amen.

O BONE JESU à 19
Text as track 13

James MacMillan’s O bone Jesu was commissioned by The Sixteen with funds from The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Southern and South East Arts.

Dum Sacrum mysterium (Carver) *
Credo (Carver)*
O Bone Jesu a 19 (Carver)*
Recording Producer: Mark Brown
Recording Engineer: Mike Clements, Floating Earth

O bone Jesu (MacMillan), Three motets from the Glasgow Euing Col. and When David heard (Ramsey)
Recording Producer: Mark Brown
Recording Engineer: Mike Hatch, Floating Earth
Recorded at St Michael’s Church, Highgate, July 4 2002

Ave Maria*, Salve Regina (Cornysh)*
Recording Producer: Mark Brown
Recording Engineer: Antony Howell
*Originally released on Collins Classics.

Photography Graham Topping and Andrew Giles

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