The Flower of All Virginity
Eton Choirbook Volume IV
The Sixteen
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS

Kellyk
Nesbett
Fayrfax
Browne

THE VOICES OF CLASSIC fm
Our edition represents very much the grass roots of our work and our overwhelming desire to rejoice in the survival of this great music.

Harry Christophers.

---

I remember well, some years ago, sitting in the library at Eton College with Christopher Page and recording a programme for BBC Radio 3 about the Eton Choirbook, by far the most outstanding of a handful of choirbooks to survive the Reformation. We turned the parchment pages of this vast book, admiring the vividly illuminated capitals, marvelling at some of the, obviously frequently performed, motets, the corners of which were heavily thumbed by fingers of a past century. My abiding thought was how incredibly talented these sixteen choristers must have been to sing this vast book, admiring the vividly illuminated capitals, marvelling at some of the, obviously seven-part, reserved for special occasions. This recording includes two such pieces, John Browne’s eight-part O Maria Salvatoris mater and Kelly’s seven-part Gaude flore virginali. Standing as they do at the head of the Eton Choirbook, they represent the height of splendour. Music such as this can hardly have been undertaken lightly, even by the most proficient of singers.

---

Eton College was founded by a man in order to teach other men how best to serve in a male-dominated society; but it was a woman who lay at its conceptual heart. It is characteristic of late medieval devotion to the person of the Virgin Mary that Henry VI chose to dedicate his new institution to her, and name it ‘the College Roiall of Our Ladie of Eton beside WIndesor’. And it was natural that the great book of polyphonic music copied early in the sixteenth century expressly for the use by the choir of Eton College chapel should contain largely music written in honour of the Blessed Virgin. Today we think of the Eton Choirbook as a collection of music – majestic, extravagant, virtuosic music, which satisfies many listeners as sound alone. In the late Middle Ages the contents of the manuscripts would have been regarded more as appropriate statements of allegiance; not so much loyalty to God, a belief so basic as to need no expression, but rather obedience to the woman chosen by God to bear his Son, the saint who might most potently act as mediator between God and man, and assist the soul in its quest for salvation.

In the same way that painters and sculptors conventionally represented the Virgin as the ideal woman, so medieval poets saw in her the image of feminine perfection. She is the flower of all virginity, described in the language used equally to address the earthly lover.

According to the original statutes of Eton College, members of the choir were to assemble each evening in the chapel before the image of the Virgin, and sing ‘in the best manner of which they have knowledge’ an antiphon in her honour. During Lent they were to perform the ‘Salve Regina;’ the choirbook offered them the choice of no fewer than fifteen different settings of that text. On feast-days during Lent and at some other times of the year they could select ‘some other antiphon of the Blessed Virgin’, using appropriate words. Before some of its pages were lost, the Eton Choirbook contained more than forty different Marian antiphons, some of them seasonal in tone, some related to specific acts of devotion or petition – prayers for protection against the plague, for example – and some of a more general nature. For everyday use there were pieces of modest dimensions. Other works, sometimes of breathtaking size and complexity, were probably reserved for special occasions. This recording includes two such pieces, John Browne’s eight-part O Maria Salvatoris mater and Kelly’s seven-part Gaude flore virginali. Standing as they do at the head of the Eton Choirbook, they represent the height of splendour. Music such as this can hardly have been undertaken lightly, even by the most proficient of singers.
In these two works, qualities such as superabundance of melody, intricacy of texture, richness of sonority and the interplay of buoyant rhythms serve to express the joy of the text. More intimate word-music relationships are rare. Phrases that refer to ‘sorry’ or ‘sins’ receive none of the special attention a later composer might have lavished on them, and instead are subsumed into the setting as a whole. To achieve variety, the composer looked into the form of the poetry rather than to its specific content. In *Gaude flore virginali* the sevenfold repetition of the word ‘Gaude’ (rejoice) provided Kellyk with an irresistible architectural plan; here changes of texture serve to mark off stanzas and half-stanzas from one another. John Browne might have proceeded in broadly similar fashion in *Salve Regina*, one scored for a choir of six-part choir). It may also be more than coincidence that all three works are in fifteenth-century. Where other works in the Eton Choirbook were imported from choirs of Franciscan origin. Perhaps the most striking difference between man and God, the carols either address the Virgin in her role as mediatrix or focus on the Eucharistic sacrifice. Whereas Stabat Mater celebrates the Passion, the *Gaude* is a joyful hymn of praise to the Virgin. The carol into the service of piety, and there is still a Franciscan ring about the words set by Richard Sheryngham and Browne, bluntly plain and direct. Perhaps Cornysh knew Davy’s *Salve Regina*, since the poetic form of his text is the same as Kellyk’s, lacking only the neat symmetry of the ‘Gaude’ acclamations. Instead he attempts a more sophisticated reading; sometimes he emphasizes the stanzaic structure of the poem; elsewhere he cuts off stanzas and half-stanzas from one another. John Browne might have proceeded in broadly similar fashion in *O Maria Salvatoris mater*, since the poetic form of his text is as simple as Kellyk’s, lacking only the neat symmetry of the ‘Gaude’ acclamations. Instead he attempts a more sophisticated reading; sometimes he emphasizes the stanzaic structure of the poem; elsewhere he directs it by highlighting important phrases. Ingenuity of design combines with richness of sonority and a marvellous display of vocal fireworks to produce one of the most arresting works in the choirbook.

Browne composed two five-part settings of the ‘Salve Regina’, one scored for a choir of restricted vocal range, almost certainly men’s voices, and the version performed here, which is for a more brilliant mixed-voice combination. Evidently it was written for use during Holy Week, for the music is structured around a plainchant melody ‘Maria ergo unxit’, which forms part of the Mandatum service sung on Maundy Thursday. As the choir makes its fervent prayer to the Virgin, the tenors recall the act of Mary Magdalen washing Jesus’ feet, drying them with her hair and anointing them with oil. In addition to votive antiphons, the Eton Choirbook pays homage to the Virgin through the words of the Magnificat. There were once 24 settings of this text in the manuscript, but damage to the book has resulted in the loss of more than half of them. One that survived is by Nesbitt, a composer with English connections but possibly of Scottish origin; his five-part Magnificat is also found in the roughly contemporary Carver Choirbook, a collection that has close links with the Scottish Chapel Royal. Where other works in the Eton repertoire stand out for their florid vocal lines and massiveness of effect, this piece is remarkable more for the bold, declaratory quality of its word-setting and for its resourceful use of imitative counterpoint.

Hugh Kellyk
*Gaude flore virginali*

---

Gaude flore virginali
Honoreque speciali
Transcendens splendiferum
Angelorum principatum
Et sanctorum decoratum
Dignitate numerum.

Gaude sponsa cara Dei,
Nam ut clara lux diei
Solis datur lumine,
Sic tu facis orbem vere
Tuae pacis resplendere
Lucis plenitudine.

Gaude splendens vas virtutum,
Cuis pensendis est ad nutum
Tota caeli curia:
Te benignam et felicem
Veneratur in gloria.

Gaude nexu voluntatis
Et amplexus caritatis
Inuncta sic Altissimo,
Ut ad votum consequaris
Quicquid virgo postularis
A Jesu dulcissimo.

© JOHN MILSOM

Rejoice, who in the flower of your maidenhood And in the special honour due to you Surpass all the shining Hosts of angels And the decorated company of saints In worthiness. Rejoice beloved spouse of God, For as the clear light of day Shines forth in the sun’s rays, So truly do you make the earth Brilliant with the fullness Of the light of your peace. Rejoice radiant vessel of goodness, On whose assent hangs All the government of heaven: You the kind, the blessed, The worthy mother of Jesus They venerate in glory. Rejoice that you are so united in the bond of will And the embrace of love With the Most High That you obtain the promise Of whatever virgin prayer you make Of your sweetest Jesus.
Rejoice mother of the poor
That the father of all ages
Will grant to all who honour you
A fitting reward here on earth
And a blessed place on high
In the kingdom of heaven.

Rejoice virgin mother of Christ
That you alone were counted worthy,
Most dutiful maiden,
To enjoy the great honour
Of taking the place
Next to the holy Trinity.

Rejoice, who as pure virgin and mother
Remain ever sure and secure,
That these seven joys
Will not cease or diminish
But will endure and flourish
Through eternal ages. Amen.

Anon
Ah, my dear, ah, my dear son!

‘Ah, my dear, ah, my dear son!’
Said Mary: ‘Ah my dear;
Kiss thy mother, Jesu,
With a laughing cheer.’

This enders night I saw a sight
All in my sleep:
Mary, that may, she sang lullay
And sore did weep.

To keep she sought full fast about
Her son fro cold:
Joseph said, ‘Wife, my joy, my life,
Say what ye would.’

‘Nothing, my spouse, is in this house
Unto my pay;
My Son, a king, that made all thing,
Lieth in hay.’

‘Ah, my dear, …
laughing cheer.’

‘My mother dear, amend your cheer,
And now be still;
Thus for to lie, it is soothingly
My Father’s will.’
John Nesbett

Magnificat

Magnificat anima mea Dominum:
Et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.
Quia respect humilitatem ancillae suae:

Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes
generaciones
Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est:

Et sanctum nomen eius.
Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies:

Timentibus eum.
Fecit potentiam in brachio suo:
Deposuit potentes de sede:
Et divites dimisit inanes.
Esurientes implevit bonis:
Et exaltavit humiles.
Deposuit potentes de sede:
Dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.
Fecit potentiam in brachio suo:
Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies:
Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est:

And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
For he has looked upon the lowliness
of his handmaid:
Behold, from henceforth all generations
will call me blessed.
For he who is mighty has done great
things for me:
And holy is his name.
And his mercy extends from generation
to generation:
Upon those who fear him.
He has put forth his arm in strength:
And scattered those who are proud in heart.
He has cast the mighty from their thrones:
And has raised up the lowly.
The hungry he has filled with good things:
And he has sent away empty.
He has protected Israel his servant:
Remembering his mercy.
As he promised to our forefathers:
To Abraham and his children for ever.
Glory be to the Father and to the Son:
And to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning,
Is now, and ever shall be:
World without end. Amen.

John Browne

Salve Regina

Salve Regina, mater misericoridiae:
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Eva.
Ad te convertere, illos tuos misericordes oculos
Versaverunt eis qui exspectabant eam in instructionalibus.
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.

Robert Fayrfax

Most clear of colour

Most clear of colour and root of steadfastness
With virtue cunning her manner is led,
Which that passeth my mind for to express
Of her bounty, beauty and womanhood:
The brightest mirror and flower of goodlihead,
Which that all men know’th, both more and less;
These virtues been printed in her doubtless.

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 to us 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.

8

John Nesbett
Magnificat

9

Robert Fayrfax
Most clear of colour

John Browne
Salve Regina

Salve Regina, mater misericoridiae:
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Eva.
Ad te suspiiram, gentes et gentes
In hac lagrimarum valle.
Eia ergo advocata nostra,
In hac lacrimarum valle.
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes
Ad te clamamus exsules filii Eva.
Vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.

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 to us 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.

Most clear of colour and root of steadfastness
With virtue cunning her manner is led,
Which that passeth my mind for to express
Of her bounty, beauty and womanhood:
The brightest mirror and flower of goodlihead,
Which that all men know’th, both more and less;
These virtues been printed in her doubtless.

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 to us 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.

Most clear of colour and root of steadfastness
With virtue cunning her manner is led,
Which that passeth my mind for to express
Of her bounty, beauty and womanhood:
The brightest mirror and flower of goodlihead,
Which that all men know’th, both more and less;
These virtues been printed in her doubtless.

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 to us 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.
Afraid, alas, and why so suddenly?

Anon

Afraid, alas, and why so suddenly?
Afrid, alas, and why so suddenly?

O dulcis Maria, salve!

Spinis puncto, felle potato.

Et pro nobis flagellato,
Crucifixo, vulnerato,

Funde preces tuo nato,
O pia!

Virgo dulcis, O Maria,
O Clemens!

Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Therefore though death be never so sore,
To joy of every worldes wight,

Thy Son was doughty, the fiend was adrad:
To have brought forth leaf and bud?

They beat him for our guilt, though he sin no had;
That God has had the power in the same way

When Jews with their treason to death thy Son lad:
This mother brings forth the child

They beating and bruising, or life did depart;
Who could deny it? Do we not read

All was on red blood without any shirt:
That Aaron’s staff was seen

But blessed be that hour that He suffered
To have brought forth leaf and bud?

That sharp shower!
To bring forth a son we here declare.

Pour out our prayers to your Son,
Filium adseritur.

Crucified, bruised

And scourged for our sake,

And all that lives.

Pierced with thorns, given gall to drink.

Pierced with thorns, given gall to drink.

And all our sins.

Therefore though death be never so sore,

That the Son of God should make us all free,

Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Sith it concluded was in the Trinity

Sith it concluded was in the Trinity

Or otherwise evil apaid? Afraid.

Why so dismayed? Why should she heavy be,

Methinketh in my reason thou ought to be glad,

Afraid, alas, and why so suddenly?

Well I remember his woundes were full smart;

Why so dismayed? Why should she heavy be,

Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Afraid, alas, and why so suddenly?

Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Therefore though death be never so sore,
Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Why so dismayed? Why should she heavy be,
Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.

Now, blessed Lady, weep no more: Afraid.
Illum ergo recolamus,
Cuius fructum sic amamus;
Colant et caelestia.

Quisnam vivit hoc in mundo,
Cum sit captus iniucundo
Morbo vel tristitia,

Quin, si oret istam matrem,
Intercedat ut ad Patrem
Caelesti in patria?

Exstat mater tum parata
Nos iuvere; En! Quam grata
Adest semper Maria.

Rogamus et Frideswidam,
Magdalenam, Catharinam
Doctam philosophia;

Theologia disputans
Gentes cunctas superans
Cum sit haec Catharina.

His iam sanctis iubilemus,
Voce, corde decantemus
Hac nostra melodia.

Her therefore we celebrate,
Thus showing our love for her child;
Indeed the heavens honour her.

Who is there living on this earth
For whom, when in the unhappy grip
Of illness or sorrow,

If he but prayed to this his mother,
She would not intercede as with his Father
In his heavenly home?

We have a mother ready at those times
To help us: Lo! How graciously
Mary ever stands by us.

Let us make our prayer also to Frideswide,
To Magdalene, to Catherine
Learned in philosophy;

Since in theological argument
She overcomes all the pagans,
This Catherine.

In these saints now let us rejoice;
With heart and voice let us go on singing
In this our melody.