An Immortal Legacy

The Sixteen
Harry Christophers

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An Immortal Legacy

An Immortal Legacy was a programme I devised some years ago to present several secular works within our customary sacred output and depict how composers of our own time revel in the glories of the 16th century. It concentrates, in the main, on what I would term our ‘grass roots’ repertoire, that of the English Renaissance. In addition I have focused on two figures from the 20th century who are undoubtedly among England’s finest composers, Benjamin Britten and Sir Michael Tippett.

I was introduced to the music of both Tallis and Tippett from a very early age. As a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, we would perform some of Tippett’s Spirituals as anthems at evensong, but it was Tallis’s O nata lux that was to have a profound effect on me. This 20-bar motet is, without doubt, one of the finest miniatures of all choral music and there I was, as a chorister in the 1960s, singing where Tallis stood as a lay clerk in the 1540s. Tippett adored the music of Thomas Tallis. His legendary choir at Morley College emphasized a penchant for early music (and in particular that of the English Renaissance) and new music, with precious little from the intervening years.

Britten, likewise, was greatly influenced by Elizabethan England. His opera Gloriana, which depicts the relationship between Queen Elizabeth I and Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, was composed in celebration of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. The Choral Dances are a perfect complement to the madrigals by William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Morley. It is here that another miniature captures my imagination; can there be any better madrigalian gem than Gibbons’ The Silver Swan?

This compilation represents 20 years of recording by The Sixteen. Many of the singers may have changed but our ethos and commitment to this great music has remained the same.
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Extraordinary events called for extraordinary responses in the lives of Thomas Tallis and Michael Tippett. Both composers clashed with authority over matters of conscience: Tallis because of his reluctance to accept the new state religion and renounce his Catholic faith; Tippett because of his determined pacifism in an age disfigured by war and destruction. While Tallis managed to trim his professional sails to suit the opposing liturgical demands of the English Chapel Royal under Edward VI and Mary Tudor, Tippett refused to compromise his conscientious objection to the business of war. Tippett, tried and convicted as a 'conchie', was imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubs from 21 June to 21 August 1943. “Prison is not a creative experience at any point – except perhaps in human contacts,” he wrote on 5 July. He did, however, manage to develop plans for life beyond the prison’s gates, encouraged by colleagues at Morley College, the pioneering central London institution for adult education.

Tippett’s moving settings of the spirituals ‘Steal away’, ‘Nobody knows’, ‘Go down, Moses’, ‘By and by’ and ‘Deep river’ began life as part of his oratorio, A Child of Our Time, in which they serve as points of reflection on the courage shown by those oppressed because of their origins or beliefs. A Child of Our Time was inspired by the assassination of a German diplomat in November 1938 by a young Polish Jew, Herschel Grynszpan, which triggered the brutal events of Kristallnacht and an intensification of individual attacks and state measures against the Jews of Hitler’s Reich. The refugee Grynszpan’s desperate act followed the arrest, humiliation and deportation of 12,000 Polish Jews from Germany, his parents among them. Although Tippett took his oratorio’s title from that of a book by the anti-Nazi writer Ödön von Horváth, published in English translation in 1938, his work presents a distinctly universal and partly Jungian response to the ‘shadow and light’ contained within every individual’s psychology.

The boundary edges of Thomas Tallis’s world extended from Dover and the nearby Isle of Thanet to Westminster and Waltham Cross. We know that he was spared to reach old age, although not the precise year of his birth. He spent his final years in Greenwich and lies buried there in the parish church of St Alfege. Tallis, by then a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, married in middle age and appears to have died childless. Prosperity and financial hardship marked various points of the musician’s career, as did mundane duties teaching musical rudiments to the Chapel Royal’s singing boys. This thin factual outline can be fleshed out with assumptions about the enduring nature of his personal faith in an age of religious upheaval.

Although Tallis maintained his allegiance to the Roman Catholic faith, he turned his professional skills to meet the shifting demands for sacred music under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. Those skills helped the composer negotiate a period of church reform that delivered many of his contemporaries to the scaffold or stake. In the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, a developing puritan consensus on the role of music in worship directed Tallis to compose nine simple psalm settings for four voices to the words of Archbishop Matthew Parker’s The Whole Psalter translated into English Metre. Parker decided to have the music published in 1567, complete with a lengthy preface in which he describes the moods of Tallis’s pieces and offers advice for other composers to follow. “You ought to conjoin a sad tune or song with a sad Psalm, and a joyful tune and a song with a joyful psalm, and an indifferent tune and song with a song which goeth indifferently,” Parker proclaimed. The Archbishop added descriptive titles to eight of Tallis’s settings: ‘Why fum’meth in fight’, the third in the series, ‘doth rage: and roughly brayeth’, while the lachrymose sixth ‘bewaileth: it weepeth full sore’. The final piece in Parker’s Psalter, a setting of Come Holy Ghost, is better known today as the ‘Ordinal’.
In 1575 Tallis and William Byrd were granted a monopoly to publish music by the queen; later that year they produced a joint anthology of motets or Cantiones sacrae. Among Tallis’s 17 contributions to the 1575 collection, the elegant and simple motet *O nata lux* was almost certainly conceived for the Elizabethan Chapel Royal. Here the composer sets only the first two verses of a Latin hymn without employing its associated chant as part of the motet’s structure or following other conventions that would have applied to a liturgical treatment of the work. Striking dissonances add a piquant flavour to the motet’s repeated final section. Whereas *O nata lux* leaves its mark with economy of means, *Loquenbantur variis linguis* deals in complexity. Tallis’s contrapuntal mastery is fully revealed in this Whitsun responsory, with six of its seven voices weaving an elaborate texture around the tenor part’s plainsong-derived notes to evoke the ‘various languages’ spoken by the apostles. The Magnificat antiphon for the feast of Corpus Christi, *O sacrum convivium*, was almost certainly written during Elizabeth I’s reign and appeared in print as the ninth work in the 1575 *Cantiones sacrae*. Tallis here uses five-part counterpoint to create a sense of urgency and forward momentum that governs the piece throughout.

William Byrd’s place among the greatest of English composers was already well established by the turn of the 18th century. “The Standard of Church Music, begun by Mr Tallis and Mr Bird [sic], &c. was continued for some years after ye Restauration”, observed Thomas Tudway in the preface to a six-volume ‘Collection of Ancient and Modern Church Music’ specially compiled for the first and second Earls of Oxford and their magnificent Harleian Library between 1714 and 1720. *Laudibus in sanctis* (‘Praise the Lord among his holy ones’) presents Byrd at his breathtaking best. This ecstatic motet, built on a paraphrase of Psalm 150, may have been purposely written for inclusion in the composer’s 1591 volume of *Cantiones sacrae*. It stands among the finest masterpieces of late Tudor church music, intricate in polyphonic detail, technically assured, formally imposing and, above all, joyful in expression.

In addition to works in praise of God, Byrd also composed music for the greater glory of his monarch. *This sweet and merry month of May*, which appeared in print in 1590, is the first known madrigal written to celebrate Elizabeth I’s many virtues. Though *Amaryllis dance in green*, published two years earlier, might also be interpreted as a gentle commentary on Elizabeth’s status as ‘Virgin Queen’.

Orlando Gibbons, Oxford born yet Cambridge trained, went on to become senior organist of the Chapel Royal, master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey and a close confidant of Charles I. He produced a series of outstanding works for the Anglican Church, many of them still in the repertoire lists of today’s cathedral and collegiate choirs. “The name of Orlando Gibbons has always been, and will continue to be, associated primarily with his church music,” wrote Edmund H. Fellowes in 1925 on the tercentenary of the composer’s death. More recent surveys on disc and in concert of Gibbons’ secular output have revealed the breadth and all-round excellence of his work. *The Silver Swan*, first published in 1612 in *The First Set of Madrigals and Motets, apt for Viols and Voyces*, highlights the melodic eloquence of Gibbons at his best. The aphoristic text, perhaps written by the composer himself, captures life’s transience in six lines of simple verse, a feat of concision matched by Gibbons in his masterly treatment of five-part counterpoint.

The Elizabethan Age takes centre stage in Benjamin Britten’s opera *Gloriana*, first produced at Covent Garden during the week of Elizabeth II’s coronation in June 1953. The work’s second act depicts a masque held in Norwich’s Guildhall to celebrate the first Queen Elizabeth’s ‘progress’ to the city, complete with dances and songs in her honour. Britten, unhappy with the incidental nature of the scene as it played on stage, later arranged a
sequence of Choral Dances from Gloriana for unaccompanied chorus. The demi-god Time opens proceedings before giving way to his wife Concord (whose song is aptly discord free) and joining her for the next dance. A company of country girls, rustics and fishermen enliven the fourth and fifth dances respectively. The final ‘Dance of Homage’ portrays a scene of celebration and popular affection for the monarch.

As a Cumnock Academy schoolboy, James MacMillan was encouraged by his music teacher to write pieces for choir, several of which were performed at Paisley Abbey before he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh. MacMillan first received national attention as composer of sacred choral music: his Beatus vir, for example, received a prize at the 1983 Norwich Festival of Contemporary Church Music. Since then he has written over 70 sacred works for choir, many of them simple in their technical demands, short in duration and yet impressively effective in evoking the mystery of faith.

MacMillan’s commitment to Roman Catholicism stands as a cornerstone of his life and work. Mitte manum tuam (‘Stretch forth your hand’) and Sedebit Dominus Rex (‘The Lord will sit on his throne’) belong to a series of Communion motets written for practical use, to be sung by amateur choirs and presented in liturgical settings: the former text belongs to Communion for the second Sunday after Easter; the latter, to Communion for the feast of Christ the King. The so-called Strathclyde Motets were conceived for Strathclyde University’s chamber choir and its director, Alan Tavener. The individual pieces, observes the composer, have ‘a kind of suspended animation about them.’ A mellifluous melody voiced by the basses at the opening of Mitte manum tuam taps into the timeless atmosphere of Gregorian chant, while echoes of ancient Celtic music surface in the pellucid soprano lines of Sedebit Dominus Rex. The simplicity of both works serves to intensify their contemplative atmosphere.

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TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

TALLIS (c.1505-1585) Tunes for Archbishop Parker’s Psalter

1. The first is meek: devout to see

Man blest no doubt who walk’th not out in wicked men’s affairs, and stand’th no day in sinner’s way, nor sit’th in scorne’r’s chairs; but hath his will in God’s law still, this law to love aright; and will him use, on it to muse, to keep it day and night.

2. The second is sad: in majesty

Let God arise in majesty and scatter’ d be his foes. Yea, flee they all his sight in face, to him which hateful goes. As smoke is driv’n and com’th to naught, repulse their tyranny. At face of fire, as wax doth melt, God’s face the bad must fly.

3. The third doth rage: and roughly Brayeth

Why fum’th in fight the Gentiles spite, in fury raging stout? Why tak’th in hand the people fond, vain things to bring about? The kings arise, the Lords devise, in counsels met thereto, against the Lord with false accord, against his Christ they go.

4. The fourth doth fawn: and flattery playeth

O come in one to praise the Lord and him recount, our stay and health. All hearty joys let us record to this strong rock, our Lord of health. His face with praise let us prevent; his facts in sight let us denounce. Join we, I say, in glad assent. Our Psalms and hymns let us pronounce.
TALLIS  Salvator mundi

Salvator mundi salva nos,
qui per crucem et sanguinem
redemisti nos,
auxiliare nobis,
te deprecandum Deus noster.

O Saviour of the world,
who by thy cross and precious Blood
hast redeemed us,
save us and help us,
we humbly beseech thee O Lord.

MORLEY (1557/8-1602)  April is in my mistress’ face

April is in my mistress’ face,
And July in her eyes hath place;
Within her bosom is September,
But in her heart a cold December.

GIBBONS (1583-1625)  The Silver Swan

The silver swan, who living had no note,
When death approached, unlocked her silent throat,
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:
Farewell all joys! O death, come close mine eyes;
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.

BYRD (c.1540-1623)  This sweet and merry month of May

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.

MACMILLAN (b.1959)  Sedebit Dominus Rex
(from The Strathclyde Motets)

Sedebit Dominus Rex in aeternum,
Dominus benedicet populo suo in pace.

The Lord will sit on his royal throne for ever,
the Lord will bless his people with peace.

Lord, you give us Christ, the King of all creation, as food for everlasting life.
Help us to live by the gospel and bring us to the joy of his kingdom.
Steal Away

Nobody knows

By and by

Steal Away

Go down, Moses

TALLIS  O nata lux

Deep River

TIPPETT  Five Spirituals (from A Child of Our Time)

solo quartet: soprano Carys Lane
alto  Sally Bruce-Payne
tenor  Neil MacKenzie
bass  Robert Evans

Steal Away

Go down, Moses

O nata lux de lumine
Jesus redemptor saeculi
Dignare clemens supplicum
Laudes precesque sumere.
Qui carne quondam contegi
Dignatus es pro perditis
Nos membra confer effici
Tu beati corporis.

Nobody knows

I'm going to lay down my heavy load.

O by and by, by and by,
I'm going to lay down my heavy load.

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
O steal away, steal away home,
I haven't got long to stay here.

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Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus;
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I haven't got long to stay here.
O sacred feast, in which we feed on Christ
The memory of his passion is renewed,
the mind filled with grace
And to us is given the pledge of future glory.

Loquebantur variis linguis

The apostles were speaking in many tongues, alleluia,
of the great works of God, alleluia.
They were all filled with the Holy Spirit
and began to speak in many tongues
of the great works of God, alleluia.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit, alleluia.

Mitre manum tuam
Put forth thy hand
and know the place of the nails, alleluia,
and cease thy doubting and believe, alleluia.

Laudibus in sanctis

Celebrate the Lord most high
in holy praises:
let the firmament echo
the glorious deeds of God.
Sing ye the glorious deeds of God,
and with holy voice sound forth oft
the power of his mighty hand.
Let the warlike trumpet
sing the great name of the Lord;
celebrate the Lord with Pierian lyre.
Let resounding timbrels ring
to the praise of the most-high God,
lofty organs peal to the praise of the holy God.
Him let melodious psalteries
sing with fine string,
him let joyful dance
praise with nimble foot.
Let hollow cymbals
pour forth divine praises,
sweet-sounding cymbals
filled with the praise of God.
Let everything in the world
that feeds upon the air of heaven
sing Alleluia to God for evermore.

John 20 v 27
The Masque begins
The masque begins.
Melt earth to sea, sea flow to air;
And air fly into fire!
The elements, at Gloriana's chair,
Mingle in tuneful choir.
And now we summon
from this leafy bower
The demi-god that must appear!
‘Tis Time! ’tis Time! ’tis Time!

Time
Yes he is Time,
Lusty and blithe,
Time is at his apogee!
Although you thought to see
A bearded ancient with a scythe.
No reaper he
That cries “Take heed!”
Time is at his apogee!
Young and strong in his prime!
Behold the sower of the seed!

Concord
Concord, Concord is here
Our days to bless
And this our land to endue
With plenty,
Peace and happiness.

Country Girls
Sweet flag and cuckoo flower,
Cowslip and columbine,
Kingcups and sopsinwine,
Flower deluce and calaminth,
Harebell and hyacinth,
with Myrtle and bay,
with Rosemary between,
Norfolk’s own garlands for her Queen.

Time and Concord
From springs of bounty,
Through this county,
Streams abundant,
Of thanks shall flow.
Where life was scanty,
Fruits of plenty,
Swell resplendent
From earth below.
No Greek nor Roman
Queenly woman
Knew such favour from heav’n above
As she whose presence,
Is our pleasance,
Gloriana Hath all our love.

Rustics and Fishermen
From fen and meadow
In rushy baskets
They bring ensamples
Of all they grow.
In earthen dishes
Their deepsea fishes;
Yearly fleeces,
Woven blankets;
New cream and junkets,
On wicker flaskets,
Their country largess,
The best they know.

Final Dance of Homage
These tokens of our love receiving,
O take them, Princess great and dear,
From Norwich city you are leaving,
That you afar may feel us near.
The fifth delighteth: and laugheth the more

Even like the hunted hind the water brooks desire, 

even thus my soul, that fainting is, to thee would fain aspire. 

My soul did thirst to God, to God of life and grace. 

It said even thus: When shall I come to see God's lively face?

The sixth bewaileth: it weepeth full sore

Expend, O Lord, my plaint of word in grief that I do make. 

My musing mind recount most kind; give ear for thine own sake. 

O hark my groan, my crying moan; my king, my God thou art. 

Let me not stray from thee away. To thee I pray in heart.

The seventh treadeth stout: in froward race

Why brag'st in malice high, O thou in mischief stout? 

God's goodness yet is nigh all day to me no doubt. 

Thy tongue to muse all evil it doth itself inure. 

As razor sharp to spill, all guile it doth procure.

The eighth goeth mild: in modest pace

God grant we grace, he us embrace. 

In gentle part bless he our heart. 

With loving face shine he in place. 

His mercies all on us to fall. 

That we thy way may know all day, 

while we do sail this world so frail. 

Thy health's reward is nigh declared, 

as plain as eye all Gentiles spy.

TALLIS ‘Tallis’s Ordinal’

Come Holy Ghost, eternal God, which dost from God proceed; 

the Father first and eke the Son, one God as we do read.

CHILCOTT (b.1955) Tallis Canon

For text see track 31

Also available as a CD quality download at www.thesixteendigital.com

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The Sixteen
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Julie Cooper
Grace Davidson
Sally Dunkley
Kirsty Hopkins
Alexandra Kidgell
Charlotte Mobbs

ALTO
David Clegg
Daniel Collins
Kim Porter
Christopher Royall

TENOR
Simon Berridge
Mark Dobell
Matthew Long
Tom Raskin

BASS
Ben Davies
Eamonn Dougan
Tim Jones
Rob Macdonald

SOPRANO
Julie Cooper
Grace Davidson
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Kirsty Hopkins
Elin Manahan Thomas
Charlotte Mobbs

ALTO
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William Missin
Christopher Royall

TENOR
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Jeremy Budd
Mark Dobell
David Roy

BASS
Ben Davies
Eamonn Dougan
Tim Jones
Stuart Young

SOLO TENOR
Ian Partridge

HARP
Helen Tunstall

SOPRANO
Fiona Clarke
Libby Crabtree
Sophie Daneman
Ruth Dean
Sally Dunkley
Nicola Jenkin
Nicola Jane Kemp
Carys Lane

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Helen Templeton
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TENOR
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Duncan MacKenzie
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BASS
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In 2011 the group launched a new training programme for young singers called Genesis Sixteen. Aimed at 18 to 23 year-olds, this is the UK’s first fully-funded choral programme for young singers designed specifically to bridge the gap from student to professional practitioner.
For further information about recordings on CORO or live performances and tours by The Sixteen, call: +44 (0) 20 7936 3420 or email: coro@thesixteen.com

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