Star of Heaven
The Eton Choirbook Legacy
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Ikon of Light
John Tavener
“As time goes by, I find Harry Christophers’ music-making more and more captivating…”
BBC RADIO 3, CD REVIEW

James MacMillan:
Stabat mater
“It’s stunningly composed and also magnificently performed… under Harry Christophers’s inspired direction.”
THE TIMES

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An Enduring Voice

Wylkynson
Fayrfax
Sheppard
Tavener
MacMillan
Jackson
Whitacre

The Sixteen
HARRY CHRISTOPHERS
However, one work by Wylkynson was not quite so fortunate; only a very small fragment survives of *O virgo prudentissima*. When I saw it, I immediately thought of James MacMillan, and asked James to write an extended motet on Angelo Poliziano’s 1493 poem based on that fragment. The result is astonishing, both evocative and daring. It is always interesting to see just how much the works of the Renaissance and in particular Tudor England have influenced composers of today and our programme highlights that choral journey. Gabriel Jackson is another composer who recognises the wealth of that tradition; he, like me, was a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral and knows just how to use the exceptional acoustics of our cathedrals to optimum effect. His angelic salutation, *Ave Maria*, is quite beautiful, both reverential and full of emotional urgency. Both the late John Tavener and Eric Whitacre achieve a unique mysticism and energy. Tavener’s *Hymns to the Mother of God* have become icons in their own right; both were written in memory of his mother and both conjure up an other-worldly experience: double choir in tandem where the final chords resonate in the silences alongside single lines reminiscent of plainsong underpinned with solemn drones. The combined effects are extraordinary. The inspiration for Whitacre’s *Sainte-Chapelle* came from both modern and old – the spiralling pillars of Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia in Barcelona and the stained glass windows of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. The haunting clusters of ‘Sanctus’ represent the former and the young girl, who is depicted hearing angels in the stained glass, the latter.

This is all exceptional music and I cannot think of a better way to depict England’s remarkable legacy than to bring this incredible heritage into the modern day.
The Virgin Mary wears many faces in the Christian liturgy. She is the all-powerful Queen of Heaven, the all-knowing Throne of Wisdom, the radiant Star of the Sea, but also the Handmaid of the Lord, the tender Mother of God, the grieving Mother of Sorrows. She is at once saint and symbol – splendid as a gilded icon and just as untouchable – and daughter, mother and mourner, a woman at once divine and painfully human. 

She is the still point at the centre of a programme that spans six centuries and two continents, moving from plainsong and Renaissance polyphony to contemporary choral works, a guiding thread through The Sixteen’s 40 years of concerts and recordings. She is also at the heart of the Eton Choirbook – the earliest and greatest surviving collection of Latin Tudor church music, and the start of the group’s recording journey back in 1982.

This musical portrait begins with the melodic pen and ink sketch of plainsong. One of the four seasonal Marian antiphons that between them divide up the Church year, the Salve Regina paints the Virgin as intercessor and advocate, pleading for the ‘banished children of Eve’. The arching lines of the chant are graceful, delicate, and it doesn’t seem too fanciful to hear the echo of their subject in them.

From simplest musical sketch to elaborate, architectural complexity, the music of the Eton Choirbook – whose works are as richly coloured as the illuminations that illustrate the volume and just as precious – was miraculously preserved from the ravages of the Reformation. Of the 64 surviving works in the collection, the vast majority are Marian – tributes to the Virgin, to whom the College itself is dedicated. College statutes stipulate that each
night a choir assemble in the chapel to sing an antiphon in her honour, and the result is a superb sequence of anthems including both Robert Fayrfax’s *Eternae laudis lilium* and Robert Wylkynson’s *Salve Regina*.

Wylkynson was part of the Eton community – a member of the choir and subsequently master of its choristers – and his magnificent *Salve Regina* celebrates the skill of an ensemble he knew well. The unusual scoring, which divides the choir into nine parts, is explained by the illuminated letters that introduce each voice, each depicting one of the nine orders of angels including Seraphim, Cherubim and Archangels. The plainchant *cantus firmus* (Assumpta est Maria) heard in the slow-moving notes of the tenor part marks this out as an Assumption motet, and the Virgin’s ascent into heaven is accompanied by a heavenly choir – magnificently sonorous in these dense clouds of counterpoint.

Votive antiphon *Eternae laudis lilium* by the younger Robert Fayrfax takes a more muscular approach to its subject matter, a hymn of praise with a strong sense of pulse and rhythmic direction. The narrower compass of the five voices (including a comparatively low-lying treble line) creates a more focused effect – a musical close-up in contrast to the wide shot of the Wylkynson. This impression is exacerbated by the work’s intricate structural games. The text – a rhyming genealogy of Christ – is constructed so as to form an acrostic spelling out the words ‘Elisabeth Regina Anglie’ (Elizabeth Queen of England), a homage to the composer’s patron Elizabeth of York, wife of Henry VII, while the name ‘Elizabeth’ is also picked out of the text in a distinctive imitative phrase that moves through all the voices.

We move forwards a generation for the music of John Sheppard. Probably dating from the reign of Mary I, under whom Catholic tradition were restored, his *Missa Cantate* reflects the period’s revival of the earlier florid, festal style of English polyphony. The largest and most elaborate of Sheppard’s surviving Mass settings (and the only one in six rather than four parts), the work’s drama is achieved through the contrast of full-voice passages, woven seamlessly as any tapestry, and the spare clarity of verses for reduced forces.

The Mass’s musical source, heard intermittently in the tenor’s *cantus firmus*, is unknown, though the title ‘*Cantate*’ (Sing) leaves us a small clue, as does the opening of each of the Mass’s movements, which all begin with a shared motif. The expansive *Gloria* sets the tone for the large-scale work, introducing first upper and then lower voices before combining them in joyous splendour at ‘*gratias agimus*’ – a collective statement of praise. The ‘sins of the world’ are painted with elegant fragility in upper voices, including Sheppard’s distinctive, high-lying trebles. The *Agnus Dei* is more compact, contemplative. Once again, intercessions are first split between upper and lower voices, before the prayer is intensified in a shared statement. The Mass closes in an ecstatic flourish of false relations – no dreamy, soft-focus peace this, but something much more assertive and celebratory.

The pivot at the centre of this programme, transporting us from the 16th century to the 21st, is James MacMillan’s *O virgo prudentissima*. Commissioned by the Genesis Foundation for The Sixteen and premiered in 2018, this Marian anthem takes as its starting point a six-bar fragment of music by Robert Wylkynson preserved in the Eton Choirbook. Taking inspiration from the exquisite Renaissance text, which celebrates the Virgin as a ‘haven of salvation…between cliffs and dark whirlwinds’, warming with her grace ‘the ice of our hearts’, the music offers vivid soundscapes that quickly swell Wylkynson’s humble original into
something with the same ambition and scope as the composer’s Salve Regina.

The work starts hesitantly. Through a haze of humming, melodies begin to emerge, gradually growing in power and duration. This is Renaissance polyphony heard through a glass darkly, its original angles and shapes softened and bent by the composer into something new. A solo soprano emerges out of the texture with a hymn-like melody, leading the rest of the voices into increasingly passionate and virtuosic outpourings. As the poetry intensifies, so does the intricacy and complexity of the imitative writing, in which voices conjure the clatter and clamour of winds and stormy seas. The music briefly collapses into soundscape, misty and indistinct, punctuated by arresting interjections from the lower voices, before finding its footing once again in declamatory utterances – musical stained glass that fragments into glittering shards of musical light as the sopranos scatter in elaborate heterophony. After a return of the soprano hymn, the work closes with a glowing ‘Alleluia’.

The two works by John Tavener featured here were composed as a pair – each a facing panel of a musical diptych of the Virgin, but behind whose image is concealed that of Tavener’s own mother, to whom the pieces are dedicated. Based on a text from the liturgy of St Basil, A Hymn to the Mother of God celebrates Mary as a ‘sanctified temple’ and a ‘mystical paradise’ in music that combines an architectural quality (the music is divided into three distinct sections, and moves in strict canon between two choirs) and a blooming, ecstatic freedom. It’s the friction between these – perpendicular precision and emotional unboundedness – that generates the work’s strange power.

If the first hymn gives us a Virgin elevated in glory, then the Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God is a portrait of a woman still tied to earth. There’s a fragility and simplicity to a text in which she instructs the apostles to bury her body after death. This is mirrored in an unadorned chant-like melody. Repeated three times, it grows in strength and richness with each iteration, moving from simply a sustained drone to thick harmonies that surround the melody like a halo.

Eric Whitacre’s Sainte-Chapelle tells the story of a young girl entering Sainte-Chapelle – Louis IX’s Gothic ‘Holy Chapel’ in Paris – and joining her voice with those of the angels. The music moves from simple chant to dense clusters and collages of notes. Just as a single beam of light is reflected and refracted endlessly through the chapel’s intricate stained-glass windows, so Whitacre’s single pitch becomes echoed and re-echoed until it is transformed into something beyond itself – something greater, richer. The harmonic language, shot through with the same jewel tones that daylight disperses across the chapel floor, pierces in deep red chromatic clashes that resolve into glassy blues and greens – a contemporary composer’s homage to his musical forebears.

Of all the Marian prayers, the Ave Maria is surely the most familiar – a litany whose gentle, lulling rhythms are the steady pulse of Christian worship. Gabriel Jackson’s setting finds both the intimacy and the splendour of the figure of the Virgin Mary in music that draws on a tradition of plainchant without directly quoting from it. Upper voices, thickly divided, introduce a radiant hymn, climaxing in an insistent, almost desperate imploration at ‘Sancta Maria’, before the music subsides into a muted meditation, embellished by two solo sopranos who soar and weave freely above the texture, caught like the Virgin herself somewhere between heaven and earth.
Plainsong **Salve Regina**

*Salve Regina, mater misericordiae,*
*vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve.*

*Ad te clamamus, exsules filii Evae.*
*Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle.*

*Eia ergo, advocata nostra,*
*illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte.*

*Et Jesus, benedictum fructum ventris tui,*
*nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.*

*O clemens,*
*O pia,*
*O dulcis virgin Maria!*  

Gloria from **Missa Cantate**

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.

Laudamus te, benedicimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te.

Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloria tuam.

Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe,
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.

Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis;
qui tollis peccata mundi,
suscipe deprecationem nostram;
qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,
miserere nobis.

Quoniam tu solus sanctus.

Tu solus Dominus.

Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe.

Cum Sancto Spiritu,
in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

Sir John TAVENER **A Hymn to the Mother of God**

In You, O Woman full of Grace,
the angelic choirs,
and the human race, all creation rejoices.

O sanctified Temple,
ymystical Paradise,
and glory of Virgins.

In You, O Woman full of Grace,
all creation rejoices.
All praise be to You.

Setting of a text from the Liturgy of St Basil

John SHEPPARD **Gloria from Missa Cantate**

Gloria be to God on high.

And on earth peace to men of good will.

We praise you, we bless you,
we worship you, we glorify you.

We give thanks to you for your great glory.

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.
You who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.

You who takes away the sins of the world, receive our prayer.

You who sits at the right hand of the Father, have mercy upon us.

For you only are holy, you only are the Lord,
you only are the most high, Jesus Christ.

With the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen.
Eric WHITACRE  Sainte-Chapelle

An innocent girl
Entered the chapel;
And the angels in the glass
Softly sang,
‘Hosanna in the highest!’

The innocent girl
Whispered,
‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’

Light filled the chamber,
Many-coloured light;
She heard her voice
Echo,
‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’

Softly the angels sang,
‘Lord God of Hosts,
Heaven and earth are full
Of your glory!
Hosanna in the highest!
Hosanna in the highest!’

Her voice becomes light,
And the light sings,
‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’
The light sings softly,
‘Lord God of Hosts,
Heaven and earth are full
Of your glory!’

An innocent girl
Entered the chapel;
And the angels in the glass
Softly sang.

Charles Anthony Silvestri (b.1965)

Robert WYLKYNSON  Salve Regina

Hail, O Queen, mother of mercy,
or our life, our sweetness and our hope, hail.
To you we cry,
exiled children of Eve.
To you we sigh,
as we mourn and weep in this valley of tears.
Ah then, our advocate,
turn those merciful eyes of yours
upon us; and Jesus,
the blessed fruit of your womb,
show to us after our exile here.
Virgin mother of the church,  
everlasting gate to glory,  
be our refuge  
before the Father and the Son.  
O gentle!  
Gentle virgin, loving virgin,  
O sweet virgin Mary,  
hear the prayers of all  
who humbly cry to you.  
O loving!  
Pour out prayers to your Son,  
the crucified, the wounded,  
scourged for our sake,  
pierced with thorns, given gall to drink.  
O sweet Mary, hail!

Sir John TAVENER  Hymn for the Dormition of the Mother of God

O ye apostles, assembled here from the ends of the earth,  
bury my body in Gethsemane:  
and Thou, my Son and God, receive my Spirit.  
From the Vigil Service of the Dormition of the Mother of God

Robert FAYRFAX  Eternae laudis lilium

Eternae laudis lilium, o dulcis Maria, te  
Laudat vox angelica, nutrix Christi pia.  
Iure prolis gloriae detur harmonia,  
Salus nostrae memoriae omni agonia.  
Ave radix, flos virginum, o sanctificata,  
Benedicta in utero materno creat;  
Eras sancta puerpera et inviolata,  
Tuo ex lesu filio virgo peramata.  
Honestis caeli precibus virgo veneraris,  
Regis excelsi filii visu iocundaris;  
Eius divino lumine tu nusquam privaris.  
Gauda sole splendidior virgo singularis.  
Issachar quoque Nazaphat necnon Ismaria,  
Nati ex esse stipite, qua venit Maria  
Aque Maria Cleophae. Sancto Zacharia  
A quae patre Elizabeth, matre Sophonia,  
Natus est Dei gratia Iohannes Baptist;  
Gaudebat clauso Domino in matrice cista.  
Lineae ex hoc genere est Evangelista  
Iohannes. Annae filia ex Maria ista  
Est Iesus Dei filius natus in hunc mundum,  
Cuius cruore tumulo mundatur in mundum.  
Conferat nos in gaudium, in aevum iocundum,  
Qui cum Patre et Spiritu Sancto regnat in unum.  
Amen.
Lily ever to be praised, O sweet Mary, angel voices praise you, loving nurse of Christ. Rightly is harmonious song raised to the glory of your son when our salvation at the cost of so much suffering is recalled.

Hail root of our salvation, flower of all virgins, O holy one, made blessed already in your mother’s womb; you remained holy and inviolate even in giving birth, O virgin most beloved of Jesus your son.

You are revered in the prayerful acclamations of heaven, where you rejoice in the sight of your son, the most high King; nowhere and never are you without his divine light. Rejoice then, virgin, you who alone shine more brightly than the sun.

Issachar and Nazaphat, and no less Ismarias, these were born of Jesse’s stock, whence came Mary and Mary Cleophas. With holy Zachary as his father, from Elizabeth, whose mother was Sophonia, was born, by the grace of God, John the Baptist; he rejoiced at his Lord enclosed in his mother’s womb. Born of this line too was the Evangelist John. And from this Mary, daughter of Anna, was Jesus the son of God born into this world, by whose blood and burial the world was cleansed. May he bring us to that joy, to that eternity of rejoicing, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit reigns as one. Amen.

Gabriel JACKSON  Ave Maria
Soli: Julie Cooper, Charlotte Mobbs soprano

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Amen.

Sir James MACMILLAN  O virgo prudentissima
Soli: Julie Cooper soprano
Joshua Cooter (1), Simon Berridge (2), Jeremy Budd (3), George Pooley (4) tenor

Most prudent maiden, the heavenly herald of the most-high King, Gabriel, bears witness that you are full of grace. A wife to the inventor of all things, a mother to the son of the divine, a dwelling to the blessed spirit, you are called.
Tu stella maris diceri; quae nobis inter scopulos, portum salutis indicias.
Per te de taetro carcere antiqui patres exeunt; per te nobis astriferae panduntur aulae limina.
Audi, virgo puerpera, et sola mater integra; audi precantes, quaesumus, tuos Maria servulos.
Repelle mentis tenebras, disrumpe cordis glaciam. Nos sub tuum praesidium confugientes protege.
Alleluia.

It is said you are a star of the sea, uncovering our sanctuary of salvation between the cliffs and amongst the hidden whirlpools.
Through you our venerable forefathers can escape their foul prison; it is through you that for us the doorsteps of the starry temple will be uncovered.
Take notice, child-bearing virgin and sole mother who stays untouched, listen to your young servants praying, we ask you, Mary.
Dispel gloom from our minds, shatter the ice in our hearts.
Guard us, taking refuge under your protection. Alleluia.

Translation by Trajan Halvorsen
OS Eton Sixth Former

John SHEPPARD  Agnus Dei from Missa Cantate

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

Sir John TAVENER  Song for Athene

Alleluia. May flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.
Alleluia. Remember me, O Lord, when you come into your kingdom.
Alleluia. Give rest, O Lord, to your handmaid who has fallen asleep.
Alleluia. The Choir of Saints have found the well-spring of life and door of paradise.
Alleluia. Life: a shadow and a dream.
Alleluia. Weeping at the grave creates the song: Alleluia. Come, enjoy rewards and crowns I have prepared for you.
Harry Christophers stands among today's great champions of choral music. In partnership with The Sixteen, the ensemble he founded almost 40 years ago, he has set benchmark standards for the performance of everything from late medieval polyphony to important new works by contemporary composers. His international influence is supported by more than 150 recordings and has been enhanced by his work as Artistic Director of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society and as guest conductor worldwide.

The Sixteen's soundworld, rich in tonal variety and expressive nuance, reflects Christophers' determination to create a vibrant choral instrument from the blend of adult professional singers. Under his leadership The Sixteen has established its annual Choral Pilgrimage to cathedrals, churches and other UK venues, created the Sacred Music series for BBC television, and developed an acclaimed period-instrument orchestra. Highlights of their recent work include an Artist Residency at Wigmore Hall, a large-scale tour of Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610, and the world premiere of Sir James MacMillan's Stabat mater; their future projects, meanwhile, comprise a new series devoted to Purcell and an ongoing survey of Handel's dramatic oratorios.

Harry has served as Artistic Director of the Handel and Haydn Society since 2008. He was also appointed as Principal Guest Conductor of the City of Granada Orchestra in 2008 and has worked as guest conductor with, among others, the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Deutsches Kammerphilharmonie. Christophers' extensive commitment to opera has embraced productions for English National Opera and Lisbon Opera and work with the Granada, Buxton and Grange Park festivals.
He was appointed a CBE in the Queen’s 2012 Birthday Honours for his services to music. He is an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, as well as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and has Honorary Doctorates in Music from the Universities of Leicester, Canterbury Christ Church and Northumbria.

Whether performing a simple medieval hymn or expressing the complex musical and emotional language of a contemporary choral composition, The Sixteen does so with qualities common to all great ensembles. Tonal warmth, rhythmic precision and immaculate intonation are clearly essential to the mix. But it is the courage and intensity with which The Sixteen makes music that speak above all to so many people.

The Sixteen gave its first concert in 1979 under the direction of Founder and Conductor Harry Christophers CBE. Their pioneering work since has made a profound impact on the performance of choral music and attracted a large new audience, not least as ‘The Voices of Classic FM’ and through BBC television’s Sacred Music series.

The voices and period-instrument players of The Sixteen are at home in over five centuries of music, a breadth reflected in their annual Choral Pilgrimage to Britain’s great cathedrals and sacred spaces, regular appearances at the world’s leading concert halls, and award-winning recordings for The Sixteen’s CORO and other labels.

Recent highlights include the world premiere of James MacMillan’s Stabat mater, commissioned for The Sixteen by the Genesis Foundation, an ambitious ongoing series of Handel oratorios, and a debut tour of China.

Photograph: Firedog

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

Many CORO recordings are also available as studio master quality downloads at www.thesixteen.com

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