



**MEDIA VITA
IN MORTE SUMUS
JOHN SHEPPARD**

I
INVENTA

**ALAMIRE
DAVID SKINNER**

JOHN SHEPPARD (c.1515–1558)

Media vita in morte sumus

Alamire

David Skinner, *director*

Media vita in morte sumus

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|---|--------|
| 1. Incipit: Media vita – Nunc dimittis | [1:41] |
| 2. Antiphona: Media vita in morte sumus | [6:57] |
| 3. Versus I: Ne projicias nos – Sancte deus | [2:27] |
| 4. Versus II: Noli claudere – Sancte fortis | [2:03] |
| 5. Versus III: Qui cognoscis – Sancte et misericors | [3:18] |

Total playing time	[16:30]
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Alamire (Photography: Clive Barda)

John Sheppard: *Media vita in morte sumus*

The music of John Sheppard (c.1515–1558) has received much attention in recent decades, having been resurrected from obscurity by David Wulstan in the 1970s and subsequently becoming widely published and recorded. Sheppard is a quirky and highly individual composer, and it may be argued that the breadth and quality of his works rarely holds up to that of his earlier contemporary Thomas Tallis. However, when Sheppard shines he is beyond glorious, and the monumental six-part *Media vita in morte sumus* is undoubtedly among the greatest of his creations. This work has been recorded by a number of fine ensembles over the past thirty years, including the Tallis Scholars, Gabrieli Consort, The Sixteen, Stile Antico, Contrapunctus and Westminster Cathedral Choir. Each performance is highly accomplished, and each has something different to say in terms of expression, chosen performance pitch and tempi. The Tallis Scholars' monumental and hugely influential recording of 1989 encapsulates their trademark 'high pitch' approach, while later performances opted for darker sonorities. Performance length also varies widely from 19'07 (Gabrielis, 2007) to 30'00 (Westminster Cathedral, 2017).

There is certainly something in Sheppard's polyphony that entices groups to return to this most monumental of early Tudor works.

We recorded our version back in October 2012 as part of a project linked to David Starkey's BBC series *Music and Monarchy* in which Alamire featured, and was part of a Tudor 'miscellany' which was never released. So *Media vita*, and a few other things, have been resting 'in the can' since then. But why would another version be necessary, given the many excellent recordings already available? The original reason was that I felt we might have something new to say in terms of pitch and pacing; Alamire tend to lean towards those darker sonorities, allowing the tenors especially to sing within the sweetest spots of their register. I had also found the length and scale of *Media vita* curious in terms of maintaining balance and interest in modern performance. Something always seemed amiss with the structure, a notion shared by a number of colleagues, but in the absence of new ideas into the liturgical complexities of the form we had no choice but to record the work in its traditional format.

Independently, Professor John Harper and Jason Smart meticulously reexamined the liturgical sources of *Media vita* and it does indeed turn out that the work has long been misunderstood and we are now able to offer a new take on one of the greatest masterworks from Tudor England. *Media vita* follows a rather unusual liturgical form, being an antiphon to the *Nunc dimittis* at Compline from the Third Sunday in Lent to Passion Sunday which was traditionally sung to plainchant; the

three verses were to be performed only on Saturdays, Sundays and Feasts of Nine Lessons during this period. Sheppard's polyphony survives in a single source (Oxford, Christ Church Library, MSS 979-81) copied by John Baldwin in the late 1570s. The music offers no liturgical instruction apart from symbols which mark the beginning of the three invocations 'Sancte Deus', 'Sancte fortis' and 'Sancte et misericors'. The 'Tenor' part is lacking but may confidently be reconstructed from the *Antiphonale ad usum ecclesie Sarum* (1519) in the full passages where the plainsong *cantus firmus* is present. The missing Tenor in the first two verses for TTBarB have been reconstructed, while the third verse with a double gimell SSA with added bass remains complete.

For a liturgical performance one must initially turn to the 1519 *Antiphonale* for guidance on use of plainsong and the ordering of Sheppard's polyphony. As an antiphon, *Media vita* intended to frame its psalm or canticle – in this case the *Nunc dimittis*. The main issue is two-fold: i) what precisely is performed before the canticle *Nunc dimittis* and ii) how the antiphon and verses play out after the *Nunc dimittis*. Previous editions and recorded performances have habitually laid out the form as implied in the 1519 *Antiphonale* and subsequently printed by Proctor and Wordsworth in the

nineteenth century, which was interpreted as a performance of Sheppard's antiphon up to 'ne tradas nos', followed by the *Nunc dimittis* and then the three verses, each followed by repeated sections of the antiphon:

∞. Ne projicias nos in tempore senectutis; cum defecerit virtus nostra ne derelinquas nos Domine.

Sancte deus. [Sancte fortis. Sancte et misericors salvator, amarae morti ne tradas nos.]

∞. Noli claudere aures tuas ad preces nostras.

Sancte fortis. [Sancte et misericors salvator, amarae morti ne tradas nos.]

∞. Qui cognoscis occulta cordis, parce peccatis nostris.

Sancte et misericors salvator, amarae morti ne tradas nos.

This practice of repeats is common to the respond form (such as *Dum transisset* or *Videte miraculum*), and was adopted by previous editors for *Media vita*. However, the editorial bracketed texts should in fact not be repeated. Smart notes that this is clearly the case in a Sarum ordinal of the fourteenth century at Corpus Christi College, Oxford (MS 44), where the first two cues (after 'Sancte deus' and 'Sancte fortis') are followed by the word 'tantum' ('only'). A similar instruction also appears in Exeter

ordinal of 1337 (following a variant of the Use of Sarum), where the same cues are followed with 'non ulterius' ('no further'). Indeed in Sheppard's polyphony the 'Sancte deus', 'Sancte fortis' and 'Sancte et misericors' are self-contained sections.

Further, Harper observes that the liturgical sources are clear in indicating that the verses do not directly follow the *Nunc dimittis*, but that the whole of the antiphon *Media vita* is to be repeated with the verses interspersed in the second half of the antiphon. Smart adds that there is no evidence in the liturgical sources that the antiphon 'Media vita' (in plainchant or polyphony) would have been sung in full *before* the *Nunc dimittis*, and that only the incipit 'Media vita' would have been intoned. The revised order, therefore is i) *Media vita*, incipit only, followed by the *Nunc dimittis*; ii) the whole antiphon 'Media vita' up to 'ne tradas nos'; iii) the three verses, the first two followed by the short invocations 'Sancte deus' and 'Sancte fortis' respectively, while the final verse is followed by 'Sancte et misericors' to the end.¹

This, therefore, is the first recording set in a liturgical form that Sheppard very likely would have recognised. The structural balance of the entire work now seems more satisfactory, while the unnecessary lengthy repeats of the antiphon text relieves some tedium, especially in live performance. One

aspect of this recording that may be judged liturgically incorrect is that the *Nunc dimittis* in this context should in fact be sung to the simple rather than solemn tone; they are quite similar but the latter is slightly more ornamented at the start of each verse. As the reworking of the *Media vita* audio files happened during the Covid-19 lockdown, re-recording the chant was unfortunately not possible; but perhaps the solemn tone seems more appropriate in these times if not completely liturgically sound.

Who knows what form of performance Sheppard's successors might have adopted in Protestant Elizabethan England, when there was a strong tradition of reworking old liturgical forms such as responds and hymns into 'motets' for domestic use. Some of Tallis's works in the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae* come to mind here. It would not be surprising if Sheppard's *Media vita* may have been similarly treated. So for a concert performance following this tradition one need only to omit the plainchant entirely, clocking in a performance of around 14'40 in length – interestingly around the same as the average Votive Antiphon of the period.

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Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge

¹ I am most grateful to Professor John Harper and Jason Smart for sharing their research with me. The arguments and evidence are spelled out more fully in Smart's edition on Choral Public Domain Library (<http://www3.cpd.org/wiki/images/a/a5/Shep-Media.pdf>).

Text & Translation

Plainchant:

Media vita. Nunc dimittis servum tuum
Domine: secundum verbum tuum in pace.
Quia viderunt oculi mei: salutare tuum.
Quod parasti: ante faciem omnium populorum.
Lumen ad revelationem gentium:
et gloriam plebis tuae Israel.
Gloria patri et filio: et spiritui sancto.
Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper:
et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

Sheppard:

Media vita in morte sumus.
Quem quaerimus adiutorem nisi te, Domine,
qui pro peccatis nostris iuste irascaris?
Sanctus deus. Sancte fortis.
Sancte et misericors salvator,
amarae morti ne tradas nos.

✠. Ne projicias nos in tempore senectutis; cum
defecerit virtus nostra ne derelinquas nos Domine.

Sancte deus.

✠. Noli claudere aures tuas ad preces nostras.

Sancte fortis.

✠. Qui cognoscis occulta cordis, parce
peccatis nostris.

Sancte et misericors salvator, amarae morti
ne tradas nos.

*In the midst of life ...
Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace:
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation.
Which thou hast prepared:
before the face of all people.
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles:
and to be the glory of thy people, Israel.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning,
is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

*In the midst of life we are in death. Of whom
may we seek for succour but of thee, O Lord,
who for our sins art justly angry? Holy God,
holy and strong, holy and most merciful
saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains
of eternal death.*

✠. *Cast us not away in our old age when
our strength fails; neither forsake us, O Lord.*

Holy God.

✠. *Shut not your ears to our prayers.*

Holy and strong.

✠. *Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts;
forgive our sins.*

*Holy and merciful saviour, deliver us not into
the bitter pains of eternal death.*

*Antiphon to the Nunc dimittis at Compline,
3rd Sunday in Lent to Passion Sunday; the
verses should be performed only on Saturdays,
Sundays and Feasts of Nine Lessons during
this period.*

Alamire

directed by David Skinner

Sopranos

Julie Cooper
Grace Davidson
Alexandra Kidgell

Altos

Ruth Massey
Clare Wilkinson

Tenors

Mark Dobell
Nicholas Todd
Christopher Watson
Simon Wall

Baritones

Robert Evans
Gregory Skidmore
Tim Whiteley (incipit only)

Basses

William Gaunt
Robert Macdonald

Alamire

Alamire boasts some of the finest consort singers in the world under the directorship of David Skinner. Inspired by the great choral works of the medieval and early modern periods, the ensemble expands or contracts according to repertoire and often combines with instrumentalists, creating imaginative programmes to illustrate musical or historical themes. The ensemble was formed in 2005 by three friends and early music experts: David Skinner, Rob Macdonald and Steven Harrold.

Performing extensively throughout Europe and the USA, the consort recorded for several years with Obsidian Records, founded by Martin Souter, for whom they have won a number of awards. In 2015 they received the coveted Gramophone Award (Early Music) for *The Spy's Choirbook*, while *Anne Boleyn's Songbook* was nominated for a BBC Music Award, and was CD of the Year (Choral & Song) in Australia's *Limelight Magazine*. 'Thomas Tallis: Songs of Reformation' was met with widespread media acclaim, being featured on various media outlets including BBC Breakfast Television. The project commemorated the beginning of the European Reformations, famously initiated by Martin Luther on 31 October 1517, and offered new perspectives on Thomas Tallis, Queen

Katherine Parr and the advent of the English Reformation.

The ensemble continues under its own label, Inventa, with the same underlying principles of offering rich, historically informed projects that not only shed light on rarely performed repertoire but also on the historical events surrounding them. Their first album – *Hieronymus Praetorius: Motets in 8, 10, 12, 16 and 20 parts* – was released in June 2019.

www.alamire.co.uk

David Skinner

David Skinner divides his time equally as a scholar and choral director. An engaging presenter he has worked extensively for BBC Radio, appearing in and writing a variety of shows on Radios 3 and 4. He acted as music advisor for the Music and Monarchy series on BBC2 with David Starkey, and was Music Consultant for the BBC4 documentary *Evensong* with Lucy Worsley. He has published widely on music and musicians of early Tudor England, and his latest publications include an historical introduction for a facsimile publication of Royal College of Music, MS 1070 – *The Anne Boleyn Music Book* – as well as a collected edition of Tallis's Latin church music for Early English Church Music (Stainer & Bell).

David is Fellow and Osborn Director of Music at Sidney Sussex College in the University of Cambridge where he teaches historical and practical topics from the medieval and renaissance periods. He directs the Choir of Sidney Sussex College, with whom he has toured and made highly acclaimed recordings, and is frequently invited to lecture, lead workshops and coach choirs throughout Europe and the USA.



David Skinner (Photography: Clive Barda)

Media vita in morte su mus quem querimus ad-
 tutozem nisi te domi ne qui pro peccatis no stris iuste
 ira ce ris. Sancte de us. Sancte
 fo? tis. Sancte et misericors salua to? amare mo?
 ti ne tra das nos. ps. Nunc dimittis. v. Re poci as
 nos in tempo? se nectu tis cum defecerit virtus no stra
 x.iii.

Detail from *Media vita in morte sumus* in the *Sarum Antiphoner* (1519)

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www.inventarecords.com

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Project Patron: Mrs Patricia Brown
 Producer: Nigel Short
 Engineer: Jim Gross
 Editing and Mastering: Adam Binks
 Music transcribed, edited and reconstructed by David Skinner

Recorded at 24-bit/96kHz resolution
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