

***Spem in Alium* – a comparatively review of fourteen recordings
by Ralph Moore**

Background

We know less about Thomas Tallis than Shakespeare or any other major cultural figure of the Tudor age; definite facts are few and reasonable inferences and conjectures are many, starting even with the dates of his birth – presumed to be around 1505 - and death - either 20th or 23rd November, 1585. The exact site of his grave in the chancel of the parish of St Alfege Church, Greenwich, is lost. We have no authenticated portrait. What we do know is that despite being a recusant Catholic, he not only survived those perilous times but prospered under a succession of Protestant monarchs, the sole Catholic being Edward VI's sister Mary, who reigned for only five years, from 1553-1558. He was so valued and respected that Elizabeth gave him the lease on a manor house and a handsome income, and in 1575 he and his pupil William Byrd were granted an exclusive royal patent to print and publish polyphonic music. The key to his survival must lie in his discretion, flexibility and, above all, prodigious talent: he is indubitably one of the greatest English composers of his or any age and a towering figure in Renaissance choral music.

His masterpiece is certainly the forty-voice motet *Spem in alium* but here again, verified facts regarding its origin and first performance are few. The original manuscript is lost and our knowledge of the work is derived from another score prepared for the investiture in 1610 of James I's elder son, Henry, as Prince of Wales, and used again for the coronation in 1625 of his younger brother, Charles I, next in line to the throne after Harry's death in 1612 from typhoid fever at eighteen years old. It is a mark of the esteem in which the work was still held that it should twice have been revived for such occasions – albeit with an English text, evidently more suitable for celebration than the sombre Latin original, a paraphrase of words from the Book of Judith which appear in a Responsum in the ancient Sarum Rite, predecessor of the Tridentine Mass. Those Latin words are written at the bottom of the manuscript; the English translation reads as follows:

I have never put my hope in any other
but in Thee, God of Israel,
who canst show both wrath and graciousness,
and who absolves all the sins
of suffering man.
Lord God,
Creator of Heaven and Earth
Regard our humility.

The contrafactum “Sing and Glorify” has a decidedly more upbeat – and, in the context of Henry's death, only a year and a half later, sadly ironic - text:

Sing and glorify heaven's high Majesty,
Author of this blessed harmony;
Sound divine praises
With melodious graces;
This is the day, holy day, happy day,
For ever give it greeting, Love and joy
heart and voice meeting:
Live Henry princely and mighty,
Harry live in thy creation happy.

This English version is sung on the concluding track of both albums by the Sixteen and the Cardinal's Musick, reviewed below. Their timings are considerably faster than those of the original, obviously in an attempt to make it sound less lugubrious, and Christophers enhances its sonority by the addition of the rich, purring sound of sackbuts and cornets. As such, it emerges as a grand, but still slightly incongruous, adaptation, given its original devotional and penitential character. However, as it is in this form that this miraculous work, the greatest of its kind, survived, we must be grateful that it was deemed suitable for a celebratory occasion.

The genesis of that original is open to speculation and subject to several theories. Its revival in 1610 gave rise to reminiscences of events forty years previously in a letter by one Thomas Wateridge relating how, in 1567, the Italian composer Alessandro Striggio had been sent to London by the Medici on a diplomatic mission and there directed a performance of either his forty-part motet, *Ecce beatam lucem*, or his mass *Missa sopra Ecco sì beato giorno*. This led an un-named Duke – who must have been the Catholic Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, there being only one Duke in Elizabeth's reign – to challenge Tallis to equal the feat, and demonstrate that an English composer could rival the Italian master in his exploitation of the new medium of "cori spezzati" ("split choirs"). According to Wateridge, the success of Tallis' endeavour was so great that "the Duke, hearinge yt songe, tooke his chayne of Gold from his necke & putt yt about Tallice his necke and gave yt him".

My MWI colleague Robert Hugill in his [review](#) of the Naxos recording points out the Duke's son-in-law, the Earl of Arundel, owned a property suitable as a venue for the performance of such a work, the Long Gallery in Arundel House in the Strand, and the CD notes observe that "Arundel also owned Nonsuch Palace, whose octagon banqueting hall would have been ideal for performance of the work." As the Duke was executed for treason in 1572, this would date the first performance to any time between Striggio's visit and Howard's death. Other theories are that Tallis composed it years before that as a triumphalist Catholic paean to Queen Mary during her reign, or to celebrate Elizabeth's fortieth birthday in 1573; indeed, it could have been sung at any or all of those occasions. Thus it cannot strictly be regarded as a sacred work despite the "vertical" thrust of its music and text, as it was clearly intended for performance in a secular setting.

The mystery surrounding the piece is heightened by Tallis' embedding of his name in its structure and his use of coded numbers in his compositions. It is written for eight five-voice choirs, employing an extraordinary variety of modes, from a single voice to antiphonal exchanges in pairs, to complex polyphonic, linear and chordal harmonies, to homophonic singing in unison.

One question which vexes those concerned with authenticity is how resonant and reverberant the recording acoustic should be, according to both the venue and the engineering and what the correct placement of the singers should be: the consensus is that Tallis wanted his choirs arranged in a horseshoe shape, but they could equally have been positioned in the round, distributed in and below the four balconies of the Nonsuch banqueting hall.

Another issue is whether women's voices should be used in performance, as obviously Tallis employed only boys and men. I have no problem with female voices because of the comparative ease with which they can encompass the high tessitura of the treble and mean lines, especially when they sing with a straight, "white" sound, sparing of vibrato and barely distinguishable from boys' voices. In some recordings, even the best trebles and especially countertenors can still sound stretched, despite singing in the original key of G major, but some of the best recordings here, regardless of whether boys or women are used, successfully opt to sing the piece a semitone, or even a whole tone higher, as per the versions by Willcocks, Wulstan, the Taverner Consort and the Sixteen. For the climax of the piece, when all forty voices combine for the first time on the A major chord at the fortieth bar on "Respice", there must surely be a sense of theatre and that drama must be carried through to the

ensuing bars rather treated as an isolated outburst. The best ensembles do that but are also sensitive to that fact that the words immediately following it are “humilitatem nostram” – “our humility” – a somewhat ironic conclusion to so deliberately ostentatious a work.

Recordings

I offer here brief reviews of fourteen recordings which constitute a representative, if unavoidably incomplete, sample of the discography over the last fifty-five years. Older recordings tend to be a slower; a pioneering recording by Michael Tippett, conducting at the invitation of EMI producer Walter Legge, the Morley College Choir in 1948, gives the music more space to breathe at 12:02. Unfortunately, its uncertain beat, superannuated sonics and claustrophobic acoustic – it was recorded in an EMI studio - inevitably render it of specialist or curiosity interest only. Most more modern performances have timings of around ten minutes but there are exceptions to this, such as the recording by the Oxford Camerata, at over twelve minutes and the Pro Musica Antiqua, at fourteen.

Sound preferences obviously depend to some extent on the listener’s own equipment, whether the listening is on speakers or headphones, or especially whether the SACD version is listened to; my own survey is based on listening via a conventional stereo set-up, not surround-sound, so my apologies to those who have SACD.

The following recordings are mainstream and available; they are arranged chronologically, by recording date. For ease of reference, I provide the key as it is designated and performed according to modern notation.

The Choir of King’s College, Cambridge/Sir David Willcocks (Decca 4336762 or Classic FM CFM 001) [11:32] (1965) - A flat major.

This is still a deeply moving account; the big wash of resonant sound creates its own magic and one can imagine how many thousands of people first encountered this wonderful music via this medium. If you want small-scale, period OVPP clarity, look elsewhere; the choir here is doubled to eighty, yet Willcocks still permits individual lines to emerge then recede enticingly. The nature of the acoustic justifies the expansiveness of the tempi and the effect is overwhelming; its opulence is underscored by the rumbling organ bass line – which is not necessarily inauthentic as Tallis might well have expected there to be an organ providing support. The Decca stereo sound copes well with the massive sonorities. It remains a classic.

The Clerkes of Oxenford/David Wulstan (Classics for Pleasure 72435680621) [10:12] (1973) – B flat major.

Now forty-five years old, this recording by the Clerkes of Oxenford, under the leadership of David Wulstan, demonstrated the conductor’s theory that Tudor pitch was to be interpreted a minor third higher than is usual today, with the angelic sound of high sopranos performing ethereally on top B flats (a whole tone and half up from the majority of recordings in G major). This was a top “Gramophone” recommendation in 2010: ‘Superlative trebles, a beautifully transparent, almost fragile texture and a few moments that hit the bull’s-eye as no subsequent reading’s quite done.’

Unusually, for so early a recording date, this was a OVPP yet suffers from no lack of weight or “swell” when the voices combine, and the high tessitura lends an other-worldly quality achieved by no other version. Some might find its momentum a tad rushed and not be reconciled to the more piercing quality of its sound-world but I love it. The analogue sound is fine.

Pro Antiqua/Mark Brown (Alto ALC1082) [13:59] (1985) – G major.

The augmented voices here are not especially well integrated; both the sopranos and the countertenors are sometimes edgy and tenor entries are unnecessarily intrusive instead of gliding in. There is even a suggestion of them sounding a little under-powered; the top-line soprano is a bit thin and the voices are not always ideally supported, so sometimes seem to flag. The slow speed means that there is some lack of momentum and cumulative power; if the aim was greater textural clarity, the very resonant acoustic works against that aim. One of my two least favourite recordings.

Tallis Scholars/Peter Phillips (Gimell CDGIM006) [9:50] (1984) – A flat major.

The higher key gives a more penetrating quality to the singing and the top line sung by Tessa Bonner is especially striking. This is steady, controlled singing of great purity and precision; the refined, ethereal sound is deliberately non-interventionist. This has been a top, benchmark recommendation since its release 32 years ago but for those who want more dynamic variety and emotional investment, it is too cool and even dispassionate. Balances and the stereo spread are excellent. I love its patrician sparseness but suspect that this music has more to give than the Tallis Scholars concede.

Taverner Consort & Choir/Parrott (Virgin Veritas 724356223028) [10:20] (1986/87) – A flat major.

The Taverner Consort make a big, pure, poised sound, very similar to the Tallis but strive more consciously to build tension and grandeur. Parrott's exploitation of pauses, more flexible beat and greater emphasis upon propulsiveness mean that there is more swing and momentum to their phrasing and a more pronounced sense of shape to the music. The addition of a quite prominent instrumental underlay enhances rather than distracts from the harmonies. In many ways this can be a first recommendation alongside the Naxos and Linn versions.

The Choir of King's College, Cambridge/Stephen Cleobury (Argo 4251992) [8:52] (1989) - G major.

Using only boys' and men's voices lends homogeneity but the combination of the brisk speed and the very reverberant acoustic of King's College chapel means that there is a rather a wash and blur of sound. As sheer noise, it is impressive but does not permit much detail to emerge, so the overall effect remains impressionistic rather than profound and "Respite" is positively roared, twice. It's grand but generalised.

Westminster Choir/David Hill (Hyperion CDA66400) [11:04] (1989) - G major.

This is another large-scale performance which owes something to Willcocks' example. The choir isn't as big but it is recorded well back in the generous acoustic of Winchester Cathedral, creating a "wall of sound", somewhat at a remove from the listener. Tempi are very steady to compensate for the reverberation in the venue but Hill keeps a grip on the overall shape of the music. A satisfying, traditional account which just about avoids being mushy but cannot offer the same precision as more immediately recorded versions. The final bars swell impressively and quality of singing throughout is very high; the trebles slice dramatically through the wash of noise but ultimately everything is rather too distant.

Magnificat/Philip Cave (Linn CKD075) [9:59] (1997) – G major.

Recorded completely in the round, with the conductor in the centre of the circle of the forty singers, the sound here is warm, beautifully balanced and perfectly engineered. The eight choirs feature a host of famous names - Carolyn Sampson, Sally Dunkley, Lisa Beckley, James Bowman, James Gilchrist and

Andrew Carwood, to name but a few – and their smooth control of dynamics, precise entries and flexible phrasing create a mesmerising ensemble. Unlike some recordings, there is no hint of “scratchiness” in the countertenors’ tone and the sopranos do not overpower the lower voices. The gradual build-up to “Respite” swells beguilingly and they do not make the mistake of pouncing on the word but let it hang and float in the air. This was the first choice of “Gramophone” critic Mary Berry and I agree with her; this is perhaps the best of all.

New College, Oxford/Edward Higginbottom (Erato 8573802392) (9:35) (2000) – G major.

Like the Cleobury King’s recording, this offers a wall of sound, rather lacking in nuance and dynamic variety. The trebles here are fruitier of tone and not as pure or steady as some other choirs with too much pulsing on held notes and some tuning issues. Individual voices tend to obtrude rather than blend. Higginbottom’s tempi are brisker than Willcocks’, almost as a contra-reaction and antithesis to the King’s style, without being as fast as the 1989 King’s recording. The acoustic is rather muddled; not a favourite.

La Chapelle du Roi/Alistair Dixon (Regis RRC1394) [9:54] (2002) – G major.

I seem to like this one more than some commentators; it enjoys rich sound, with lovely bass lines, swelling like an ocean. The reverberant acoustic does not bother me as the vocal lines are still clear. They make pointed use of subtle pauses and their top-line soprano is fine, if not as pure as the trebles in the very best, most competitive recordings - and I positively dislike the scratchy tone of some oddly prominent high tenors.

The Sixteen/Christophers (Coro CORSACD16016) [9:40] (2003) – A major.

Superb recording quality from the All Saints Church, Tooting: a big, rounded acoustic, very clear and able to accommodate the high frequency of a performance sung a whole tone up from the norm, so the high treble-line soprano is constantly sounding bell-like top As. The choir has plenty of heft but soars upwards easily without strain. I can appreciate that Christophers’ tempi are a bit rushed for those who want more repose and stillness in the music but it works on its own terms. A wonderful performance of very high technical and artistic quality.

Oxford Camerata/Jeremy Summerly (Naxos 8. 557770) [12:14] (2005) - G major.

For this recording, the ranks of the Oxford Camerata were swelled from the usual twelve to forty by inviting the participation of twenty-eight former members of the ensemble.

Recorded in the same venue as the La Chappelle du Roi disc, the singers are arranged in a circle and surround the listener like an angelic host. I like the degree of reverberation here and do not find that it obscures the vocal lines. Carolyn Sampson and Robin Blaze, both of whom now have important solo careers, soar ethereally and I especially like Jeremy Summerly’s attention to the gradation of dynamics. His pace, unusually broad for a recent recording, does not detract from the sense of flow. For the unison “Respite”, the singers in unison adopt a gentler, humbler demeanour without over-doing the restraint – an interpretatively sound choice. I rate this version very highly.

The King’s Singers (Signum Classics SIGCD071) (8:22) (2005) – F major.

This is the multitracked version by the King’s Singers, sung a whole tone down to accommodate their tessitura. Despite its artistry and precision, it suffers from a certain blandness of phrasing and dynamics, and also from being sung simply too fast, both flaws being perhaps the consequence of the

need to adhere rigidly to the beat to facilitate the over-dubbing. The peculiar, artificial acoustic also presumably results from the application of ambiance via electronic trickery to make the six singers sound like forty singing in a larger venue. Not really a contender.

The Cardinal's Musick/Andrew Carwood (Hyperion CDA6156) [10:22] (2015) – G major.

This, the most recent of the recordings reviewed here, sounds as if it is performed “in the round” and is very well recorded, but for me it lacks tension, instances of hard, scratchy tone in the upper voices are too frequent and occasionally intonation is inaccurate. It does not displace my preferred versions.

Conclusion

The field is very strong and my providing an absolute first recommendation is inadvisable beyond remarking that my personal favourites for a modern, digital recording remain the recordings by the Oxford Camerata, Taverner Consort, the Sixteen and Magnificat, with the vintage Willcocks and the pioneering Wulstan accounts both occupying special, separate niches in my affections.

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