

CAMBRIDGE TAVERNER CHOIR

Owen Rees *director*

John Taverner MISSA CORONA SPINEA and music by Nicholas Ludford & William Cornysh



Sunday 8 October 1995
Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge
8.15 p.m.

PROGRAMME

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Domine Jesu Christe	Nicholas Ludford (c. 1485–1557)
Kyrie: Deus creator omnium	chant
Gloria: Missa Corona spinea	John Taverner (c. 1490–1545)
Collect	chant
Credo: Missa Corona spinea	Taverner

INTERVAL of 15 minutes

Ave Maria mater Dei	William Cornysh (d. 1523)
Preface	chant
Sanctus: Missa Corona spinea	Taverner
Pater noster & Pax Domini	chant
Agnus Dei: Missa Corona spinea	Taverner

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The Cambridge Taverner Choir *director* Owen Rees

<i>sopranos</i>	<i>altos</i>	<i>tenors</i>	<i>basses</i>
Diana Baumann	Simon Godsill	Paul Baumann	James Durran
Andrea Cockerton	Martin Neill	William Byrne	Frank Salmon
Josie Dixon	Rupert Preston Bell	Finlay Lockie	Gary Snapper
Helen Garrison		Philip Mills	Paul Watson
Caroline Preston Bell		Edwin Simpson	
Rachel Godsill			
Sally Terris			
Tanya Wicks			

We are grateful to the Master, Chaplain, and Fellows of Jesus College for their kind permission to perform in the chapel.

This concert opens a season marking the 450th anniversary of the death of John Taverner (on 18 October 1545), one of the greatest English composers of the Tudor era. The concerts are designed both to illustrate the great variety found within Taverner's surviving Latin works—in particular, the Masses—and to allow comparisons to be drawn with the music of other prominent composers working within the same period. Tonight we present one of the three great six-voice Masses—*Corona spinea*—together with antiphons by an older composer—William Cornysh (d. 1523)—and another who was probably a close contemporary of Taverner—Nicholas Ludford (c. 1485–1557).

John Taverner may have come from Lincolnshire, but we have no knowledge of his life until 1524 or 1525, when he was a lay clerk at the collegiate church of the Holy Trinity at Tattershall in that county (the church where the Cambridge Taverner Choir gave its inaugural concert). In 1525 he was invited to become master of the choristers of a prestigious new foundation in Oxford: Cardinal College, the brainchild of Cardinal Wolsey. Taverner took up his duties there in 1526, but his sojourn in Oxford was to be brief, for in 1529 Wolsey fell from grace and his College went into decline, and we must presume that this was the reason for Taverner's departure in 1530. While in Oxford Taverner became associated with a Lutheran faction at the college, but escaped punishment because, as Wolsey declared, he was 'unlearned and not to be regarded'.

Taverner may have returned directly to Lincolnshire in 1530. We next have sight of him as a lay clerk in the choir maintained at Boston Parish Church by the wealthy Guild of St Mary, a choir which—like those at Tattershall and Cardinal College, Oxford—was large by the standards of the time, with ten to twelve chaplains, a similar number of lay clerks, and between eight and ten choristers. By 1537 he had left the choir, and thereafter we have no evidence that he continued to be involved directly in church music. A year later he was responsible for destroying the rood screen in Boston Parish Church: this and other evidence shows that he played his part in the Henrician reformation. However, the widely-known claim of John Foxe (in *The Second Volume of the Ecclesiastical History*, published in 1570) that Taverner 'repented him very much that he had made songs to Popish ditties in the time of his blindness' is likely to be—at the least—exaggerated.

It must be presumed that Taverner composed his *Missa Corona spinea* for celebrations of the Feast of the Holy Crown of Thorns or for the Votive Mass of the Crown of Thorns. However, we do not possess appropriate chants for such occasions for the Use of Salisbury (the dominant liturgical Use in England before the reformation), and it seems in any case entirely possible that Taverner's grand work was employed on other feasts of suitable character at an establishment such as Cardinal College. In tonight's concert we do not attempt to reconstruct Mass on any specific feast, but include sufficient Ordinary chants of the Mass to give an impression of the impact which such lavish polyphony must always have made within the conduct of the liturgy. The piece is constructed on a chant cantus firmus (placed in the tenor part), which has not been identified in liturgical books. It can be heard most clearly at the start of the 'Osanna' of the *Benedictus*, where two other voices anticipate its arrival in imitation. Taverner chose an unusual vocal scoring for the Mass, with two bass parts counterbalancing a treble part of quite remarkable floridity; at the words 'in nomine Domini' in the *Benedictus* the extremes of high and low voices are isolated in a remarkable *gimell* passage for divided trebles and the two basses. Although the melodic style of the Mass is highly decorated, it is also—as is typical in Taverner's music—often unified through the development of short melodic cells, especially in sequence.

The antiphons by Cornysh and Ludford performed tonight provide a glimpse of the manner in which florid Latin polyphony was altering during Taverner's life. Cornysh's *Ave Maria mater Dei* is preserved in the Eton Choirbook, our principal source for sacred music of the late fifteenth century composed in England. Although a brief work, and modestly scored for four voices, it features the extended decorative melismas heard also in Taverner's Mass. While this elaborate melodic and rhythmic style may sometimes be heard also in Ludford's antiphon *Domine Jesu Christe* (particularly in the florid duets and trios exploring a wide range of voice-combinations), it is there juxtaposed with newer techniques: particularly striking is the clear-cut imitation between all five voices at the final climax of the piece ('que sempiternam'), followed by antiphonal scoring at the beginning of the 'amen'. There are also some wonderfully poignant responses to the text, as where the harmony darkens at the mention of 'that bitterest passion of your shameful cross' ('crucis tue passionem...amarissimam').

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