

CAMBRIDGE TAVERNER CHOIR

director Owen Rees

When David heard

*Ahi caso acerbo, ahi fat'empio e crudele,
Ahi stell' inguriose, ahi Ciel avaro.
Non si fidi huom mortale
Di ben caduco e frate
Che tosto fugge, e spesso
A gran salita il precipizio e presso.*

*(Ah, bitter chance! Ah, wicked and cruel destiny!
Ah, baleful stars! Ah, rapacious heaven!
Moral man, put not your trust
In a transient and frail benevolence
Which soon will vanish—
And the higher the leap, the greater the fall.)*

JESUS COLLEGE CHAPEL

Sunday 26 February 1995

8.15 p.m.

**By kind permission of the Master, Chaplain, and
Fellows**

PROGRAMME

- 1 How are the mighty fallen Robert Ramsey (*fl.* 1612–1644)

Works of the Franco-Flemish tradition

- 2 Nymphes des bois (Déploration sur la
mort de Johannes Ockeghem) Josquin Desprez (*c.* 1440–1521)
3 O mors inevitabilis Hieronymus Vinders (*fl.* 1510–1550)
4 Doleo super te Pierre de la Rue (*c.* 1460–1518)
5 Absalon fili mi Pierre de la Rue?
6 Lugebat David Absalon Nicolas Gombert (*c.* 1495–*c.* 1560)

Works from Spain

- 7 Versa est in luctum Alonso Lobo (*c.* 1555–1617)
8 Mortuus est Philippus Rex Ambrosio Cotes (*c.* 1550–1603)
9 Versa est in luctum Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611)

Interval of 15 minutes

- 10 When David heard Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656)
11 O Jonathan Thomas Weelkes
12 When David heard Thomas Weelkes (1576–1623)
13 Sleep, fleshly birth Robert Ramsey
14 Come to me, grief, for ever William Byrd (*c.* 1542–1623)
15 What is our life? Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625)
16 When David heard Robert Ramsey

The Cambridge Taverner Choir

director Owen Rees

sopranos

Diana Baumann
Josie Dixon
Helen Garrison
Bernadette Nelson
Caroline Preston Bell
Margaret Simper
Rachel Sutton
Sally Terris
Tanya Wicks

altos

Simon Godsill
Martin Neill
Nicholas Perkins
Rupert Preston Bell

tenors

Paul Baumann
Finlay Lockie
Philip Mills
Rob Nicolls
Edwin Simpson

basses

James Durran
Frank Salmon
Gary Snapper
Paul Watson

Among the major concerns of artists of all kinds during the Renaissance were human mortality and transience, and the insignificance of worldly achievement, themes encapsulated in Sir Walter Raleigh's poem *What is our life*, set by Orlando Gibbons (no. 15 in the programme). In tonight's concert, we perform some of the great musical laments of the period, many of which are settings of texts which reflect these concerns.

The most common single source for such texts was David's laments on the deaths of his son Absalom (nos. 5, 6, 10, 12, and 16 in tonight's programme) and of King Saul and his son, Jonathan (nos. 1, 4, and 11), as recorded in the Second Book of Samuel. These laments (or parts of them) were not infrequently employed in musical elegies for royalty. Thus the telling phrase 'How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war destroyed' (in Latin, 'Quomodo ceciderunt robusti, et perierunt arma bellica') with which two of the Jonathan laments end (Robert Ramsey's *How are the mighty fallen* and Pierre de la Rue's *Doleo super te*) finds an echo also at the conclusion of the lament for Philip II of Spain, *Mortuus est Philippus rex*, set by Ambrosio Cotes (no. 8). La Rue's *Doleo super te*, actually the fourth part of a longer motet (*Considera Israel*) setting the laments for Saul and Jonathan, is found as an independent item in a music book compiled for Marguerite of Austria (1480–1530), perhaps because Marguerite adopted this section of the larger work—the section that directly mourns a brother ('frater mi')—as a lament for her brother, Philip the Fair (d. 1506). It may be that several of the remarkable English settings of King David's laments—by Ramsey, Weelkes, and Tomkins—were written upon the death in 1612 of Prince Henry, eldest son and heir of James I, who during his short life became the focus for the nation's hopes of future glory, and whose private court was a centre for artistic endeavour, including music. Certainly, the textual themes of these laments—death in youth, and the fall of the mighty—could most appropriately have been applied to the Prince. Similarly, the 'sweet youth' of Ramsey's *Sleep fleshly birth* may be Henry.

Among the most famous of the musical settings of David's laments is the motet *Absalom fili mi* (no. 5), which until recently was accepted as the work of Josquin Desprez but is now thought more likely to be by Pierre de la Rue. The piece is best known for the dramatic descent into flat keys and low vocal ranges at its end, painting the words 'but let me go down into hell weeping'. Gombert's treatment of the same subject in *Lugebat David Absalom* is altogether more grand, the eight voice-parts engaging in pungent clashes which mirror in music the grief of the King.

In the late fifteenth century it became increasingly common to lament the death of the greatest composers in poetry and music, a genre now usually termed 'déploration'. The largest numbers of such works took as their subjects the deaths of Johannes Ockeghem in 1497 and Josquin Desprez in 1521. The text of *Nymphes des bois* (no. 2 in the programme) is an elegy by Jean Molinet on the death of Ockeghem, while Vinders's *O mors inevitabilis* (no. 3) commemorates Josquin; this latter text was apparently the epitaph included with a portrait of Josquin at Ste Gudule in Brussels. Byrd's *Come to me, grief, for ever* laments not a fellow-composer but the statesman and poet Sir Philip Sydney, whose untimely death in 1596 (like Absalom and Jonathan, in battle) was marked by a number of poets.

Among the group of Spanish works with which the first half of the concert ends are two very different—but equally powerful—settings of *Versa est in luctum*. That by Alonso Lobo was published in 1602 under the title 'Ad Exsequias Philip II Cathol. Regis Hisp.' ('for the funeral of Philip II, Catholic King of Spain'), and therefore clearly dates from 1598 (like Cotes's piece mentioned above); Victoria's setting was included in the published version (1605) of the great six-voice *Requiem*, written for the obsequies in 1603 of Philip II's sister—the Dowager Empress Maria—whom Victoria had served as choirmaster and chaplain.

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.* (Shakespeare)

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thy high places. O Jonathan, woe is me for thee, my brother Jonathan: very kind hast thou been to me; thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war destroyed!

Nymphes des bois, déesses des fontaines,
Chantres experts de toutes nations,
Changez voz voix fort clères et haultaines
En cris tranchantz et lamentations.
Car d'Atropos les molestations
Vostre Okeghem par sa rigeur attrappe
Le vray trésor de musique et chief d'oeuvre
Que de trépas désormais plus n'escappe
Dont grant doumaige est que la terre coeuvre.

Acoutez vous d'abitiz de deuil:
Josquin, Brumel, Pirchons, Compère,
Et plorz grosses larmes d'ocil:
Perdu avez vostre bon père.
Requiescat in pace. Amen.
(*Tenor: Requiem æternam dona eis Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.*)

Wood-nymphs, goddesses of the springs, skilled singers of all nations, change your clear and lofty voices into piercing cries and lamentations. For the harsh molestations of Atropos have ensnared your Ockeghem, Music's very treasure and master, who henceforth cannot escape death. It is a great misfortune that he is covered by earth.

*Clothe yourselves in dress of mourning, Josquin, Brumel, Pierre de la Rue, and Compère, and weep great tears from your eyes, you who have lost your good father. May he rest in peace. Amen.
(Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may everlasting light shine upon them.)*

O mors inevitabilis, mors amara, mors crudelis, Josquin de Pres dum necasti, illum nobis abstulisti, qui suum per harmoniam illustravit ecclesiam. Propterea tu musice di: requiescat in pace.
(*Tenor: Requiem æternam dona ei Domine, et lux perpetua luceat ei.*)

*O inescapable death, bitter death, cruel death, by slaying Josquin Desprez who stole him from us, who by his harmony gave lustre to the church. Now say thous with music: may he rest in peace.
(Grant him eternal rest, O Lord, and may everlasting light shine upon him.)*

Doleo super te, frater mi Jonatha, decore nimis, et amabilis super amorem mulierum. Sicut mater unicum amat filium suum, ita ego te diligebam. Quomodo ceciderunt robusti, et perierunt arma bellica.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan, thou who was fair beyond measure, and more dear to me than the love of women. As a mother loves her only son, thus did I love you. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war destroyed.

Absalon fili mi, quis det ut moriar pro te, fili mi Absalon? Non vivam ultra, sed descendam in infernum plorans.
Absalom my son, would that I might die for you, my son Absalom. Let me live no longer, but descend into hell weeping.

Lugebat David Absalon, pius pater filium, tristis senex puerum: heu me fili mi Absalon, quis mihi det ut ego pro te moriar, O fili mi Absalon? Rex autem David filium cooperto flebat capite. Poro rex operuit caput suum, et clamabat voce magna: fili mi Absalon.
David mourned for Absalom, a pious father for his son, a sad old man for his boy: Alas, my son Absalom, would that I might die for you, O my son Absalom. King David wept with covered head for his son. Then the King uncovered his head, and cried with a great voice: my son Absalom.

Versa est in luctum cithara mea, et organum meum in vocem flentium. Parce mihi, Domine, nihil enim sunt dies mei.
My harp is turned into mourning, and my music into the voice of those that weep. Spare me, Lord, for my days are nothing.

Mortuus est Philippus Rex, et fleverunt eum omnis populus planctu magno, et lugebant dies multos, e dixerunt: quomodo cecidit potens qui salvum faciebat populum suum.
King Philip is dead, and the whole people wept for him with great lamenting, and mourned for many days, and said: how is the mighty one fallen, the protector of his people.

When David heard that Absalom was slain, he went up to his chamber over the gate, and wept. And thus he said: O my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee, O Absalom my son.

Sleep fleshly birth in peaceful earth,
And let thine ears list to the music of the spheres,
While we around this fairy ground
Thy doleful obit keeping
Make marble melt with weeping.
With num'rous feet we'll part and meet,
Then chorus-like in a ring thy praises sing,
While showers of flowers bestrew thee.
Rest in soft peace, sweet youth, and there remain
Till soul and body meet to join again.

Come to me, grief, for ever
Come to me tears day and night,
Come to me plaint, ah helpless.
Just grief, heart tears, plaint worthy.

He whom the Court adorned,
He whom the country courtis'd,
He who made happy his friends,
He that did good to all men.

Come to me, grief...

What is our life? A play of passion,
Our mirth the music of division.
Our mother's wombs the tiring-houses be
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is,
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss.
Our graves that hide us from the searching sun
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
Thus march we, playing, to our latest rest:
Only we die in earnest, that's no jest. (Text by Sir Walter Raleigh)

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