

CAMBRIDGE TAVERNER CHOIR

Media Vita

Music by John Sheppard

Little St Mary's Church Cambridge

Sunday 19 June 2005

7.45pm

PROGRAMME

Paschal Kyrie	John Sheppard
Gloria (Missa Cantate)	Sheppard
Sequence: Prome casta concio cantica	chant
Credo (Missa Cantate)	Sheppard
Preface	chant
Sanctus & Benedictus (Missa Cantate)	Sheppard
Libera nos, salva nos	Sheppard
Agnus Dei	Sheppard

INTERVAL of 15 minutes

Media vita in morte sumus	Sheppard
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The Cambridge Taverner Choir

Director: Owen Rees

sopranos: Diana Baumann, Andrea Blakesley, Josie Dixon, Hester Higton,
Caroline Preston Bell, Kate Semmens, Sally Terris, Tanya Wicks

altos: Suzanne Aspden, Rachel Howells, Rupert Preston Bell, Helen Zimmer

tenors: David Allinson, Paul Baumann, Mark Dourish, Tom Salmon, David Thomson

basses: James Durran, Frank Salmon, Gary Snapper, Paul Watson

The Cambridge Taverner Choir is a member of the National Federation of Music Societies
Our thanks to the Vicar and PCC of Little Saint Mary's for their kind permission to use the church.

Texts and translations

Libera nos, salva nos, justifica nos, O beata Trinitas.

Free us, save us, justify us, O blessed Trinity.

Media vita in morte sumus. Quem quærimus adiutorem nisi te, Domine, qui pro peccatis nostris juste irasceris? Sancte Deus, Sancte fortis, Sancte et misericors Salvator, amaræ morti ne tradas nos.

In the midst of life we are in death. Whom shall we seek as our helper, if not thee, O Lord, who art justly angered by our sins? Holy God, Holy and strong, Holy and merciful Saviour, do not deliver us to the bitterness of death.

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 tuæ Israel.

Gloria Patri et Filio: et Spiritui Sancto.

Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper: et in sæcula sæculorum. Amen.

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.

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

Do not cast us away in our old age; when our strength fails us do not abandon us, O Lord.

Noli claudere aures tuas ad preces nostras.

Close not thine ears to our prayers.

Qui cognoscis occulta cordis, parce peccatis nostris.

Thou who knowest the secrets of our hearts, forgive us our sins.

John Sheppard must be counted one of the finest English composers of the sixteenth century, and tonight we perform two of his most spectacular large-scale works: the six-voice *Missa Cantate*, and the grand Lenten antiphon *Media vita*. Sheppard was Master of the Choristers at Magdalen College, Oxford, in the 1540s, and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary Tudor (1553–1558). He died very shortly after Mary herself, and before Elizabeth I (her successor) was crowned.

Five Masses by Sheppard survive, but the most elaborate is the one intriguingly entitled 'Cantate' in the only source, which dates from the late sixteenth century. The explanation for this title remains a puzzle: no-one has yet identified the source of the melodic material which recurs throughout the Mass. (This material occurs sometimes in long notes in the tenor part, and sometimes is distributed throughout the voices.) The style of the piece demonstrates wonderfully the extent to which English sacred polyphony contrasted with that written on the Continent in the mid-sixteenth century. The melodic language is extraordinarily exuberant, with frequent wide leaps and an plethora of decorative figures. The combining of these figures in fully-scored sections brings the pungent clashes which are such a feature of Sheppard's style. An extreme example of melodic elaboration—a written-out trill which occurs at several points in the contratenor parts—is perhaps the most unusual feature of the Mass.

The work is faithful to English tradition also in its scoring. At the top of the texture is the 'treble', extending to written high G (and in tonight's performance to sung A), below which is the 'mean' (probably sung by boys in the larger church choirs, such as that of the Chapel Royal, to which Sheppard belonged). The middle of the texture is enriched by the presence of two equal contratenor parts, with remarkably wide ranges (and tonight sung by a mixture of altos and tenors), and below these are the tenor (low by modern standards) and bass. This array of six voices is exploited to the full, with the structure of the piece marked in large part by changes in texture. Full scoring is often reserved for climactic points in the text, such as 'gratias agimus tibi' in the *Gloria*, 'Et resurrexit' in the *Credo*, and 'Osanna' in both *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*.

Whenever it was composed, the *Missa Cantate* would surely have been performed in the Chapel Royal of Mary Tudor. Tonight we give some sense of the impact of the piece within Mass by singing appropriate chant items—a Sequence from Easter week and the Easter Preface—between some of the polyphonic 'movements'. The concert begins with Sheppard's setting of the Kyrie for the Easter season, in which alternate invocations are chanted and sung in six-voice polyphony (the same kind of scoring as in the *Missa Cantate*) acting as a florid decoration of the chant melody in the tenor voice.

Libera nos, salva nos has become perhaps Sheppard's most famous work during the restoration of interest in the composer spearheaded by David Wulstan in the 1970s. This prayer to the Holy Trinity was to be said every night by Fellows of Magdalen College. The extraordinary setting by Sheppard which we sing here is founded upon the steady tread of the chant in the basses, and uses a texture of seven parts to reflect the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The single work in the second part of the concert—*Media vita* ('In the midst of life we are in death')—belongs to the Lenten season, being a setting of the antiphon to the canticle *Nunc dimittis* at Compline (the last Office of the day) on the third and fourth Sundays in Lent. The canticle itself is performed in chant, and surrounding it Sheppard constructed a monumental polyphonic elaboration of the plainchant (placed, where present, in the tenor). At the opening the rising motive of the chant (the first voice to enter) is taken up in turn by the other five voices to produce a marvellous natural crescendo. After the chanting of the *Nunc dimittis* comes a series of verses scored for a reduced number of voices—the first two for the lower parts and the third employing *gimel*, with divided trebles and means (underpinned eventually by the basses to produce a strikingly 'hollow' scoring). Between these verses ever shorter parts of the opening full section are repeated, the repetitions adding steadily to the power of the sung prayer to 'Holy God'.

Owen Rees began his academic and conducting career as Organ Scholar at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, studying with Peter le Huray and Iain Fenlon. After a period as College Lecturer in Music at St Peter's College and St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he joined the Music Department at the University of Surrey. In 1997 he returned to Oxford, where he is Fellow in Music and Organist at the Queen's College, Lecturer at Somerville College, and Lecturer in the Faculty of Music. His published studies include work on musical sources and repertoires from Coimbra, and on the music of, for example, Francisco Guerrero and William Byrd. His work as a scholar has consistently informed his work as a performer. He has conducted at festivals in the UK, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Choirs under his direction have released CD recordings on the Herald, Hyperion, and Unicorn Kanchana labels, to consistently high critical acclaim.

The Choir

The Cambridge Taverner Choir is one of Britain's leading early music chamber choirs. Like The Tallis Scholars and The Sixteen, the choir emerged from the Oxford and Cambridge choral tradition and has built a reputation for powerful and expressive performances of Renaissance polyphony. Since reaching the shortlist for the Gramophone Early Music Award in 1994, the choir has received acclaim for its concerts and recordings of Renaissance choral music. In 2002, the choir performed at the York Early Music Festival and released its fourth CD, *Music from Renaissance Portugal Vol.2* which was voted one of the top ten CDs of 2002 by the Daily Telegraph. In March 2003 it appeared at the Oslo Church Music Festival to critical acclaim. In 2005 the choir will perform at the 500th anniversary celebrations of the University of Seville. In addition to appearances throughout Britain and abroad, the choir regularly performs to enthusiastic audiences in the beautiful church of Little St Mary's, Cambridge.

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