

PROGRAMME

Salve Regina Robert Wylkinson (c.1450–1515)

Ave Maria mater Dei William Cornysh (d c.1502 or 1523)

Ah Robin, gentle Robin William Cornysh (d 1523)

Stabat mater John Browne (*fl.* c.1490)

INTERVAL of 10 minutes

Jesu, mercy, how may this be? (10'30) John Browne

Salve regina (15') William Cornysh (d. c.1502 or 1523)

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The Cambridge Taverner Choir

Director: Owen Rees

Sopranos: Helen Arnold, Diana Baumann, Josie Dixon, Helen Garrison,
Hester Higton, Caroline Preston Bell, Sally Terris, Tanya Wicks

Altos: Rachael Beale, Matthew Orton, Rupert Preston Bell, Mythili Vamadevan

Tenors: David Allinson, Paul Baumann, Vijay Rangarajan, Tom Salmon, Joss Sanders

Basses: Rupert Beale, James Durran, Piers Master, Frank Salmon, Gary Snapper

The Cambridge Taverner Choir is a member of the National Federation of Music Societies.

All profits from tonight's concert will go to the charity CORD
and will be used to establish of a gynaecological unit in a Mozambique hospital.

Our thanks to the Master & Fellows of Jesus College for their kind permission to use the chapel.

Continental musicians who heard English sacred music of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were surely astonished. The extraordinarily florid polyphony preserved in the famous choirbook copied for Eton College, and in the few other similar manuscripts which survive, is in many ways strikingly different to the works of composers working in other parts of Europe. The opening bars of the first piece in tonight's concert—Robert **Wylkinson's** *Salve regina*—make some of these difference clear: the astonishing vocal scoring (in this case for nine voices, representing the nine orders of angels), with its massive overall range of more than three octaves; the decorative abundance of contrasting melodic and rhythmic figures, including frequently syncopated rhythms; the occasional spinning-out of a single syllable of text over several bars of florid music; the delight in contrast between different groupings of voices, and the dramatic use of the full ensemble.

The Eton Choirbook—copied in the years around 1500 and complete by 1502—is our most important source of English sacred music at this time, and without it our knowledge of such music would be poor indeed. At the time, of course, many institutions—including for example King's College in Cambridge, the sister-foundation of Eton (both founded by Henry VI)—would have owned such books and cultivated the singing of such music, and indeed Eton College itself would have owned other books of polyphony. The Eton choirbook contains both local repertory and works collected from elsewhere, and is therefore invaluable for the glimpse it affords of the music of other institutions, including perhaps works performed by the Chapel Royal. The choirbook (itself far from intact) contains two kinds of works: settings of the canticle Magnificat for use at Vespers, and votive antiphons dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the latter intended for performance at a Marian devotion which took place each evening in the College chapel. The choir entered the chapel, knelt before the crucifix to recite the Lord's Prayer, and then performed the votive antiphon before an image of the Virgin (to whom Eton College was dedicated). The musical floridity of these works is matched by the language of many of their texts. For example, in both Wylkinson's and Cornysh's *Salve regina* the familiar words of this Marian text are augmented with additional epithets of the Virgin and exhortations to her, the whole ending with a final 'Salve' which matches the salutation at the beginning of the text.

Not all the Eton antiphons are on the same grand scale as Wylkinson's piece (which takes about a quarter of an hour to perform). **Cornysh's** *Ave Maria mater Dei* is a miniature by comparison, both in scoring (the maximum number of voices being four) and in duration. The way in which the petition 'miserere mei' ('have mercy upon me') is set demonstrates that the floridity of the Eton style does not exclude expressiveness.

The dramatic use of changes in scoring is a distinctive attribute of English polyphony of this period. It is interesting in this respect to compare the start of **Cornysh's** *Salve Regina* with that of Wylkinson's setting: while Wylkinson sets the first 'Salve' of the text as a full-choir flourish, Cornysh begins with just two high voices (later joined by a third), but interrupts this opening trio with the entry of the full choir at the second 'salve', and extraordinary moment.

It is possible that the Latin pieces attributed to 'Cornysh' in the Eton Choirbook are the work of the William Cornysh who was Master of the Choristers at Westminster Abbey between c. 1480 and c. 1490, who was subsequently a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal, and who died in 1502. The English songs attributed to Cornysh, such as *Ah Robin, gentle Robin*, are likely to be by the William Cornysh (possibly the son of the like-named musician) who was Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal from 1509 until his death in 1523, and who played a leading role in plays and other entertainments at court (as actor and author). This song, from the repertory of court song in English, could not be further from the grand style of sacred polyphony: it presents its text simply and directly—but movingly—in three parts.

John **Browne's** *Jesu mercy, how may this be* is rather more elaborate, an example of the typical English carol of the period in its use of a burden (refrain) alternating between verses. The text is—typically for this repertory—a vivid meditation on the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, involving Christ and sinning man. It reflects the common emphasis at the time on the need for believers to visualise as vividly as possible, and identify strongly with, the events of the Passion.

The Passion—together in this case with Mary's suffering at the foot of the Cross—is likewise the theme of **Browne's** *Stabat mater*, the vividness with which the composer presents the shouts of the crowd 'Crucifige' ('Crucify him') being no less than the approach to text in *Jesu mercy*. It was a musical achievement of an unusual kind that Browne and other composers represented in the Eton Choirbook could thus bring together within one musical style the most elaborate musical invention 'for its own sake' and such direct response to text.

The **Cambridge Taverner Choir**, founded in 1986, belongs to a generation of exciting early music chamber choirs which, like The Tallis Scholars and The Sixteen, emerged from the Oxford and Cambridge choral tradition. As well as regular concert series and festival appearances in Cambridge, the choir has performed in many parts of the U.K., and undertaken highly successful tours of Portugal in 1991 and Switzerland and Italy in 1996; it has also broadcast on Radio 3, and has been featured on Radio 4. The choir has released three recordings; all have been acclaimed by the critics, and *Music from Renaissance Portugal* was short-listed for the *Gramophone* Early Music Award in 1994.

The choir specialises in the performance of sacred polyphony in illuminating thematic, liturgical and physical contexts, aiming to recreate the grandeur and excitement of the European Renaissance, and especially the Tudor age in England and the Iberian 'Golden Age'. The choir also performs baroque and contemporary works. The 1995/6 season celebrated the music of John Taverner on the 450th anniversary of his death, and included a prestigious commission from the contemporary composer, John Tavener, while the 1996/7 season explored the music of five great European cities at the turn of the seventeenth century. In 1999 the choir performed the complete motets of J.S. Bach with guest director John Butt.

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.

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Next concert in the series
Europe 1500

9 July 2000, 8.15 pm
The Low Countries

The beautiful musical craftsmanship of northern composers made them the most influential musicians of their age. Among the greatest centres for the cultivation of such polyphony were the **Habsburg-Burgundian courts** in the Low Countries. This concert includes works by the most famous of the Habsburg musicians at this time, **Pierre de la Rue**, including *O Domine Jesu Christe*, *Gaude virgo mater Christi*, and *Absalon fili mi*.