

## Tallis Scholars at the Cleveland Museum of Art (December 11)

by Nicholas Jones



In the dark days of December, the seasonal need for light and hope seems to unite the faithful, the lapsed, the secular and even the skeptical in a desire for choral music. Tallis Scholars, the distinguished English choir, recently brought a program of great Renaissance vocal works to the Cleveland Museum of Art, singing with enough soul and skill to light us at least through the impending solstice.

William Byrd's motet *Vigilate* opened the concert with an appropriate Advent message: "watch out, stay awake, be ready for the coming of the Lord!" The Englishman Byrd, like the group's namesake Thomas Tallis, deftly negotiated the shifting currents of the English Reformation: though Catholic, he worked for monarchs who were nominally the heads of the English Protestant church, but who more or less favored Catholicism (Elizabeth I less, James I rather more). The urgency, then, of remaining vigilant was well known to Byrd, and, perhaps as a result, the motet is filled with a tense excitement. A highpoint is the madrigalesque imitation of a rooster crowing, the sign of a dawn that better not find its audience sleeping. (This audience certainly did not sleep.)

The big piece of the first half of the program was a mass setting by the Franco-Flemish composer Josquin des Prez. Working a full century before Byrd, Josquin wrote in the last years of the secure Roman Catholic hegemony, before Luther's revolution broke the European church in two. His early *Missa gaudeamus* builds on a plainchant melody with a beautiful rising figure from G up to A and then a leap up to E, followed by a little quaver to F and back again. Out of a simple tune — often repeated, sometimes obviously, sometimes hidden in the polyphony — Josquin makes a serene, extended meditation on God's care for humankind through Christ.

It takes a great choir to pull off a single work this long, and Tallis Scholars are that choir. Director Peter Phillips molds the music, not so much conducting his ten singers as carving out shapes into which they can fit their musical phrases. Faultless intonation is almost a given with this group, a precision of interval that allows their dissonances to sound as resonant (and even, one might say, as perfect) as the perfect cadences that resolve them.

The Credo — which can get monotonous in some masses — was particularly varied and moving in this case. The moment when Christ is made human (*Et incarnatus est*) was like what the words represent in the mass: a gentle, almost imperceptible manifestation of God on earth. An exquisite soprano duet graced the closing *Agnus dei* with ethereal beauty.

In moments like these, when singing at less than full voice, the Tallis Scholars created a flexible and balanced tone. Even in the dry acoustics of Gartner Auditorium, they were able to shape their quiet cadences to make us think we heard a resonant chord echoing into the distant spaces of a cathedral.

It was unfortunate that in louder passages, one bass singer's voice was too loud, disturbing the sense of blend. Near the end of the concert, I moved to the back of the hall to see whether this was an effect merely of where I was sitting, but the problem was still evident. I did, though, discover that the sound at the back of Gartner is excellent, crisp and clean and more conducive to blend than closer up where I had been sitting.

After the intermission, Tallis Scholars sang four more Byrd works, the first two in Latin: the lively *Laetantur coeli* ("Let the heavens rejoice") and *Plorans ploravit*, a dark meditation on decay. In the latter motet, Byrd embedded a passage evidently warning the English monarch not to overreach: "Say unto the king and queen: Humble yourselves, sit down: for the crowns of your glory shall fall from your heads." It seems a message worth repeating these days.

Byrd wrote *Ye Sacred Muses* as an elegy, in English, on the death of his mentor Tallis. It is a signature piece, appropriately, for Tallis Scholars, and they sang it with utter conviction, letting the final lament echo again and again, "Tallis is dead, and Music dies." Music, though, did not die, and the group performed one last Byrd motet, *Ne irascaris*, "Be not angry any more, O Lord," a majestic, expansive plea for God's relief of a people in the grip of an unnamed desolation.

The concert ended with a long, and — as Peter Phillips said from the stage — "not exactly normal" work, a *Magnificat* by one Edmund Turges. This hymn of Mary on learning that she is with child is a joyful, energetic work filled with long, leaping, twisting melismatic ensembles (that is, passages where the singers sing only a vowel, like

Rachmaninoff's famous *Vocalise*, but in several parts). There were spectacular moments when the singers suddenly moved from one vowel to another (I guess there was a consonant between, but I didn't really catch it). With this group, a simple move from "ah" to "oh" can transform the whole mood in a heartbeat.

As Phillips commented, the nearest thing to this piece's exuberance is the late 15th-century fan vaulting that leaps over the singers' heads at King's College. I'd suggest another medieval analogue, the anonymous poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This fascinating tale of Christmas festivities and magical adventures at the court of King Arthur is as strange and unpredictable as the music described in it, where (in a translation by Paul Deane) "kettledrums rolled and the cry of the pipes / wakened a wild, warbling music / whose touch made the heart tremble and skip." Tallis Scholars did all that without the pipes and kettledrums.

I'm not convinced that Edmund Turges — if that is his name (there is some doubt) — is likely to become a household word anytime soon, but his *Magnificat* was a memorable end to a deeply informed and skillfully rendered program.

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