

Tallis Scholars Programme Notes: US Tour December 2013

VICTORIA, TOMAS LUIS DE: Dum complerentur, dum ergo essent

VICTORIA, TOMAS LUIS DE: Missa Gaudeamus

Interval

VERDELOT, PHILIPPE: Beata es Virgo Maria

VERDELOT, PHILIPPE: Sint dicte grates Christo

BRUCKNER, ANTON: Ave Maria

VICTORIA, TOMAS LUIS DE: Ave Maria a 8

GUERRERO, FRANCISCO: Usquequo Domine

GUERRERO, FRANCISCO: Maria Magdalene

Mary, Mother of God, and Mary Magdalene: two women, two contrasting figures at the heart of the Christian story. Virgin and whore, saint and redeemed sinner, both occupy an unusually prominent role in Gospels dominated by men, and have proved fruitful inspiration for artists and composers alike. Tonight's works come from Spain and France, the renaissance and 19th-century, but across nations and eras find a shared point of expressive reference in these women, whose human truths and exuberant joys are no less present in these musical portraits than their spiritual personas.

With the exception of Thomas Tallis's *Loquebantur variis linguis*, few works for Pentecost achieve the sense of euphoric urgency captured in Victoria's *Dum complerentur*. "And suddenly they heard a great sound from heaven, alleluia, like a hurricane in its fury." Mirroring the liturgical form of the Responsory in his musical setting, Victoria structures his motet in two sections, each punctuated with a returning "alleluia" refrain. The counterpoint is unusually conventional; each section opens with staggered points of imitation, giving a sense of organic growth that culminates each time in an alleluia. These alleluias develop from the almost homophonic first statement to the pealing scalic chatter of the final one, a vivid aural rendering of the flickering fire of the Holy Spirit and the clamour of the disciples speaking in tongues.

Although perhaps best-known for the austere beauty of his Lamentations or Requiem, Victoria's music also displays a more extrovert, muscular beauty, and nowhere more prominently than in the Missa Gaudeamus, composed for that most joyous of festivals – All Saints' Day. The Mass's origins are something of a palimpsest, taking Morales' motet *Jubilate Deo omnis terra* (apparently written for the celebration of the 1539 peace treaty between Charles V and Francis I) as its basis, which in turn uses the plainchant proper *Gaudeamus omnes* as a cantus firmus.

It's a technique Victoria preserves in his setting, and the chant can be heard in the second tenor in the Kyrie and later in rhythmic augmentation in the second alto part of the final Agnus Dei, with the lower voices of the Credo also peppered with quotations. Morales' own motet also gets a musical nod in the melodic motifs that are woven through Victoria's six-part polyphony. The Mass sustains this full texture almost throughout, giving it a weight suitable for a festal occasion, but also heightening the drama for the occasional reduced-voice sections such as the magical "per quem omnia" for upper voices in the Credo. Other striking moments include the extended opening phrase of the Sanctus, where resolution is exquisitely delayed, and the web of imitative entries that closes the second iteration of the Kyrie.

The first of tonight's explicitly Marian works, Philippe Verdelot's *Beata es virgo Maria* is an exquisite motet, whose delicate contrapuntal flowerings are rooted in the Ave Maria chant that is heard throughout as a cantus firmus in the second sopranos. The work doesn't so much open as unfold, growing upwards through the voices in a sequence of imitative entries. Phrases are long, and Verdelot deploys his seven voices in varying rhythmic pairs, quartets and trios, creating a work that pulses gently with syncopated interest while never losing its surface tranquillity.

Verdelot's *Sint dicte grates Christo* is perhaps a more typical of a composer celebrated for his secular madrigals rather than his motets. Supposedly written during the Siege of Florence (and dedicated to the city's patron saint John the Baptist), the work's colourful chromaticisms and dramatic harmonic shifts echo the emphasis of the text, which celebrates St John for his protection. Divided into two large-scale parts, the motet swings between sections of harmonic stasis and sudden movement, delighting in the unexpected cadence ("et urbis" is a striking example) and bold gestures (the repeat at the semitone of "nostrorum et procerum").

From polyphony of the sixteenth century to the nineteenth – a shift far less dramatic than it might perhaps appear. While the text-driven directness of Victoria's liturgical music was shaped by the Counter-Reformation, Bruckner's own motets emerged under the shadow of the Cecilian Movement – a reaction to the increasingly operatic excesses in nineteenth century church music. Thoroughly trained in counterpoint, and fascinated by the works of Palestrina and Bach, Bruckner produced a series of *a capella* motets that married the spare, contrapuntal elegance of these earlier masters with a distinctly Romantic sensibility – embracing techniques beloved of the Cecilian Movement while rejecting its ascetic agenda absolutely.

The seven-part *Ave Maria* initially sets a choir of female voices against one of men, only uniting the forces at the mention of Jesus – a statement that is repeated three times in a growing crescendo, creating a climax that then gives way to peeling waves of suspension-laden echoes between all seven voices. The emotional arc that peaks here then subsides gradually through the remaining text, creating a work whose formal balance and proportions frame a peculiarly intimate supplication to the Virgin.

Victoria was both priest and composer, and while it may be dangerous to trace an artist's personal faith through his work, the sheer number of Marian works Victoria produced – setting popular antiphons such as the *Alma Redemptoris* and *Ave Regina* multiple times, with four different surviving settings of the *Salve Regina* – leave little doubt as the significance the composer placed upon the figure of the Virgin. Tonight's two motets – although both written for the same double-choir forces – are contrasting in mood, reflecting the emotional range of Victoria's Marian works that explore many facets of a subject who is both saint and mother.

The *Ave Maria* a8 sees Victoria at his most refined and austere. Far from an ecstatic hailing of the Queen of Heaven, the opening phrases – passed in traditional fashion between the two choirs – are deliberately kept simple, the all-but homophony creating a sense of rapt collective awe. While the music unbends a little at the mention of Mary's motherhood ("benedictus fructus ventris") it soon returns to potent simplicity, almost starkness, for the crux of the verse ("O Mater Dei"). Even the triple-time section at "ora pro nobis" is more stately processional than the dance the time-signature suggests.

Surpassing Victoria in reputation during his lifetime, the older Guerrero was revered above all as a technician. Capable of supreme polyphonic feats, his personal faith informed a style whose smooth-surfaced elegance frames an awkward and intense spiritual sincerity. Scored for six voices, Guerrero's setting of Psalm 13 – *Usquequo, Domine* – is sombre in tone. Whereas many of the composer's penitential motets are coloured with vivid chromaticism, the tonality of *Usquequo, Domine* is barely disturbed. The long melodic lines and unhurried pace heighten the motet's emotional scope, framing with changelessness the question stressed so poignantly in the many rising intervals, the question that roots the work in human grief: "How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget me?"

Although a sacred work, there is little of the contemplative about Guerrero's Easter motet *Maria Magdalene*. Unusually the focus here is on narrative rather than thematic musical development, though there are some unifying gestures such as the scalic embellishments for each mention of spices or anointing ("aromata", "ungerunt") which become extended and transformed in the "alleluia" that closes Part I. The madrigalian urgency of the piece is driven by the intricate quaver moment, and it's almost impossible to hear the two echoing treble parts and not characterise them as the voices of the two Marys. A simpler, more declamatory voice is heard in Part II for the direct speech of the risen Jesus. The beauty of this vivid work goes some way to explaining Guerrero's unofficial title among his contemporaries: "El cantor de Maria".

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