

THE CHOIR OF



ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

LAMENT & LIBERATION  
GRAY



# LAMENT & LIBERATION

**Roxanna Panufnik (b. 1968)**

- [1] Deus, Deus meus [6.19]  
From *Westminster Mass*

**Joanna Marsh (b. 1970)**

*Echoes in Time*\*

- [2] The Hidden Light [6.22]  
[3] Refugee [4.27]  
[4] Still to Dust [6.13]

**Helena Paish (b. 2002)**

- [5] The Annunciation\* [6.14]

**Martin Baker (b. 1967)**

- [6] Ecce ego Ioannes\* [8.01]

**James MacMillan (b. 1959)**

*Cantos Sagrados*

- [7] I. Identity [9.21]  
[8] II. Virgin of Guadalupe [9.17]  
[9] III. Sun Stone [5.49]

**Dobrinka Tabakova (b. 1980)**

- [10] Turn our captivity, O Lord [5.51]

Total timing: [1.08.02]

\* Commissioned by St John's College

THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE  
ALEXANDER ROBSON ORGAN  
CHRISTOPHER GRAY DIRECTOR

www.signumrecords.com

# CONDUCTOR'S REFLECTIONS

In this first album at St John's, I wanted to lean into the College's well-established tradition of championing new music. At the heart of the programme are two triptychs: James MacMillan's *Cantos Sagrados*, composed 35 years ago, and Joanna Marsh's *Echoes in Time*, commissioned by the College in recent months. There is also a new choral work by Helena Paish and a new organ work by Martin Baker alongside existing works by Roxanna Panufnik and Dobrinka Tabakova.

The album can, of course, be dipped into, but I hope that it will particularly reward those who choose to listen to it in its entirety. It opens with a single treble voice calling into the darkness. As *Deus, Deus meus* unfolds, Panufnik uses an expansive palette of harmony to capture the plaintive longing of a soul in pain reaching out to God for rescue: 'My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water'. Into that darkness comes *The Hidden Light*, Joanna Marsh's first setting of Malcolm Guite's poetry, premiered at our 2023 Advent Carol Service. In *Refugee*, commissioned for our Epiphany Carol Service two months later, the horror of the Slaughter of the Innocents is confronted, but there is



Christopher Gray

justice: 'every Herod dies, and comes alone to stand before the Lamb upon the throne'. In the final movement, commissioned for our Lent Meditation service, the burning of Palm Sunday crosses for symbolic use on Ash Wednesday reminds us of the burning of the forests. We make late repentance for the loss, 'but hope could rise from ashes, even now'.

© Nordin Catić

The next piece gives us a glimpse of how that hope might be fulfilled. In Edwin Muir's poem, *The Annunciation*, heaven touches earth as the Angel appears to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Paish captures both the personal simplicity of the meeting and also its cosmic significance with shimmering textures of up to seventeen parts. The idea of Mary as the connection point between things earthly and things celestial also underlies MacMillan's *Virgin of Guadalupe* where she is addressed as the 'coeli porta' ('portal of heaven').

Martin Baker wrote his organ work *Ecce ego Ioannes* specially for this album. The title takes us into the book of Revelation, and St John's vision of the world's destruction, prefiguring the terror of the MacMillan work to come. The St John's organ's famous Trompeta Real stop shines through the texture in the last line, reminding us that the Revelation reading is set for All Saints' Day, when the church remembers all the saints who have passed into heaven.

I got to know James MacMillan's *Cantos Sagrados* while still at school and it left a deep impression on me. There was an unsettling immediacy about both the music and poetry that was heightened by the juxtaposition of the English and Latin texts. This comes over most searingly in *Sun*

*Stone*, when the prisoner is shot and the word 'crucifixus' is there in the background, reminding us of the death of another innocent man, nearly two millennia before. Jesus empathising with us in our suffering is the powerful conclusion of the journey begun with the Annunciation.

I am aware that this is not an album for the faint-hearted. Having confronted some challenging issues head-on, I wanted to finish by offering comfort, and that comes in the form of Tabakova's *Turn our captivity, O Lord*. Through soaring ornamented melodies in the treble line and rich, luminous harmonies in the lower voices, Tabakova leaves us with the reassurance that 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy'.

Christopher Gray  
Director of Music, St John's College



*Behind the scenes as the Choir records in July 2024.*

## MUSICAL NOTES

by Jeremy Dibble

This recording features a range of contemporary works by British composers and explores a variety of texts and spiritual dispositions across the full gamut of the church calendar and beyond. A number of the works, what is more, were specially commissioned for the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, and were conceived with the distinctive environment of its Victorian Chapel (designed by George Gilbert Scott and consecrated in May 1869), its organ and its fine, world-famous Choir which has done service since its post-Restoration establishment in the 1670s.

The earliest work performed here is **James MacMillan's** triptych, *Cantos Sagrados*, for choir and organ (a part characterised by its virtuoso nature) which dates from 1989. It was originally commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council for the Scottish Chamber Choir who premiered it at the church of Old St Paul's in Edinburgh on 10 February 1990. A reflection of the composer's political protest, the work was intended to be an expression of Liberation Theology and solidarity with the repressed poor of Latin America, a sentiment not immediately suggested by the work's title 'Sacred Songs'. The first and third



© Marc Mamie

Sir James MacMillan

songs, *Identity* and *Sun Stone* set words by the Argentinian-born academic, poet and playwright, Ariel Dorfman, whose writings focused particularly on the disappearances and murders of political prisoners. The rapid conversational, interrogative dialogue of *Identity*, punctuated by the chord clusters and precipitous angry passagework of the organ, embodies the horror

of the discovery of the dead body found in the river, the shocking circumstances of which are thrown into relief by the tranquillity of the slow, chorale-like conclusion in Latin. The second song, *Virgin of Guadalupe*, uses a text by Ana Maria Mendoza, which is a prayer by the Indians of Tapeyepac, oppressed by their Spanish conquerors. It is combined with the Marian antiphon 'Salve mater coeli porta'. Essentially a solemn motet which deploys a five-part a cappella choir as the main body of the structure, the organ enters to intensify the recapitulation of the opening material and, with its greater rhythmical activity, to heighten the effect of the jarring question ('Why is it that in Spain, on the far side of our hills and valleys, across the sea, why is there another Virgin of Guadalupe?'). The triptych finishes with *Sun Stone*, a chilling account of a political prisoner about to be shot by firing squad. Like the previous two songs, its desolate narrative intermingles with a Latin text, this time from the 'Credo' ('Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto Ex Maria Virgine'), forming another chorale based on the preludial organ material.

**Roxanna Panufnik's** *Deus, Deus meus* for eight-part choir and solo treble originally formed part of her *Westminster Mass* of 1997, composed specially for the birthday of Cardinal Basil Hume and the



© Benjamin Ealovega

Roxanna Panufnik

choir of Westminster Cathedral. The first eight verses of Psalm 63 tell of the thirst for God, and it is this sentiment of contemplation, established by the fertile melodic and harmonic play on the false relation (invoked by the solo treble), which infuses the motet's bitter-sweet demeanour of yearning and desire.



**Dobrinka Tabakova's** a *cappella* setting of verses from Psalm 126, *Turn our captivity, O Lord*, was composed in 2022 for Harry Christophers and the Choral Pilgrimage of The Sixteen in 2023. A setting of the last three verses of Psalm 126 (taken from *The Primer, or Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1599) by the Anglo-Dutch antiquary and publisher, Richard Verstegen), the piece blends simple, slow-moving diatonic harmonies and



Dobrinka Tabakova

modal progressions for altos, tenors and basses (which hover tantalisingly between C major and its relative, A minor) with an embellished, more rhythmically florid upper line, itself a recreation of the Jewish cantor's prayerful expressive lament pervaded by the prospect of hope in the Lord for joy and liberation from exile ('They that sow in tears shall reap in joy').

The textual source for **Helena Paish's** *The Annunciation*, commissioned by St John's in 2024, and first sung in the Chapel on 31 May, was the eponymous poem (from his last publication of poetry, *One Foot in Eden*, in 1956) by the Orkney-born poet and translator, Edwin Muir. A manifestation of Muir's almost Damascene Christian conversion in 1939, the poem, couched in the poet's typically direct and uncomplicated language, affecting images and skilful rhyming scheme, ruminates on the mystery of the interface between the heavenly Angel Gabriel and the worldly, humble 'girl' of the virgin. This is conveyed in Muir's opening line ('The angel and the girl are met') and further encapsulated in the richer harmonic textures of the coda where, with more quizzical effect, the same words are epigrammatically reiterated. At the end of the opening section, with its distinctive Lydian inflections and major-minor fluctuations,



Helena Paish

a climax represents the first high point of rapture ('Heaven in hers and Earth in his') before, as a fresh evocation of wonder and awe, the tonality (retaining its Lydian colour) shifts more radically to A flat minor and then, *en passant*, to the major as a part of richer sonority of soprano and alto soloists and (up to) 17 choral parts. A transformed restatement of the opening material ('Outside the window footsteps fall'), in which the

dominant of C, more nebulous at the beginning, is now more fully verified by a full cadence in that key ('Rolls its numbered octaves out'). This 'white-note' purity subsequently becomes significant in the coda as the juxtaposition of C major and the flat submediant (A flat) prove to be more vividly symbolic of the angel, the virgin and the extraordinary aftermath of their encounter.

**Joanna Marsh's** triptych, *Echoes in Time*, for double choir was commissioned by St John's in 2023 as the first commission under its new musical director, Christopher Gray. The triptych was also expressly composed as a foil to the triptych by MacMillan on this recording. For the second and third movements, Marsh drew on the words of poet, academic and Anglican priest, Malcolm Guite, with the College commissioning a new poem from Guite for the first movement. Influenced by earlier formal paradigms of poetry, especially those of John Donne and his seventeenth-century metaphysical contemporaries, *The Hidden Light* explores the Petrarchian sonnet. Composed for the 2023 Advent Carol Service at St John's and sung there for the first time on 3 December, it dwells on the intimate fears and potential dangers of the travel-weary Mary, mysteriously expectant, as



Joanna Marsh

she and her husband search for shelter. The initial idea (E-G sharp-G natural) based around E, the prevailing key of the larger structure, seeks to evoke a sense of foreboding with the onsetting darkness ('it's getting darker') and this idea is developed throughout, as is a secondary image of weariness in the falling phrase first heard in the tenor. Much effect is gained in depicting the trudging imagery of the tiring, seemingly endless journey to Bethlehem from the mantra-like repetitions of these cells through antiphonal exchange between the two choirs and their

attendant, rich textural sonorities and shifting harmonies, yet all gravitates towards E major at the conclusion as 'love casts out fear'. *Refugee* was first sung at the Epiphany Carol Service at St John's in 2024. Another sonnet form, though this time of the English kind with its final rhyming couplet, this musical essay also focuses on a similar theme of travel and fatigue, but now in the context of the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod. Essentially through-composed, *Refugee* also makes use of repeated cells though this time made up of a series of harmonic progressions which are organically reworked as a dialogue between the choirs. A central paragraph becomes more rhythmically animated as a depiction of Herod's wrath, but, in the transformed restatement of the opening material, charged with a greater passion, we are reminded of the mortality of tyrants ('But every Herod dies') and their ultimate judgment before God. The last piece of the triptych, *Still to Dust* (another English sonnet), was composed for Lent and first sung at St John's on 9 March 2024. In keeping with the penitential tone of the season, Guite invokes the image of ashes, taken from the emblematic burning of a cross for the Ash Wednesday service, and parallels the action with the environmental 'violence' of forest burning and the destruction of

trees. Germane to the tripartite structure is a figure built on a series of descending melodic fifth intervals ('Receive this cross of ash upon your brow') first heard in the alto solo which runs like a *cantus firmus* throughout the eight-part texture complemented by an assembly of other short contrapuntal lines in the rest of the choir. A more agitated central episode ('But all the trees of God') provides an emotional accumulation to the climactic *cri de coeur* ('He weeps to see the ancient places burn') before a recurrence of the fifths motive provides an appropriate adjunct to a reprise of the Lenten symbology of the ashes ('Hope could rise from ashes even now').

Former Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral, **Martin Baker** is a composer and recital organist with a special reputation for improvisation (he was first-prize winner in the Improvisation Competition at the St Albans International Organ Festival in 1997). His organ prelude, *Ecce ego Ioannes Omnium Sanctorum* ('Behold, I am John of all the Saints'), was written specifically for this recording and makes reference to John's vision of the world's annihilation with the opening of the seventh seal (Chapters 8 and 9 of the Book of Revelation). The prelude as a whole is dominated by a rising fanfare idea. This is developed in a series of three major recurrences,



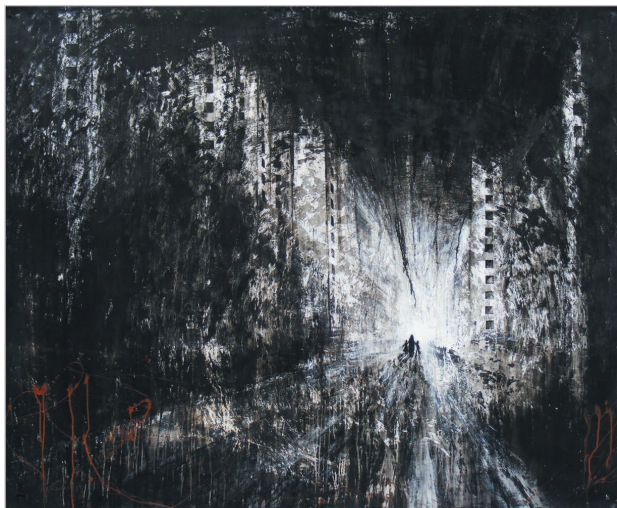
Martin Baker

interspersed by quieter, more angular episodes, which grow in cumulative force as the vision becomes evermore chaotic and terrifying with the appearance, at the end, of the 'two hundred thousand thousand horsemen' with their breastplates 'of fire, and of jacinth and brimstone.' The prelude concludes with violent trills and the inclusion of a third hand to utilise the renowned and unique 'Trompeta Real' of the St John's Mander organ (which Michael Tippett so vitally exploited in his St John's Service in 1962) as a final gesture of menace and destruction.

## ALBUM COVER ARTWORK

The cover artwork is by Phil Whiting, and is entitled 'Sarajevo, Aleppo, Mariupol...the list goes on' from the 'Places of Mourning in the Western World' series. Created on heavy Fabriano paper, the work is made of acrylic, ink, and PVA. Whiting developed the painting from sketches made in 'Sniper Alley', Sarajevo, during his time

working as a war artist on assignment with an NGO in Bosnia. Christopher Gray encountered the work during an exhibition at Truro Cathedral and returned to it when seeking a suitable image for this album. He feels it confronts some of the worst horrors of humanity with the same uncompromising honesty as the music and poetry, and is grateful to the artist for permission to use it in this context.



Members of the Choir during the recording session on 17 July 2024.



Listening back to a take. L to R: David Hinitt, Adrian Peacock, Joseph Wicks, Christopher Gray.

## TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

### 1 DEUS, DEUS MEUS

*Roxanna Panufnik*

Deus, Deus meus es tu;  
ad te de luce vigilo.  
Sitivit in te anima mea;  
te desideravit caro mea.

*O God, you are my God  
For you I long  
My soul is thirsting for you  
My body pines for you*

Like a dry, weary land without water  
So I gaze on you in the sanctuary  
To see your strength and your glory.

For your Love is better than life,  
my lips will speak your praise.  
So I will bless you all my life,  
in your name I will lift up my hands.  
My soul shall be filled as with a banquet,  
my mouth shall praise you with joy.

On my bed I remember you.  
On you I muse through the night,  
for you have been my help;  
in the shadow of your wings I rejoice.  
My soul clings to you;  
your right hand holds me fast.

*Psalm 63, verses 1—8*

### 2 THE HIDDEN LIGHT

*Joanna Marsh*

It's getting darker, darker all the time  
And she is weary and beset with fear  
Yet in the darkness of her womb he stirs,  
Her tiny hope, the one who is to come.  
So on she plods, on past the hostile stares  
The checkpoints and the soldiers on the street  
Seeking some shelter, somewhere to retreat  
And bring to birth the hidden light she bears.

She finds her shelter now and we attend her  
Attend this burdened girl who speaks for us,  
Whispers to God a broken world's soft 'yes,  
Come to be born with us, come find us here  
Outface for us the darkness we can't face,  
Show us the face of Love that casts out fear'.

*Malcolm Guite (b. 1957)*

### 3 REFUGEE

*Joanna Marsh*

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,  
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,  
But he is with a million displaced people  
On the long road of weariness and want.  
For even as we sing our final carol  
His family is up and on that road,  
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,  
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.  
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower  
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,  
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,  
And death squads spread their curse across the world.  
But every Herod dies, and comes alone  
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.  
Alleluia.

*Malcolm Guite (b. 1957)*

### 4 STILL TO DUST

*Joanna Marsh*

Receive this cross of ash upon your brow,  
Brought from the burning of Palm Sunday's cross.  
The forests of the world are burning now  
And you make late repentance for the loss.  
But all the trees of God would clap their hands  
The very stones themselves would shout and sing

If you could covenant to love these lands  
And recognise in Christ their Lord and king.  
He sees the slow destruction of those trees,  
He weeps to see the ancient places burn,  
And still you make what purchases you please,  
And still to dust and ashes you return.  
But Hope could rise from ashes even now  
Beginning with this sign upon your brow.

*Malcolm Guite (b. 1957)*

### 5 THE ANNUNCIATION

*Helena Paish*

The angel and the girl are met.  
Earth was the only meeting place.  
For the embodied never yet  
Travelled beyond the shore of space.  
The eternal spirits in freedom go.  
See, they have come together, see,  
While the destroying minutes flow,  
Each reflects the other's face  
Till heaven in hers and earth in his  
Shine steady there. He's come to her  
From far beyond the farthest star,  
Feathered through time. Immediacy  
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss  
That from their limbs all movement takes.  
Yet the increasing rapture brings  
So great a wonder that it makes



Each feather tremble on his wings.  
Outside the window footsteps fall  
Into the ordinary day  
And with the sun along the wall  
Pursue their unreturning way.  
Sound's perpetual roundabout  
Rolls its numbered octaves out  
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.  
But through the endless afternoon  
These neither speak nor movement make,  
But stare into their deepening trance  
As if their gaze would never break.

*Edwin Muir (1887—1959)*

## **7 IDENTITY**

*James MacMillan*

What did you say - they found another one?  
- I can't hear you - this morning  
another one floating  
in the river?  
talk louder - so you didn't even dare  
no one can identify him?  
the police said not even his mother  
not even the mother who bore him  
not even she could  
they said that?  
the other women already tried - I can't  
understand

what you're saying,  
they turned him over and looked at his face, his  
hands they looked at,  
right,  
they're all waiting together,  
silent, in mourning,  
on the riverbank,  
they took him out of the water  
he's naked  
as the day he was born,  
there's a police captain  
and they won't leave until I get there?  
He doesn't belong to anybody,  
you say he doesn't belong to anybody?  
tell them I'm getting dressed,  
I'm leaving now  
if the captain's the same one as  
last time  
he knows  
what will happen  
that body will have my name -  
my son's my husband's  
my father's  
name  
I'll sign the papers tell them  
tell them I'm on my way,  
wait for me  
and don't let that captain touch him  
don't let that captain take one step closer  
to him.

Tell them not to worry:  
I can bury my own dead.

Libera animas omnium fidelium  
defunctorum de poenis inferni,  
et de profundo lacu: Libera eas  
de ore leonis ne absorbeat eas  
tartarus, ne cadant in obscurum.

[Deliver the souls of all the faithful  
departed from the pains of hell  
and from the depths of the pit: deliver them  
from the lion's mouth, that hell devour  
them not, that they fall not into darkness.]

*Ariel Dorfman (b. 1942)*  
*Latin from the Requiem Mass*

## **8 VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE**

*James MacMillan*

Sweet Virgin of Guadalupe,  
oh virgin of the gentle eyes,  
dark-eyed virgin, good Lady, my love,  
painted by God's own hand  
on the cloak of the Indian Juan Diego,  
Sweet virgin, my love,  
who commanded the bishop to build you a shrine,  
where my brothers the Indians lived  
in Tapeyepac in Mexico, outside the city.

Flogged and burned were these poor little ones,  
despised, deceived and mocked,  
my brothers the Indians.  
A thousand times mistreated,  
a thousand thousand killed.

What did you say to the bishop?  
"You will build me a house outside the city,  
where I will wait, where I can hear the cries,  
the pleas of my Indian children."

Sweet Virgin of Guadalupe,  
oh virgin of the gentle eyes,  
dark-eyed virgin, my girl,  
my love, I want to ask you  
this question, dear mother:

Why is it that in Spain,  
on the far side of our hills and valleys,  
across the sea,  
why is there  
another Virgin of Guadalupe,  
Patron Saint of the Conquerors?  
men with great beards,  
men on horses,  
men with swords and fire,  
who crush and burn our homes,  
and the Indians, your children, still inside?

Why is it, Sweet Virgin,  
sweet mother,  
why is there another Virgin of Guadalupe,  
“Patroness of the Conquerors”?

Salve Mater coeli porta  
Virga florens et exorta  
David ex prosapia.

[Hail Mother, portal of heaven  
Flowering Virgin, sprung  
from the line of David.]

*Ana Maria Mendoza (unknown)*  
*Latin hymn*

## 9 SUN STONE

*James MacMillan*

They put the prisoner  
against the wall.  
A soldier ties his hands.  
His fingers touch him – strong,  
gentle, saying goodbye.  
– Forgive me, compañero –  
says the voice in a whisper.  
The echo of his voice  
and of  
those fingers on his arm  
fills his body with light

I tell you his body fills with light  
and he almost does not hear  
the sound of the shots.

Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto  
Ex Maria Virgine, et homo factus est.  
Crucifixus etiam pro nobis.

[He became incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified.]

*Ariel Dorfman (b. 1942)*  
*Latin from the Creed*

## 10 TURN OUR CAPTIVITY, O LORD

*Dobrinka Tabakova*

Turn our captivity, O Lord, as a brook in the south.  
They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.  
Going they went and wept, casting their seeds,  
but coming, they shall come with jollity,  
carrying their sheaves with them.

*Psalm 126, verses 4—6*

## THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN’S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE 2023 – 2024, APRIL MACMILLAN, MARSH

### Trebles

Evelyn Austen  
Ingrid Birchall <sup>2</sup>  
Bertram Bowes  
Arthur Cobb <sup>4</sup>  
Amelia Crichton-Stuart  
Nicholas Garcia  
Gabriel Gritten  
Martha Gritten  
George Henty  
Kevin Ke  
Charles Lipscomb  
Bryony MacLeod-Jones  
James Marshall  
Samuel Smith <sup>2</sup>  
Montague Tatnell  
Felix van den Bos  
Aiden Wee

### Altos

Alasdair Austin <sup>+</sup>  
Liv Hawkins  
Alice Hilder-Jarvis  
Alice Markham <sup>4</sup>  
Matthew Monaghan

### Tenors

James Gant <sup>4</sup>  
Joseph Hancock <sup>2</sup>  
Theodore Horch  
Garbhán McEnoy  
Carlos Rodríguez Otero

### Basses

George Bird  
Jonathan Hatley  
John Moore  
Henry Montgomery  
Alexander Semple  
Alexander Weiss

### Herbert Howells Organ Scholar

Alexander Robson <sup>+</sup>

### Junior Organ Scholar

Tingshuo Yang

<sup>\*</sup> This organist was playing for the recording

<sup>+</sup> Deputy singer for some tracks

Numbers indicate soloist credits for each track

**THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE,  
CAMBRIDGE 2023 – 2024, JULY**  
BAKER, MACMILLAN, MARSH, PAISH, PANUFNIK, TABAKOVA

**Trebles**

Evelyn Austen  
Ingrid Birchall  
Bertram Bowes  
Arthur Cobb  
Amelia Crichton-Stuart  
Nicholas Garcia  
Gabriel Gritten  
Martha Gritten <sup>5</sup>  
George Henty  
Jing Jin  
Kevin Ke <sup>1</sup> trio  
Charles Lipscomb  
Bryony MacLeod-Jones  
James Marshall  
Samuel Smith <sup>1</sup> trio  
Montague Tatnell <sup>1</sup>  
Felix van den Bos  
Aiden Wee

**Altos**

Liv Hawkins  
Alice Hilder-Jarvis  
Alice Markham <sup>5</sup>  
Matthew Monaghan <sup>5</sup>

**Tenors**

James Gant  
Joseph Hancock  
Theodore Horch  
Hamish MacGregor <sup>\*</sup>  
Garbhán McEnoy  
Carlos Rodríguez Otero

**Basses**

George Bird  
Jonathan Hatley  
John Moore  
Henry Montgomery  
Alexander Semple  
Alexander Weiss

**Herbert Howells Organ Scholar**

Alexander Robson <sup>\*</sup>

**Junior Organ Scholar**

Tingshuo Yang

<sup>\*</sup> This organist was playing for the recording

<sup>+</sup> Deputy singer for some tracks

Numbers indicate soloist credits for each track



The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, 2023-2024 at the end of the recording session on 18 July 2024.

## THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge is known and loved by millions from its broadcasts, concert tours and recordings. Founded in the 1670s, the Choir has developed a reputation for its rich, warm sound, its expressive interpretations, and its broad repertoire. Alongside these musical characteristics, the Choir is particularly proud of its happy, relaxed and mutually supportive atmosphere. The Choir is directed by Christopher Gray who follows a long line of eminent musicians including George Guest, Christopher Robinson, David Hill, and Andrew Nethsingha.

The Choir is made up of boy and girl Choristers who are educated at St John's College School and altos, tenors, and basses who are mostly members of St John's and other colleges that make up the University of Cambridge. The Choir's primary purpose is to enhance the liturgy and worship at seven services each week during term time in the College's beautiful Gilbert Scott Chapel. The group has a vast repertoire spanning over 500 years, with a special interest in championing new music. In recent decades, there have been commissions from most of the

UK's leading composers of choral music, as well as from numerous early-career artists in Cambridge and elsewhere. The Choir also enjoys joining the period instrument ensemble St John's Sinfonia to perform Bach cantatas in a liturgical setting each term.

There are regular tours across Europe, Asia, and North America, performing in some of the world's most famous concert venues and cathedrals. Recent tour destinations have included The Netherlands, Estonia, France, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, Japan, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, Singapore, and the United States. At home in the UK, the Choir has performed in concert venues including Symphony Hall, Birmingham, Royal Albert Hall, St John's Smith Square, and Royal Festival Hall.

In May 2016 the College launched its 'St John's Cambridge' recording label in conjunction with Signum Classics. Since then, 21 Choir albums have been released, including single-composer albums of music by Jonathan Harvey (BBC Music Magazine Award winner), Ralph Vaughan Williams and Michael Finnis, two of which were shortlisted for Gramophone Awards. In addition to these albums, there have been four *Magnificat* albums of varied Evensong canticles, an anthem compilation *Locus Iste*, masses by Poulenc and Kodály, a live anthology *The Tree*, a Psalms collection, and

seasonal albums for Advent, Christmas, Ash Wednesday and Eastertide.

Webcasts of services are available at [www.sjcchoir.co.uk](http://www.sjcchoir.co.uk) and there are live-streamed video broadcasts of Chapel services on Facebook, in association with Classic FM, as well as substantial content on YouTube and Instagram.

## ALEXANDER ROBSON ORGAN

Alexander Robson is the Herbert Howells Organ Scholar at St John's College, where he is in his third year studying Music. Alongside accompanying the daily services at St John's, he has performed for live broadcasts, recordings, and international tours with the College Choir, recently including concerts at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam and the Tivoli Vredenburg, Utrecht.

In his gap year before coming to St John's, Alex was Organ Scholar at St George's Chapel, Windsor, where he played for services and special events. In 2024, he was awarded Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists (FRCO), receiving the Turpin and Durrant, Harding and Durrant, and Dr F J Read Prizes.



Alexander Robson

Alongside the organ, Alex has played the piano and clarinet in the Kent Youth Wind Orchestra and Kent Country Youth Orchestra. He also regularly performs as a continuo keyboardist, recently including Bach's *St John Passion* with the Cambridge Collegium Musicum.

Alex studies the organ with Ann Elise Smoot and the piano with Marie-Noëlle Kendall, and has performed as a solo recitalist across the south of England. His other interests include cross-country running and foreign languages.



## CHRISTOPHER GRAY

DIRECTOR OF MUSIC  
ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Christopher Gray has been Director of Music at St John's College since April 2023. With responsibilities focusing on the College's celebrated Choir and organ, he works with the Choristers, Choral Scholars, Choral Graduates, and Organ Scholars to provide music that enhances the liturgy of the Chapel, upholding a tradition that dates from the 1670s.

After early musical education in his hometown of Bangor, Northern Ireland, Christopher became Assistant Organist at St George's Parish Church, Belfast. At the age of 18 he moved to England to take up the organ scholarship at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he read music. A Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, Christopher studied the organ with David Sanger and Nicolas Kynaston at Cambridge. He was subsequently taught by Margaret Phillips at the Royal College of Music, where he was a post-graduate student and a prize-winner. During this time, he also held the organ scholarship at Guildford Cathedral.

In 2000 Christopher was appointed Assistant Director of Music at Truro Cathedral, working



© Richard Marsham

Christopher Gray

closely with Andrew Nethsingha and then Robert Sharpe. In 2008 he became Director of Music, taking on responsibility for the cathedral choir and its seven sung services each week, as well as the Father Willis organ. As Musical Director of Three Spires Singers and Orchestra he conducted most of the large-scale choral-orchestral repertoire.

During his first two years at St John's, Christopher has directed the Choir on broadcasts including the

Advent Carol Service, and on tours to Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary and the USA. He has worked with composers on seven new works for the Choir, as well as collaborations with The Gesualdo Six and the Academy of Ancient Music.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The College is grateful to Antonella and Philip Oakes, Paul Lindsell and Joanna Gibbon for their generous support of the commissioning of new works for the Choir, including several on this album. Thanks are equally offered to the donors who support the 'St John's Cambridge' recording label.

### PUBLISHERS

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SignumClassics, Signum Records Ltd., Suite 14, 21 Wadsworth Road, Perivale, Middlesex, UB6 7LQ, UK. +44 (0) 20 8997 4000  
E-mail: [info@signumrecords.com](mailto:info@signumrecords.com) [www.signumrecords.com](http://www.signumrecords.com)

## AWARD-WINNING RECORDINGS FROM THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE



Latest Release

### **MAGNIFICAT 4** SIGCD777

"All good things, they say, must come to an end and now the discography of Andrew Nethsingha and the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge has reached its conclusion. He has left a remarkable legacy of recordings and this final album maintains all the high standards we have come to expect. By this I don't just mean the excellence of the singing and organ playing, though that's extremely high – yet again – throughout this disc." *MusicWeb International*

"As before, every detail has been polished and beautifully presented..." *Gramophone*

### **ADVENT LIVE – VOLUME 3** SIGCD768

"The singing is uniformly excellent" *Cross Rhythms*

"The voices of the choir unfold with brilliance and with a sonority of optimal quality in the interpretation of the majestic hymns..." *Sonograma Magazine*

"This is a college that is very well placed to be leading the way into the new sound that will become increasingly the norm in our cathedrals and collegiate chapels"

*John Rutter on BBC Radio 3*

BBC Music Magazine  
Choral & Song Choice

Choir & Organ  
Choral CD Choice

### **NEW MILLENNIUM** SIGCD750

★★★★★ (Performance & Recording) "The album gives a remarkable overview of contemporary choral trends... The choir's musicianship is superb and its vocal balance perfectly calibrated; the textures vibrant and the sensuous beauty of the St John's Sound is expertly captured... A valuable addition to the choral library"

*BBC Music Magazine*

★★★★★ "This superlative album represents Andrew Nethsingha's exploration of contemporary music during his 15 years as director of music at St John's College, Cambridge... the sequence is beautifully planned and feels seamless" *Choir & Organ*

"Needless to say, the standard of playing and singing from St John's is impeccable. These are wonderful performances underpinned by superb balance and intonation. Nethsingha bringing out musical detail and textural meaning with a finely judged ear that does small miracles with every piece. A fascinating and indispensable collection!" *Opera Today*

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

Gramophone Award  
Shortlist (Choral)  
September 2023

### **MAGNIFICAT 3** SIGCD742

"What a wonderful performance: the dynamics, the contrasts, the utter confidence of the singing... Excellent solos, boys in great fettle, acoustic well-captured. It's a fine series, this: anyone who's ever sung or loved this kind of Anglican church music should be impatient for more" *BBC Radio 3 Record Review*

Gramophone Critics' Choice & Editor's Choice

"This ongoing series has not only been a beautifully prepared and sung tribute to the Anglican canticle tradition, but also to Andrew Nethsingha's brilliant leadership of music at St John's" *Gramophone*

#### THE PSALMS SIGCD721

"The diction of the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge is so exquisitely perfect that one can take dictation from it, yet there is absolutely no sense of metronomic stiffness... Choral singing at this level of perfection can never be taken for granted" *Fanfare*

"Nethsingha and the Choir of St John's clearly recognise the importance of these liturgical poems-in-music: the performances here are evidence that they are guided by the principle that everything — metre, emphasis, lyricism, momentum, dynamics and clarity — plays an equally crucial role" *The Sunday Times*

Europadisc  
Easter Highlight

#### EASTERTIDE EVENSONG SIGCD707

★★★★★ "The results are extremely fine, with much attention to musical detail, clear diction, impeccable tuning and a well-balanced choral blend" *Choir & Organ*

"Nethsingha is his own man and absolutely his own musician, which is why his choir continues to evolve and lead" *Andrew Mellor, Gramophone*

"For all devotees of choral evensong, this is an indispensable disc" *David Truslove, Opera Today*

#### THE TREE SIGCD691

"The whole thing is a beautifully realised tribute to the history of the choir and its hope for the future" *BBC Record Review*

"A well-crafted and beautifully sung disc" *BBC Music Magazine*

★★★★★ "The outstanding quality of the singing and playing is the reason to buy this recording. Even something as straightforward as Stanford's 'A song of Wisdom' is given a ravishing performance" *Choir & Organ*

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

#### MAGNIFICAT 2 SIGCD667

"These are inspirational performances, music wonderfully shaped and words unfailingly invested with meaning" *Opera Today*

"They're on cracking form right now... there's that sort of earthy ferocity that is totally exhilarating... the control, the pianissimo and the clarity this recording brings is magnificent" *BBC Radio 3 Record Review*

"This choir's singular qualities – responsiveness, sophistication of line and texture and a chameleonic stylistic acumen that never loses sight of its own core, identifying sound – are all in play here" *Gramophone*

#### ADVENT LIVE - VOLUME 2 SIGCD661

"It is a real album, the mystery and expectation of Advent coursing through a repertoire that never stoops below this ensemble's judicious idea of what constitutes high-quality music, whatever the century... The qualities of the choir hardly need repeating" *Gramophone*

"The fantastic balance of anthems, hymns and organ music leaps out in this arresting, fabulously performed Advent programme" *BBC Music Magazine*

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

Finalist (Contemporary)  
Gramophone Awards  
2021

BBC Music Magazine  
Choral & Song Choice

Europadisc  
Top Ten Recording  
of the Year

#### MICHAEL FINNISSY – PIOUS ANTHEMS & VOLUNTARIES SIGCD624

★★★★★ "The sequence maintains a powerfully communicative grip... The choir makes the music sound as lived-in as Byrd or Howells" *BBC Music Magazine*

★★★★★ "Exquisitely beautiful, sensual music" *Choir & Organ*

"An 84-minute work that might well change your listening life" *Classical Music*

"This is some of the most compelling music written for the 'English choral tradition' in many years... the results are infinitely rewarding" *Europadisc*

**ASH WEDNESDAY** SIGCD605

"The malleable, sensitive trebles have what seems to me an unparalleled ability to invest text and phrase with meaning" *Gramophone*

"It's the most glorious, glorious music making" *BBC Radio 3, Record Review*

★★★★★ "Exceptionally satisfying. Bravo. Bravissimo" *AllMusic*

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

**MAGNIFICAT** SIGCD588

"extreme perception of blend (vowel and timbre), words and phrasing; a true ensemble" *Gramophone*

★★★★★ "A fascinating hour's music" *Choir & Organ*

« Superbe. Les petits trebles sont en grande forme » *Diapason (France)*

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

**LOCUS ISTE** SIGCD567

★★★★★ "a glint of sunlight, inspired and inspiring" *BBC Music Magazine*

"Beautifully captured" *BBC Radio 3, Record Review*

"This disc really soars" *Gramophone*

**ADVENT LIVE** SIGCD535

"Under Andrew Nethsingha's inspired direction, the choir has retained its renowned clarity, flamboyance and readiness to take risks" *Gramophone*

"Sung with typical St John's verve and character, this superbly programmed collection will take your Advent listening in unexpected, but entirely apposite, directions" *BBC Music Magazine*

BBC Music Magazine  
Choral & Song Choice

**VAUGHAN WILLIAMS – MASS IN G MINOR** SIGCD541

★★★★★ "Formidably attractive" *BBC Music Magazine*

"Director Andrew Nethsingha shapes a performance of profound dignity and power, beautifully sung by this always impressive choir" *The Guardian*

**POULENC | KODÁLY | JANÁČEK – KYRIE** SIGCD489

★★★★★ "...a superb reading from Nethsingha and his forces... Throughout, the choir sing with their justly famed blend and perfect intonation. An essential disc..." *Choir & Organ*

**CHRISTMAS WITH ST JOHN'S** SIGCD458

"proving yet again, they are as good as it gets" *Classic FM*

"a meticulously sung carol collection from the always classy choir of St John's... shimmering tone clusters and delicious suspensions" *The Guardian*

"an evocatively sung collection...glowing with devotional joy, wonder and a kaleidoscope of colours and emotions" *Choir & Organ*

BBC Music Magazine  
Award Winner

Gramophone  
Editor's Choice

**JONATHAN HARVEY – DEO** SIGCD456

★★★★★ "ecstatic...the Choir tackles it all with confidence and clarity"

*The Observer*

★★★★★ "characterful yet authoritative performances of which they can be justly proud" *Choir & Organ*



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

ADVENT LIVE VOLUME 3  
NETHSINGHA HERBERT



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

NEW MILLENNIUM  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

MAGNIFICAT 3  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

THE PSALMS  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

MAGNIFICAT 4  
NETHSINGHA



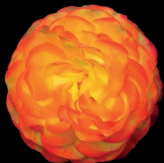
THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

THE TREE  
HILL NETHSINGHA ROBINSON



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

MAGNIFICAT 2  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

ADVENT LIVE VOLUME 2  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

PIOUS ANTHEMS & VOLUNTARIES  
FINNISY NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

ASH WEDNESDAY  
NETHSINGHA



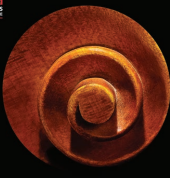
THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

MAGNIFICAT  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

SUBITO JULIA HWANG VIOLIN



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS  
MASS IN G MINOR  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

ADVENT LIVE  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

KYRIE  
MENC MODALY JANACEK  
NETHSINGHA



THE CHOIR OF  
ST JOHN'S  
CAMBRIDGE

CHRISTMAS WITH ST JOHN'S  
NETHSINGHA

