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THOMAS TALLIS

SPEM IN ALIUM

THE KING'S SINGERS



THOMAS TALLIS

SPEM IN ALIUM

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| 2 | Interview with the King's Singers | [6.14] |

Total Time [14.36]

THE KING'S SINGERS

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MUSICAL NOTE – THOMAS TALLIS

SPEM IN ALIUM

Spem in alium is surely not just the greatest of all Thomas Tallis's musical achievements, but one of the great musical compositions of all time. Written for 40 independent voices, this is a noble and monumental edifice, which in the course of its 69 longs makes creative and imaginative use of the extensive musical palette.

Tallis groups his singers into eight choirs of five voices and it seems most likely that he intended them to stand in a horseshoe shape. The piece begins with a single voice from the first choir; gradually the voices enter in imitation and, as the earlier voices fall silent, the sound moves around the line from choir one to choir eight. During the fortieth breve, all forty voices enter simultaneously for a few bars, and then the process happens in reverse with the sound moving back from choir eight to choir one. After another brief full section the choirs sing in pairs alternately throwing the sound across the space between them until finally all voices join for a full culmination to the work.

Clearly *Spem in alium* is an occasional piece despite being based on a liturgical text; 'Spem in alium' is a respond from Sunday Matins during the reading of the history of Judith. Various theories have been put forward concerning the purpose for which *Spem in alium* was written and the significance of the number of voices. Of these, Paul Doe's suggestion that the first performance took place in 1573, the fortieth year of Elizabeth I's reign, was originally the most plausible explanation.

However, as Denis Stevens later pointed out, a near contemporary account from 1611 describes how Tallis was commissioned to compose the work—probably by Thomas Howard, fourth duke of

Norfolk—as an answer to Striggio's 40-part *Ecce beatam lucem*. This may place the first performance in the long gallery at Arundel House on the Strand, perhaps in 1570, after Norfolk was released from prison (he was executed in 1572). It is intriguing to note, too, that the banqueting hall of Nonsuch Palace—Norfolk's country home—was octagonal and possessed first-floor balconies.

The earliest surviving manuscript of this great work, the Egerton manuscript, is laid out with an English contrafactum, *Sing and glorify heavens high majesty*. This version was evidently produced for the coronation (as Prince of Wales) of Prince Harry in 1610 and (after his untimely death) repeated in 1616 at Charles' coronation. In the manuscript Harry's name is clearly written in each part—then crossed out and Charles' name substituted. The English words are not a translation of the Latin, but a new poem written as a syllable-for-syllable replacement. Evidently the authorities decided that musically *Spem in alium* was fitting for such an impressive occasion as a coronation, but that the Latin words were too sombre.

An interesting feature of *Spem in alium* is that its total length is 69 longs (a long being two breves). This is a cryptogram; the same number is arrived at by taking Tallis' name, ascribing each of the letters of the Latin alphabet a number (A=1, B=2 etc.) and summing the values. Perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine that Tallis 'signed' the work in a way that ensures he is fully bound up with his summa for perpetuity?

'SIX INTO FORTY MIGHT NOT GO ...'

Tallis's forty-part motet is not a work one would naturally associate with the King's Singers. That the finished product works so well owes a lot to our upbringing in the Cathedrals of England, but also – and perhaps more significantly – to modern recording technology, flexibility and experimentation.

The 'Father of English church music', Tallis wrote music for four monarchs – two catholic and two protestant – each of whom had different ideas about the role of music in the liturgies. With infinite capacity he expertly adapted to these new conditions, leaving us with some wonderfully varied music. Given the text, it is easy to forget that *Spem in alium* seems to have been written for a secular purpose. The Italian composer Alessandro Striggio came to London in 1567 with another forty-part piece, *Ecce beatam lucem* and Tallis – or a patron – may have wanted to see if England could match it; undoubtedly, *Spem in alium* surpassed it.

We prepared *Spem* during a tour of the Far East, during which its subtitle became 'The Tallis Project'. We thought of it as a 'Project' because we realised that six into 40 might not go, and that the finished recording – overdubbed, click-tracked, edited and mixed – might not sound as successful as we had collectively heard it in our heads. But we all agreed that the musical journey, including discussion, rehearsal, recording and filming would more than justify the time spent on it. With open minds we wondered whether we would create a performance to stand alongside the more traditional 'Spems', those with forty singers all together at the same time, including sopranos and a conductor desperately trying to keep it all together. This version is better than we could have hoped for. With each of the forty parts balanced, with no weak voices, no wrong notes or rhythms, and with everyone singing on the beat, the grandeur and weight of the music combines with the rather more penitential text to produce something very special.

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SPEM IN ALIUM - TEXT

Spem in alium nunquam habui praeter in te, Deus Israel, qui irasceris, et propitius eris, et omnia peccata hominum in tribulatione dimittis.

Domine Deus, Creator coeli et terrae, respice humilitatem nostram.

I have never put my hope in any other but you, God of Israel, who will be angry and yet become again gracious, and who forgives all the sins of suffering man.

Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, look upon our lowliness.

BIOGRAPHY

THE KING'S SINGERS

For nearly forty years the King's Singers have been delighting audiences around the world with their charm, wit, and incomparable musicianship.

From mediaeval to renaissance, romantic to contemporary, folk, jazz and pop, their repertoire is all encompassing. As well as performing in the world's major concert halls the list of venues at which they have appeared is equally diverse, including the Hollywood Bowl, Shea Stadium (home of the New York Mets), and Windsor Castle (a private concert for the Royal Family). They have joined forces with many famous orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Cincinnati Pops, with whom they released a Beatles album featuring arrangements by one of the Beatles' original producers, George Martin. In addition there have been collaborations with many solo musicians, including Kiri te Kanawa, George Shearing, Evelyn Glennie, Emanuel Ax and even Bruce Johnston of the Beach Boys.



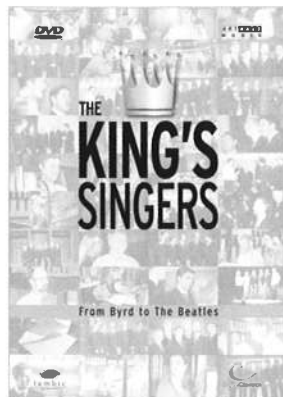
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KS the colour of song

Started in 1968 by six Choral Scholars from King's College Cambridge, the King's Singers quickly became a prominent musical force in the UK. The rest of the world soon followed so that today the group's engagements are spread throughout the four corners of the globe. Since their debut concert the King's Singers have commissioned works from many well-known composers including Krystof Penderecki, Luciano Berio, Peter Maxwell Davies, Toru Takemitsu and Gyorgy Ligeti. This branch of their repertoire now comprises well over 200 pieces, and continues to expand.

Renowned for their commitment to blend, balance and intonation in their own performances, they are keen to pass on their knowledge through educational work. They regularly conduct masterclass courses in many countries and since 1996 have been Prince Consort Ensemble-in-Residence at the Royal College of Music. But above all it is their simple enjoyment of what they do that has captured the imagination of the public all over the world and kept the King's Singers at the top of their game for nearly four decades. As The London Times put it, they are "still unmatched for their musicality and sheer ability to entertain."

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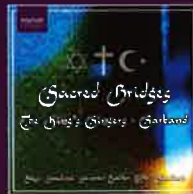
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