

## PROGRAM NOTES BY CARL CUNNINGHAM

The troubled, ultimately bloody 16th-century succession of English monarchs, Henry VIII (1509-47), Edward VI (1547-53), Mary I (1553-58) finally calmed down in the late 1580s, 30 years into the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). She consolidated the Church of England as a parallel form of worship alongside Catholicism, and she ruled beyond the 1588 sinking of the Spanish Armada, easing some of the political and religious strife that wracked the European continent for a century. James VI of Scotland (1566-1625) became King James I of England upon Elizabeth's death, making peace with Spain while uniting England and Scotland.

While the Elizabethan era brought England a gesture toward peace and an increase in international trade and communication, this period of spiritual adjustment held personal challenges for creative musicians whose livelihoods depended upon the pleasure of their rulers. This concert celebrates the life and work of five master English composers who collectively lived and worked through these changing times: the two famed octogenarians, Thomas Tallis (1505-85) and William Byrd (1543-1623); Thomas Morley (1557-1602), Thomas Weelkes (1575-1623) and Orlando Gibbons (1583-1623).

The gigantic-but-mysterious 40-voice motet, **"Spem in alium" ("I have never put my hope in any other")** was composed by Thomas Tallis about 1570. Its text is taken from the early-morning liturgical prayer called Matins, the first of six sets of prayers recited or sung by members of the clergy throughout each day.

There are three large segments of the text, each forming a separate musical section of the motet: (1) "I have never put my hope in any other but Thee, God of Israel," (2) "who can show both anger and graciousness and absolve the sins of suffering humans," (3) "Lord God, creator of Heaven and Earth, be mindful of our humiliation."

The 40 singers who perform the motet are divided into eight five-voice choirs (soprano, alto, tenor and two bass voices). In each of the three large sections, the staggered entry of the eight choirs creates a kind of choral alphabet soup, but certain words are emphasized in powerful unison block harmonies. The Latin word "tribulatione" ("suffering") is the most dramatic example, suddenly sung by all 40 voices!

### MUSIC FOR THE PROTESTANT CHURCH

William Byrd's English-language setting of the opening verses from Psalm 81, **"Sing joyfully to the Lord,"** shows an Elizabethan composer absorbing the varied influences of the Latin motet and the quick, lighthearted echo effects of the Italian madrigal. Set for six separate vocal parts, its famous text celebrates both vocal and instrumental music as a means for rejoicing. The upward leaps in its melodic lines and its modern tonal harmony add to the joyous character of the of

the music. The sung text progresses through several interlocking fugal episodes, culminating in a dramatic chordal pause that leads to the anthem's conclusion.

By contrast, Byrd's hymn, **"O Lord, make they servant Elizabeth,"** flows as a gentle processional composed during his service as a youthful chorister at Lincoln Cathedral in the 1560s. It portrays the new queen as a quiet servant of peace. Like **"Sing joyfully,"** it is set in six vocal parts, but they are divided differently, emphasizing the darker middle vocal registers with pairs of alto and tenor voices, and only a single soprano and bass line. The rhythmic pulse is even, the music is largely chordal and the melody often has a descending stepwise profile. The text is adapted from the second, third and fourth verses of Psalm 21, with references to "the king" exchanged for those acknowledging a female monarch.

A descending melodic line also dominates the three opening sections of Orlando Gibbons' **"Almighty and everlasting God,"** a model example of music expressing the meaning of the textual appeal for mercy from above. Again, Gibbons' polyphonic prayer begins with the darker bass and alto tone colors, before being repeated by the brighter tenor and soprano voices.

When humanity's appeal reaches its climax in the fourth section, "Stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us," the music suddenly emphasizes the words by stretching out" in a fiercely repeated chordal texture, then falls back in a quiet "Amen." Though Gibbons lived only a short 40 years, such a dramatic gesture in his music was a harbinger of the oncoming Baroque era.

Thomas Tallis was the earliest of the five composers represented here. His setting of **"If ye love me"** illustrates the simplicity of the Anglican anthem in its earliest stage of development. Its musical structure was reduced to that of the old medieval Bar Form: a simple two-part form with a repetition of the second part: A:BB. The music is largely chordal, with limited use of staggered vocal entrances common to polyphonic music. But in the midst of the steady pulse in the anthem's evenly-paced rhythm, the discerning listener can hear different tone colors pop out from within each chord as individual vocal lines leap upward, while others move stepwise.

William Byrd's **"Prevent us, O lord"** is listed as the fourth prayer following communion, prior to the blessing that concludes an Anglican liturgical service. (In this context, the term "prevent us," takes its meaning through its derivation from the Latin antecedent, "praevengo – to lead, anticipate or proceed ahead of us.")

The five-voice hymn Byrd set to this text is thought to have been composed during the year 1570, honoring Queen Elizabeth I. Nearly eight centuries later, this sober minor-mode choral plea for divine

guidance toward a heavenly goal has again been sung at the recent coronation of Great Britain's King Charles III, the son of Elizabeth II. Its lengthy text is contained within a single, seemingly never-ending sentence. To provide some sense of clarity, Byrd alternately composed chordal and contrapuntal musical settings of its numerous phrases.

Thomas Weelkes' "**When David heard/O Absalom my son**" exemplifies the same two-part structure as the earlier Tallis anthem, but in a much more highly developed manner. While its subject matter is biblical, the text is not part of the Anglican liturgy. It is described as a "sacred madrigal" by Weelkes' biographer, David Brown. Like Gibbons, Weelkes was one of the younger Elizabethan composers, and he penned several books of madrigals before becoming organist the College of Winchester in 1600. He later held a longer appointment to the Chichester Cathedral.

King David's grief at the slaying of his younger son is expressed in halting, much-repeated phrases strewn in dark minor-key tonalities throughout the six-part vocal work. As in the Gibbons

anthem, the full-stop cadence at the center of the anthem is observed, but David's broken-hearted repetitions of words and phrases indicate the newer stylistic influence of the then-current Italian madrigal upon this sad dirge.

"**Praise Our Lord, all Ye Gentiles**" is one of Byrd's most florid English-language anthems. It is a setting of the brief Psalm 117, celebrating the eternal endurance of God's word in a seemingly endless parade of vocal acrobatics. Its six voice parts – two sopranos, only one alto and tenor, and two basses – are arranged in their middle-to-high registers, adding brightness and breadth to the choral texture.

The anthem begins with a solid wall of choral sound, then breaks into constant waves of polyphonic activity, running up and down stepwise scale patterns, leaping up and down the bright outlines of major-mode triads, all of them rejoicing in the open vowel sounds of the words "praise," "Lord," "upon" and "forever." The celebration concludes with a 15-measure vocal exercise on the word "Amen."

# BYRDS OF A FEATHER

Marking the 400th anniversary of the death of the great composer  
**WILLIAM BYRD**

Featuring a centerpiece performance of  
*Spem in alium* by  
**THOMAS TALLIS**

Proudly Supporting  
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## MUSIC FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Thomas Morley was a pupil of Byrd, and he achieved his degree in music at Oxford University in 1588. He initially obtained a position as organist at St. Paul's Catholic Church, then became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1592, bringing him closer to the circle of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers. Morley composed numerous volumes of English songs and madrigals and a considerable amount of instrumental music. He published the famous *Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* in 1592.

Morley's setting of the Easter Sunday Gradual prayer, "**Haec dies,**" ("**This Day the Lord has made**") is a joyous short hymn, set for alto, tenor and bass voices in the typical Bar Form, A:BB. Its echo effects on the word, "Exultemus," result from Morley's knowledge and fondness for the Italian madrigal style. Its repeated B section takes the form of an extended "Alleluia."

In 1575, Lassus and Byrd jointly published a famous volume of Latin motets, titled *Cantiones Sacrae*, under a patent granted by Queen Elizabeth. A somber penitential motet, "**Emendemus in melius**" ("**Let us change for the better**") was chosen as the opening work in that volume. Byrd set its sorrowful text in solidly chordal five-voice harmony (SACTB), with very restricted melodic ornamentation only at the ends of textual phrases. The second part of the motet is particularly intense, allowing melodic decoration of the text only at the words, "salvation" and "honor."

"**Justorum animae**" ("**The souls of the righteous**") quietly celebrates a more beatific vision of those who have fended off unholy temptations. Byrd replaced the countertenor with a second soprano in order to lighten and elevate the choral tone in this gently floating motet.

Byrd's setting of "**Laudibus in sanctis,**" ("**Praise the Lord in his holy places**"), the well-known Psalm 150, cites music and dancing as ideal ways to praise God. Following a powerful chordal statement of its opening verses, the two-section motet alternates contrapuntal and harmonic sections as it parades the names of ancient musical instruments through a sequence of lively rhythmic effects.

The communion hymn, "**Ave verum corpus**" ("**Hail, true body born of the virgin, Mary**") was first sung as a Gregorian chant melody with a text written by one of several 13th-century popes who chose the name "Innocent" – most likely Innocent VI, according to Wikipedia. William Byrd's version was published in his hymn book titled *Gradulia* in 1605, preceding Mozart's famous setting by 186 years.

The reverent hymn, especially appropriate for the feast of Corpus Christi, is set in the simple Bar Form, A:BB, with staggered polyphonic vocal entries in its repeated second section adding intensity to the textual plea for divine mercy.

Byrd's setting of "**Haec dies**" greatly magnifies the texture of Morley's previously heard version by doubling the voice parts from three to six (SSATTB). It also expands the dimensions of this piece into a huge three-section motet that might seem to be a more fitting Easter celebration for the town square than the village church.

When all six voices get moving in the opening fugal section, a set of little running notes on the opening words almost becomes a blur. An abrupt change from duple to triple meter suddenly adds a "jump for joy" quality to the middle section. And a 43-measure celebration of the concluding "Alleluia" may stand as the most boastful finale until Beethoven composed his Fifth Symphony. Enjoy it all!

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## CARL CUNNINGHAM BOOK SIGNING AT FOLTZ GALLERY

Carl Cunningham will sign copies of his three books on the history of Houston Grand Opera, Houston Symphony, and the Round Top Music Festival from 2:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturday, December 2, 2023, at Foltz Fine Art Gallery, 2143 Westheimer at Greenbriar.

Free parking in the lot behind and west of the Gallery. Beverages and lite bites, with works by Texas artist Billy Hassel on display. Books will be available for purchase at this special event!

