



THE TALLIS SCHOLARS

Peter Phillips *Music Director*

Spring Tour 2011 PROGRAMME NOTES

Victoria Requiem – 10 Voice Composite

Writing in the preface to his *Liber Vesperarum* of 1584, Francisco Guerrero explained his life's endeavour: "...not to caress the ears of pious persons with my songs, but on the contrary to excite their souls to devout contemplation of the sacred mysteries." It is this refusal to caress, to soften the unyielding edges either of harmony or liturgy that has come to characterise the music of the Spanish Golden Age. Fostered in the distinctive craftsmanship of Morales and later Guerrero, this tradition of spiritual intensity reached its craggy peak in the music of Tomás Luis de Victoria and his astonishing Requiem of 1605.

Tonight's programme places Victoria – whose 400th anniversary we celebrate this year – in context, exploring the work of his contemporaries, forebears and followers, and culminating in a performance of his late and undisputed masterwork.

We open with two contrasting motets by Guerrero – the joyous Eastertide anthem *Regina caeli laetare* and *Hei mihi, domine*, a penitential Responsory for the Matins of the Dead. Surpassing Victoria in reputation during his lifetime, the older Guerrero (1528-1599) 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.

The bright *Regina caeli* setting separates its eight voices into double choir, but rather than alternating exchanges between the two, Guerrero instead treats his voices as part of a single textural continuum, phasing parts in and out of freely shifting ensembles. The counterpoint is deceptively dense, its lyrical imitation belying the tightly-structured treatment the plainchant melody receives. Only at "ora pro nobis" do the peeling rising scales and motor rhythms give way to a moment of contemplation, as just four upper voices beg with fragile urgency for the Virgin's intercession.

Scored in the six-part texture beloved of Spanish composers, *Hei mihi* is an altogether weightier affair. Chromaticism adds unexpected shades to an already dark tonal palette, distorting any clear sense of harmonic direction. The sense of hopeless acceptance (“What will I, wretched, do? Where will I seek refuge?”) emerges initially from the slow syncopation of the rhythmic entries, with voices lingering over the barlines as they struggle to move forward.

Sharing the SSATTB six-part texture are Juan Gutierrez de Padilla’s (1590-1664) Lamentations, music from just one of many Spanish composers of the period working in Mexico. Steeped in the traditions of the Spanish High Renaissance and owing a considerable debt to Victoria, Padilla’s setting of this bleakest of Holy Week texts is stately rather than especially sensitive to its text. Mirroring Victoria’s own treatment however, Padilla reserves his most tender and emotive music for the Hebrew letters – Aleph, Beth etc – that punctuate the verses, drawing out their suspension-laden melismas.

Heralded by contemporaries as a greater musician not only than Apollo but also than Josquin des Prez, there is much in the music Francisco de Peñalosa (1470-1528) that recalls the style of this greatest of Franco-Flemish composers. Until recently attributed to Josquin, Peñalosa’s *Sancta Mater* occupies a discernably different sound-world to the rest of tonight’s programme. Shaped by word stress, this largely syllabic setting favours the imitative counterpoint typical of the late fifteenth century. Verse sections create textural contrast, often placing just two voices in dialogue. In a piece of otherwise understated drama it is impossible not to be struck by the impact of the sudden homophony at “crucifixo” – the liturgical heart of the piece.

Composed for the funeral of Philip II in 1598, Lobo’s (1555-1617) motet *Versa est in luctum* sets an unusual text from Job, “My harp is turned to mourning” – a text later used by Victoria to equally striking effect. Possibly intended for performance at the Elevation of the Host, the evocative imagery and rapt simplicity of the work have placed it among the greatest of its period, music worthy of a composer hailed by Victoria as an equal. Waves of entries roll over one another, drawing the ear into the seemingly endless cycles of harmonic movement. Suspensions push and pull, ebbing at last to a gloriously redemptive close on a major chord.

Though his reputation has latterly been obscured by his contemporaries, Vivanco (1551-1622) was among the leading Spanish composers of his day. His Magnificat Octavi Toni is written in the traditional *alternatim* style, alternating polyphonic verses with those of unison plainsong. Although scored for the composer’s preferred ensemble of eight voices, unusually these are treated as a single group. With the exception of a short verse section, ‘Et misericordia eius’, the full eight-voice texture is sustained throughout, and the effect is impressively ceremonial, even if on closer inspection the imitative writing lacks the complexity of the composer’s polychoral works.

Composed at the turn of the new century, at the very end of Victoria's life, it is hard not to see the Requiem a 6 as an elegy for Spain's Golden Age. The Dowager Empress Maria, Philip II's sister and Victoria's patroness, died in 1603, prompting this, the composer's second Requiem setting. In addition to the standard liturgical movements, the work unusually includes an introductory lesson from the Matins of the Dead, *Taedet animam meam* ("My soul is weary of my life") as well as a funeral motet, *Versa est in luctum*.

Much of the Requiem's distinctive character comes from its six-part texture, sustained almost throughout and widely imitated by later composers. The slow pace of the polyphony, built around a cantus firmus most often heard in the second soprano, is mesmeric. Lingering but never indulgent, the restraint of the polyphonic writing throws the harmonies into greater relief. Reinterpreting notions of consonance and dissonance, Victoria delights in unlikely juxtapositions and progressions, unmooring the ear and emotions with equal assurance.

That this is the work of a priest is everywhere evident. The second iteration of the Kyrie – some of the Requiem's simplest music texturally – glows with intensity, a plea for mercy whose desperate sincerity cannot but move. Yet it is arguably in the freely composed *Versa est in luctum* that Victoria reaches his greatest heights in the artistry of grief. The harmony searches restlessly after resolution, building to a desperate climax at "nihil enim sunt" ("for my days are nothing"), a prescient thought for a composer whose last published work this would prove to be.

© Alexandra Coghlan, 2011