

Thomas Tallis: *Spem in Alium*

In 1567, the Italian composer Alessandro Striggio (1535-1592) visited London and introduced his forty-voice motet *Ecce beatam lucem*. A seventeenth-century document states that upon news of such a “mega-motet” an unnamed Duke challenged his fellow Englishmen to undertake a similar feat. Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585), a skilled composer, was encouraged enough to take the dare and the end result was nothing less than a masterpiece. *Spem in alium*, Tallis’ forty-voice motet, has until recently emerged as an English Renaissance classic written by a composer at the height of his maturity. In this investigation, a comparison to Striggio’s motet in historical context and an examination into modern performance practice will shed some light on the permanent qualities of *Spem in alium*.

Ecce beatam lucem is the best-documented work of music for a large number of voices written before *Spem in alium*. Striggio composed the piece for an occasion in Florence in 1561 and later reused it in Munich in 1568 to mark the wedding festivities of the Duke of Bavaria. As implied by its scenographic character, the text is closely associated with the religious tradition of *tableaux vivant*. Voices are independently numbered 1-40 as the performers were to be positioned in a semi-circle reading left to right. It appears that no musical instruments were used to double vocal lines or provide a continuo accompaniment.

The compositional technique transmitted through *Ecce beatam lucem*, according to Philip Brett, failed to establish a strong case for forty-voice writing. The structure of the work is established by two repetition schemes built from short motivic phrases as Striggio “badly mismanages the harmonic rhythm leading to the final cadence” (Brett 347). The piece is mostly homophonic with vocal adjustments made to provide textural contrast. Nevertheless as

previously mentioned, Striggio's composition made enough noise to garner performances throughout Europe and alert the English of its existence.

The "unnamed" English nobleman with an interest in music that set forth the musical challenge is believed to have been Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. Soon after, in October of 1569, Norfolk and his wife Mary Queen of Scots were jailed as political prisoners when a plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth was discovered. Left to his own devices, Tallis decided to base his forty-voice motet on a responsory sung at Matins that refers to the ninth chapter of the Book of Judith. The text depicts the Israeli heroine praying feverishly to God for strength against her enemy Holofernes— King Nebuchadnezzar's general. In the prayer, she humbly recognizes God's power over man's weakness and praises Him as the Ultimate Creator. Although Queen Elizabeth was reluctant to sign the death warrants of Norfolk and Mary, Tallis was sensitive to the political and religious instability of the times and embedded a symbolic reflection on human condition.

Spem in alium was likely premiered during the summer of 1571 at the Long Gallery of Arundel House in London during Norfolk's last months of freedom (he was imprisoned again and executed in June of 1572). The Duke was pleased with the work and awarded Tallis a chain of gold. Certainly members of the audience recalled Striggio's earlier piece and in comparison Tallis' handling of the medium dwarfed its predecessor. While Striggio arranged his work through chordal techniques and choral effects, Tallis wrote for forty independently crafted lines beginning in two twenty-voice points of imitation.

The piece is scored for eight five-part choirs in reference to the octagonal hall at Nonsuch Palace (another estate owned by the relatives of Norfolk). It lasts for 69 longs that through mathematical additive procedures using the Latin alphabet translate into TALLIS. Each choir

enters in turn until a full tutti is reached at the fortieth semibreve. Successive tutti denote key points in the text especially at the words “Respice humilitatem nostram” (Look upon our lowliness) where all voices make a shift from C major to A major before descending into A minor. Stuhr-Rommereim describes the shift as “a tear in the tonal fabric [that] evokes the transcendent and transforming power of the divine” (23).

The beauty of Tallis’ forty-voice motet lies in the presentation of a highly contrapuntal fabric of lines tied together by effective vertical/structural nodes that illuminate the text masterfully. What further distinguishes the piece from Striggio’s *Ecce beatam lucem* is its awareness and use of acoustic properties characteristic of large instrumental forces. The performance of *Spem in alium* at Nonsuch Palace would necessitate a vocal setup “in the round”. The audience’s aural experience would do justice to the line of text “Domine Deus, creator coeli et terrae” (Lord God, creator of heaven and earth) as brief echoing phrases swirl around the space. The use of silence is more than delegated to textual accentuation for it also allows the reverberations of the hall to clash, create, and sustain rich, complex harmonies— a technique explored four hundred years later through the use of electronics.

Along these lines, modern performers have rediscovered the value of reproducing *Spem in alium* “inauthentically”. Besides the novelty of a forty-voice composition, the piece allows itself to be exploited in ways that enhance and reshape the listening experience. I should note that the work was originally composed for boy and male adult voices that most modern interpreters have decided to forego. Conductor David Hill’s recording for the Hyperion label (March 1990) preserves this arrangement but offers a rendition that attempts to create expansive washes of sound in booming Winchester Cathedral for the overwhelming effect of sound masses. The independence of line is lost but what is clearly projected is the textual impression of the

heavens and the spiritual realm through the architectural ambience of the cathedral. In effect, the building *becomes* part of the composition.

Other interpretations have attempted to superimpose a small number of performers on a grand scale. The King's Singers, a six-piece *a capella* ensemble, used the recording technique of multi-tracking to blend layers of independent lines towards the final product. Recorded in similar fashion, the Kronos quartet offers a string version that attempts to highlight timbral properties of instrumental ranges and focuses exclusively on the sonic content of the work. In either case, a preference is made to maintain linear clarity and therefore reduce the harmonic "extra-effect" of sound masses.

Let me now return to some points regarding historical performance practice. A continuo part has survived which may suggest the use of instruments doubling voices. However this can be attested as a seventeenth-century addition reserved for performances with insufficient vocalists. More importantly is the use of *musica ficta* by Tallis and the clarity that he sought in harmonic delineation. The aforementioned interpretations (especially the Hill and Kronos recordings) may blur such boundaries but the core essence of the work is never undermined. It is a rich, malleable object unlike, for example, a Bach fugue in which such applications would not maintain or add any vividness. As Stuhr-Rommerein suggests it is like, "wandering through a great cathedral and peering around the corners and over screens, glimpsing other rooms that tantalize the eye" (23).

Due to its dimensionality, volume, and craftsmanship, Thomas Tallis' *Spem in alium* has been established as a Renaissance masterpiece as compared to Alessandro Striggio's *Ecce beatam lucem* that demonstrates a more limited approach to forty-voice motet writing. Historically, Tallis' composition reflects the volatile political situation in England during the

sixteenth-century as set into art by a leading composer in his mature state of writing. The existence of multiple modern realizations of the work attests not only to its permanency but also to its rich malleable character.

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