Concert: The Tallis Scholars

The Tallis Scholars

Peter Phillips

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ITHACA COLLEGE CONCERTS  2007-8

The Tallis Scholars
Peter Phillips, director

Sopranos
Janet Coxwell
Helen Parker
Amy Moore
Amanda Morrison

Altos
Patrick Craig
Caroline Trevor

Tenors
George Pooley
Nicholas Todd

Basses
Stephen Charlesworth
Robert Macdonald

Ford Hall
Thursday, February 28, 2008
8:15 p.m.
"Masterpieces from Spain and Portugal"

Asperges me (a8)  
Manuel Mendes  
(c.1547-1605)

Lamentations (a5)  
Manuel Cardoso  
(1566-1650)

Pater peccavi  
Duarte Lobo  
(c.1565-1646)

Ajuva nos  
Diogo Diaz Melgás  
(1638-1700)

Magnificat Secundi Toni  
Manuel Cardoso

INTERMISSION

Requiem (a6)  
Tomas Luis Da Victoria  
(1548-1611)

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About 70 miles east of Lisbon in Portugal lies the town of Évora. Its approximately 50,000 residents enjoy a historic city centre, complete with a largely in-tact Roman temple, medieval walls, and a number of historic monuments and architecturally stunning buildings that are remarkably well preserved. The entire city centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the heart of this magnificent place is Évora Cathedral, a massive 13th-century building that sits at the highest point in the city. It is the largest medieval cathedral in Portugal. Here, in the 16th and 17th centuries, a remarkable tradition of music performance and education was established and almost all of the major composers for approximately 150 years of Portuguese history were in some way associated with the city.

Tonight the Tallis Scholars present music from three distinct generations of these composers alongside one of the great masterpieces of the Spanish Golden Age, Victoria’s 6-voice Requiem.

Manuel Mendes is the sole representative of the first of these three generations. Born in 1547 in Lisbon, his first job was in Portalegre as mestre da capela at the cathedral there, but in 1575 he moved to Évora where he remained until his death in 1605. He is now known much more as a teacher than as a composer and the Asperges me which appears on tonight’s programme is one of only 6 works by him that survive. It achieved some fame, however, and was still being sung more than 125 years after his death in the chapel of the Dukes of Bragança – the noble household of the Kings of Portugal – and tonight’s edition is taken from a manuscript found there. In this book, three of the 8 voices are attributed to Manuel Soares, a much later composer who died in 1756. That it was given this treatment is a testament to its fame and lasting appeal.

Manuel Cardoso was born in 1566 in the small village of Fronteira, about 20 miles south west of Portalegre, where Mendes was mestre da capela. Cardoso was sent to the choir school at Évora, however, arriving at almost exactly the same time as Mendes; he may have been one of Mendes’ first pupils in Évora. At the age of 22, he became a Carmelite monk and remained at the Convento de Carmo in Lisbon until he died 62 years later in 1650. He was a great friend of King John IV of Portugal, and possibly was employed as his music teacher in the first quarter of the 17th century. Cardoso was highly regarded in his own lifetime and is considered now to be one of the great Portuguese composers of the Évora school. He published regularly throughout his career and the two works on tonight’s programme come from his first and last known publications. The Lamentations appear in his last book, a collection of motets and other sacred music published in 1648, and are settings of four passages from the biblical book Lamentations of Jeremiah. Every year during Holy Week – on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and
Holy Saturday during the service of Matins in the Roman Catholic liturgy – sections of this book are read and these plangent, desperate, and emotional words were incredibly popular with composers in the 16th and 17th centuries. A unique feature of these texts is the inclusion of Hebrew letters denoting the verses (eg. Jod, Caph, Lamed, Aleph, etc.). Composers often used their settings of these otherwise meaningless place-markers as a vehicle to show off their skill at writing pure polyphony; some of the most beautiful music in these works occurs here. The contrast between these sections and the emotionally charged texted passages which alternate with them contributes to the enduring popularity of this form.

While his date of birth remains unclear (1564-9), it is certain that Duarte Lobo was a boy chorister at Évora Cathedral as the same time as Cardoso, early in Mendes’ time there as mestre da capela. This must have been an incredibly fruitful time for the choir, as Duarte Lobo went on to become the most famous Portuguese composer of his day. He went to Lisbon as a young man and became maestro de capilla at Lisbon Cathedral, where he stayed until his death, but he was the only Portuguese musician to have his works published outside of Portugal. The two motets on tonight’s programme appear in his first of two major mass publications, Liber Missarum, published in Antwerp in 1621. Lobo’s style is distinctive, balancing the characteristically Portuguese conservative polyphonic style with more up-to-date sonorities and chromatic gestures in a way that is much less overt than the way Cardoso writes. Lobo’s setting of the text ‘Beati mortui’ (Blessed are the dead) in Audivi vocem de caelo is a perfect example of his ability to blend the old with the new. Keeping in mind that the piece is a polyphonic, a cappella motet very much in the general style of Roman counterpoint – a style basically defined by Palestrina’s writing – it is therefore very conservative for a piece published in the 1620s. However, Lobo’s isolation of the soprano line for this text followed immediately by the rest of the choir in an almost -homophonic answer is an incredibly emotionally vivid moment, displaying more of the outward expression seen in other early Baroque music of the time. Portuguese music as a whole is really a study in this kind of blend of conservatism being slowly influenced by newer trends occurring elsewhere and it can be seen in Lobo’s music better than anywhere else.

Diogo Dias Melgaz was born in 1638 in a small village called Cuba, about 25 miles south of Évora. At this time, Manuel Mendes was long dead (he died in 1605) and both Cardoso and Lobo were successfully established in Lisbon, nearing the end of their lives. By the time Melgaz became a boy chorister, Lobo had died. Melgaz, therefore, represents a completely different, later generation of Portuguese musicians. However, it is perhaps he who had the closest
life-long relationship with Évora Cathedral, as he was a boy chorister there but didn’t leave to pursue a career in Lisbon. He worked his way up the musical hierarchy in the choir school and cathedral and after holding many lower posts, including that of an adult singer in the choir, became mestre de capela in 1678. He died in 1700, in Évora. The Portuguese balance between conservatism and innovation was approached by Melgaz in a unique way. All of Melgaz’ known works are sacred choral pieces and he only supplied a simple thoroughbass instrumental accompaniment to a few of his compositions. While making him thoroughly conservative when compared to the contemporary musical traditions of France and Italy, this, in itself, was a progressive step for Portuguese music. He was the first Portuguese composer to use barlines in his music and his counterpoint, while still using points of imitation, is all firmly grounded in the newer idea of functional harmony, the construction of progressions of vertical chords as opposed to the interweaving of linear melodies. Both *Adjuva nos* and *Domine hominem* are simple four-voice settings, quite chromatic in places, but contained within their emotional range. It is interesting to note how some of the earlier music on tonight’s programme actually sounds more exotic and adventurous, especially some of the music by Cardoso, regardless of the fact that it was written more than 50 years prior to these two pieces.

Cardoso’s very first publication was a book of Magnificat settings he produced in 1613. The *Magnificat secundi toni* on tonight’s programme is drawn from this collection and is in many ways a very conventional piece. Its structure, that of setting alternate verses and leaving the others to be sung in plainsong, was a well-established practice for Magnificat settings as was the technique of incorporating the plainsong tone itself into the polyphonic texture in long notes. Where Cardoso’s individual flare comes to the surface is in the use of chromaticism, especially noticeable in the beginning of the verse beginning ‘Esurientes implevit bonis’ (He has filled the hungry with good things).

The remainder of tonight’s concert consists of one of the great masterpieces of the late Renaissance, Tomás Luis de Victoria’s *Requiem* for 6 voices of 1605. This work is well known and performed often by modern choirs and with good reason. It is one of the single most stunningly beautiful pieces of music in the repertoire, written to mark the funeral of Victoria’s patroness of 16 years, the Dowager Empress Maria of Austria, sister of Phillip II of Spain and widow of Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian II. She, and Victoria along with over 30 nuns, 12 priest singers, and a collection of choirboys, lived in the Royal Convent of Barefoot Nuns of St. Clare in Madrid and the Requiem Victoria wrote to be performed at her funeral in 1603 was his last publication. As with many Requiem settings – including those written by Manuel Cardoso and Duarte
Lobo, who definitely would have had access to the printed version of this Requiem mass – the plainsong on which it is built features prominently throughout the work, usually in an upper voice and in long note values. Victoria’s incredible ability to create incredible expanses of musical space through the use of harmony and sonority alone is displayed here in abundance, as in the final ‘Kyrie’ of the final Libera me movement, and this contrasts with his much more emotionally fervent use of harmonic sculpture in the opening Tedet animam meam. The extra-liturgical Versa est in luctum motet is possibly the high-point of the entire mass, and is indeed one of the great masterpieces of Victoria’s entire oeuvre.

While Victoria is viewed as being at the very centre of the stylistic developments of the high Renaissance, Portuguese polyphonists are often overlooked. Their peculiar conservative style – Melgaz was far behind his time in terms of structure, genre, and affect – has sometimes baffled scholars and singers but this programme proves that their music is worthy of the praise and status of Victoria’s much more famous masterpiece.

Program notes by Greg Skidmore