

# Toby Wardman

Writing sample

## Programme notes for Micklegate Singers, Winter 2006

### Salve Regina – Tomás Luis de Victoria

Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611) was Spain's most famous composer of the 16th century. He devoted himself entirely to writing sacred choral music, of which several hundred examples survive today. Unusually for the era, Victoria's music is generally free from elaborate counterpoint, preferring simple textures and lyrical melody lines.

His *Salve Regina*, composed largely as a dialogue between two choirs, has far more overt emotional impact than music composed by contemporaries such as Palestrina. It is divided into seven short movements, with a particularly vivid setting of the words 'lacrimarum valle' ('vale of tears') forming the central movement.

### Advent Antiphons – Bob Chilcott

*i. O Sapientia; ii. O Adonai; iii. O Radix Jesse; iv. O Clavis David; v. O Oriens; vi. O Rex gentium; vii. O Emmanuel*

The origins of the seven ancient verses that form the 'Great Advent O Antiphons' are uncertain, though their use in liturgy is recorded in the fifth century, and by the eighth century they were common in monasteries across Europe. Each of the seven mystical verses is based on one of the titles given to the Messiah in Isaiah's biblical prophecies, and the initial letters of these titles (Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, Emmanuel), taken in reverse order, spell the phrase 'ero cras', or 'Tomorrow, I come'.

This new, eight-part setting of the Antiphons is as creative and harmonically indulgent as one would expect from Bob Chilcott (1955–), a contemporary British composer, but the music also draws heavily on ancient melodies which are linked with these verses. Plainsong motives run through the entire work, often in the men's parts. On several occasions, singers are instructed to sing phrases "independently and in own rhythm", creating a clustered effect evocative of the vast cathedral in Reykjavik where this work was first performed, but also ideally suited to the expansive acoustic of the Minster.

### O magnum mysterium – Pierre Villette

At a time when the music of his French contemporaries were experimenting with new, avant-garde styles, Pierre Villette (1926–1998) continued to draw on established influences as diverse as medieval music, Gregorian chant, Stravinsky, and jazz. Today, his work is familiar to audiences across the world, particularly in Britain, Japan and Germany, though curiously not in France.

This intimate setting of *O magnum mysterium* is typically reflective, though Villette's penchant for jazz harmonies is never too far away, particularly in his breathtakingly sudden setting of the word 'Maria'. The commonalities between Villette's writing and that of Olivier Messaien, who studied alongside him in the Paris Conservatoire, are also particularly evident in the extended 'Ave Maria' epilogue.

### Salve Regina – Jacob Obrecht

Plainsong themes once again abound in Jacob Obrecht's (1457/1458–1505) elaborate setting of the *Salve Regina* text. Obrecht alternates melodic chant and polyphony, and the intricacy of his writing foreshadows Thomas Tallis's later and more famous *Spem in alium*.

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Throughout the entire piece, the upper soprano and tenor lines are built on plainsong, and are almost entirely imitative of each other – either directly, or with more subtle imitations which vary the rhythm, pitch or duration of each phrase. The last polyphonic verse, ‘O pia [Virgo]’ (‘O loving Virgin’), is an extended phrase of astonishing rhythmic complexity, first in the upper voices, then the lower, then all six parts.

### **Birthday Sleep – John Tavener**

Tavener (1944 –) writes: “The manifestation of the Son reveals the mystery of God who is love. Thus Christ reveals the Father, from whom he comes, whose Son and Word he is, and he breathes the mighty breathing of the Holy Spirit.

“Vernon Watkins, the great twentieth-century Welsh poet, evaluates and recreates divine events and places them in the light of the everlasting. So it is with his poem *Birthday Sleep*, which I see as a meditation on the incarnation of the Logos. The music moves between awe and inner silence.”

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### **O magnum mysterium – Morten Lauridsen**

Morten Lauridsen (1943 –) is America’s most popular living composer of choral music. This short, gentle setting of *O magnum mysterium* is taken from a series of sacred motets which has been recorded over a hundred times since its publication in the early 1990s. Lauridsen’s serene harmonies lend all his music a meditative, almost mystical air, perhaps going some way towards explaining his extraordinary popularity in the US today.

### **Nativitas – Jean Belmont**

*i. Carol; ii. Nova, nova; iii. Salve, lux fidelium; iv. Veni redemptor gentium; v. Nativitas; vi. Sweet was the song the Virgin sung; vii. Noe, noe, psallite noe*

Jean Belmont’s extended suite of Advent and Christmas-themed texts depicts the sanctification of Mary, the birth of Jesus and the jubilation of Jerusalem. The chosen texts are from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, except for *Veni redemptor gentium*, which is a 4th-century hymn.

Belmont’s writing is characterised by seemingly endless creativity, with each new idea following rapidly from its predecessors. In its most striking moments, the music is astonishingly vivid, crashing through rich, full chords at an astonishing rate.

### **Lux aurumque – Eric Whitacre**

The young US composer Eric Whitacre (1970 –) is equally idiomatic in writing for voices, instruments or a combination. *Lux aurumque* (‘Light and gold’) sets a Christmas poem by Edward Esch, translated into Latin at the request of the composer. He writes: “A simple approach is essential to the success of the work, and if the tight harmonies are carefully tuned and balanced they will shimmer and glow”.

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