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Sign of contradiction: Tallis at 500

It is thought that Thomas Tallis was born in c.1505. He died in Greenwich on 23 November 1585.

TWO THINGS STAND OUT about Thomas Tallis's career as a composer: he experimented more regularly and more extravagantly than any of his contemporaries; and he did what he was told. Since it goes against current ways of thinking for creative artists to be subservient, I think we have a conceptual problem with Tallis. Since he clearly did trim to the prevailing political winds and quite possibly had a mild and undemanding character, there is a tendency now to want to say he was suffering for his Catholicism in bitter silence. This may be to take away from him a characteristic which does seem really unusual, especially in so turbulent a century as the 16th in England: a desire to push back boundaries of language and expression while living a fulfilling life.

Both Tallis's experiments and his pliability were unusual in the context of his time, though none of his contemporaries seems to have commented on them. More recently there has been, if anything, an even greater silence about him: a modern collected edition of his Latin church music still awaits publication. One feels that if so apparently unremarkable a character and so high-achieving an artist had been at work in any other field, academics would have been falling over each other to find a new angle to illuminate the central contradiction. And it is not just that he lived a long time ago. The Venetian painter Giorgione, for example, died at about the time Tallis was born, but partly because he was a painter in a city which has always drawn attention to itself, and partly because his surviving work sometimes has the kind of romantic quality people can't leave alone, experts have long been fighting high-profile battles over what he did really do and why. Nor is it just that Tallis was English: poets in 16th-century England never lack for interpretation. One only has to ask a question about any of Shakespeare's characters, no matter how minor, to be buried in literature arguing the point from every angle. But to be both English and a musician has been disastrous for Tallis in modern scholarship, as it has been for just about everybody similarly circumstanced (except Taverner and, to a certain extent, Byrd).

It is not just that there is no full-length study of Tallis:[1] there has been no debate about him at any level. It is still taken at face value, as it has been for centuries, that he was an ardent Catholic who suppressed his instincts either because he feared arrest or because he wanted a quiet life. Being an exceptional craftsman as well as an undemanding person, he therefore had no trouble in more or less single-handedly inventing the child's-play Anglican style, having learnt his trade doing something immeasurably more difficult.

1. The nearest we have is Paul Doe's *Tallis* in the Oxford Studies of Composers series (Oxford University Press, 1968) and Davitt Moroney's PhD thesis, *Under fower sovereygnes: Thomas Tallis and the transformation of English polyphony* (University of California, Berkeley, 1980). John Milsom has more recently devoted a series of articles to him and edited much of his music in performing editions.

It has been assumed that he didn't really want to do this, for both musical and religious reasons, and that as soon as he could, with the re-establishment of Catholicism in Mary's reign, he returned to the florid style with the kind of relief felt by a pupil on being let out of school. It has further been assumed that he remained faithful to the old religion with the same tenacity which Byrd was to show all his life; his late works, which like Byrd's include sets of Lamentations, being full of references to the unhappy state of a people which has lost its way. However, unlike Byrd, he successfully kept this to himself and the fact that he lived to be 80 years of age is generally taken as proof that he must indeed have lived, as he died, 'in mild and quiet sort' to which his tomb-stone in St Alfege's Church in Greenwich once testified. Meanwhile no proper attempt has been made to place the achievement of *Gaude gloriosa* or *Spem in alium* or even *If ye love me* in a proper context, either European or within the gamut of renaissance thought. In many ways, therefore, we still find ourselves at the pioneering stage when considering both Tallis and his achievement.

One of the problems for the would-be modern biographer of Tallis, searching for clues to his real character, is that most of his music was written for a Catholic Church which didn't ask its composers to express anything more tangible than a kind of luminous joy in the contemplation of eternal things. Such music can give little clue as to the personality or emotional make-up of its composer in a modern sense. However, there can be no doubt that its limited demands suited Tallis perfectly well. The music he wrote for the Catholic monarchs Henry VIII and Mary has a fluency to it which suggests a mind fully at ease with its circumstances. In these years Tallis showed that he had, along with Palestrina but few others, the ability to write joyful music; to set texts with a positive message convincingly. Every indication is that he was content to be writing to the limits of his technical ability, in a style ill-equipped to express overt emotion, safe within the Catholic world of his fathers. A number of his colleagues seem to have been similarly content: Taverner, Sheppard, Tye, William Mundy among them.

It was Tallis's behaviour in Edward VI's reign which set him apart. Unlike Taverner, who seems to have stopped composing for whatever reason, or Tye, who became a Protestant cleric, or Sheppard, who lost his muse and died young, or the new Protestants like Causton and Farrant who appeared from nowhere and as quickly disappeared again, Tallis quickly adapted to the new Protestant circumstances and simply carried on, without obvious complaint. This is the crux of the matter: he did not stand out for one religion or the other, as Tye did at the time and Byrd would later do, nor does the Protestant music he wrote show any sign of unease. He still was not required to demonstrate emotion in his writing, merely to set texts according to certain

more-or-less defined principles. It is my reading that he did this willingly. It could be argued that he was merely being the perfect artisan, plying a trade to the best of his ability while hating it; but one cannot help noticing that everyone else, potentially equally good craftsmen, got too involved and eventually failed as artists. Tallis was able to keep his mind clear and produce great music.

The main argument in favour of Tallis being an emotional man who wanted to pour his suffering into his art comes from the music he wrote in Elizabeth I's reign. To put this in perspective, we hear more of this music today than of his earlier writing, apart from one or two Edwardian anthems, partly because it is more overtly expressive and partly because it tends to be scored more suitably for the modern SATB choir. However, it only makes up a part of the whole picture – not as great a part as we might think – and in greatly changed circumstances. Nor is it all penitential. The two psalm-motets, *Laudate dominum* and *Domine quis habitabit*, for example, are rarely performed but exemplify the Flemish techniques Tallis was adopting just as well as the much-performed Lamentations sets. Finally, against the idea that he, possibly like Taverner and Tye, had come to regret the whole tenor of his life and wanted to make amends, is the evidence of his will. There he wrote: 'First I bequeath my soule unto Allmightie god our Lorde and Saviour Jesus Christ the onely Redemer of the worlde'. This was hardly the language of a man who had spent his life wrestling with a terrible truth. Byrd, on the other hand, who clearly had so wrestled, wrote in his will: 'And that I may live and dye a true and perfect member of his Holy Catholycke Church without which I believe there is noe Salvation for me.' Without meaning to play down the power of his last works, maybe there were straightforward, mundane reasons for Tallis's partial change of tone. It is certain, for example, that he was surrounded by younger composers who were trying out darker texts for the first time, suggesting that this experiment appealed to their listeners, including Elizabeth, who in turn may have been reacting against the certainties being promoted by the warring churches. Amongst these younger men was William Byrd, perhaps keen to show his master a new way, in an idiom which required some consistency of thought between them since they had to publish the fruits of their labours together. The Flemish imitative style, still fairly new on the English scene, had always lent itself better to contemplation than to more positive texts (Tallis's psalm-motets are disappointingly tame). He may anyway have felt that he had said all he had to say in a joyful style, many years earlier. And then, once again, he found that the tools at his disposal suited him. He relished the opportunities inherent in the imitative style, especially what happens when imitation is allowed to lose its usually rigid tonal control. In the end Tallis's penitential music is highly emotive, but ultimately it is not as passionate as Byrd's. Tallis is enjoying himself too

much with the possibilities of language, even in the Lamentations, to appear as an out-and-out emotional militant and lose himself in complaint. It is like looking at a Bellini when, hanging nearby, is a Titian or a Michelangelo; which is not to say that many people might not prefer to spend time with the Bellini.

Tallis does indeed come over as a man of mild sort, who was happiest making experiments, pushing out the frontiers of what he had inherited more as a mathematical exercise than as a series of lessons in word-setting and deeper meaning. Ironically a composer like Byrd didn't actually need to indulge in the same kind of pushing in order to express himself fully. By intensifying the style which was already there, he had everything necessary to write something as devastating as *Civitas sancti tui*. He was looking inwards, which meant he didn't need to write 40-voice motets, or antiphons which last 20 minutes. But if I'm right about what motivated Tallis, he must indeed have been a happy man, because no-one has so fluently or relentlessly asked questions of form and style. His solutions may have happened to end up historically as culs-de-sac – how could anyone follow up on *Spem*? – but as achievements in themselves they deserve far more profile than they have received so far.

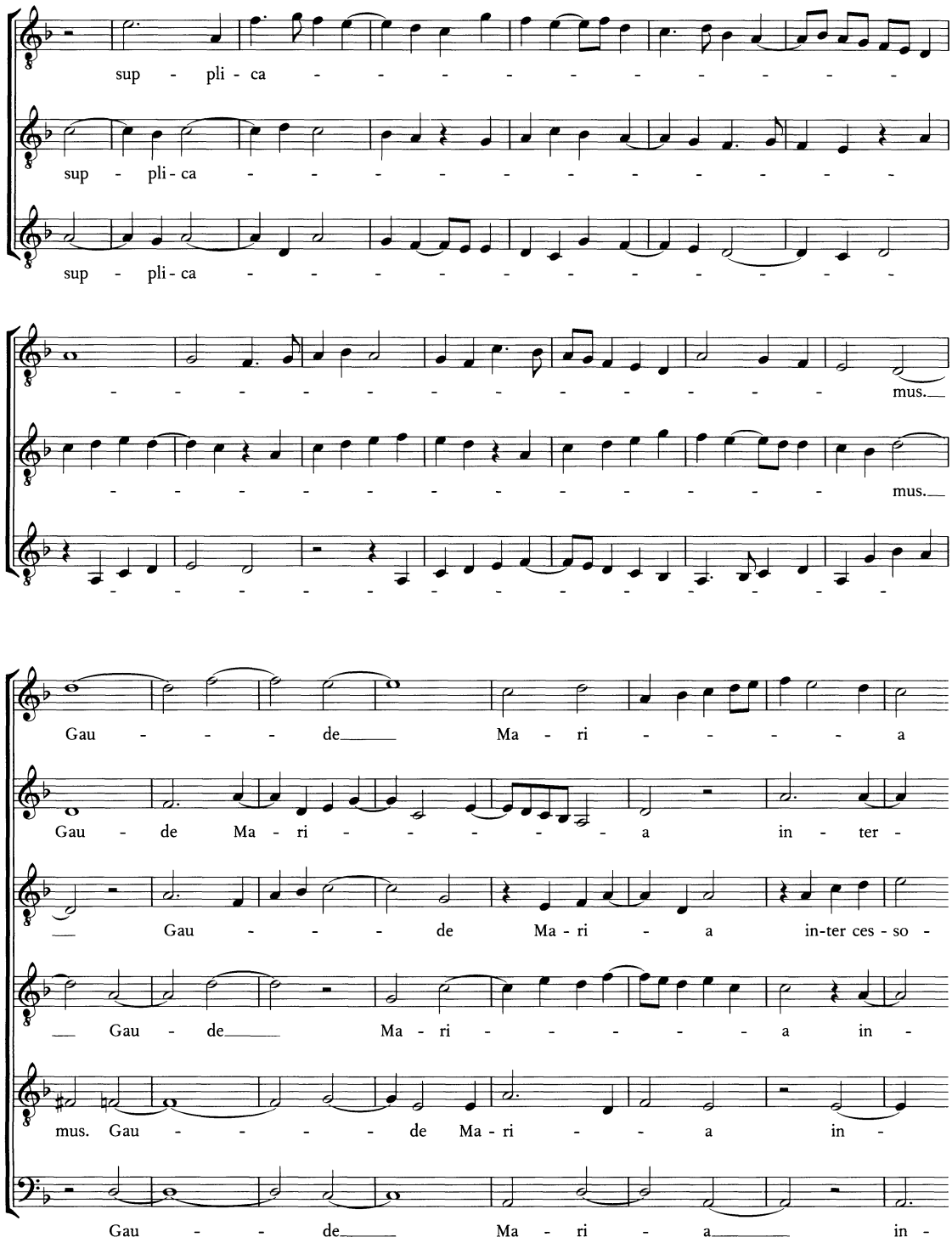
In some sense or other most of what Tallis wrote was breaking new ground, and it would take the length of a book to do justice to it all. In the discussion which follows I have preferred to judge the quality of his music by the standards of absolute excellence, rather than from the more usual 'whom was he influenced by and whom did he influence?' perspective. If one adopts the latter approach, there is little space for Tallis's Latin music, since the tradition effectively ended with him: in this way of judging him, his Anglican music is vastly more significant, and indeed it has stolen much of what limelight there has been for him. His Elizabethan writing – which can be seen as part of a continuum in developing the imitative style, itself later to embrace many leading English composers like Gibbons and Tomkins – is the next in line for the same reason. From this perspective Tallis's achievement appears to dwindle as one looks back in time.

Taking each piece on its merits, the 40-part motet *Spem in alium* represents the tip of an iceberg. It is an achievement of the greatest magnitude, yet it is typically discussed in almost parochial terms: for example, that it was not an achievement which stood alone, but one which was set up by an earlier composer, Alessandro Striggio, in his 40-part motet *Ecce beatam lucem*, a piece Tallis probably knew and hoped to rival. This is true, but the emphasis is wrong. What deserves to be said is that there are very few monuments to intellectual thought in the whole range of composed music as staggering as *Spem*. The Striggio isn't in the same hemisphere; Bach's *Art of fugue* is; and

if it is thought worth spending time talking about and analysing the *Art of fugue*, so also should it be thought worth analysing *Spem*. It is not that an analysis of the *Art of fugue* will teach us anything about *Spem*: it is that out of such attempts to pinpoint genius myths are made, and out of myths come reputations and the desire for performances.

And *Spem* is by no means the whole story. Nor is *Gaude gloriosa*, though that inevitably comes next on the list (ex.1). There are many earlier examples of what *Gaude gloriosa* set out to achieve, some by Tallis himself, most by his greatest predecessors. The votive antiphon had been the jewel in the crown of English composition for many decades before Tallis's first essays in the form, but in *Gaude gloriosa* he significantly expanded it. This is not a comment about sheer length – at 17 minutes it is uncommonly long, though his earlier *Salve intemerata* is slightly longer – but about breadth of conception and the technique required to convey it. The melodies are longer and more graceful than before, they fit together better, resulting in a grander sweep of phrase, the scoring is more varied and impressive, especially in the double gimell, and the ranges are more taxing. The stamina required from the singers to do justice to this masterpiece – not least when Tallis asks his top part to reach an almost unprecedented high A at written pitch in the closing moments – is of a quite different order from any earlier composition of this type. I still have yet to hear a completely convincing live performance of *Gaude gloriosa*. It is as if Tallis, like Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony, simply would not be constrained by human considerations. The fact that William Mundy went on to write something just as impressive as *Gaude gloriosa* in his *Vox patris caelestis* – in effect an extraordinary one-off – should not diminish our respect for his model. Anyway, with the death of Queen Mary, it was culde-sac time for the whole genre.

I WOULD ALSO CONTEND that *If ye love me* and several of the other anthems which Tallis wrote in Edward's reign deserve to be similarly admired both as successful experiments and as first-rate conceptions in their own right. In their case they are of the first historical importance too. It is impressive that without them the whole Anglican church music project would have been so impoverished in its initial stage that it is hard to imagine how the thread would have been picked up again in Elizabeth's reign, when the business of creating a complete repertoire of appropriate settings had to be undertaken in greater earnest. The Edwardian scene was otherwise unpromising, propped up by older composers like Tye and Sheppard who were obviously feeling their way with the new idiom, alongside younger, more minor figures who believed in the doctrinal changes but who had little experience as composers. Richard Farrant's *Call to remembrance* is an effective piece, but it sounds stilted alongside Tallis's *Hear the voice and*



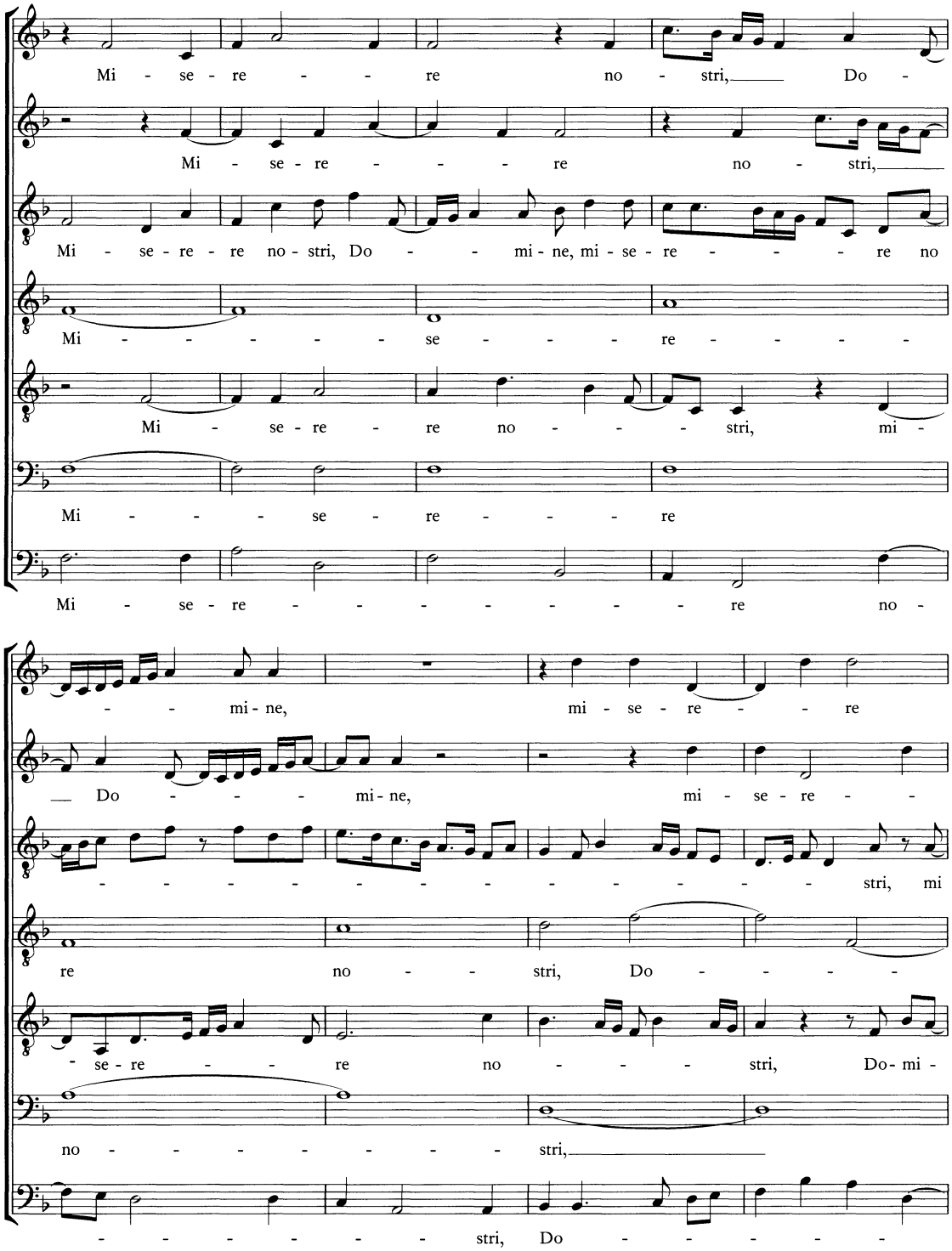
Ex.1: from Tallis's *Gaude gloriosa*

prayer. The best Tallis anthems have a beauty which has rendered them timeless: not only did they give a stylistic starting-point to Anglican composers from the 16th century through to the 19th (for instance in the anthems of someone like John Goss) but they have been performed without break in the English cathedrals from Tallis's day to our own. The Third Tune for Archbishop Parker's psalter – *Why fum'th in fight* – inspired Vaughan Williams to write a fantasia around it. Yet here was a style fashioned out of wreckage, in an atmosphere of fear.

A full study of Tallis's innovations would refer to the seven-voice canon *Miserere nostri*, which for sheer mathematical ingenuity has been equalled (by Bach amongst others) but scarcely outdone (ex.2). (The question with canons is not only how clever they are, but how expressive. Did Tallis know he would create this precise atmosphere when he started to plan all those inversions and augmentations?) It would refer to the *Missa Puer natus*, with its archaic use of very long-note chant coupled to a quite modern use of rapidly overlapping motifs, the two together resulting in a motion which resembles that of the penny-farthing – one element turning very slowly while the other races by. That particular combination, and the mood which comes from it, is unique to this setting. Then it would be necessary to analyse the way the first set of Lamentations, *Derelinquat impius* and *In jejunio et fletu*, to mention only three, wander about tonally to give the sensation of being lost. This too was a Tallis invention, which in *In jejunio* especially produces something out on its own.

And in a sense those are only the obvious candidates, taken from Tallis's last period. To gauge how original he was being in the less glamorous forms of the Catholic hymn and respond poses a different challenge. Pieces such as *Candidi facti sunt*, *Dum transisset sabbatum*, *Euge caeli porta*, *Homo quidam fecit coenam*, *Honor virtus et potestas*, *Videte miraculum*, *Jam Christus astra ascenderat* and *Jesu salvator seculi* have more or less vanished from cathedral and concert listings, as has the surrounding repertoire which would show us by comparison exactly what Tallis was trying to achieve. It is as if the performing tradition of his music leads to one set of conclusions about him, while the surviving corpus taken as a whole promotes another. According to Paul Doe's listing in *Tallis*, there are 18 Latin-texted pieces by Tallis from Elizabeth's reign, as against 28 from the earlier periods; and eleven of the 18 were published in the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae*, which ensured their survival in a way not available to the earlier material.

These figures lend weight to the caution I feel about thinking that late Tallis sums him up. Unlike most composers in the history of music he was not allowed to develop a style which matured over his career as a composer, which adds to the difficulty of finding what motivated him. A consistent stylistic framework can provide a useful yardstick. With Tallis we have to



Ex.2: Tallis's *Miserere nostri*, opening

take each piece as we find it, remembering that he was the only composer who remained active throughout the entire period under consideration. Everybody of his generation, the one before it and the one after it either didn't contribute to one style or the other for confessional reasons, or died before reaching old age: John Taverner, John Merbecke, Christopher Tye, Robert Johnson, John Sheppard, the several Parsons, Robert White, William Mundy (arguably an exception), Thomas Causton, Richard Farrant, John Farrant, William Fox, William Whitbroke, Osbert Parsley (also something of an exception, though his music is second-rate) and several anonymous composers in the Wanley partbooks. None of these comes anywhere near Tallis in stature; and it was not until the 1540s and 1550s that a generation of composers was born that could eventually flourish in the relatively stable times of Elizabeth's reign, and continue into the 17th century. What it took in terms of stamina and personality to survive and excel as Tallis did, in the times he did, has something of a miracle about it. But, looked at superficially, hunkering down, blotting out and keeping going come what may, is not a glamorous activity.

I am grateful to David Skinner for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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