

Towards the light

Alex Hodgkinson leads us from Lent, through Passiontide, and on to Easter

ON THE RECORD

T*enebrae factae sunt* – there was darkness. *Tenebrae* is a dramatic three-part liturgy for Holy Week, consisting of sung Psalms, Lessons and Responsories – narrative reflections on the lessons. Taking place on the Eves of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday respectively, it is common to begin as daylight is fading, concluding in the thick of night.

The church is lit by 15 candles, representing Christ, the three Marys and eleven disciples. Fourteen are extinguished during the service, leaving just the Christ candle, which, still alight, is hidden behind the altar. In almost total darkness, the service ends with a *strepitus*, a “great noise”, perhaps imitating the earthquake that followed Christ’s death.

The Spanish genius Tomás Luis de Victoria (c.1548-1611) is one of the few to have composed polyphonic settings of the 18 *Tenebrae Responsories*. Victoria’s music is passionate and profound, offering scenes of spectacular technicolour amidst the monochrome chant.

Although it is just not possible to capture on CD quite how theatrical and provocative this music is in its liturgical context, there are a number of wonderful recordings, all of which owe something to the very first, that of Westminster Cathedral Choir under George Malcolm in 1959. Whilst “of its time” in many respects, the drama and pathos is as rousing today as it ever was. The madrigalian exuberance is magnified by the bright, visceral “continental” sound that became the choir’s trademark.

Three decades later, Westminster Cathedral Choir released a second recording of the *Responsories*, directed by David Hill (Hyperion, 1989). This reading is just as dramatic, but the effects are elegantly nuanced, and there is a more consistent sense of melodic line and pulse. *Una hora* (Thursday V) describes the disciples’ abject failure to stay awake at Gethsemane, and Christ’s pain is captured exquisitely as he chastises those who previously



Nigel Short's choir, *Tenebrae*

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vowed that they would die for him: *qui exhortamini mori pro me?* Scored for four higher voices, the imitation between them is thrilling. *Tamquam ad latronem* (Friday I) illustrates the full range of the choir’s tonal palette (and, thankfully, Hill does not follow Malcolm’s rather eccentric voicing). The violence of the mob, with their swords and clubs, soon gives way to a searing cry: “you lead me to be scourged and crucified”.

Aestimatus sum (Saturday V) is a subdued lament, again scored for higher semi-chorus. In their second recording of the *Responsories*, Nigel Short’s choir *Tenebrae* portrays Christ’s desolation with great sensitivity (Signum, 2013). The demanding vocal parts sound effortless, not least the soft top Gs in the tenor part. The singers are acutely responsive to Victoria’s illustration of the text, for example at *inter mortuos liber* (“move freely among the

dead”) where there is a little more gesture in the music.

Led by Robert Hollingworth, I Fagiolini are renowned for their fresh, imaginative, historically informed perspectives of music both familiar and long-forgotten. Their new recording of the *Tenebrae Responsories* (CORO, 2024) stands out, not only for the quality and thoughtfulness of the singing, but due to the spartan forces and lower pitch. Rather than a full choir, there are just four single voices at any given time, singing a fourth lower than is notated.

This performance practice would have been familiar to Victoria, yet this is only the second recording to do it in this way. The low pitch gives the music an earthy richness, making it feel more intense and human, rather than celestial and beyond reach. With just four singers, intricate details of the text and melodies are given a crystalline clarity. The communication is immediate and direct in a way that is, at times, suitably unsettling.

There is perhaps no better demonstration of this than *Caligaverunt oculi mei* (Friday VI): “O all ye that pass by, attend and see, if there be any sorrow like my sorrow.” On the CD, each Nocturn (group of three Responsories) is followed by a poem from Christopher Reid’s 2009 collection *A Scattering*, a deeply personal and poignant reflection on the death of his wife.

Having started in the shadows of Holy Week with Westminster Cathedral Choir’s first album, we begin the final part of the Triduum in the light of the choir’s most recent release, *Lumen Christi* (Ad Fontes, 2024). This is its first CD under Simon Johnson, and it demonstrates the choir on superb form. Beginning with *Lumen Christi* and the *Exultet*, the disc leads us through music of the Easter Vigil.

It is a portrait of the Cathedral’s unique musical heritage: alongside works by Lassus, Victoria, Palestrina, Monteverdi and L’Héritier’s immersive *Surrexit pastor bonus*, we hear music by former Cathedral musicians Andrew Reid, Matthew Martin and Martin Baker. Baker’s arrangement of *O filii et filiae* is electrifying, perfectly paired with the final track, Jean Langlais’s (1907-91) *Incantation pour un jour saint*, a triumphant résumé of *Lumen Christi* and the Litany of the Saints. “Be glad, let earth be glad, as glory floods her, ablaze with light from her eternal King.” **CH**

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