

# From Christmastide to an early Lent

Alex Hodgkinson presents his listening choices

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## ON THE RECORD

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‘H’ e took up Jesus in his arms, and blessing God he said: in peace I now depart, my Saviour having seen.” Johannes Eccard’s magisterial *When to the Temple Mary went* has the unusual distinction of being as compelling in the English translation (by John Troutbeck) as in the original German: *Maria wallt zum Heiligtum*. One of the earliest recordings is by King’s College, Cambridge, on their 1965 LP *The Nativity to Candlemas* (it can also be found on a 2004 EMI compilation entitled *Byrd and his Contemporaries*).

We are spoilt for choice when it comes to recordings of Thomas Tallis’s *Videte Miraculum Matris Domine* (“Behold the miracle of the mother of the Lord”). Stile Antico’s expansive performance (*Puer Natus Est, Harmonia Mundi*, 2010) conveys the warranted reverence and awe. The plainsong provides the *cantus firmus*, and Tallis responds sensitively to the chant’s modality. There’s a particularly tantalising moment, at “*congoso*”, one of the several instances where it so nearly seems to commit to either a major or a minor tonality, but never quite has two feet firmly in either camp: it is, after all, a feast of present joy and sorrow yet to come.

Looking forward, if I were to mention *Miserere Mei, Deus*, the Gradual for Ash Wednesday, no doubt Gregorio Allegri would spring immediately to mind. I’m going to swerve the obvious, and instead explore other, equally noteworthy settings of that great psalm.

Robert White (or Whyte) (c.1538-74) was one of the many professional musicians who had to walk the Reformation tightrope. His *Miserere Mei* is through-composed, yet there is clear distinction between almost every verse, most often marked by a change in texture. Many verses start with a single voice announcing the text, followed by the others in homophony, gradually breaking off into independent lines as the verse progresses. What really draws me to the recording by Henry’s

Eight (*Robert White: The Greatest Glory of our Muses*, Meridian, 1995), are the subtle changes of tempo and dynamics in each verse.

These sensitive adjustments are inspired: they keep the ear’s attention through nearly 15 minutes of singing, yet never dilute the sense of a whole (or two halves, to be precise). White’s vocal writing is varied and engaging but not complex or fussy. Melodies are elegant

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and chromatic dissonance is used to decorate throughout, right to the very last phrase. The group responds with singing that is beautifully balanced yet full of character.

A generation earlier, Constanzo Festa (c.1485-1545) was one of the first Italian composers to gain a reputation across Europe as a polyphonist, and his work probably influenced that of Palestrina. His setting of *Miserere Mei* has recently been recorded by the Sistine Chapel Choir under Mgr Massimo Palombella (*O Crux Benedicta*, Deutsche Gramophon, 2019). Like its more famous cousin, the piece alternates between plainsong, 5-part chorus and 4-part semi-chorus.

It is understated and reverential, and the track gives us a sense of the enormous space in which it was recorded, almost as though we are in the chapel ourselves, kneeling in prayer as the choir diligently petitions on our behalf. There’s a slight kerfuffle in the background towards the end, and I think a mobile phone goes off at one point – all designed to replicate the authentic churchgoing experience, no doubt!

At this point, you could be forgiven for thinking that Psalm 51 (50, if you’re following the Septuagint numbering) has to be slow-moving and unaccompanied. But allow me to transport you to 18th-century Europe, where we will find settings by Pergolesi, Richter, Caldara, and two by the Czech composer Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679-1745). His four-section *Miserere in C minor* (ZWV 57) was recently recorded by the Accademia Barocca Lucernensis under Javier Ulises Illán (*Sacred Music for Dresden Cathedral*, Panclassics, 2019).

Sir James MacMillan’s monumental *Miserere* was commissioned by The Sixteen and premiered in 2009. Throughout we hear MacMillan’s characteristic fingerprints: modality, dissonance, and canonic textures inspired by music of an earlier era; Scotch snaps, trills, glissandi; dramatic, emotional surges; and rich, thickly-scored harmony, with moments of piercing discord and bitonality (for example, the striking shift from B minor to B flat major at “*Ecce enim iniquitatus*”).

The piece opens with a broad, somewhat desolate landscape of divided tenors and basses, followed by two unrooted, unstable alto and soprano phrases. The subsequent soprano duet becomes so agitated that a primordial scream is let out at “*et peccatum meum contra me est semper*” (and my sin is ever before me), and the lower parts re-enter with long, wordless chords, providing a platform for dissonance.

The six sections, threaded together by recurring motifs, are divided into two by a passage of harmonised chant (the same *Tonus Peregrinus* used by Allegri), and the tumultuous opening is counterbalanced by a gentle, mesmerising conclusion.

There are first-class recordings by ORA and The Sixteen themselves, and I find the smaller forces of The Marian Consort, directed by Rory McCleery (*In Sorrow’s Footsteps*, Delphian, 2018), offer an intimacy, directness and variety of tone that is completely captivating. **CH**

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