

Following the star

Alex Hodgkinson selects his favourite Epiphany music

British composer Judith Bingham typically uses imaginative and poetic performance directions in her scores. For the anthem “Epiphany”, the entire text is her own. The Magi are transposed into the deepest, darkest British winter, where in the “black hours [they] begin their journeyings”. In their 2023 recording, *No Small Wonder* (Acis), the choir of Saint Thomas’s, Fifth Avenue, New York, directed by Jeremy Filsell, captures the bitter chill of Bingham’s dark-hued opening. Earthy lower parts look up to a celestial, translucent top line. The Magi are ever-present in the modal *ostinati* and declamatory triplets as the piece steadily grows to a mighty climax: “In dazzling darkness God appears”. The choir certainly dazzles in this recording, as does the 2018 Dobson organ, played by Nicholas Haigh. The album’s title track is Paul Edwards’s Epiphany jewel, and Alexander L’Estrange’s “Epiphany Carol” of 2013 is finely wrought.

Last year, the Tallis Scholars celebrated their 50th anniversary. That their recordings remain preeminent in an increasingly crowded field is testament to the pioneering work and widespread influence of Peter Philips and his colleagues. The 1989 album of the music of John Sheppard (Gimell) includes “Reges Tharsis”, a setting of the Matins responsory for Epiphany. Imitative polyphony envelops the plainsong *cantus firmus* in the tenor part. The clarity and precision of the singing, especially the high treble part, is compelling.

The Sheppard is included on the London Oratory School Schola’s 2020 disc, *Sacred Treasures of Christmas* (Hyperion), in a performance that also glows, like the Tallis Scholars’, but in a more expansive way (and at a slightly lower pitch). London boasts not one, but two outstanding Catholic state-school choirs of cathedral standard (the other being the Schola Cantorum of Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School), and this disc shows the Oratory Schola at their most assured, with a seemingly effortless musicality. Although Christmas-centric, there are several Epiphany works on this recording, including the

majestic “Omnes de Saba” by Sheppard’s continental contemporary, Orlando di Lassus.

The recitative (“When Jesus our Lord...”), trio (“Say, where is he...?”) and chorus (“There shall a star...”) from Mendelssohn’s unfinished oratorio *Christus* are characteristically tuneful and theatrical. Often sung liturgically at this time of year, they are all the more rewarding in the original language and with orchestral accompaniment (not least the walking bass that accompanies the travelling trio). The French chamber choir Accentus, accompanied by the Ensemble Orchestra de Paris, recorded what exists of the oratorio in 2011 (Naïve). Staying on the continent, in 2017, Paul Hillier and the Theatre of Voices released a festive disc of Buxtehude and friends, entitled *In Dulci Jubilo* (Harmonia Mundi). The two representations of “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” – Christian Geist’s setting for soprano and two *obbligato* violins, and Buxtehude’s organ prelude – are particularly appealing. The strings in the Geist dance around the chorale melody with a nimble elegance.

Gesualdo Six’s star certainly shines brightly, and quite rightly. Their latest release of music for Epiphany and adjacent feasts, *Morning Star* (Hyperion), is utterly compelling; first-class performances of first-class repertoire.



The Tallis Scholars, celebrating their 50th anniversary

The works, both old and new, are sewn together with seasonal chant, sometimes solo, sometimes with several voices. Their account of Byrd’s *Ecce advenit* – an intricately crafted introit for Epiphany, with wily syncopation and persuasive counterpoint – is a masterclass in one-per-part singing. Each line is rich in character, yet no part obtrudes. Like Geist’s violins, the voices seem to dance together in the opening section, often in pairs, and the extended imitation at the end of the *Gloria Patri* (“*et in saecula saeculorum*”) is captivating.

The purity of tone, balance and fine tuning that has earned the Gesualdo Six such recognition is immediately apparent in “*Mirabile mysterium*” of Jacob Handl. This five-voice antiphon for Lauds on the Feast of the Circumcision expresses the mystery of the incarnation through startling dissonance and roaming, chromatic harmony. There is exquisite word-painting throughout the piece: listen to the chromatic imitation used to describe the world’s radical transformation (“*innovantur naturae*”) by the incarnation, and the way the subsequent phrase is extended, emphasizing the continuity (“*permansit*”) of God’s divinity, now too in human form. Listen for the staggering chromatic modulations in the three “*passus*” phrases towards the end of the piece. Kudos especially to countertenor Guy James, *primus inter pares* on this track. Alongside Byrd, Handl and others are excellent pieces by living composers, including Arvo Pärt, Joanna Marsh and the group’s founder, Owain Park.

Clare College, Cambridge, under Graham Ross, have also recorded a CD of Epiphany music, *Mater Ora Filium* (Harmonia Mundi). David Hill’s arrangement of “Bethlehem Down”, an amalgamation of Warlock’s own solo piano and choral versions, is sublime. Palestrina’s “*Tribus miraculis*” tells of three manifestations of the Divinity of the Lord: the visit of the Magi, the wedding at Cana, and his baptism in the Jordan. The choir’s vitality captures the joy of these wondrous happenings.

Finally, no review of Epiphany music would be complete without Peter Cornelius’s perennial favourite *Die Könige*. Baritone Robert Rice’s superbly judged performance on *A Christmas Present from Polyphony* (Hyperion) cannot fail to illuminate the gloomiest January day. “Their royal gifts they show to the King; gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.”

Alex Hodgkinson is Director of Music at St Theresa’s Church, Trumbull, Connecticut