

Body and soul

Alex Hodgkinson offers a selection of music to celebrate *Corpus Christi* and *Ss Peter & Paul*

ON THE RECORD

Proclaimed before the Gospel on the Feast of Corpus Christi, *Lauda Sion* is one of the four medieval sequences that remain in annual use. These magnitudinous pillars of the liturgical calendar carry with them the voices of our ancestors; centuries of the faithful singing the same chant and verse. St Thomas Aquinas wrote *Lauda Sion* in the 13th century, at the behest of Pope Urban IV. It is most commonly sung to plainsong, but there are a great number of composed versions.

⊕ In 1846, Felix Mendelssohn was commissioned to set the hymn to mark the 600th anniversary of the first local celebration of Corpus Christi, which took place in Liège. At the time, Mendelssohn was in the thick of composing his oratorio *Elijah*, and you can certainly hear similarities. In eight movements for soloists, chorus and orchestra, it is a work worthy of greater recognition.

At the opening of the fifth movement (*Doctis sacris institutis*), the unison chorus intones the plainsong three times. The chant is then transposed to the bass part, present but concealed at the bottom of the texture as the consecration song continues in harmony: *latent res eximiae* – exceptional things are hidden. The final movement, *Sumus unus, sumunt mille*, begins with a dramatic description of the multitudes, before a final, calming vision of Christ the Good Shepherd.

Several recordings move faster than the given tempi, not least Nicholas Danby's hair-raising interpretation from Farm Street in London. With the Kammerchor Stuttgart, conductor Frieder Bernius strikes the right balance between majesty, propulsion, and clarity (*Mendelssohn Chorwerk IV*, Carus, 1997).

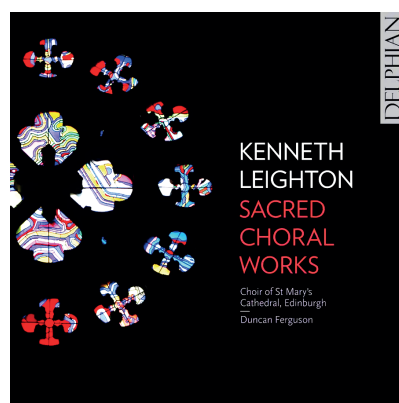
⊕ François Couperin's *Lauda Sion* for soprano duet oscillates between minor and major; the former imploring us to praise, the latter reveling in the act of praise itself. On New College, Oxford's superlative disc *Exultent superi*

(Novum, 2012), the treble duettists sing with an incisive musicality. You can almost see the incense billowing through the shafts of sunlight from the windows in the “*sit laus plena, sit sonora*” call and response.

⊕ Thomas Tallis and Olivier Messiaen composed two of the most enduring settings of another eucharistic text, *O Sacrum Convivium*. Both are masterpieces in very different ways. While we're in the soprano-duet mood, try the setting by Kenneth Leighton, one of the greats of 20th-century British choral music.

Recorded by the choir of St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh (*Kenneth Leighton: Sacred Choral Works*, Delphian, 2019), this little-known miniature of 1980 displays all the hallmarks of Leighton's captivating style: winding modality, lyrical counterpoint, quaver trills, and a constant tussle between major and minor, between concord and discord.

Leighton sets *memoria passionis* (memory of his Passion) with a deep emotional



It has all the hallmarks of Leighton's captivating style: winding modality, lyrical counterpoint, quaver trills, and a constant tussle between major and minor, between concord and discord

resonance, and there is a thrilling climax at *futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur* (a pledge of future glory to us is given). A third, solo voice is added in the gentle, concluding Alleluia.

⊕ The end of June sees the Solemnity of Ss Peter and Paul, patrons of the Eternal City. *Hymn to Saint Peter* by another 20th-century great, Benjamin Britten, was premiered in 1955 at the quincentenary celebrations of the great medieval (now Anglican) church of St Peter Mancroft in Norwich.

Britten sets the text of the gradual, using the prescribed plainsong as his melodic impetus. The organ opens with a brazen statement of the Alleluia, followed by an equally powerful unison choral entry accompanied by a roving pedal ostinato on the same theme.

The vibrant sound of the Finzi Singers, conducted by Paul Spicer (*Britten: Choral Edition Vol 1*, Chandos, 1997), suits the long legato phrases of the opening and the nimble, jangling central section. The playful chatter gradually disintegrates into harmonic chaos before the organ strikes up with the opening phrase once more, bold and solid as a rock.

The chant is given an entirely different context and colour in the final section: a soprano soloist gently sings the entire verse in Latin followed by the Alleluia refrain. The solo is underpinned by the subdued choir singing an English translation in Britten's characteristic harmonic language.

⊕ In his ageless six-part motet *Tu es Petrus*, Palestrina uses the voices in various combinations, with much imitation between groups. The music enables the text to glow – a shrewd tactic, when the Successor of Peter pays your salary! Listen to how the voices build to a radiant *tutti* at the end of the first section with the words *claves regni coelorum* (keys of the kingdom of heaven).

For something from outside the English choral tradition, try Coro della Radio Svizzera's recording on *Palestrina: Motets & Missa Sine Nomine*, conducted by Diego Fasolis. The vowels are bright and the consonants sparkle. One voice per part gives wonderful clarity to both text and vocal lines. The melodic nuances are perceptible and the overall effect is fulsome and colourful. “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church.”

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