

# 'This Mistake of a Barbarous Age:' Performances and Perceptions of Tallis's *Spem in alium* in Nineteenth-century England

Suzanne Cole

---

In the final days of the twentieth century, performances of Thomas Tallis's mighty forty-part motet, *Spem in alium*, are frequent and unremarkable. At least ten commercial recordings are currently available,<sup>1</sup> and it has become something of a standard in the choral society repertoire. John Stuhr-Rommerein's article 'Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium* and the "Ultimate Musical Experience"' urges conductors of 'midsized or larger choirs to consider placing it on a program,<sup>2</sup> and suggests that 'with appropriate guidance, a good high school choir should be able to perform the work successfully.'<sup>3</sup> The current widespread performance of this work is in sharp contrast to its performance history for the first three hundred years of its existence. Despite its historical fame, very few performances are recorded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and, as a review of an 1845 performance observed, it had 'little more than a historical existence.'<sup>4</sup> From the 1830s, however, there was a gradual increase in interest in this work, with increasingly frequent performances, and its modern musical, as opposed to historical, existence could be said to date from this time. This article attempts to provide an accurate list of early performances and to describe the changing attitudes towards this unique work. I will examine the press reception of the nineteenth-century performances, and will show how the reviews indicate a gradual change in the aesthetic status of *Spem in alium* from historical curiosity to autonomous work of art.

Very little is known about the composition and first performance of *Spem in alium*. Even the date of its composition is unknown, although it is generally estimated at about 1570.<sup>5</sup> An account of the first performance was, however, published in a letter from H. Fleetwood Sheppard to the editor of the *Musical Times* in 1878. It contained the following description of the circumstances surrounding its composition and first performance, found in the Commonplace Book of a Thomas Waterbridge, as told to him by Ellis Swayne on 27 November 1611. Given that this is some thirty years after Tallis's death, there must be some doubts about its reliability:

In Queen Elizabeth's time yere was a songe sen[t] into England in 30 parts (whence ye Italians obteyned ye name to be called ye Apices of ye world) wch beeing songe mad[e] a heavenly Harmony. The Duke of — beeringe a great love to Musicke asked whether none of our Englishmen could sett as good a songe, and Tallice being very skilfull was felt to try whether he would undertake ye matter, wch he did and made one of 40 partes wch was songe in the longe gallery at Arundell house, wch so farre

---

<sup>1</sup> R.E.D. *Classical Catalogue* (1998): 948.

<sup>2</sup> John Stuhr-Rommerein, 'Thomas Tallis's *Spem in alium* and the "Ultimate Musical Experience,"' *Choral Journal* 33 (1993): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Stuhr-Rommerein, 'Ultimate Musical Experience' 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Times*, 5 Jun. 1845: 6.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Doe, *Tallis* (OUP: London, 1976) 41 and Denis Stevens, 'A Songe of Fortie Partes, Made by Mr Tallys,' *Early Music* 10 (1986): 171–81.

surpassed ye other that the Duke, hearinge yt songe, tooke his chayne of Gold from his necke & putt yt about Tallice his necke and gave yt him (wch songe was againe songe at ye Princes coronation).<sup>6</sup>

*Spem in alium* (in the English version, 'Sing and Glorifie') was indeed again sung at the Princes' coronation: the Creations as Prince of Wales of Henry in 1610<sup>7</sup> and Charles (later Charles I) in 1616.<sup>8</sup> It was not performed liturgically during the actual ceremony, but over dinner afterwards:

After the ceremonie... the King arose and went up to dinner; but the Prince with his Lords dined in the Hall, and was served with great state and magnificence... After some musique the Song of forty parts was song by the Gentlemen of the Chappell and others, sitting upon degrees over the Screene at the north end of the Hall.<sup>9</sup>

Ian Woodfield discusses these performances in some detail in his article "Music of forty several parts: A Song for the Creation of Princes,"<sup>10</sup> and argues for the possibility of further performances at the Creations as Prince of Wales of the future Charles II in 1638, and of George (later George III) in 1751.<sup>11</sup> His argument rests largely on the existence of scores copied at these times: the Gresham College score and the score made in 1751 by John Immyns respectively.<sup>12</sup> Immyns was an avid copyist and musical antiquarian, and founded the Madrigal Society in 1741.<sup>13</sup> While it is an interesting co-incidence that the later manuscript was made in the same year as George III's creation as Prince of Wales, it is entirely consistent with Immyns' interest in early music that he would have made a copy of this work, if it had come into his possession, for his own use, or possibly with a view to performance by the Madrigal Society, without being involved in a royal performance. Immyns was amanuensis to Christopher Pepusch, and Charles Burney tells us that a copy of *Spem in alium* which had belonged to the Earl of Oxford had been 'attracted into the vortex of Dr. Pepusch,' and later became the property of the music seller Robert Bremner.<sup>14</sup> Pepusch died in 1752, and it is known that items in his library were purchased by Bremner.<sup>15</sup> It is therefore quite possible that Immyns did come into contact with this score in the mid-eighteenth century and I believe that Immyns' copying of this score in 1751 is adequately explained without invoking a possible performance at George's creation as Prince of Wales. Although the layout of the Gresham College manuscript with one part to a

<sup>6</sup>H. Fleetwood Sheppard, 'Tallis and his song of forty parts,' *Musical Times* 19 (1878): 97. The letter continues with various factual details arising from this account, and has been discussed by Elizabeth Roche in 'Tallis's 40-part motet,' *Musical Times* 122 (1981): 230 and Stevens, 'A songe of fortie partes.'

<sup>7</sup>Elizabeth Foster, *Proceedings in Parliament 1610*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale U P, 1966) 98.

<sup>8</sup>John Nichols, *The Progresses, Processions, and Magnificent Festivities of King James the First*, vol. 3 (London, 1828) 213.

<sup>9</sup>Nichols, *Progresses... of King James* 213.

<sup>10</sup>Ian Woodfield, "Music of Forty Several Parts: A Song for the Creation of Princes," *Performance Practice Review* 7 (1994): 54-64.

<sup>11</sup>Woodfield, "Music of Forty Several Parts" 61-64.

<sup>12</sup>The Gresham College score is now held in the Guildhall Library, London at G. Mus.420. The Immyns score is listed on the British Library catalogue as Mad. Soc. H1.MS.100, but has been missing since 1966 after being loaned to the Madrigal Society for an exhibition and never returned (communication with Chris Banks of the British Library, 1 Dec. 1997).

<sup>13</sup>John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, intro Charles Cudworth, vol. 2 (Dover: New York, 1963) 886-87.

<sup>14</sup>Charles Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789), vol. 1 (Dover: New York, 1957) 67. The score in question is Lib Egerton Ms 3512.

<sup>15</sup>Bertram Schofield, 'The Manuscripts of Tallis's Forty-part Motet,' *Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951): 179.

page suggests that it may have been prepared for an actual performance, there is no direct evidence to suggest that it was for the creation of the Prince in 1638 and these performances must remain in the realm of speculation.

Thus, prior to the nineteenth century, the only recorded performances of *Spem in alium* are the first performance in Arundell house, and those in 1610 and 1616 for the Creations of Princes Charles and Henry, with the possibility of further performances in 1638 and 1751. Performances are, however, recorded increasingly frequently from 1835 and this period could be considered the beginning of the modern performance history of the work. Table 1 lists all performances of the forty-part motet referred to in the secondary literature. A close examination of the evidence found in scores and newspaper reviews suggests that many of the details of these performances are inaccurate, and several of them appear not to have taken place at all.

**Table 1:** Nineteenth century performances of Tallis's *Spem in alium* referred to in the secondary literature. Performances marked \* appear not to have taken place.

Date	Choir	Conductor	Venue
*Jan. 1834 <sup>16</sup>	Madrigal Society	William Hawes	—
*15 Jan. 1835 <sup>17</sup>	Madrigal Society	William Hawes	Freemason's Hall
21 Jan. 1836	Madrigal Society	William Hawes	Freemason's Hall
4 Jun. 1845	Hullah's Upper School	John Hullah	Exeter Hall
17 May 1879	Mr Henry Leslie's Choir	Mr Henry Leslie	St James' Hall
*1888-9 <sup>18</sup>	—	A. H. Mann	—
Jan. 1889	Manchester Vocal Society	Dr Henry Watson	—
20 May 1890	Madrigal Society	Dr Frederick Bridge	Holburn Restaurant
Jan. 1898	Incorporated Society of Musicians	Dr A H Mann	—

I have found no contemporaneous evidence to suggest that *Spem in alium* was performed in 1834, and references to this performance appear to have originated in reviews of the 1879 performance by Henry Leslie's Choir, possibly as a result of misleading information circulated at that concert. The evidence relating to the 1835 performance is more ambiguous. The score currently held in the Madrigal Society collection in the British Library as Mad. Soc. MS H.114 bears the following inscription:

It was performed by the Madrigal Society and their friends, assisted by the Young Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal, St Paul's Cathedral, and Westminster Abbey, at their Anniversary Fest' on the 15th January 1835, held in the Freemason's Hall. It was noticed by most of the Newspapers.

This is followed by a list of the names of all the singers present. This might seem to be clear evidence that such a performance took place, and is the source of later references to this

<sup>16</sup>*The Figaro* 21 May 1879. Versions of the same review were also found in the *London and Provincial Music Trades Review* 15 Jun. 1879: 2 and *Dwight's Journal of Music* 39 (1879): 120. Also *Athenaeum* 24 May 1879: 673-74.

<sup>17</sup>H. Ormond Anderton 'Thomas Tallis,' *Musical Opinion* 37 (1914): 437.

<sup>18</sup>John S. Bumpus, *History of English Cathedral Music* (London: T Werner Laurie, 1908) 40.

performance, such as that contained in the preface to Mann's 1888 edition.<sup>19</sup> However, a search for the newspaper reviews mentioned raises some serious doubts about whether this performance ever took place. The Madrigal Society Anniversary Festival in 1835 was indeed 'noticed' in several newspapers, but none of them contain any reference to *Spem in alium* or 'Sing and Glorify.' The *Spectator* published a complete list of the works performed, from which *Spem in alium* is conspicuously absent.<sup>20</sup> The body of the review makes it clear that it was not merely overlooked; the reviewer observes that 'the selection was not, on the whole, so rich as last year; but it contained some pieces of unrivalled vocal grandeur, particularly Gibbons "O clap your hands."' Whilst 'O clap your hands' is indeed a splendid piece, it is improbable that it would be considered 'unrivalled' by a work of the magnitude of Tallis's. This list of works performed is confirmed by a handbill from this Festival that, by a great stroke of good luck, survives in the archival collection of the Royal College of Music (see Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> The list of works quoted is identical to that printed in the *Spectator* and does not include the Tallis motet.

An examination of the reviews of the Anniversary Festival for the following year, 1836, further supports the conclusion that this work was not performed at the 1835 Festival. The Festival was reviewed in the *Spectator*, the *Standard* and the *Morning Post*, and the complete program was given in the *Spectator*. The Tallis is clearly listed as the culmination of the first half of the program, and it is discussed at the sort of length that one would expect of the first performance for decades, if not centuries, of such a significant piece of music. And its description as 'an achievement without parallel in the history of modern vocal enterprise' suggests strongly that it was the first such performance.<sup>22</sup> This is further supported by the observation in the *Morning Post* that it was remarkably well performed, 'when it is considered that the majority of the vocalists had never seen it before!'<sup>23</sup> These comments support the claim that it had not, in fact, been performed the previous year.

If we accept that it was not performed in 1835, what are we to make of the record of performance found in Mad. Soc. H.114? There are several possibilities, all largely unsatisfactory. The simplest explanation would be that H.114 was actually used at the 1836 performance, but somehow the dates on the manuscript are incorrect. It is, however, possible to confirm from Madrigal Society records that the singers listed on the manuscript attended the 1835 rather than the 1836 Festival. For example, the *Spectator* review of the 1836 performance mentions 'Sir Andrew Barnard fresh from the Court of King William.' Sir Andrew is not, however, found amongst the participants listed in H.114. The Madrigal Society financial accounts confirm that Sir Andrew Barnard was present for the Festival in 1836, but not in 1835.<sup>24</sup> Several other members, including Riversdale Grenfell, Charles S. Packer and George Duvall, are recorded as having paid to attend the festival dinner in 1835, but not 1836, and all are included in the listing in H.114.

A second possibility is that the motet was scheduled to be performed in 1835, but was for some reason postponed to the following year. It is, however, hard to imagine how such a

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Tallis, *Motet for 40 Voices*, ed. A. H. Mann (London; Weekes & Co, 1888) ii. This performance was also mentioned in Bumpus, *Cathedral Music* 40, and *Daily Chronicle*, 16 May 1879. However, a review in the *Times* (5 Jun 1845) cites 1836 as the only performance.

<sup>20</sup> 'Music of the Week,' *Spectator* 17 Jan. 1835: 60.

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Oliver Davies from the RCM for his assistance in finding this handbill.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Madrigal Society,' *Spectator* 23 Jan. 1836: 80

<sup>23</sup> *Morning Post* 22 Jan. 1836: 3. An abbreviated version of this review was published in the *Standard*, 22 Jan. 1836: 3.

<sup>24</sup> Accounts of the Madrigal Society, 1832–1839, *Lib Mad. Soc.* MS F.17. In 1835 Sir Andrew Barnard paid only £1 quarterage, but in 1836 he paid £1/15/-, which was the quarterly subscription plus 15 shillings for the Anniversary dinner.

detailed list of singers could have been compiled before the Festival took place, especially when 88 of the 115 adult performers named were visitors rather than members of the Madrigal Society.

The third possibility is that the score was annotated at a later date, the guest list being compiled from some record of those present at the 1835 Festival in the mistaken belief that the performance took place in 1835 rather than the following year. The records of the Madrigal Society currently held in the British Library do not, however, contain sufficient information to recover a complete list of the visitors present in 1835, so some other source would have been required. This suggestion that the list of performers was prepared retrospectively is rendered less likely by the existence of another score, which is fundamentally similar to Mad. Soc. H.114, but records the correct details of the Anniversary Festival in 1836. Unfortunately I have been unable to trace the whereabouts of this score since it was described as follows by Mann in 1888:

"This Motett was performed at the Anniversary Festival of the Madrigal Society 21st of Jan. 1836, by the undersigned members of the Society, and their friends."  
Here follow the signatures of all those present, performers & non-performers. This page is in itself a valuable collection of autographs  
It concludes "Finis. Laus Deo. 17 Jan. 1836. Thos. Oliphant"<sup>25</sup>

Given the existence of a score that accurately recorded the 1836 performance, including signatures rather than just names of the participants, it seems unlikely that Oliphant would have erroneously compiled H.114 as a record of the same event. None of these solutions is therefore very satisfactory, and for the moment the question of why Mad. Soc. H.114 records in such detail a performance that appears never to have taken place must remain a mystery.

If we accept that Tallis's 'Song of forty parts' was not performed in 1835, the Madrigal Society Anniversary Festival in 1836 was the first documented performance of this work in over 200 years. Even if, as Woodfield suggests, it had been performed in 1638 and 1751, the 1836 Madrigal Society performance marked a new phase in the performance history of the work. For the first time it moved out of the private chambers of the aristocracy and royalty and into the public sphere of the musical enthusiast.

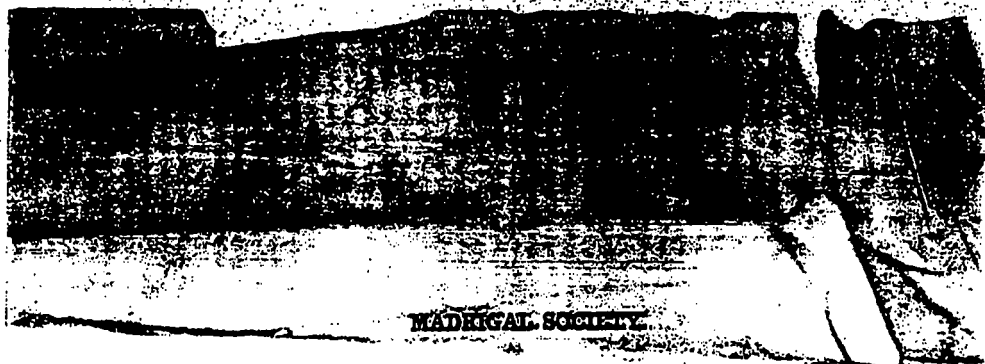
The Madrigal Society Anniversary Festivals fall into a grey area between the public and private realms. They evolved out of what were originally known as 'Public Feasts,' but the enjoyment of the performers was paramount and they greatly outnumbered the listeners.<sup>26</sup> Yet they took place in a public hall and were commented upon in the press. The membership of the Madrigal Society was quite diverse; although it included many, if not most, of the prominent English musicians of the day, its origins were amongst the weavers of Spitalfields, a far cry from the Princes of Wales.<sup>27</sup> The *Spectator* review observed of the 1836 Festival, 'there was the usual happy admixture of professionals and amateurs—clergy and laity—Whigs and Tories.'<sup>28</sup> The newspaper reviews catch the friendly, clubbish atmosphere. The account in the *Spectator* begins with reminiscences of the 'old days,' including a personal recollection of Horsfall, 'the hero of the meeting.' The performance of *Sing and Glorify* is discussed

<sup>25</sup> Mann, *Motet for 40 voices* iii.

<sup>26</sup> The *Spectator* 23 Jan. 1836 claims that in 1836 '200 people were present, of whom not less than 150 took part in the performance of the pieces' while a description of the score found in an advertisement in *Reeve's Catalogue of Music and Musical Literature* 9 (1882): 75 claims there were only 104 vocalists and 24 visitors. The *Spectator* mentions that there were two singers to a part, which is more consistent with the lower number.

<sup>27</sup> Reginald Nettel, 'The Oldest Surviving English Musical Club,' *Musical Quarterly* 34 (1948): 99–100.

<sup>28</sup> *Spectator* 23 Jan. 1836: 80.



ANNIVERSARY FESTIVAL,

JANUARY 15, 1835.

	Voices.	Composers.	Date.	No.	
				I	K
O clap your hands, 1st Part } God is gone up... 2nd Part }	8	O. Gibbons	1612.	117	69
When Thoralis delights to walk.	6	T. Weelkes	1600.	8	72
Sigh not, fond shepherd	5	G. Ferretti	1580.		*
O sleep, fond fancy	4	J. Bennet	1599.	143	*
Hope of my heart	5	J. Ward	1613.	24	*
Almighty God	4	T. Forde	1614.		*
Stay, limpid stream	5	L. Marensio	1580.		*
Laudate Dominum	5	L. Rossi	1630.	49	71
Smile not, fair Amaryllis	5	G. Pizzoni	1585.		*
Hard by a crystal fountain	5	T. Morley	1601.	116	74
Lady, your eye	5	T. Weelkes	1600.	132	30*
Lady, when I behold	6	J. Wilbye	1598.	10	6
O fly not, Love	5	T. Bateson	1600.	81	15
Fa la la (the Waits)	4	J. Saville	1666.	29	52

The Madrigals marked thus (\*) have separate printed Parts.

Figure 1: Handbill of the Madrigal Society Anniversary Festival, 1835 (RCM Archives)

enthusiastically, but that the primary purpose was the pleasure of those singing is not forgotten. After pointing out the obvious difficulties of performing such a complex work, and noting 'some lapses,' the author concludes 'the Madrigalians [*not* the audience] had a proud and joyous day of it.' The *Morning Post* review similarly focuses on the chummy atmosphere, recounting president Sir John Rogers' 'humorous exordium' on the history of the work, and his joke with Sir George Smart, then organist of the Chapel Royal, about Tallis's salary of 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> d per day while holding the same position.<sup>29</sup> The writer in the *Spectator* was unsure about the success of the performance for the listener, observing that 'the merits of this curious and elaborate work are more accurately discernible by the eye than the ear...but the effect in performance more than realised what we had anticipated and showed the mastery which at that early period, Tallis had attained over vocal harmony.'<sup>30</sup> The *Morning Post* reviewer was a little less cautious. The work 'was performed—when it is considered that the majority of the vocalists had never seen it before—with astonishing skill, and the burst of the general choir, when all the parts were heard together, was perfectly electrical. It is to be hoped that another opportunity will be found of hearing "Sing and Glorify" of Tallis.'<sup>31</sup> Despite this wish, the next opportunity of hearing 'Sing and Glorify' did not present itself for another nine years, when it was performed by John Hullah's Upper Singing School. This occasion does not appear to have been a success.

John Hullah had begun massed singing classes at Exeter Hall in 1841, based upon the Wilhelm method taught in Paris.<sup>32</sup> Together with Joseph Mainzer's classes, this generated a type of 'sightsinging mania.' It has been estimated that by July 1842, fifty thousand people were being taught by Hullah and his pupils. The Upper Singing School concert was a showcase for his most advanced pupils.<sup>33</sup>

Tallis's 'Forty Part Song' was performed by Hullah's Upper Singing School at Exeter Hall on Wednesday, 4 June 1845 by a 'semi-chorus' of five hundred singers, although a total of 1,500 singers were involved in the concert. It was sung to *solfege* syllables, as the English words were considered 'too trashy for endurance,'<sup>34</sup> and was reviewed in the *Times*, the *Morning Post* and the *Spectator*. The *Times* review is the warmest, noting that it 'was a most creditable effort on the part of Mr. Hullah to train his pupils into the performance of a work that was at once so great a rarity and so admirable an exercise.' The review concludes, however, that 'the work can never become popular, belonging in fact to those musical pedantries which existed in the early days of art, and... therefore it may be many years before it is played again.'<sup>35</sup>

The *Morning Post* review was considerably less kind:

The great feature of the evening was expected to be Tallis's 'Forty Part Song,' announced in the programme in imposing capitals. This composition chiefly owes its fame to tradition, while it remained unheard it might have retained its repute, but its merits will by no means stand the test of modern criticism. The *forty* parts so much talked about, are found, on examination, to consist of barely *four*—very ill written and ill digested—breaking off here and there to be resumed elsewhere, without the shadow of continuity. Forty parts may be easily written thus. The extreme

<sup>29</sup> *Morning Post* 22 Jan. 1836: 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Spectator* 23 Jan. 1836: 80.

<sup>31</sup> *Morning Post* 22 Jan. 1836: 3.

<sup>32</sup> For a brief description of the spread of the sightsinging movement see Percy Scholes, *The Mirror of Music, 1844–1944* (London: Novello, 1945–7) 3–19. A more extensive discussion is found in Bernard Rainbow, *The Land without Music* (Novello: London, 1967).

<sup>33</sup> Scholes, *Mirror of Music* 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Times* 5 Jun. 1845: 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Times* 5 Jun. 1845: 6.

obscurity of the harmony enhances the ill effect arising from the unskillful part writing, and the result was anything but satisfactory. All the singers in the world—and five hundred voices did their best for this last night—would never make the ‘forty-part song’ endurable to modern ears. Mr Hallah [*sic*], however, is to be praised for his perseverance in preparing so great a curiosity for public performance. It is not likely, we think, to be repeated.<sup>36</sup>

The reviewer for the *Spectator* was, if possible, even more critical.

Tallis’s ‘Song of Forty Parts’ was produced, probably as an exercise of the reading of the more select pupils. When performed at the Madrigal Society’s Anniversary in 1836, it was found totally effectless; and this mistake of a barbarous age as to the principles of harmonious effect, it might be thought quite sufficient to have revived once as a curiosity. Its repetition on Wednesday seemed to put an end to its pretensions as a work of interest or entertainment; none present, we suspect, will ever want to hear it more.<sup>37</sup>

There can be little doubt from these reviews that the 1845 performance must have been very poor, and extremely unsatisfying musically, but there still seems to be a rather startling disparity between the reviews of the 1836 and the 1845 performances. In order to understand this apparent shift in the appreciation of the motet, we must look at the differences in the two performance contexts, and the different expectations of the reviewers. Lydia Goehr, in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, describes the changes in musical practice that took place in the early nineteenth century, which she attributes to the increased regulative power of the work-concept. She identifies the nineteenth century as a period when ‘musical masterpieces’ began to be seen as

transcending temporal and spatial barriers... Works were not to be thought about as expressive or representative of concrete historical moments, but as valuable in their own right, transcending all considerations other than those of an aesthetic/spiritual nature.<sup>38</sup>

The 1836 performance was not, however, seen in this light. *Spem in alium* was not presented as a transcendent musical masterpiece, but very much as an historical curiosity, ‘representative of [the] concrete historical moment.’ The pleasure of the performers and its historical interest were almost the sole criteria of judgement, and as such it was found to be a satisfactory performance. That ‘the effect in performance more than realized [what was] anticipated’ is seen as rather a bonus. Once the work moved into the context of the concert hall in 1845, however, much more was demanded of it, and it was found wanting. The *Times* review may have been the kindest because it expected the least. *Spem in alium* was seen as representative of ‘the early days of art’ and as an ‘admirable exercise’ but was found to be aesthetically lacking. It was this inability to ‘stand the test of modern criticism’ that so disappointed the reviewers in the *Morning Post* and the *Spectator*. As a curiosity it was interesting; as a ‘work of interest or entertainment’ it was a complete failure.

It is no doubt an indication of the extent of this failure that it was another thirty-four years before *Spem in alium* was performed again, by Mr Henry Leslie’s Choir on 15 May 1879 at St

<sup>36</sup> *Morning Post* 5 Jun. 1845.

<sup>37</sup> *Spectator* 7 Jun. 1845: 546.

<sup>38</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon-OUP, 1992) 246.



James's Hall. In the previous year the *Musical Times* had published Thomas Waterbridge's description of the first performance of the work quoted above, and it is quite possible that this glowing account of the impact of 'hearinge yt songe' inspired Leslie to mount his 1879 performance.

Although it was made up of amateurs, Mr Henry Leslie's Choir was extremely highly regarded, the *Daily Chronicle* describing them as 'singularly perfect in those qualities that constitute good part-singing',<sup>39</sup> and the standard of this performance seems to have been very high. The *London and Provincial Music Trades Review*, for example, observed that 'to properly conduct such a work, sung by the finest of our amateur choirs, was a stupendous task, and Mr Leslie deserves the highest credit for its altogether successful accomplishment.'<sup>40</sup> The reviewer in the *Daily Chronicle* not only praised Mr. Leslie for the successful execution of the music, but noted that it 'was evident that the utmost pains had been taken to secure an adequate interpretation of this curious work.'<sup>41</sup> Unlike the earlier performances, the music would have been extensively rehearsed, Henry Leslie being on record as having said that 'a difficult choral piece requires some eighty rehearsals, and an amount of labour greatly exceeding that necessary for the most elaborate orchestral symphony.'<sup>42</sup>

Despite this conscientious preparation, the music itself was not well received. The *Daily Telegraph* dismissed it as 'about as interesting and valuable as a set of Chinese concentric balls or a table made of a million bits of wood.'<sup>43</sup> This view is echoed in the *Musical Times* review, which, after downplaying the skill involved in writing in forty parts, concludes that it is 'as interesting as any other ingenious, if not particularly useful, application of labour and patience. That it was successful in performance we cannot say. The complicated machine seemed to have become rusty, and creaked a good deal when set in motion.'<sup>44</sup> The reviews in the *Music Trades Review* and the *Daily Chronicle* were generally more positive, but the former was forced to admit that 'the effect of this marvellous work is, in performance, perhaps more astonishing than pleasing to modern ears,'<sup>45</sup> while the latter observed that 'applause at the conclusion was by no means so hearty as that invariably awarded to the performance by this choir of such pieces as Mendelssohn's eight-part psalm, "Judge me, O God."<sup>46</sup>

Although this reception is still less than enthusiastic, a subtle shift in the perceptions of the Song of Forty parts can be observed. As Goehr has argued, the increase in the importance of the conductor reflected the increasing importance of the *Werktreue* ideal: 'conducting was no longer thought to be just a matter of marshalling the beat, but of leading the orchestra [choir] in such a way as to interpret, express, and convey the musically meaningful content of a work.'<sup>47</sup> In 1836 it was performed without rehearsal, and with eight separate subconductors, who obviously can have done nothing more than 'marshall the beat.' The use of *solfege* syllables in 1845 suggests that it was viewed more in the nature of singing exercise than a performance of a work of art. In 1879, however, Henry Leslie is praised for his 'interpretation' of the work and for 'reviving a work of the Elizabethan era.'<sup>48</sup> Interpretation and revival imply some meaning in the music, transcending 'temporal barriers,' which had not been perceived by the critics of the earlier performances.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Chronicle* 16 May 1879.

<sup>40</sup> *London and Provincial Musical Trades Review* 15 Jun. 1879: 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Chronicle* 16 May 1879.

<sup>42</sup> Scholes, *Mirror of Music* 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 19 May 1879.

<sup>44</sup> *Musical Times* 20 (1879): 311.

<sup>45</sup> *London and Provincial Musical Trades Review* 15 Jun. 1879.

<sup>46</sup> *Daily Chronicle* 16 May 1879.

<sup>47</sup> Goehr, *Imaginary Museum* 235.

<sup>48</sup> *Athenaeum* 24 May 1879: 673-74.

As it became increasingly valued as a work of aesthetic, as well as historical, interest, performances of *Spem in alium* became more common. This may have been at least partly due to increased availability of scores, after its publication in 1888 by A. H. Mann. John Bumpus, who seems to have been uncharacteristically unreliable on the subject of early performances of *Spem in alium*, claims that Mann himself conducted a performance shortly after the 1888 publication.<sup>49</sup> I have found no evidence of such a performance, but the publication does seem to have prompted Dr Watson, the conductor of the Manchester Vocal Society, to mount a performance in January 1889. This performance was not widely reviewed, but the *Musical Times* praised Watson for his 'boldness' in presenting the work, and concluded that 'the performance was very interesting and drew together a large number of students of counterpoint.'<sup>50</sup> It was performed again by the Madrigal Society at its 150th Anniversary Festival on 20 May 1890 at the Holborn Restaurant under the direction of Dr (later Sir) Frederick Bridge, and Dr Mann himself directed a performance at the Congress of the Incorporated Society of Musicians in January 1898. The reviews of these performances were mixed, with many of the earlier doubts about the merits of the work resurfacing. The *Musical Times* review of the Madrigal Society performance in 1890 found that 'as an example of ingenuity it is most interesting, as a piece of music it is by no means so effective as might be expected,' and once again decided that its value was primarily as a 'monument to patience and skill.'<sup>51</sup> The 1898 reviews of the Incorporated Society of Musicians's performance were warmer, noting that 'the audience so much appreciated it that a repetition was asked for, but time did not permit,' and that Dr Mann was thanked for his services 'by the ladies of the choir, who afterwards presented him with a handsome dressing bag.'<sup>52</sup> The pre-publicity for this concert contained a fascinating reference back to the unsuccessful Hullah performance in 1845. The writer claims that

the *personnel* of the combined choirs will probably be as interesting as was the case upon the revival of this work under the baton of John Hullah many years ago, when the Rev. Sir Fredk. Ouseley sang the first alto part in one of the choirs, and Henry Leslie, and quite a host of other distinguished musicians, took part in a memorable performance of this masterpiece.<sup>53</sup>

It is obvious that none of the contemporary reports bear any resemblance to a 'memorable performance' by a 'host of distinguished musicians,' and one can only assume that the intervening half century had softened the recollections of the writer. It is interesting that the current perceptions of the value of the work appear to have influenced evaluations of earlier performance. The 1836 Festival was remembered in 1845 as 'totally effectless,' in sharp contrast with the actual reviews written at the time, and the 1879 reviewer seems to have let his view of the work colour his memory of earlier performances. The assessment of the work as a 'masterpiece,' even if it directly contradicts the evidence, indicates a gradual, yet significant change in perceptions of *Spem in alium*.

It can be seen from this description of the nineteenth-century performances and reviews of *Spem in alium* that the process of its acceptance into the concert repertoire was a slow one, and that throughout much of the century the press reception was poor. On the basis of the newspaper reviews alone it might appear that the work was most popular in 1836 and that it actually was less understood as the century progressed. The changes in the nature and

<sup>49</sup> Bumpus, *Cathedral Music* 40. Bumpus lists three performances, 1835, 1836 and this performance by Mann. Of these only the 1836 performance actually seems to have taken place.

<sup>50</sup> *Musical Times* 30 (1889): 92.

<sup>51</sup> *Musical Times* 31 (1890): 348–49.

<sup>52</sup> *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review* 1 Feb. 1898: 323.

<sup>53</sup> 'Church Music,' *Musical Times* 38 (1897): 744.

frequency of the performances indicate, however, that it was gradually being accepted as 'valuable in its own right.' In 1836 it was performed in the context of a small group of enthusiasts, in a programme devoted entirely to early choral music, as an 'historical curiosity.' In 1845 it was performed in a public concert, but as an exercise for singing students. In 1879 it was finally performed as part of the normal concert program of a highly respected choir, and from this point on its place as a 'timeless masterpiece' became increasingly secure. While the acceptance of the work was not complete until the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century performances bridged the gap between the neglect of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the enthusiasm of the twentieth.

*Australia's journal of*

## RECORDER and EARLY MUSIC

*A publication of the Victorian Recorder Guild*

*Recorder and Early Music* is a journal devoted to a wide range of topics relating specifically to the recorder and to Early Music generally: instruments and their history, acoustics, construction, design and maintenance; Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque repertoire; performance practice and related issues; Australian performers and instrument makers; 20th-century recorder and Australian composers; pedagogy; technique; reviews of books, music and CDs; interviews with visiting and Australian artists; and reports on festivals and special events. In the past the journal has published articles by noted performers and academics from around Australia and overseas.

*Issue 22* includes an interview with David Bellugi, "We Are What We Listen To" by Nick Horn. Articles by Rodney Waterman "Recorders relatively speaking: sixteen recorders at four relative pitches" and Nick Horn "Recorders in Borderland: the recorder and World Music in Australia." Music Reviews, CD Reviews, the Society Page and Announcements. As well as an interesting article by Ronald Dellow "Recorders in New Zealand: a retrospect of the first forty years of The Society of Recorder Players (New Zealand) Incorporated."

Enquiries regarding contributions or subscriptions please contact

Greg Dikmans, the Editor, *Recorder and Early Music*,  
Early Music Studio, Faculty of Music,  
The University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3052.  
Email: [dikmans@music.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:dikmans@music.unimelb.edu.au)

