

MICHAEL FINNISSY: Pious Anthems and Voluntaries, The Choir of St John's College, Nethsingha, Dempsey, Anderson-Besant, O'Flynn, Ward. Signum Classics, SIGCD624.

Conceived as a single cycle, *Pious Anthems & Voluntaries* represents the culmination of Michael Finnissy's three-year residency with the choir of St John's College Chapel, Cambridge. Having previously commissioned Finnissy to write *John the Baptist*, premiered at the choir's Advent service in 2014, director Andrew Nethsingha planned Finnissy's residency to coincide with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the college chapel. At almost eighty-five minutes of music, the cycle seems more substantial than Nethsingha's initial plan for four anthems and five complementary organ works, yet Finnissy's music is highly sensitive to the choir's specific context and purpose. Each movement provides a musical response to a model or 'found object' from the choir's repertoire. In addition to drawing on pieces that are heard regularly in the chapel, Finnissy makes use of a larger found object, Bach's cantata *Herr Christ, der Einge Gottessohn*. Reflecting the choir's tradition of performing one or two Bach cantatas at a Saturday Evensong each term, Finnissy's choice of the cantata led to the addition of flute, violin, and chamber organ.

The first work of the cycle, *Dum transisset Sabbatum*, relates to a motet of the same name by sixteenth-century English composer John Taverner. Opening with a fragment of plainsong, the music blossoms into detailed polyphonic tracery, recalling Taverner's material through the unmistakable lens of Finnissy's musical language. After three minutes, a brief moment of chordal material provides a punctuation point – a ceiling boss set against the intricate detail of Finnissy's counterpoint. The name of Jesus is repeated three times, beginning with a quiet intensity that assumes a loud, declamatory character by the third iteration. These 'Jesum chords' are heard later in the piece, forming an integral part of the structure and pitch organisation not only of *Dum transisset Sabbatum*, but of the entire cycle. The companion organ piece, *Dum transisset Sabbatum – double*, is performed, together with the second *double*, by Glen Dempsey, the Herbert Howells Organ Scholar. The music of the *double* alludes to the preceding choral movement, while also drawing on later pieces of the cycle, notably the final section of *Plebs angelica*. In *Videte miraculum*, the opening few bars quickly move from the harmonic world of Tallis into denser textures. Later in the movement, solo voices subtly underline the work's harmonic richness, drawing attention to the inclusion of text in English by seventeenth-century poet John Donne. During the final minute, lower voices form an austere backdrop for Oliver Morris's expressive bass solo. By the time we reach *Videte miraculum – double*, allusions to the cycle's earlier material are well established, suggesting similarities with the ways in which a listener might reimagine music after hearing it for the first time. Contemplation becomes an active process.

The first work of CD 2, *Commentary on 'Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern'*, introduces a strikingly different mood, with octaves in organ, violin and flute lending a dancelike quality to Bach's chorale melody. The Baroque character of the instrumental writing sets the scene for the six movements of *Cantata: 'Herr Christ, der einge Gottessohn.'* Movement one begins with compound-time material on flute, violin and organ. The choir, joining after

about one minute, adds slower moving, unison phrases from the chorale, seeming to float through the texture. In movement two, Nethsingha's decision to use the main organ, with its more distant, somewhat ethereal sound, ensures a well-balanced accompaniment to boy soprano Alfred Harrison's emotionally eloquent solo. Returning to the full instrumentation of flute, violin and chamber organ, '*Ach, ziehe die Seele*', sung with lyrical agility by counter tenor soloist Hugh Cutting, presents the most direct relationship to Bach's material. In the following movement, tenor soloist Gopal Kambo soars with seemingly effortless delicacy amid the spacious resonance of the more distant main organ, here played by Junior Organ Scholar James Anderson-Besant. '*Bald sur Rechten*' uses contrasting, widely spaced lines on the violin and left and right hands of the organ to create a clear, crystalline texture surrounding bass soloist James Adams's sustained phrases. The cantata's final chorale gradually drifts further and further from Bach's material. Towards the end, a sustained pedal G highlights the structural importance of this pitch throughout the cycle.

In the second of disc two's purely instrumental works, *Commentary on BWV 562*, flautist Sarah O'Flynn, violinist Cecily Ward, and organist Glen Dempsey deftly navigate between the controlled Baroque expressivity of D minor Bach-based material and the angular incisiveness of progressively longer Boulez-like episodes. The last of the cycle's choral works, *Plebs angelica*, relates to Michael Tippett's setting of the same text in a 1943 motet. Like Tippett, Finnissy also explores the rich harmonic possibilities afforded by double choir. Beginning diatonically, in a modal G, Finnissy's harmony reveals increasingly kaleidoscopic richness, yet the spacing of voices ensures that even the densest, most saturated harmony is never muddy. The motet's monumental blocks of sound contrast beautifully with the intricate polyphony of earlier movements. The concluding piece, *Plebs angelica – alternativo*, for two organs, is also the longest single movement of the cycle. Beginning by reiterating the start of the preceding motet, the piece subsequently highlights material from the cycle's other movements, juxtaposing and re-presenting musical ideas. It feels as though we are being invited to consider the cycle outside of a linear temporal framework, touching on the theological interpretations of time and eternity that are expressed in the texts.

In the world of contemporary music, the idea that new repertoire might also be used in a liturgical context can raise questions. There is an implication that such music must compromise on its contemporaneity, perhaps by avoiding 'unusual' sounds such as extended vocal techniques, or re-using the music of the past, to satisfy the perceived requirements of a devotional setting. Advocates of this view might point to the commercial success of much recent European and North American choral music, in which the perfect balance of white note clusters and tonal resolution makes it immediately accessible to amateur singers. But such dismissive attitudes arguably miss the point of Finnissy's cycle. In addition to being designed around the specific circumstances of St John's Chapel Choir, *Pious Anthems & Voluntaries* clearly reflects Finnissy's longstanding engagement with the

music of the past.<sup>1</sup> Here is truly a ‘cabinet’ of musical objects, viewed through the prism of Finnissy’s language to create something both engaging and profoundly moving.<sup>2</sup>

Reading the accompanying CD booklet for the first time, the breadth of Finnissy’s imagination might seem daunting. Cited influences include the music of earlier composers (and the specific works that became the cycle’s found objects), paintings by David Hockney, Biblical texts, the chapel’s Victorian Gothic architecture, and the associated ‘Victorian’ idea of spiritual renewal in the face of the society’s ills.<sup>3</sup> Yet there is a generosity to the way in which Finnissy’s music draws us in, with each listening revealing ever more richness. It is easy to forget that these pieces were envisaged not just as standalone concert works, but as part of the choir’s regular liturgical repertoire. It is even more striking to be reminded that this is a choir made up of boy sopranos and full-time university students. In a genre – the Anglican choral tradition – which is often seen to typify the most conservative of British musical institutions, the project is surely testament to Andrew Nethsingha’s inspired vision.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Exaudi’s recording of Finnissy’s choral works: *Michael Finnissy: Vocal Works 1974–2015*, EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble, cond. By James Weeks (Winter & Winter, 910 246-2, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Palmer, *Encounters with British Composers* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Finnissy, liner notes for *Pious Anthems & Voluntaries* (Signum Classics, SIGCD624, 2020), pp. 3–4.