Thomas Tallis: Spem in Alium - Salve Intemerata (2005)

[1] Spem in alium (40-voice Motet) 12:14 [2] Salve intemerata (Motet) 23:10 Missa Salve intemerata [3] Gloria 6:41 [4] Credo 7:56 [5] Sanctus 7:47 [6] Agnus Dei 5:27 [7] With all our heart 3:15 [8] Discomfort them, O Lord 6:38 [9] I call and cry to thee, O Lord 4:12 Oxford Camerata Jeremy Summerly - conductor

Thomas Tallis was a composer who inclined toward musical extremes -- or sometimes was pushed toward them. The opening title track of this CD, Spem in alium, is a 40-voice motet for eight five-voice choirs. There's nothing like it in the Renaissance repertory except for an Italian piece to which it was written in answer, as a response to a challenge. A major achievement of Tallis' old age, it is balanced on this recording by an enormous (23-minute) motet, Salve intemerata, by the young Tallis, as well as a later Missa salve intemerata that uses the Renaissance parody technique (a sort of musical paraphrase) as a form of musical self-critique; the material from the motet is gracefully compressed.

When religious winds shifted and Tallis needed to write minimal Anglican music in English, he did that, too. But this beautiful recording by the Oxford Camerata does not include any of Tallis' very simple Anglican pieces, such as the familiar If Ye Love Me. Instead, the three English pieces that close out the disc are all associated in some way with Latin-language Tallis compositions, and they thus occupy an interesting middle ground between the Catholic and Anglican phases of Tallis' career.

For those interested primarily in Spem in alium, this recording makes an excellent choice; director Jeremy Summerly achieves just the right degree of transparency to bring out the incredible richness of contrapuntal detail in a work that too often sounds unwieldy. The sometimes sonically challenged Naxos label has done a superb job this time out. An available

SACD disc should be worth the money for those who have good equipment; it should bring out yet more detail that Summerly has aimed at through innovative singer placement. Listeners interested in what a profound masterwork like Spem in alium might reveal about its composer as a younger man -- in the expansive side of Tallis' musical personality -- will find an intelligently chosen program here. And any buyer will get a gorgeous hour of English Renaissance choral singing. ---James Manheim, Rovi

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