

SPEM IN ALIUM

Spem in alium numquam habui praeter in te Deus Israel
qui irascéris et propitius eris
et omnia peccata hominum in tribulatione dimittis.
Domine Deus, Creator coeli et terrae, respice humilitatem nostram.

Spem in alium is a forty part motet composed by Englishman, Thomas Tallis [c.1505-1585], organist and composer to successive sovereigns throughout the course of the upheavals wrought in England by the Protestant Revolt. This motet ranks with the greatest musical compositions. The text is taken from a paraphrase of words in the Book of *Judith* where the children of Israel faced slaughter at the hands of the Assyrian general, Holofernes.

Hope in any other than Thee I have never had, O God of Israel, whose anger may yet may be appeased as Thou forgivest all the sins man commits in his distress.
Lord God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, look upon us in our lowliness.

The words appear in a *Responsum* in the ancient Sarum rite of Mass, predecessor of the Tridentine rite. No passage in the Book of Judith reflects the content of this prayer precisely, but it manifests the recourse to humility and complete trust in God of the heroine before she sets out to relieve the Israelites by bewitching Holofernes with her beauty, watching as he lapses into a drunken stupor, then cuts off his head.

There is debate as to when, and for what occasion, Tallis wrote this remarkable work. On the wikipedia website it is said to have been written during Elizabeth's reign [1558-1603]. The author of the material there quotes a letter written some 40 years on by one Thomas Wateridge who asserts that an unidentified Duke had incited English composers to improve on a motet heard "in Queene Elizabeth's time" and written by an Italian, that Tallis wrote the work in consequence and that the Duke rewarded him by placing his own gold chain around Tallis's neck. It is suggested that the Duke was Thomas Howard, Fourth Duke of Norfolk, executed by Elizabeth in 1572. Another opinion has it that the piece was written for Elizabeth's 40th birthday in 1573¹.

A more compelling case for the timing of its composition, however, is put by American conductor and musicologist, George Steel, who suggests that it was written almost twenty years earlier in the reign of Catholic Queen Mary [1553-1558].² Drawing on a dissertation by Daniel Page on music in the reign of Queen Mary, he argues that Mary was linked by her courtesans and Catholic supporters with the biblical Judith and a number of incidents surrounding Mary's accession to the throne reinforce that connection. Thus, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, had persuaded the dying Edward VI to endorse the Duke's 16 year old daughter in law, Lady Jane Grey, as Edward's successor, rather than Mary Henry VIII's rightful heir.

¹ Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Tallis

² *The Story of Spem in alium*, at <http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=16297>. This website has, regrettably, now disappeared. The text of the article is included in the appendix to this article.

Lady Jane was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's late sister, Mary, and Northumberland had arranged her marriage to his son, Guildford, just months prior to Edward's death on July 6th. Northumberland had Lady Jane proclaimed Queen on 10th July. She reigned just nine days. Mary, surrounded by her Catholic supporters, rode into London from the north and claimed the throne. She had the treacherous Northumberland beheaded and thus, in a similar manner to Judith, secured her victimised Catholic people against the Protestant tyranny.

There are a number of extrinsic matters which serve to confirm Steel's view. First, the Book of Judith is one of the deuterocanonical books of the Bible, that is, the books written after the time of Esdras, or outside Israel, or in a language other than Hebrew³. Luther, following a theory of his Jewish contemporary, Elias Levita, (that the canon of the Hebrew Bible was completed and closed by 'the men of the Great Synagogue' over which Esdras was said to have presided) rejected the authenticity of these books of the Bible, as he rejected the authority of the Catholic Church which had established the canon of sacred scripture 1,000 years before. Luthers' Bible of 1534 placed the deuterocanonical books in an appendix and described them as 'apocrypha'.

The English priest, Myles Coverdale, an associate of William Tyndale, omitted the deuterocanonical books in an English version of the Bible he produced in 1535. Thomas Cromwell employed Coverdale in the production of his 'Great Bible' (also known as the Cranmer Bible) published in 1539 and authorised by Henry VIII which, it seems, included the deuterocanonical books as 'apocrypha'. This bible remained the official text in Anglican churches until 1568 when it was replaced by the Bishops' Bible, edited by Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴ It is not known whether the Bishops' Bible also excluded the deuterocanonical books, but the King James (Authorised) Bible issued in 1611, which did exclude them, is said to have been based on the Bishops' Bible.

With Elizabeth's accession to the throne came a growing puritanism. This, as the author of the wikipedia material rightly remarks, discouraged the use of polyphony in the liturgy. By the Acts of Uniformity and of Supremacy passed in 1559, Elizabeth undid the good that Mary had achieved in repealing the nonsensical assertion of religious supremacy of her father and abolished the Roman liturgy. It would seem unlikely in the extreme, then, that the singing in public of any motet which drew on words adapted from the Book of Judith, and drawn from the Roman liturgy, would have been tolerated during the reign of Elizabeth.

³ The deuterocanonical books are Tobias, Judith, Baruch (with the letter of Jeremias), Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), I and II Machabees, parts of Esther (chapters 10-16) and of Daniel (Chapter 3 vv. 24-90, and chapters 13 and 14). They are 'apocryphal' only to minds infected with the Protestant virus.

⁴ The material in this paragraph has been gathered from Cornelius Hagerty CSC, *The Authenticity of the Sacred Scriptures*, Lumen Christi, Houston, 1969; under the title, *Versions of the Bible*, in the Catholic Encyclopaedia at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15367a.htm#english>; and on the wikipedia website, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Bible#_note-ash, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bishops%27_Bible.

Again, the contrafactum (literally, ‘a setting in opposition’), the displacement of the majestic words to which the motet was set, in favour of others in dedication of the investiture of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales, in 1610, appears to slight the provenance of its composition by stealing the polyphony at the expense of the text.

Further, if Wateridge’s report is as unworthy of reliance as George Steel has suggested, it may yet contain a partial truth. The *Duke* he refers to as investing Thomas Tallis with his own gold chain, may have been Thomas Howard, the *Third Duke of Norfolk*, grandfather of the Fourth Duke, and contemporary of Sir Thomas More. The Third Duke of Norfolk was charged with treason, stripped of his title and imprisoned in the Tower by Henry VIII in December 1546. He was due to be executed on 29th January 1547 but Henry died the previous day. The closing ‘voice over’ in the film version of Robert Bolt’s play about Sir Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*, refers to the Duke’s narrow squeak with the headsman. He remained in prison during the short reign of Edward VI but was released, and had his title restored, on Queen Mary’s accession in 1553. He led the forces that put down the rebellion of Sir Thomas Wyatt against Mary in 1554. He died on 25th August of the same year.

Catholics have, at least implicitly, always understood the sleight of hand that Protestantism works. It is the rejection of God in disguise. It rejects his Church: it rejects his authority. It pretends to be of God, but it is not. With this in mind, the force of the prayer which is the setting for the motet is manifest.

Thomas Tallis remained a Catholic all his life, composing and performing for each of the sovereigns from Henry to Elizabeth, avoiding the religious controversies that raged round him. *Spem in alium* is a majestic monument to the endurance of his Catholic faith.

Michael Baker

1st January, 2011 — *Solemnity of the Mother of God*

APPENDIX

The Story of Spem in alium

by George Steel

A look at the possible origins of—and the myth surrounding—the legendary motet for 40 voices by Thomas Tallis.

In Queene Elizabeths time there was a songe sent into England of 30 parts (whence the Italians obteyned the name to be called the Apices of the world) which beeinge songe mad[e] a heavenly Harmony. The Duke of _____ bearing a great love to Musicke asked whether none of our English

men could sett as good a songe, & Tallice beinge very skillfull was felt to try whether he would undertake the Matter, which he did and mad[e] one of 40 p[ar]ts which was songe in the longe gallery at Arundell house which so farre surpassed the other th[er]e the Duke hearinge of the songe tooke his chayne of gold from of his necke & putt yt about Tallice his necke & gave yt him.

So goes the story of *Spem in alium*, the motet for 40 voices by Thomas Tallis whose very mention has inspired awe in generations of choral singers. The performance of this sumptuous masterpiece by the Tallis Scholars and friends in New York on 16 and 17 March 2002, will do more than mark the culmination of the Miller Theater's "Mary Triumphant" series. It will also serve as an excellent case in point for the series' central thesis: that the reign of England's Queen Mary Tudor, far from being the dark period of cruel and chaotic misrule traditionally portrayed in English history, saw any number of magnificent cultural achievements, particularly in the realm of sacred music—that many of the masterpieces of Tudor-era church music that were traditionally ascribed to the reigns of Elizabeth I or Henry VIII were more likely the fruits of the Catholic restoration under Mary.

Caveat lector

The anecdote above comes from a letter written in 1611 by Thomas Wateridge, a law student, and was brought to modern attention in a 1982 article in the journal *Early Music* by Denis Stevens, the eminent English musicologist. Stevens nursed a hunch that Tallis could not have written this work for 40 voices *sui generis*, but rather must have modeled his work on the work of Alessandro Striggio, who had written a work for forty voices, *Ecce beatam lucem*, in 1561. Stevens takes '30' in the letter to be a misprint for '40', and thus sees Wateridge's letter as evidence that "the work could only have been Striggio's motet" though neither the title nor the composer is mentioned. (Interestingly, no one has proposed that the influence might have traveled the other way, from Tallis to Striggio.) Stevens then reasons that Tallis could only have known Striggio's 40-voice work after the latter came to London in 1567 (although there is no record of a meeting with Tallis, or of a performance of *Ecce beatam lucem*). Thus, reasons Stevens, Tallis must have written *Spem in alium* after 1567—and thus during Elizabeth's reign.

However good a story the young law student's account makes, it seems clear in hindsight that Stevens overreached in his reasoning, pushing harder for a connection with Striggio than this letter alone can support.

There is no musical or textual evidence, aside from the extraordinary number of voices involved, to suggest a connection between the two motets. Striggio's work is for ten four-part choirs; Tallis' work is for eight five-part choirs, each having the very English configuration of treble, mean [mezzo/alto], countertenor, tenor, and bass. Striggio's music makes considerable use of homophony, echoing Venetian practice; Tallis' work shows a more thoroughgoing interest in imitation, spending the first 39 bars running an exposition of the opening theme through all 40 voices (which join in a thrilling *tutti* in the 40th bar). As for the circumstances of the tale's source, Wateridge got the anecdote, he wrote, from one Ellis Swayne; neither figure appears elsewhere in the historical record, and the letter was written in 1611, some 26 years after Tallis' death.

Wateridge goes on to say that *Spem in alium* was performed at the 1610 coronation of Henry (son of James I) as Prince of Wales. That being the case, his anecdote seems likely to be a nationalistic, and apocryphal, fable.

No surviving manuscript of *Spem in alium* preserves the original Latin text underlay; actually written under the notes is a somewhat clumsy English *contrafactum*, "Sing and Glorify" (used

at that 1610 coronation and on later ceremonial occasions), with the Latin written separately at the bottom. This fact is often taken to indicate that *Spem* must come from Elizabeth's reign. But *Spem's* Latin text is indicated in the manuscripts as the original—and that text is drawn from the biblical book of Judith as used in the Sarum (*i.e.*, pre-Reformation English) liturgy of the *Historia Judith*.

Juditha Triumphans - Mary Triumphant

Daniel Page, in his dissertation *Uniform and Catholic: Church Music in the Reign of Mary Tudor (1553–1558)*, has shown that Queen Mary was deliberately linked by court iconographers with the biblical Judith and that the troubled background to her coronation reinforced that connection. While Mary's claim to the throne should have been undisputed (her father, Henry VIII, listed her in line of succession immediately after her younger half-brother Edward), John Dudley, the Duke of Northumberland, had another scheme in mind. He persuaded the boy king Edward VI to pass over Mary and Elizabeth in favor of his own daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Gray, who famously reigned for nine days. In a stunning show of strength, Mary mustered her supporters, rode triumphantly into London to claim the throne, and beheaded the traitorous Northumberland.

Briefly, the story of Judith (as related in the Apocryphal book of the same name) runs thus: Judith (read: Mary), a pious and beautiful widow, defends her homeland from the Assyrian army by cutting off the head of its treacherous commander Holofernes (read: Northumberland). At the time of Mary's coronation, the story of Judith would have been very fresh in the minds of the English, as it was rehearsed as a part of a short "season" in the Sarum liturgical calendar called the *Historia Judith*. Page points out that in 1553—the year of Mary's coronation—the *Historia Judith* fell on the days immediately preceding the coronation itself, September 24–30, 1553. On the final day, September 30, Mary made her triumphal entry into London, where she was crowned Queen the following day, October 1. She had beheaded Northumberland only weeks before, on August 22. The parallels to Judith could not have been plainer to the populace of London.

Circumstantial evidence

The earliest surviving evidence of *Spem in alium's* existence is in a catalogue of the library at Nonsuch Palace made in 1596 lists "a song of fortie partes, made by Mr. Tallys". Denis Stevens takes this as further evidence of the motet's Elizabethan dating; I am persuaded that the circumstances argue all the more strongly for *Spem's* Marian provenance. The long-demolished Nonsuch Palace was the last and most lavish of the great building projects undertaken by Henry VIII. Mary inherited Nonsuch upon her accession, and in 1556 she sold it to Henry Fitzalan, 12th Earl of Arundel. Fitzalan's son-in-law, Lord Lumley, inherited the house at his death. Under Fitzalan (and, later, his son-in-law Lord Lumley), Nonsuch was a great center for the Catholic cause and a hotspot for Catholic music. Stevens has suggested that Thomas Howard, Fourth Duke of Norfolk, was the "Duke of _____" in Wateridge's letter and that he commissioned Tallis' masterwork for performance at Nonsuch ("Arundell house").

Thomas Howard was, Stevens tells us, "the last of England's four dukes to survive the years of strife that bridged the reigns of Edward VI and Mary I. Somerset had been executed in 1552, Northumberland in 1553, and Suffolk in 1554." But Howard did not merely "survive" Mary's reign—it was she who restored the title of Duke to him and his family. On her accession, Mary restored the earldom to Thomas's grandfather (his father Henry, Earl of Surrey, had been executed under Edward VI); on his grandfather's death in 1554, Thomas rose to the title.

If Howard commissioned the forty-part motet to honor a royal patron, it seems far more likely that Mary—the queen who restored the earldom of Norfolk to the Howard family and who sold Nonsuch to Fitzalan when she was 40 years of age—was the dedicatee, and that the text *Spem in alium* was chosen to allude to the Biblical heroine with whom she was identified.

[originally on the website of *Andante* magazine at <http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=16297>]