Latin & English Church Music
Spem in Alium; Salve Intemerata; Mass Salve Intemerata; With All Our Heart; Discomfort Them, O Lord; I Call and Cry to Thee, O Lord
Oxford Camerata/ Jeremy Summerly
Naxos 557770—77 minutes
[Also available as SACD 6.110111 and DVD 5.110111]

No one knows the exact year of Thomas Tallis's birth, but it is near enough to 1505 that this year has served to mark the 500th anniversary with many new recordings of his music, including the completion of Alistair Dixon's nine-volume series of the complete works (Signum 60; May/June 2005). These two recordings are worthy additions to the catalog.

Philip Cave was a boy chorister and later choral scholar at Christ Church, Oxford under Simon Preston and later became a lay clerk at New College under Edward Higginbottom. He has sung with the Clerkes of Oxenford under David Wulstan and is a member of the Tallis Scholars. He founded Magnificat in 1991. The choir is composed mainly of former Oxford and Cambridge choral scholars, and they specialize in "the restoration and performance of neglected choral masterpieces of the 16th and 17th Centuries". They have also recorded more familiar works like Allegri's 'Miserere', Palestrina's 'Stabat Mater', and Victoria's *Officium Defunctorum*. Among the pieces on this program, the 40-voice motet 'Spem in Alium' and the two sets of *Lamentations* are among Tallis's best-known and most recorded works. These are not very recent recordings. The Mass for Four Voices and *Lamentations* (sung with one voice to a part) were recorded in 2000. The other works were recorded in 1997 and are sung chorally, though 'Spem in Alium' has one voice for each of its 40 parts. A photograph on the back cover of the booklet shows the choir recording this work. They are grouped in a circle with Cave conducting from the center. This piece is a natural for the surround-sound treatment. An early—possibly the first—performance took place in the octagonal banqueting hall at Nonsuch Palace, the country residence of the Duke of Norfolk, who may have prompted Tallis to write his masterpiece. The 40 voices are deployed as eight choirs of five voices, one for each wall of the banqueting hall.

Cave and Magnificat give outstanding performances. The choral tone is clear and warm with good blend and delineation of contrapuntal voices. On occasion one hears performances that are so precise that they sound inhuman, almost mechanical. Here there is all the precision one could wish for, but with a human face.

The recording by Jeremy Summerly and the Oxford Camerata is more recent, made in January of this year. The principal works are the early votive antiphon 'Salve Intemerata', possibly the greatest of Tallis's works in this genre, and the mass based on it. Summerly seems partial to slow tempos. At best these can give the music a serene spaciousness. At worst they can produce a lack of deliberate direction. A sampling of recent recordings of 'Spem in Alium' shows Summerly (at 12:14 performance time) to be among the slowest. Compare the following:

Philip Cave (Linn 233) — 9:56
Harry Christophers (Coro 16016) — 9:40
Alistair Dixon (Signum 60) — 10:03
Peter Phillips (Gimell 203) — 9:59

The disparity is even greater for the antiphon 'Salve Intemerata'. Summerly's timing is an ultra-expansive 23:10 as compared with Dixon's 15:54 and Phillips's 17:20. Summerly makes an impressive beginning. For the first ten minutes, the tempo does not seem the least bit sluggish. The music unfolds with a dignified serenity. I felt things bogging down around the middle, and they never recovered. Perhaps it is not possible to sustain coherence and forward motion at that tempo over such a long span. On the other hand, Dixon and Phillips lack the spacious serenity. Their performances sound just that bit prodded.

This is a vast improvement over a Tallis program recorded by the Oxford Camerata in 1992 (Naxos 550576; Sept/Oct 1994). That recording was made in what sounds like a painfully dry acoustic. Two of the three English works on the present disc were sung in Latin on the previous one, allowing instructive comparison. 'With All Our Heart', for example, is a contrafactum (probably posthumous) of the motet 'Salvator Mundi'. The 1992 recording of the motet seems to plod so that the music lacks forward momentum, and the dry acoustic does not help. The newer recording of the English adaptation flows better, with an excellent choral tone carried by a much friendlier acoustic.

There are, of course, many Tallis recordings to choose from, and choices may be based on the presence of specific pieces. These two discs are strong contenders. As far as I know, Dixon is the only option for the complete works. I can recommend a two-disc compilation of recordings made between 1985 and 1998 by Peter Phillips and the Tallis Scholars, issued for the 500th anniversary (Gimell 203; Jan/Feb 2005). I continue to be fond of a single-disc collection of Latin and English liturgical works, consort music, and tunes from Parker's Psalter recorded by Paul Hillier and David Douglass with the Theatre of Voices and the King's Noyse (Harmonia Mundi 907154; Jan/Feb 1997).

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