

THE CHOIR OF



ST JOHN'S
CAMBRIDGE



MAGNIFICAT
NETHSINGHA

MAGNIFICAT

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in A

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|
| 1 | Magnificat | [6.20] |
| 2 | Nunc Dimittis | [5.37] |

Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis

Second Service

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|
| 3 | Magnificat | [6.45] |
| 4 | Nunc Dimittis | [4.29] |

Herbert Sumsion (1899–1995)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in A

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|
| 5 | Magnificat | [5.02] |
| 6 | Nunc Dimittis | [3.09] |

Herbert Howells (1892–1983)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis

Gloucester Service

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--------|
| 7 | Magnificat | [7.01] |
| 8 | Nunc Dimittis | [4.48] |

Gabriel Jackson (b. 1962)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis

Truro Service

- | | | |
|----|---------------|--------|
| 9 | Magnificat | [4.51] |
| 10 | Nunc Dimittis | [2.46] |

Sir Michael Tippett (1905–1998)

Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis

Collegium Sancti Johannis Cantabrigiense

- | | | |
|----|---------------|--------|
| 11 | Magnificat | [4.25] |
| 12 | Nunc Dimittis | [3.31] |

Total timings: [58.44]

THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S
COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
GLEN DEMPSEY ORGAN
ANDREW NETHSINGHA DIRECTOR

CONDUCTOR'S REFLECTIONS

The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis have been said or sung at daily acts of Christian worship for over a thousand years. Mark Oakley writes about the two canticles later in the booklet. The album seeks to demonstrate the breadth of imagination with which composers have approached these enduring texts. Stanford's starting point was the Germanic symphonic tradition; Howells took his inspiration from the architecture and acoustics of the Cathedral in Gloucester; Tippett was inspired by the unique Spanish trumpet stop at St John's.

Whilst contemplating the concept for the recording, and the way in which external factors can shed new light on the words of the canticles, I happened to visit Antwerp Cathedral to see the famous Rubens painting, *The Descent from the Cross*. This is the centrepiece of a triptych, the right-hand panel of which depicts Mary presenting the infant Jesus to Simeon in the temple. The angle of the panels is such that as she hands her child to Simeon, Mary also gazes left towards the central crucified Jesus. Mary's apparent premonition of what was to come resonates

strongly with those settings, such as Leighton's *Second Service*, in which a layer of melancholy is superimposed on the often-joyous words of the Magnificat.

The present album comprises settings of the Evening Canticles that each relate to a particular period of my own music-making – at the Royal College of Music, Truro Cathedral, Gloucester Cathedral and St John's. A second volume will follow, and there could perhaps be more after that if listeners are enthusiastic! Settings of the Evening Canticles tend to be labelled in one of three ways: by key, by the building for which they were written, or in numerical order within the composer's output. The two canticles are generally jointly described as a *Service*.

Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis were originally part of different daily monastic offices, Vespers and Compline respectively. Cranmer incorporated the two into the single office of *Evening Prayer*, a service commonly known as *Evensong* when some of the texts are sung. Composers have used different means to fashion the two canticles into one entity. Most use motivic connections (even if hard to discern on first hearing, as in the case of

Tippett!) For some, the Glorias provide a pair: Jackson's Glorias complement one another with mirror-image endings; Stanford and Sumsion follow the example of seventeenth-century predecessors by repeating the Glorias as a refrain. Howells's second Gloria is a more impassioned version of the first, creating a cumulative effect. In Leighton's case there is a large-scale harmonic structure in which the start of the Magnificat is not tonally resolved until the end of the *Nunc Dimittis*. In Tippett's work the Glorias could hardly seem more different – emphasising the joy and growth of new life in the first canticle, and contraction and introspection at the end of life in the second canticle.

STANFORD IN A

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) was born in Dublin and grew up in an intellectual environment, going on to study Classics at Queens' College, Cambridge. He was appointed Organist at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1874, whilst still an undergraduate. He accepted the post on condition that he be allowed to study in Berlin and Leipzig for periods during his

tenure. Eight years later he went on to be a founding Professor of the Royal College of Music, where he taught composition for the rest of his life. He also became Professor of Music at Cambridge in 1882. Along with Hubert Parry, he had a major influence on the renaissance of British music, through both his composition and his teaching. Stanford's pupils at the R.C.M. included Howells, who also went on to be a Professor there.

In this, his fourth setting of the Evening Canticles, Stanford created a symphonic canvas which was unprecedented in Anglican choral music. Having arranged for the British premiere of Brahms' First Symphony to take place in Cambridge in 1877, Stanford now unashamedly reused the motivic building blocks from Brahms' Second Symphony to fashion something quite new. Stanford in A (1880) was first performed with orchestra at the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy at St Paul's Cathedral, though I prefer it in the contemporaneous organ version heard here. In their own Evening Canticles, Thomas Attwood Walmisley and Samuel Sebastian Wesley (Organists at St John's and Gloucester respectively) had introduced a considerable degree of independence in the accompaniments;

in Stanford's hands, choir and organ now become truly equal partners. As Nicholas Temperley has written, it was due to Stanford that settings of Anglican canticles regained 'their full place beside the anthem as a worthy object of artistic invention'.

Stanford's music is now so central to the repertoire of Anglican choirs that it is easy to forget what a pioneering figure he was in his day. He was an outspoken critic of contemporary British musical tastes, bemoaning the prevalence of sentimental nineteenth-century repertoire in Anglican church music lists. When he promoted a concert containing music by Bach, Purcell and Palestrina, he was criticised for producing a programme which 'could have been performed 150 years ago! In a paper read before the Church Congress in London in 1899 he said it was 'imperative that the Church should educate, refine and improve its members in respect of church music. She [the Church] should lead taste, and not follow it. She should uncompromisingly adopt what is best, irrespective of popularity, and eschew the second-rate, even if it is momentarily attractive'. He went on to say that the Church was failing in this duty. It is important for each generation of

choral musicians to remind ourselves of Stanford's edict.

Stanford's Evening Service in A is elegant, confident and flowing. It has a concise motivic unity, with much of the work derived from the first three notes of the organ's introductory melody. Stanford is the first composer to incorporate classical elements of sonata form into a Magnificat. He creates a single through-composed arc of music, unlike the sectional Magnificats of his most progressive predecessors. In the central section of the Magnificat, Stanford puts *down the mighty* as far as possible *from their seat* – with a minor chord a tritone away from A major – followed by a suave, deft transition to the subdominant as he exalts the *humble and meek*. This is sophisticated word-painting linked to large-scale harmonic planning. *He remembering* provides something of a recapitulation, and the motif from bar 1 is declaimed in augmentation to begin the *Gloria*.

Stanford's Nunc Dimittis opens with a funereal tread, its theme based on the first three notes of the Magnificat in inversion. Many other settings of the Nunc Dimittis use solo or choral basses to represent the voice of the

old man; Stanford's settings in G and B flat provide examples of this. However, in the present work, it is the low, earthly tessitura of the instrumental introduction which seems to depict Simeon's condition. The voices then float in with veiled tone from on high, as though the angels are singing on his behalf. Tippett's setting makes an interesting comparison at this point. Stanford contrasts the solemn end of a mortal life with the transcendent revelation of seeing the Messiah; after the minor key opening, the rest of the music is always in the major, as Simeon's life reaches its joyous fulfilment. Jeremy Dibble has noted the hints of *Valhalla* and *Das Rheingold* in the majestic solo trumpet entry at *and to be the glory*. When the organ introduction returns in the major (after *thy people Israel*), the first three notes of the Magnificat can be heard in the pedals, perhaps reminding us of the beginning of the story and emphasising the overall unity of the two canticles. The end of the Nunc Dimittis uses a device to which Stanford was to return in his G major canticles 25 years later – reprising Simeon's opening words to create an ABA structure, but with the note-lengths now doubled as the dying man takes longer to articulate each syllable.

LEIGHTON – SECOND SERVICE

This work was composed in 1972 in memory of one of the most brilliant organists of his generation, Brian Runnett, a former St John's Organ Scholar. The 35-year-old Runnett, who had been Organist of Norwich Cathedral for three years, was killed in a car crash whilst driving to his parents' home in Southport after giving an organ recital at Westminster Abbey.

In commissioning the work the Cathedral Organists' Association turned to Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988), who had sung in choirs at Wakefield Cathedral and Queen's College, Oxford, where he particularly valued his exposure to sixteenth-century counterpoint. Like Stanford, Leighton read Classics at University. Unlike Stanford, he studied for a music degree at the same time! Leighton was later taught by Goffredo Petrassi in Rome. Amongst the features of his musical language are melodic lyricism, expressive intensity and directness, and assured contrapuntal technique. Thomas Lancaster has commented on Leighton's special ability to build climaxes, a skill which I feel is shared by Howells. He balanced his composition with a career in University

teaching, culminating in his appointment as Reid Professor of Music at Edinburgh University. Julia Craig-McFeely has written that 'Leighton did much to keep alive and transform the Victorian tradition of English Church Music, purge its piety and drag it into the (late) twentieth century'.

The ritualistic repeated pattern of daily Evensong is reflected by the many ostinati used in Leighton's work, right from the first bar. The Lydian mode opening could be heard as a lament for Runnett – compare the start of Mozart's *Lacrimosa* – but at the same time it is a rocking lullaby for Mary's unborn child. The music grows from an embryonic single note in Mary's womb. There may be playfulness in the dance-rhythms of *For he that is mighty*, but this is eradicated as the next arc of music reaches its powerful climax at *He hath put down the mighty from their seat*. The tension eventually dissipates as the rich are sent away empty-handed. *He remembering* and, later, *For mine eyes* give examples of a characteristic Leighton three-part choral texture; sopranos and altos are separate, but tenors and basses share a melodic line. Is it too far-fetched to point out that the melodic contour of *He remembering* is similar to the

Trompeta opening to Tippett's canticles written a decade earlier? Runnett had been the organist for the Tippett premiere. There is an alluring sense of timelessness in the arching phrases of *Abraham and his seed for ever*.

For the start of the first Gloria, Leighton recapitulates the Magnificat's initial music. However, the bright purity of that opening is replaced by a smouldering quality when transposed down a tenth. A striking moment occurs at *world without end*: Leighton had created a sense of warm security at *is now, and ever shall be*, enhanced by the ceaselessly rocking ostinato, but the sudden bleak D minor pianissimo organ chord drains all the colour from one's face, as though one had just heard the news of Runnett's death. Leighton's music for *world without end* is mournful in the extreme, with clashing early entries adding to the unease and search for explanation. The Magnificat, which started on a single F, comes to rest in the very remote world of C-sharp major. There is, however, a glowing hope in this final chord, unlike the bleakness at the end of the other canticle. The F to C-sharp trajectory of the first canticle is later mirrored by the C-sharp to F trajectory of the Nunc Dimittis Gloria.

Like the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis grows organically out of a single note. *Lord now latest thou* provides the first of several occasions when second-inversion chords are used as a point of arrival, a device found in other Leighton works including the *Preces and Responses*. Simeon asks God to let him die in peace, and immediately we hear the peal of bells welcoming him to the gate of heaven. Distant celestial bells continue to be heard later, as in the organ at *and ever shall be*. The key change which precedes *For mine eyes have seen thy salvation* signifies the moment of revelation; as Stanford had done in his Nunc Dimittis, Leighton suddenly turns from mourning to optimism. A driving rhythm accompanies *to be a light* as the Christian message spreads around the globe. The ecstatic, blinding vision of *the glory of thy people Israel* crumples aimlessly, like a forgotten dream, as our minds are drawn back to mourning Runnett in the Gloria. The tortured and unfulfilled search for meaning continues right up to the final *Amens*. The music of the organ introduction is reprised in the penultimate *Amen* – perfect symmetry, one might say – and yet there is a sense of incompleteness. Whereas works like the Requiems by Fauré and Duruflé

seek to provide consolation and closure to the bereaved, Leighton leaves us still grieving; the listener is not yet at peace. We are back in F, as we should be in a classical sense – it's where the Magnificat began – and yet we feel so far from where we started.

Runnett's successor as St John's Organ Scholar, Jonathan Bielby, recalls a conversation with Leighton in the 1980s when the composer was complaining about university bureaucracy and administration, and looking forward to more time for composing in retirement. Alas, that was never to be; Leighton, like Runnett, was to die before his time.

SUMSION IN A

Herbert Sumsion (1899-1995), commonly known as 'John', was born in Gloucester and became an articled pupil to the Cathedral Organist, Sir Herbert Brewer. He was later Assistant Organist at the Cathedral before a period teaching at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, during which time he met his wife, Alice. Whilst in the USA he was appointed Organist of Coventry Cathedral. Shortly afterwards Sir Herbert Brewer died

suddenly. The Dean of Gloucester quickly contacted Sumsion and told him not to go to Coventry but to come to Gloucester instead! Thus began a 39-year tenure as Organist of Gloucester Cathedral. One evening there was a ring at the door and he found Sir Edward Elgar standing outside with a house-warming present. Within a few months of arriving, Sumsion had his first Three Choirs Festival to direct. After the festival Elgar, who always liked a play on words, was heard to say: 'What at the beginning of the week was a Sumsion, has now become a certainty!'

Sumsion was an astonishingly multi-talented musician. His 1965 recording of the Elgar Organ Sonata remains iconic. As a choir trainer, Sumsion was said to be demanding but also kind and encouraging. As Donald Hunt, his assistant, put it: Sumsion displayed 'that rare gift that made people want to do well for him'. As an orchestral conductor he was greatly admired, with his Elgar performances considered to be particularly close to the composer's own interpretations. For a long time there was a tradition of Gloucester organists also being composers. Sumsion wrote a considerable corpus of music – early in his career this included chamber

and orchestral music but latterly it was mostly for choir and/or organ. His *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in A* (1959) is a beautifully crafted miniature, well suited to the daily office of Evensong, and composed for a choir containing only six men singing the lower parts. In Sumsion's day the choir was led from the organ loft, not by a conductor. The organ part and the introductions are written with this practical consideration in mind.

The choice of A major is perhaps significant. John Sanders, Sumsion's assistant and successor as Organist of Gloucester, felt that this key chord resonated in the building better than any other. I'd love to see an acoustical study of the effects of architecture on particular pitch frequencies. My predecessor, David Briggs, felt that B flat major was the best key in Truro Cathedral; Sir David Willcocks felt that F sharp major was better than F major in King's College Chapel.

The work has an elegant, nonchalant melodic fluency with great craftsmanship. Almost the entire work is tightly constructed from the first four notes of the organ introduction, with subsidiary material from the four bars before *And his mercy*. Sumsion's innate

modesty reflects the humility of Mary. If all settings of the Magnificat were as dramatic and attention-grabbing as Tippett's, then the daily liturgy would be unbalanced. A service should never seem like a concert, and Sumsion understood this at a deep level. When one hears Sumsion's music as part of an Evensong in Gloucester – the architecture, the music, the light, the words and the silence are all held in a beautiful equilibrium.

HOWELLS – GLOUCESTER SERVICE

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was born in Gloucestershire. He became an articled pupil to Sir Herbert Brewer at Gloucester Cathedral, a few years before his friend Herbert Sumsion did the same. Some of his most life-changing musical experiences took place at the Cathedral; these included hearing the first performance of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*, another work that made highly effective use of the unique Gloucester acoustic. Howells was an agnostic, or perhaps even an atheist, yet his music has had a profound spiritual effect on so many listeners, showing that a musician does not necessarily need to

be a believer themselves in order to deepen people's faith. Howells went on to become the twentieth century's most significant contributor to Anglican church music. His works include twenty settings of the Evening Canticles, of which the Gloucester Service is one of the finest.

The nave of Gloucester Cathedral was completed in the early twelfth century in Romanesque style. The Quire was remodelled over 200 years later as one of the first examples of Perpendicular architecture, with a much higher roof, spectacular fan vaulting and a Great East Window the size of a tennis court! After walking from the west end of the Nave, and then east through the organ screen, the sudden awesome sense of light and height is unforgettable. If you'll forgive a digression, an analogous experience occurs when travelling on the New Haven Line into the secular cathedral that is Grand Central Terminal in New York City. After a considerable period travelling underground, your breath is taken away as you emerge from a dark tunnel into that celestial *Beaux-Arts* architecture. The Gloucester experience I have described is perfectly replicated by the soaring arches of *As it was* in the two Howells

Glorias. I don't know a better translation of visceral architectural experience into music. Perhaps the floating treble *Amens* reflect the same high-vaulted ceiling but in a different light, and the long suspended conclusions of the Glorias bring to mind candles flickering and bearing witness throughout the night. The sense of being on the edge of eternity is well-suited to the famously long reverberation of Gloucester Cathedral. The intricate winding of the Magnificat's opening melismas call to mind the tracery of the cloisters' fan vaulting. The numinous melting chords of *Abraham and his seed for ever* derive from Howells's experience of the Gloucester acoustic – composers of our own time have often made an attempt to emulate this mystical, glowing style of writing.

As in Leighton's work, the lack of organ pedal at the start of the Howells Magnificat reflects the simple innocence of the young Mary. By contrast there is more gravitas at *And his mercy* – God's mercy is everywhere. *For behold from henceforth* contains an imaginative and unusual effect – with one treble line *mf* and the other *p* or *pp* – as Mary meditates on distant, future generations calling her *blessed*. This passage also brings to mind vines growing and intertwining,

reflecting the new life developing within Mary's womb. At the words *For he that is mighty hath magnified me*, the composer emphasises the modesty of Mary rather than the mightiness of God. *And holy is his name* sees the music rise upwards like a prayer borne by clouds of incense. The work contains numerous felicitous examples of word-painting, such as the two-octave ascent *and hath exalted*, the generosity of *He hath filled the hungry*, and the nostalgia of *He remembering*. As in his later *St Paul's Service*, Howells uses a darker, more disapproving colour for *and the rich he hath sent empty away*. In a further parallel with the later work, the first choral chord of the *Nunc Dimittis* has an immediate diminuendo – it has taken the dying Simeon so much effort to begin the word, that he hasn't the energy to sustain it. Perhaps singing angels come to his aid – Stanford and Tippett had similar thoughts at this point in the text.

Howells's work displays a heartfelt lyricism. It has a taut motivic coherence, with the opening treble melody forming the basis for the whole work. The dedication of Gloucester Cathedral to the Holy and Indivisible Trinity may perhaps be reflected

in the structural centrality of triads. There is a brooding, red-blooded energy to the start of each Gloria. The Nunc Dimittis builds in an inexorable, volcanic way until it erupts in the second Gloria. I love the way in which Howells's two Glorias are so similar, but the second is an amplified, more ecstatic version of the first, just as the Quire was rebuilt to outshine the Nave. Thus the two canticles become not a pair of complementary movements, but one cumulative entity with a single compositional arc. The Glorias both float to an end, suspended in mid-air, matching the apparent weightlessness of the Quire's vault.

This masterpiece was written while Howells was in Lydney during his mother's final illness. His diary entry for 6th January 1946 describes 'a lovely long day with mother. The F sharp Mag. and Nunc finished while talking to her'. She died later that month. The music's sense of infinitude surely reflects his desire for his mother's soul to live on for ever.

GABRIEL JACKSON – TRURO SERVICE

Gabriel Jackson (born 1962) is a former chorister of Canterbury Cathedral. His Truro Service (2001) was commissioned to commemorate the life of a former chorister at Truro Cathedral, Peter Rowe. It is common for liturgical commissions to be pieces which take large amounts of rehearsal time and which, therefore, can't be performed often. I asked Gabriel to write something which would be straightforward enough to enter the regular repertoires of many Cathedral choirs, constrained as they are by minimal rehearsal time. He fulfilled the brief perfectly, and the work is widely performed.

The centuries-old verse-by-verse alternation of monody and full choir lends this setting a hypnotic quality. In this case the full choir verses are homophonic rather than polyphonic, which enhances the feeling of simplicity. I wonder whether Jackson had the same experience as me when a Cathedral chorister – I was asked to be a 'server' once a week at the 7a.m. said services; through this the experience of hearing psalm verses read alternately by one person, and then by the

others, became deeply rooted. I initially suggested a standard plainsong psalm tone for the odd-numbered verses; in fact, the composer wrote a different type of non-metric monody with small, exotic decorations. The homophonic passages are beautifully spaced, with telling changes of tessitura for different verses. There are some evocative performance indications, of which my favourite occurs at *He hath shewed strength: piano, Urgent (but not too fast)*. The unexpected shifts of tonality at the start of each *Gloria* create a pleasing frisson. The two *Glorias* conclude at opposite ends of the dynamic spectrum.

In the Nunc Dimittis, the light of revelation ignites explosively, rather than as the peak of a long build-up. The end of the Nunc Dimittis makes me think of Russian nesting dolls – hidden within the big sound of *thy people Israel* is the smaller scale (and unexpectedly coloured) *Glory be to the Father*. Hidden within that (softer still, and again in a different key) is *As it was in the beginning*. The whole thing ends suspended on a second inversion chord – not so as to seem positively inconclusive, but so as to lead your attention on to the next prayer in the service; it's a beautiful piece of liturgical writing.

TIPPETT – ST JOHN'S SERVICE

It was a bold masterstroke on the part of choirmaster George Guest to commission Sir Michael Tippett (1905-1998) to compose a Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis to celebrate the 450th anniversary of St John's College. The work was premiered in 1962, having been composed the previous year just after the completion of his second opera, *King Priam*. One hears *Priam* in the opening fanfare for the unique St John's *Trompeta Real* organ stop. The opera had marked a major turning point in Tippett's career – a shift to uncompromising clarity and concision after the radiant lyricism of earlier works. The great thing was that, unlike the other five composers on this album, Tippett had no life-long involvement in the Anglican choral tradition. He was not brought up singing Stanford, and indeed his Magnificat is the polar opposite of Mary sitting at her spinning wheel, a description often given to Stanford's setting in G major. Tippett was able to bring an entirely fresh and vivid imagination to the texts.

Tippett's two canticles could scarcely be more different from one another in character, yet at a deep level they form a single entity. The Nunc Dimittis is based on the same cluster of notes (C sharp, D, E) which permeated the Magnificat and indeed formed its very first chord. The opening four *Trompeta* notes are similarly procreant, for instance giving rise to the final chord of the Nunc Dimittis before the Gloria.

Over a Double Whisky Mac in the Baron of Beef, George Guest used to enjoy telling the story of the genesis of the new organ at St John's in the 1950s. He told the College Council that every organ that was any good had an *en chamade* Trumpet stop (i.e. with pipes protruding horizontally.) The Council were interested and enquired where they could see and hear an example of the genre, expecting the answer to be nearby Ely Cathedral or perhaps Peterborough. 'Madrid!' was George's reply. He got his way (as usual!) – and the *Trompeta Real* provided great inspiration for Tippett's canticles, which are perhaps the finest setting of the past sixty years. The *Trompeta* is distinctly un-Anglican and this anti-establishment streak

in Guest probably appealed to Tippett. The Magnificat is full of primeval, monolithic gestures. Tippett does not evoke a self-effacing innocence in the young Mary; instead we hear Mary's awareness of the radicalism of the life that Jesus was going to lead. If parts of the Magnificat make people feel uneasy – well, that was the intention. The composer may even have had his own suffragette mother in mind whilst composing.

The choral textures are less complex than they sound – until the first Gloria none of the choral writing is in more than two parts, though the almost constant octave doubling imparts a distinctive elemental sonority. This was an ingenious solution to the question of how the choir could compete with the strident *Trompeta Real* stop, which is as loud as the whole of the rest of the organ put together. There's a burst of energy at the word *rejoiced*, the choir's one and only attempt to copy the organ semiquavers! The treble phrase for *And his mercy* is strikingly new and tender, perhaps suggesting God's humanity. The tenors' answering phrase *throughout all generations* seems to act as a bridge to the future. In the Lydian-mode opening to the first Gloria, Tippett enjoys prescribing wrong

word stresses in the same headstrong way as Poulenc does in his Mass in G: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Tippett whips up an irrepressible energy, reminding us of the rhythmic vitality of late 1930s works such as *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*.

Concerning the Nunc Dimittis, George Guest wrote: 'And what of the high treble soloist, who enunciates the words? Is it too fanciful to suggest that Simeon conceived them, was too weak to utter them, but that they were plucked out of his brain (by an angel?), and articulated?' This outpouring of melody feels quite independent of the long low groans of the old man in the alto, tenor and bass parts. The organ part was described by Tippett as 'the primitive onomatopoeias of the thunderings of God'. The canticle incorporates short passages of quasi-monastic chanting in the lower voices, for instance while the treble sings *according to thy word*. These, along with the pleading repetitions of the word *Lord*, add to a sense of prayers around the bedside of the dying man, perhaps in the manner of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. The Nunc Dimittis Gloria is a quasi-Cubist construction, the phrases seeming to be cut out of paper, transposed to new

keys, and then reassembled. Tippett's visionary imagination is brought to bear on Simeon's visionary words. The Magnificat had been intensely physical, but its thrust and rhythmic energy are now all gone. Time ceases to flow in an earthly way. The Nunc Dimittis is experienced in a dream, and it is a dream from which we don't awake.

Andrew Nethsingha

MAGNIFICAT

A canticle is a hymn or song of praise that uses words from the Bible or other religious texts other than the psalms. There are twenty one of them in the Book of Common Prayer but perhaps the best known are the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*. These lie at the heart of the service of Evensong and the musical settings of them, such as those celebrated in this recording, have helped bring them into the hearts of millions of people through the centuries.

The *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* are both texts from the Gospel according to St Luke. The *Magnificat* is a speech, or maybe a hymn, by Mary, mother of Jesus. According to the

Gospel, after Mary is told that she is to bear the son of God in her womb, she makes her way, full of the good news, to her relative Elizabeth who is also pregnant. They greet each other in what one 17th-century writer called 'a collision of joys'. Even the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps with delight. Mary then tells her story and begins it with the words 'My soul magnifies the Lord'. 'Magnify' is not a word we use much today, except when we describe what a magnifying glass does – makes things look bigger. Mary tells her story not for her own celebrity but, to the contrary, to make God larger. Here she is the model for the Church. God is the subject of all the verbs in the canticle except one.

When we praise someone, we make them large in the sense of giving them more room. We step back, we put our preoccupations and plans aside so as to let the reality of someone else live in us for that moment, find room in us. Real praise, as proud parents and partners will know, is about forgetting 'me' for a moment so that the sheer beauty of someone other comes alive in 'me'. In that moment I even begin to turn a little into what I'm looking at, something of their reality caught up with mine. 'My soul magnifies the Lord and

my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.' This is a song of love. Right in the centre of Evening Prayer, our distracted lives are recalled to magnify God and not ourselves.

Mary's *Magnificat*, however, is no sentimental ballad. Biblical scholars often call it revolutionary, upturning the standards of the contemporary world. If the Church always needs the leaven of discontent then we have it here, a continual reminder of the priorities of God and his first love of the poor and marginalised and downtrodden. The truth of Mary's song is that whilst we have tried to make her a submissive woman, we have failed to see she was a subversive one. Mary puts the 'odd' back into God. She teaches us here that the way to know if God is being born in the messy stable of your life is if God revolutionizes the way you think, the way you act and the way you treat other people. The ego, the rich, the proud, the mighty – they must be resisted as the influences and priorities of a human life. They must be put down from their seats. The hungry, the poor, the forgotten, the weak – these instead lie in the heart of God's compassion and Christian spirituality means to stand with them. These are the 'exalted'.

It is always possible to be part of a land and not be part of the revolution, even to go to the revolution's festivities and not be part of the revolution. By singing or saying the *Magnificat* every day of the year, the Church is reminding the worshipper that it is possible to be part of the congregation and not be part of God's revolution. The *Magnificat* places a compass in the heart of the liturgy to point us back to the heart of God. This woman who sang of divine liberation for oppressed peoples is not made of plaster or plastic. She is very much alive and is still singing out for all who are unloved and overlooked for as long as her *Magnificat* is sung.

After hearing the words of a young woman about to bring new life into the world, Evening Prayer then enables us to hear the words of an old man facing the end of his life. The *Nunc Dimittis* is a prayer offered by Simeon in the Temple when the child Jesus is taken by his parents to present him to the Lord. Simeon says that now that his eyes have seen God's salvation, nestling in his arms and full of divine potential, he can depart this life in peace. He says that the child is a light to enlighten people, a light, perhaps, not so much that we are to look at, so much,

as to see by. Life is to be viewed in the light of the love and the wisdom and the sacrifice that this child will embody. Again, by asking worshippers to pray this prayer each day, the Church proclaims that the one who, from the beginning was seen as the light to live by is also the one who later told his disciples that they are the light of the world too (Matthew 5,14) and that the way in which they live their life, the people they become, should be a hope and not a darkness for those they share life with and for the world's justice.

These two canticles – spoken by young and old, man and woman, one near to a birth and one near to a death, capture human life and the way God is weaved within it. Both Mary and Simeon know that to try and stop God loving his people is as pointless as trying to stop a waterfall being wet. God's heart pours out, especially on those the world laughs at or ignores. These two canticles are the two compasses which point us towards the peaceful harbour of the human soul but also to the humility, courage and generosity with which we must make the journey there.

**The Rev'd Canon Mark Oakley,
Dean of St John's College, Cambridge**



© Andrew Nethsingha

TEXTS

Magnificat

My soul doth magnify the Lord :
and my spirit hath rejoiced in
God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded :
the lowliness of his hand-maiden.
For behold, from henceforth :
all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath magnified me :
and holy is his Name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him :
throughout all generations.
He hath shewed strength with his arm :
he hath scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat :
and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things :
and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He remembering his mercy hath holpen
his servant Israel :
as he promised to our forefathers,
Abraham and his seed for ever.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :
and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be :
world without end.
Amen.

Luke 1: 46-55

Nunc Dimittis

Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace :
according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen :
thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared :
before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles :
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son :
and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be :
world without end.
Amen.

Luke 2: 29-32

THE CHOIR OF ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Trebles

Felix Bamford
Matthew Brown ⁹
William Buttery
Alan Chen
Jaylen Cheng
Adam Chillingworth
Lewis Cobb ¹
George Ducker
Alfred Harrison ¹²
Harry L'Estrange
Toby L'Estrange
James Lewis
Jonathan Mews
Lucas Nair-Grepinet
Ewan Tatnell
Philip Tomkinson
Thomas Watkin

Counter Tenors

Daniel Brown ¹
Hugh Cutting ¹²
Richard Decker
Jack Hawkins

Tenors

Michael Bell
Benedict Flinn ¹
Gopal Kambo ¹²
Henry Laird
Louis Watkins

Basses

James Adams ¹
Jamie Conway
Matthew Gibson ¹²
Simon Grant ¹⁰
Piers Kennedy
William O'Brien
James Quilligan

Herbert Howells

Organ Scholar

Glen Dempsey

Junior Organ Scholar

James Anderson-Besant

Director of Music

Andrew Nethsingha

*Numbers indicate soloist credits
for each track*



© Nick Rutter

The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge is one of the finest collegiate choirs in the world, known and loved by millions from its broadcasts, concert tours and recordings. Founded in the 1670s, the Choir is known for its distinctive rich, warm sound, its expressive interpretations and its breadth of repertoire. Alongside these musical characteristics, the Choir is particularly proud of its happy, relaxed and mutually supportive atmosphere. The Choir is directed by Andrew Nethsingha following a long line of eminent Directors of Music, recently Dr George Guest, Dr Christopher Robinson and Dr David Hill.

The Choir is made up of around 20 Choristers and Probationers from St John's College School and around 15 Choral Scholars who are members of St John's College, its primary purpose being to enhance the liturgy and worship at daily services in the College Chapel. The Choir has a diverse repertoire spanning over 500 years of music. It is also renowned for championing contemporary music by commissioning new works, including recent compositions by Joanna Ward, Lara Weaver, Cecilia McDowall, and the College's Composer in Residence, Michael Finnissy.

Each term the Choir sings Bach Cantatas liturgically with St John's Sinfonia, its period instrument ensemble. This Bach series is now entering its second decade.

The Choir brings the 'St John's Sound' to listeners around the world through its weekly webcasts (available at www.sjcchoir.co.uk). The Choir has also live-streamed video broadcasts of Chapel services on Facebook, in association with Classic FM. In addition to regular radio broadcasts in this country and abroad, the Choir releases multiple recordings each year. In May 2016 the College launched its new 'St John's Cambridge' recording label (in conjunction with Signum Classics) on which the Choir has released the BBC Music Magazine award-winning recording of Jonathan Harvey's music: *DEO; Christmas with St John's*; *KYRIE* (works by Poulenc, Kodály and Janáček); *Mass in G minor* (works by Vaughan Williams); *Advent Live* (a collection of live recordings from the College Chapel's Advent Carol Services, broadcast each year by the BBC) and *Locus Iste*, the Choir's 100th recording which celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Consecration of St John's College Chapel in 2019.

The Choir also performs concerts outside of Cambridge and tours internationally each year. Recent destinations have included Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Hungary, Hong Kong, Singapore and the USA. It also performs regularly in the UK, with venues including Symphony Hall, Birmingham, Royal Albert Hall and Royal Festival Hall, London.

GLEN DEMPSEY

Born in Suffolk in 1994, Glen's formative musical experiences were centred around the English choral tradition – as a chorister in St Mary's, Bury St Edmunds and later in the choirs of St Edmundsbury Cathedral. Organ lessons with Michael Nicholas led to his being awarded a scholarship as a répétiteur to study at the Purcell School of Music. During this time Glen performed in all the major concert halls of London as a soloist and chamber musician on the organ and piano, and also conducted at the Wigmore Hall.

In 2013, Glen was appointed Organ Scholar at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. In this role he was responsible for accompanying and directing the choir's daily services and



© Louis Marlowe

for training the choristers, as well as for playing at many events attended by the British Royal Family. Alongside his organ studies with Ann Elise Smoot he maintained a varied performance profile as organist, conductor and tenor.

During the academic year 2014/15 he resided in the Netherlands and was the Assistant Organist of St Nicholas's Basilica, Amsterdam. Under the mentorship of

Michael Hedley, Glen accompanied the majority of the choral services in the Basilica, as well as having responsibility for conducting the Basilica's various choirs and ensembles. During this time he studied with Jacques van Oortmerssen.

Glen became Organ Scholar at St John's College, Cambridge in October 2015, where he accompanies the choir in their busy schedule of daily services, tours, broadcasts and recordings, and assists in the training of the choristers. Gordon Stewart and Ann Elise Smoot have been his organ teachers.

Glen's interest in contemporary music has been developed through premiering several choir and organ, and solo organ works at St John's College; by the end of his Scholarship he will have given the first performances of five new works by the College's Composer in Residence, Michael Finnissy.

ANDREW NETHSINGHA DIRECTOR OF MUSIC ST JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Performing in North America, South Africa, the Far East, and throughout Europe, Andrew Nethsingha has been Director of Music at St John's College, Cambridge since 2007. He has helped to set up the recording label, 'St John's Cambridge,' in conjunction with Signum Classics. His first disc on this label, *DEO* (music by Jonathan Harvey), was a 2017 BBC Music Magazine Award winner.

Andrew Nethsingha was a chorister at Exeter Cathedral, under his father's direction. He later studied at the Royal College of Music, where he won seven prizes, and at St John's College, Cambridge. He held Organ Scholarships under Christopher Robinson at St George's Windsor, and George Guest at St John's, before becoming Assistant Organist at Wells Cathedral. He was subsequently Director of Music at Truro and Gloucester Cathedrals, and Artistic Director of the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival.



Britten Sinfonia, Orchestra of St Luke's (New York), Aarhus Symfoniorkester, BBC Concert Orchestra. Venues have included the BBC Proms, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Verbier Festival, Tokyo Suntory Hall, Konzerthaus Berlin and Singapore Esplanade.

Andrew's concerts conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra have included: Mahler's 8th Symphony, Beethoven's 9th Symphony, Britten's *War Requiem*, Brahms' *Requiem*, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* and *The Kingdom*, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Poulenc's *Gloria* and Duruflé's *Requiem*. He has also worked with: the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, London Mozart Players,

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SignumClassics, Signum Records Ltd., Suite 14,
21 Wadsworth Road, Perivale, Middlesex UB6 7LQ, UK.
+44 (0) 20 8997 4000 E-mail: info@signumrecords.com
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