

Alamire



Centuries of change

David Skinner begins a 10-year, 30-disc project to explore three centuries of English choral music. Richard Lawrence reports

The two-disc set of the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae* by Tallis and Byrd (released by Obsidian, and an Editor's Choice in the March 2011 issue of *Gramophone*) marks the beginning of a project by David Skinner and his choral group Alamire. Over the next ten years, they plan to record 30 CDs of English choral music from 1400 up to the mid-17th century. With so many ensembles ploughing this field – The Cardinal's Musick, of which Skinner was co-founder, The Tallis Scholars, The Sixteen, Chapelle du Roi, not to mention cathedral and collegiate choirs – this is ambitious indeed. Skinner, however, is bubbling over with confidence and enthusiasm about it.

"Ideally, we would be doing 100 CDs. I've always been keen to provide a historical survey of this period, largely based on my experience as a teacher at Oxford and now Cambridge, telling the whole story of how we arrive at Tallis and Byrd, and beyond them Gibbons and Tomkins. It ties in with a book I'm writing: the subject of each CD will become a chapter in the book, and the music will be published by Peters Edition."

The plan is to record ten volumes of 15th-century music, ten of the period from 1500 to just after the Reformation, and ten of the Elizabethan-Jacobean era. "I'm not intending to record everything: who needs another recording of the Byrd Masses?" says Skinner. "But what about the works that fall in the cracks? There are so many pieces that haven't seen the light of day, such as the York Masses, an important link between the Old Hall Manuscript of around 1400 and the Eton Choirbook of a century later." Skinner will simply record the best, whether it be the best composer or the best pieces in a collection. The Old Hall composers include the relatively well-known Dunstable and Power, but also Cooke and Pycard (who was actually French). "This was the first time that the English led Europe in composition. Dufay wrote glorious music, but there's something medieval about it in its open cadences and its tight structure. The music of his English contemporaries is looser, and of course Dunstable and the others loved their thirds and sixths."

Skinner also makes a comparison between the Eton Choirbook composers (who included William Cornysh and Richard Davy) and contemporaries such as Josquin. "The range is quite narrow, about an octave and a fifth, and he requires only three voice types: top part, low bass, and three tenor parts in between. The English layered their voices, as you can tell from the clef combinations, giving you five distinct voice parts: treble, alto, tenor, baritone and bass, which gives the music a special sonority."

With the next generation of composers Alamire will be very much entering, if not trespassing on, Cardinal's Musick territory. Will there be duplication? "Not much; there's no point. I was a part of those projects, and I'm very proud of them. But Ludford and Fayrfax will get a disc each. I want to record Ludford's *Mass Videte miraculum*, which I've got a different take on. It's absolutely glorious, the only Mass of the time with divided trebles throughout. But that probably won't happen for a few years."

Skinner is particularly keen to demonstrate the change that came over English church music at the time of the Reformation. "Before 1549, England enjoyed an unbroken tradition of musical composition and liturgy. You can take the Eton Choirbook as the final medieval flowering, consolidated by Taverner, Ludford and Fayrfax. Then how did composers cope with a rather stark Reformation that happened overnight, with the accession of Edward VI? The Council of Wind-

sor of 1548 squeezed all the old Latin liturgy into the Prayer Book, a single volume all in English, which was a new challenge for composers like Tallis, Sheppard and Tye. Then when Mary – a Roman Catholic – ascended the throne, what did composers do when they had to set Latin words again? Some went back to the old style, but others reinvented themselves."

An example of this change of style is the music of Tallis. "The Latin music he wrote during the reign of Henry VIII is like the Eton Choirbook: a meditative backdrop to facilitate prayer, like a stained-glass window. It was composing in English during the six years of Edward's reign that taught composers how to set a text, which is why the Latin church music under Mary is far more 'texty'."

Once Elizabeth had succeeded her half-sister Mary, it was back to the Prayer Book. "It's important to show how there were two traditions, the underground Catholic recusant tradition, and the established Church of England tradition, with the introduction of instruments – cornetts and sackbuts, viols – in church." Why did Skinner begin his project with the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae*? "It really represents England entering the European market. This was a printed collection of English motets that put England on a pedestal, saying 'This is what the English can do'. And it's so fundamentally different from Palestrina, Lassus and the other great names. We know that it contains what Tallis thought was his best work, even if Byrd included inferior pieces like "O lux beata Trinitas" and "Siderum rector", which he buried in the middle of the collection."

Skinner intends every disc to stand on its own as a programme. So, for example, the two York Masses will be interspersed with religious songs for solo and harp. Setting aside the choice of repertoire, how does Alamire differ from other groups? "With one exception, there's no overlap in membership. The singers are those I've known and admired for a long time, and who are at the top of their game. And I don't put together a project unless the key people can take part. I'm a great fan of all the other groups, but I've got my own sound." I ask him to define it and, for the first time, Skinner struggles to find the words. "It's down to taste: whether or not you use vibrato, whether or not you are minutely concerned with the tuning of certain chords; also giving the music breadth and space. The duration of pieces can be different, as can the pitch. It's common to transpose up, to suit the normal SATB configuration. But Tallis's 'If ye love me', sung by two tenors, baritone and bass, sounds wonderful, as well as matching the layout in Taverner."

Finally, what about the name Alamire, which nobody knows how to pronounce (it's "Alla merely", more or less)? Skinner laughs. "We wanted to avoid the usual titles – consort, choir, group, ensemble. It comes from the Flemish scribe Petrus van den Hove, who called himself Pierre Alamire; he in turn took it from Guido d'Arezzo, the 11th-century theorist." But to find out more, you'll need to attend one of the concerts given by this fine – which forbidden word to choose? – ensemble.

Richard Lawrence