

DELPHIAN



Howard Skempton

The Exon Singers
Matthew Owens

The Cloths of Heaven

choral music and songs

Howard Skempton (b. 1947): *Choral Music and Songs*

The Exon Singers

Matthew Owens *conductor* [2-4, 7-9, 14, 19-26], *organ* [5, 6, 27]

Christopher Sheldrake *baritone* [5]

Jeffrey Makinson *organ* [8-9]

- | | | |
|--|--|--------|
| 1 | Upon my lap my sovereign sits <i>for mezzo-soprano</i> | [2.21] |
| 2 | O Saviour of the World | [1.47] |
| 3 | Locus iste | [1.58] |
| 4 | The Song of Songs | [4.42] |
| 5 | O Life! <i>for baritone and organ</i> | [4.29] |
| 6 | Nature's Fire <i>for organ</i> | [5.26] |
| 7 | Adam lay y-bounden | [1.22] |
| Magnificat & Nunc dimittis (Edinburgh Service) | | |
| 8 | Magnificat | [4.14] |
| 9 | Nunc dimittis | [2.05] |
| Lamentations <i>for baritone and theorbo</i> | | |
| 10 | How sits this city | [2.42] |
| 11 | I am the man | [6.23] |
| 12 | The anointed Lord | [0.46] |
| 13 | For oughtest thou, O Lord | [1.50] |
| 14 | Beati quorum via | [2.27] |

Beth Mackay *mezzo-soprano* (1, 17-18)
Bartholomew Lawrence *baritone* (10-13, 15-18)
James Akers *theorbo* (10-13)

Emerson Songs *for soprano and baritone*

15 Music	[1.48]
16 Brahma	[1.25]
17 Pan	[1.25]
18 Xenophanes	[2.31]
19 He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven	[4.15]
20 Ave Virgo sanctissima	[2.45]
Missa brevis	
21 Kyrie	[0.45]
22 Gloria	[2.49]
23 Sanctus	[1.07]
24 Benedictus	[0.47]
25 Agnus Dei	[1.30]
26 Ostende nobis Domine	[2.51]
27 Recessional <i>for organ</i>	[3.28]
Total playing time	[70.17]

All world premiere recordings except tracks 19 and 27

Tracks 1, 2, 5, 6 and 27 published by the composer

All other tracks published by Oxford University Press

Notes on the music

Take an empty space; call it a stage, a concert hall or a church, or the private room in which you might be listening to this recording. Someone has given instructions for sounds to be made in this space while someone else is listening, and this is all that is needed to define a musical act. Music is what results from the performance and perception of sound in human space. A theatre of voices, loud or quiet, alone or together.

Howard Skempton's reputation as a miniaturist can easily disguise the range of generic and stylistic affiliations which his preoccupation with small forms makes possible. 'One of the aims in composing music,' Skempton has written,

is to enhance the medium. It is important to achieve 'a good sound'. So one's primary concern is with the medium and the material.

These words come from the programme note to his orchestral work *Lento* (1991), where they lead Skempton into a series of musings on the tradition in which he came to maturity as a musician – the 'experimental' tradition perhaps most closely associated with his teacher Cornelius Cardew. 'Mainstream composers', according to Skempton, 'refer to their "ideas".' In this they differ from experimental composers, who prefer an attitude of greater aesthetic distance, or detachment. 'One has a conversation with material whereas one wrestles with ideas.'

Composers do not have to be fair or accurate in their readings of other composers. Creative misreading ('misprision', as the literary critic

Harold Bloom calls it) can be one of the greatest provocations to originality, and there are a number of respects in which one can find comments such as the above both illuminating and at the same time disputable (does one expect a short piece of 'mainstream' choral music to 'wrestle with ideas'? if not, does that make all choral music experimental?). But if the attitude which they embody is responsible for Skempton's happy accommodation with so many traditions which seem, for a composer who identifies as experimental, surprisingly 'mainstream', then the flexibility of the definition of 'experimental' is itself a source of delight for the pragmatist (and who is more pragmatic than the experimental composer?). It is perhaps the serendipitous affinities which this attitude enables that Skempton enjoys most: hence his curious compositional pantheon of Cardew, Britten, Webern and Feldman; hence, too, the openness and honesty which make him one of our most widely loved and least partisanly admired composers.

Serendipity has a habit, itself serendipitous, of multiplying its appearances for those who are open to its workings. When Skempton set, in 1998, the four verses beginning with the line **Upon my lap my sovereign sits**, he took them from a Victorian anthology of lyrics from Elizabethan songbooks which he had been given as a wedding present. Browsing in a second-hand bookshop some time later, he found the original source of the poem: it is actually a longer text titled 'Our Blessed Lady's Lullaby' by Richard Rowlands, a contemporary of the English metaphysical poets.

Liturgical texts can also serve Skempton as 'found objects', and include the Mass, the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis, and the three Latin texts on this disc familiar from settings by Bruckner (*Locus iste*), Stanford (*Beati quorum via*) and Guerrero (*Ave Virgo sanctissima*). The religious content of 'Upon my lap' – set by Skempton as an intimate song for a single female voice, unaccompanied except by the ghost of her own rocking refrain which pervades the intervening verses – is private: non-liturgical, not even strictly speaking sacred, but an illustration of how the secular may be invaded by religious sensibilities. The only texts here with no Christian connotations whatsoever are the explicitly pantheistic Emerson poems and the verses from Robert Burns' *Epistle to James Smith* set here as 'O Life!' Musically, however, Skempton's attitude could be seen as wearing a religious aspect through and through: in its fundamental optimism; in its willingness to discover wonder in everyday things; in its happy familiarity with the gamut of human emotions.

It was in the early 1980s that Skempton first began to compose choral music. *Song at the Year's Turning*, a setting of R.S. Thomas for SATB chorus, was composed in 1980, although it was not heard in London until twelve years later, by which time Skempton had made his first foray into liturgical music with **O Saviour of the World** (1986), first sung as an introit by the choir of St James's Church, Sussex Gardens. Notated without dynamic markings, it uses a simple but flexible rhythmic language to evoke the gently measured, prose-like movements of sung psalmody. There is

no polyphony, and much of the piece is in just two or three real parts, with frequent octaves between upper and lower lines. Only in the middle, for the second of the three reharmonised repetitions of text and melody, is the simple melodic line supported by a full four-part harmonisation.

The other pieces gathered here date almost exclusively from the past ten to twelve years. **Locus iste**, the first of the Latin motets distributed throughout the disc, was written in 2007 for the London Festival of Contemporary Church Music at St Pancras Church, where its premiere marked Skempton's sixtieth-birthday year, and – despite a more vigorous melodic style – the approach is little changed from *O Saviour*. Each phrase, the hushed central 'irreprehensibilis est' apart, is several times repeated and reharmonised (always diatonically). The gentle closing phrase repeats the opening's unison octaves a fifth lower. **The Song of Songs** (2000), commissioned by Paul Hillier for his group Theatre of Voices, is Skempton at his most austere: the choir of male voices, TTBB, intone a tiny fragment of the biblical text over and over. In its hypnotic repetitions, the slightest change becomes a major event. Skempton revisited texts from the Song of Solomon two years later in another work written for Paul Hillier, *Rise up, my love* (recorded on Delphian DCD34042).

Much of the remaining music on this disc was instigated by Matthew Owens. As conductor of The Exon Singers and director of their summer festival he was responsible for the premieres of *Beati quorum via* and *Ave Virgo sanctissima* in July

of 2007. The *Missa brevis* arose in response to the Exon Singers' request for a new piece for this disc. Before taking up his current post at Wells Cathedral Owens was Master of the Music at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh, and both the Advent carol **Adam lay y-bounden** (1999) and the **Magnificat & Nunc dimittis** for treble voices and organ (2003) were written for the choir there.

O Life!, too, was composed at Owens' request, for performance at the 1996 Oxford Festival of Contemporary Music. Again, Skempton takes a straightforwardly strophic approach to his text, while remaining open to the treatment suggested by its overall atmosphere and individual details: the rhythmic deceleration at 'Cold-pausing' (line 3), for instance, or the 'Scotch snap' rhythms that pervade the baritone part. Underneath, the manuals-only organ part unfolds a slow-moving sequence of chords joined by held common notes. Unobtrusive, almost shy, it seems – once you notice it at all – to exist in a different time altogether, and to demonstrate, as so often in Skempton's music, that the effect created by simple techniques can be anything but simple if you listen closely enough.

A similar accompaniment, sustaining notes from the plaintive modal melodic line into a continuum of gentle chordal harmony, is found in the *Magnificat & Nunc dimittis*. It could be said to unite two 'types' of material which recur throughout Skempton's oeuvre, the melody (or monody) and the chorale – as does the solo organ piece **Nature's Fire** (1994), where simple

chord sequences for the player's two hands enclose a middle section where the pedals spin out the underlying harmonic pattern into a winding loop of melody.

Other pieces present these same elements, melody and chorale, as separate quantities. **Recessional** (1983), the earliest piece on this disc, is written as an open score, for performance on any instrument or instruments, though its progression of simple triads in even rhythm makes it well suited to Skempton's own instruments, the piano or – more particularly – the accordion. Here it is performed on the organ, and takes its place comfortably at the close of the disc's quasi-liturgical programme. The **Emerson Songs** (2003), by contrast, are all melody, with the unadorned modal baritone lines of the first two songs joined by a female voice as a simple extension of pitch range in the third, before the – in context startling – richness of their two-part harmony in the final paean to 'universal Nature'.

Similarly concerned with varied strophic settings of poetry are the **Lamentations** (2001), the result of an unusual commission which Skempton approached with characteristic pragmatism. In 1998 he was approached privately by a friend of Emma Julieta Barreiro Isabel for a work to mark the completion of her PhD thesis, 'Translated Tears: Exegesis and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Versions of the Lamentations of Jeremiah in England and Spain'. The choice was made to set extracts

from John Donne's verse translation of the Lamentations, but, as Skempton writes:

With no performers or performances in view, little progress was made until 2000, when work on *Par la bande* (for Nigel North) and *The Song of Songs* (for Theatre of Voices) pointed the way to a very happy solution, namely Paul Hillier [a baritone as well as a choral conductor] and Nigel North. Nigel suggested that I should consider using a theorbo rather than a lute; thanks to its character and tuning, it is particularly well-suited to accompaniment.

Serendipity had played its part.

With one exception, the remaining works on the disc set Latin texts. **Ave Virgo sanctissima** and **Ostende nobis Domine** (2001) are quiet and contemplative, the former a rapt hymn of Marian adoration, the latter a prayer enclosed by alleluias in which the confident hope of salvation resounds. **Beati quorum via** divides the choir into eight parts to achieve a chordal texture which swings with alacrity through the cycle of fifths, but starts out from and returns at its mid-point to a simple, pure filling-out of diatonic harmony and a major chord. **He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven** (1999), perhaps Skempton's most sheerly beautiful choral inspiration, starts similarly but remains in a radiant C major throughout, again dividing the choir into eight parts for a richer texture. Heard in the context of the works on this disc, the piece seems to take on religious associations – but then, Yeats' poem itself seems like a distant secular memory of the Nativity scene of the shepherds at the manger ("What shall I give him, poor as I am?"). Again, the everyday language of love is imbued with sacred overtones.

And so to the **Missa brevis**, Skempton's first setting of the Latin Mass. Composed quickly around Christmas/New Year 2007-8, it begins in striking yet expressive simplicity: a phrase of invertible two-part counterpoint that rushes upwards through the choir in a crescendo of supplication. This is followed by a 'Gloria' of decidedly muted ecstasy, in which musical beauty seems to be subordinated to the demands of the comparatively verbose text. Then, however, expression takes sudden wing. Emerging from the tenors' pedal A held throughout the 'Gloria', a rapidly ascending D major chordal phrase appears at 'Sanctus' and recurs at the 'Hosanna' both here and in the 'Benedictus'.

In German one talks about an *Ohrwurm* – an 'ear-worm', a melody or phrase which burrows into your aural memory and lodges itself there. You could call this that, if it were not so much better heard than remembered. Its physicality is palpable. Rather than being indifferent to or seeking to disguise its medium, it delights in it – in the slight straining for the sopranos' high A, in the movement of inner parts ... And this is an experimentalist's attitude: music, to be heard, must be made.

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John Fallas is Delphian's booklet editor, and a writer on musical and other subjects.

Texts and translations

1 Upon my lap my sovereign sits

Upon my lap my sovereign sits
And sucks upon my breast;
Meantime his love maintains my life
And gives my sense her rest.

*Sing lullaby, my little boy,
Sing lullaby, mine only joy!*

When thou hast taken thy repast,
Repose, my babe, on me;
So may thy mother and thy nurse
Thy cradle also be.

Sing lullaby ...

I grieve that duty doth not work
All that my wishing would,
Because I would not be to thee
But in the best I should.

Sing lullaby ...

Yet as I am, and as I may,
I must and will be thine,
Though all too little for thy self
Vouchsafing to be mine.

Sing lullaby ...

Richard Rowlands (1565-1620),
as set in Martin Pearson's *Private Music* (1620)

2 O Saviour of the World

O Saviour of the World,
Who by thy cross
And precious blood
Hath redeemed us:
Save us and help us,
We humbly beseech thee, O Lord.

Visitation of the Sick, Book of Common Prayer
(after the Latin: Antiphon at Matins, Exaltation of the Cross)

3 Locus iste

Locus iste a Deo factus est:
inaestimabile sacramentum irreprehensibilis est.

*This place was made by God:
a priceless mystery, it is without reproof.*

Gradual for the Dedication of a Church

4 The Song of Songs

The song of songs, which is Solomon's.
Behold, thou art fair, my love,
Behold, thou art fair, thou hast dove's eyes.
The song of songs, which is Solomon's.
Song of Solomon 1: 1, 15 (KJV)

5 O Life!

O Life! how pleasant in thy morning,
Young Fancy's rays the hills adorning!
Cold-pausing Caution's lesson scorning,
We frisk away,
Like school-boys, at th' expected warning,
To joy and play.

We wander there, we wander here,
We eye the rose upon the brier,
Unmindful that the thorn is near,
Among the leaves;
And tho' the puny wound appear,
Short while it grieves.

Some, lucky, find a flow'ry spot,
For which they never toil'd nor swat;
They drink the sweet and eat the fat,
But care or pain;
And haply eye the barren hut
With high disdain.

With steady aim, some Fortune chase;
Keen hope does ev'ry sinew brace;
Thro' fair, thro' foul, they urge the race,
An' seize the prey:
Then cannie, in some cozie place,
They close the day.

And others, like your humble servan',
Poor wights! nae rules nor roads observin,
To right or left eternal swervin,
They zig-zag on;
Till, curst with age, obscure an' starvin,
They aften groan.

Alas! what bitter toil an' straining –
But truce with peevish, poor complaining!
Is Fortune's fickle Luna waning?
E'n let her gang!
Beneath what light she has remaining,
Let's sing our Sang.

Robert Burns (1759-1796)

7 Adam lay y-bounden

Adam lay y-bounden,
Bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter
Thought he not too long;

And all was for an apple
An apple that he took,
As clerkés finden written
In theiré book.

Ne had the apple taken been,
The apple taken been,
Ne haddé never our Lady
A been heaven's queen.

Blessed be the time
That apple taken was!
Therefore we may singen
Deo Gratias!

Anonymous English carol (c. 1450)

Magnificat & Nunc dimittis (Edinburgh Service)

8 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.

9 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.

Lamentations

- 10 How sits this city, late most populous,
Thus solitary, and like a widow thus!
Amplest of Nations, Queen of Provinces
She was, who now thus tributary is!
- Still in the night she weeps, and her tears fall
Down by her cheeks along, and none of all
Her lovers comfort her; perfidiously
Her friends have dealt, and now are enemy.
- Unto great bondage, and afflictions
Judah is captive led; those nations
With whom she dwells, no place of rest afford,
In straits she meets her Persecutor's sword.
- 11 I am the man which have affliction seen,
Under the rod of God's wrath having been,
He hath led me to darkness, not to light,
And against me all day, His hand doth fight.
- He hath broke my bones, worn out my flesh
and skin,
Built up against me; and hath girt me in
With hemlock, and with labour; and set me
In dark, as they who dead for ever be.
- He hath hedg'd me lest I 'scape, and added more
To my steel fetters, heavier than before.
When I cry out, He out shuts my prayer: and hath
Stopp'd with hewn stone my way, and turn'd
my path.
- My strength, my hope (unto myself I said)
Which from the Lord should come, is perished.
But when my mournings I do think upon,
My wormwood, hemlock, and affliction,
- My soul is humbled in rememb'ring this;
My heart considers, therefore, hope there is.
'Tis God's great mercy we're not utterly
Consum'd, for His compassions do not die;
- For every morning they renewed be,
For great, O Lord, is Thy fidelity.
The Lord is, saith my Soul, my portion,
And therefore in Him will I hope alone.
- The Lord is good to them, who on Him rely,
And to the Soul that seeks Him earnestly.
It is both good to trust, and to attend
The Lord's salvation unto the end:
- 'Tis good for one His yoke in youth to bear;
He sits alone, and doth all speech forbear,
Because he hath borne it. And his mouth he lays
Deep in the dust, yet then in hope he stays.
- 12 The anointed Lord, breath of our nostrils, He
Of whom we said, under His shadow we
Shall with more ease under the Heathen dwell,
Into the pit which these men digged, fell.
- 13 For oughtest Thou, O Lord, despise us thus,
And to be utterly enrag'd at us?

14 Beati quorum via

Beati quorum via integra est:
qui ambulat in lege Domini.

Psalm 118 (119): 1

Emerson Songs

15 Music

Let me go where'er I will
I hear a sky-born music still:
It sounds from all things old,
It sounds from all things young;
From all that's fair, from all that's foul
Peals out a cheerful song.

It is not only in the rose,
It is not only in the bird,
Not only where the rainbow glows,
Nor in the song of woman heard,
But in the darkest, meanest things
There always, always something sings!

'Tis not {only} in the high stars alone,
Nor in the cups of budding flowers,
Nor in the redbreast's mellow tone,
Nor in the bow that smiles in showers,
But in the mud and scum of things
There always, always something sings.

*Blessed are they whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.*

16 Brahma

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the Good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

17 Pan

O what are heroes, prophets, men,
 But pipes through which the breath of Pan doth blow
 A momentary music. Being's tide
 Swells hitherward, and myriads of forms
 Live, robed with beauty, painted by the sun;
 Their dust, pervaded by the nerves of God,
 Throbs with an overmastering energy
 Knowing and doing. Ebbs the tide, they lie
 White hollow shells upon the desert shore,
 But not the less the eternal wave rolls on
 To animate new millions, and exhale
 Races and planets, its enchanted foam.

18 Xenophanes

By fate, not option, frugal Nature gave
 One scent to hyson and to wall-flower,
 One sound to pine-groves and to waterfalls,
 One aspect to the desert and the lake.
 It was her stern necessity: all things
 Are of one pattern made; bird, beast and flower,
 Song, picture, form, space, thought and character
 Deceive us, seeming to be many things,
 And are but one. Beheld far off, they part
 As God and devil; bring them to the mind,
 They dull its edge with their monotony.
 To know one element, explore another,
 And in the second reappears the first.
 The specious panorama of a year
 But multiplies the image of a day, –
 A belt of mirrors round a taper's flame;
 And universal Nature, through her vast
 And crowded whole, an infinite parquet,
 Repeats one note.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

19 He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with gold and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half-light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

20 Ave Virgo sanctissima

*Ave Virgo sanctissima, Hail, most holy Virgin,
 Dei Mater piissima, most merciful mother of God,
 maris stella clarissima. brightest star of the sea.*

*Salve semper gloriosa, Hail, ever glorious,
 margarita pretiosa, precious pearl,
 sicut liliū formosa, beautiful as the lily,
 nitens, olens velut rosa. glittering, sweet-smelling
 as the rose.*

From an old Spanish antiphon
 for the Nativity of St John the Baptist

Missa Brevis

21 Kyrie

Kyrie eleison.
Christe eleison.
Kyrie eleison.

*Lord have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Lord have mercy.*

Gloria

22 Gloria in excelsis Deo,
et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.
Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te.
Glorificamus te.
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.
Dominus Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus Pater
omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem
nostram.
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus Sanctus, tu solus Dominus,
tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe.
Cum Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

*Glory to God in the Highest
and on earth peace to men of good will.
We praise thee, we bless thee, we adore thee, we
glorify thee.
We give thee thanks for thy great glory.
Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.
Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ;
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy
on us.
Who takest away the sins of the world, receive
our prayer.
Who sittest at the right hand of the Father, have
mercy upon us.
For thou only art Holy, thou only art Lord,
thou only art Most High, Jesus Christ,
With the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.*

23 Sanctus

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth:
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
Hosanna in the highest.

24 **Benedictus**

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis.

*Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

25 **Agnus Dei**

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
donanobis pacem.

*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the
world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the
world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the
world, grant us peace.*

26 **Ostende nobis Domine**

Alleluia.
Ostende nobis Domine misericordiam tuam, et
salutare tuum da nobis.
Alleluia.
Deus tu conversus vivificabis nos, et plebs tua
laetabitur in te.
Ostende nobis Domine misericordiam tuam, et
salutare tuum da nobis.
Alleluia.

*Show us, O Lord, thy mercy; and grant us
thy salvation.*

*Thou wilt turn, O God, and bring us to life:
and thy people shall rejoice in thee.*

Psalm 84 (85): 7, 6



Howard Skempton

Howard Skempton was born in Chester in 1947, and has worked as a composer, accordionist, and music publisher. He studied in London with Cornelius Cardew from 1967 and Cardew helped him to discover a musical language of great simplicity. Since then he has continued to write undeflected by compositional trends, producing a corpus of more than 300 works – many pieces being miniatures for solo piano or accordion. Skempton calls these pieces ‘the central nervous system’ of his work.

Skempton’s catalogue of works is as diverse as it is long, ranging from pieces for solo cello (*Six Figures*, 1998) and guitar (*Five Preludes*, 1999) to the Chamber Concerto for fifteen players, the Concerto for Hurdy-Gurdy and Percussion, and major orchestral works such as *Chorales* and the hugely successful *Lento*. 2003 saw the first performance of *That Music Always Round Me* given by the University of Manchester Chorus and Symphony Orchestra. *Tendrils* for string quartet received its world premiere at the 2004 Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music, performed by the Smith Quartet, and went on to win both the prize for Best Chamber-Scale Composition at the annual Royal Philharmonic Society awards in May 2005 and the chamber prize at the BACS British Composer Awards in December of the same year.

Also in 2005, *Ben Somewhen* for solo double bass and ensemble, a BCMG Sound

Investment commission inspired by Ben Hartley’s matchstick drawings depicting rural life, was premiered in April 2005 and given a subsequent ‘rural tour’ by BCMG. The year 2007 saw many concerts celebrating Skempton’s 60th birthday, including performances by the Gemini Ensemble, the Schubert Ensemble of London, Tom Kerstens and his G+ Ensemble and Leamington Music. Skempton was also a featured composer at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival and The Exon Singers’ summer festival.

Works have been commissioned and performed by other leading artists including the BBC, Ensemble Bash, OKEANOS and New Noise, and a chamber work for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra’s contemporary music group Ensemble 10/10 was premiered in May 2007. Skempton recently completed a large-scale orchestral work for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and James Gilchrist, which was premiered at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival in September 2007 and broadcast on BBC Radio 3. 2008 has seen first performances of *Expectancy* for string quartet and chamber choir, performed by the Coull Quartet and the University of Warwick Chamber Choir, and *Notti stellate a Vagli*, a 20-minute work for solo piano premiered by John Tilbury at St John’s, Smith Square in a concert recorded for CD.

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The Exon Singers

The Exon Singers, founded in 1966, is recognized as one of the UK's leading chamber choirs. Recent reviews describe the choir as 'wonderfully full-bodied, youthful ... exciting and beautiful' (Early Music America), with 'beautifully tailored singing' (Gramophone) and a 'brilliant soprano sound' (Daily Telegraph) where 'one is just swept along by the unabashed exuberance of the singing' (International Record Review).

The choir broadcasts regularly on BBC Radios 3 and 4 and has made a number of highly acclaimed recordings for Albany, ASV and Delphian record labels. Under the direction of Matthew Owens the choir has also received recognition through the commissioning of new works from some of the UK's most exciting composers – Richard Allain, David Briggs, Grayston Ives, Francis Jackson, Gabriel

Jackson, George Lloyd, Howard Skempton and Philip Moore.

Since 1973, the annual Exon Singers' Festival has taken place in the historic market town of Tavistock on the edge of Dartmoor, based in the beautiful parish church of Tavistock and at Buckfast Abbey. The choir's festival appearances include the Oxford Festival of Contemporary Music and the Edinburgh Festival, as well as concerts in St John's College, Cambridge, Gloucester Cathedral, Wells Cathedral and at venues in Winchester, Salisbury and Belfast.

This is the choir's third recording for Delphian Records, following their highly-acclaimed discs of Victoria (DCD34025) and Francis Jackson (DCD34035).



Matthew Owens

Matthew Owens became conductor of The Exon Singers in 1997. He has broadcast with them regularly on BBC Radios 3 & 4, given concerts throughout the UK and directed the annual Exon Singers Festival in Devon.

Matthew was appointed Organist and Master of the Choristers of Wells Cathedral in June 2004, taking up the post in 2005. He was previously Organist and Master of the Music at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh (from 1999-2004) and Sub Organist of Manchester Cathedral. He is also Tutor in Organ Studies at Wells Cathedral School (one of the five specialist music schools in the UK), and conductor of the Wells Cathedral Oratorio Society.

Born in 1971, he studied at Chetham's School of Music and was subsequently Organ Scholar at The Queen's College, Oxford. As a postgraduate he received the highest award for performance, the Professional Performance Diploma, with distinction, and the college Bach prize at the Royal Northern College of Music; gained a Master's Degree from the University of Manchester; won thirteen prizes in the diplomas of the Royal College of Organists; and was awarded the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. He then studied at the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam. His major organ studies were with Gordon Stewart, David Sanger, Margaret Phillips and Jacques van Oortmerssen. From 1994-9, he was Tutor in Organ Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music and Chetham's and worked for BBC Religious Broadcasting.

Matthew worked extensively with Mike Brewer as Assistant Conductor of the National Youth Choir of Great Britain from 1993-9; he has also conducted the BT Scottish Ensemble, the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orchestra of St Mary's Music School, Wells Cathedral School Chamber Orchestra, Devon Baroque and the Sarum Orchestra. He is increasingly in demand for choral workshops, masterclasses and adjudications in the UK and abroad, and has made over twenty CDs as a conductor or solo organist with Albany, ASV, Black Box, Delphian, Herald, Hyperion, Lammass and Regent record labels. His ten discs on Delphian itself include three as conductor of The Exon Singers and five with the Choir of St Mary's, Edinburgh, as well as an ongoing survey of Pachelbel's organ works recorded on different organs around the UK.

As an organist, Matthew has given recitals in France, Ireland, Switzerland and throughout the UK, including festival appearances at Carlisle, Lichfield, Newbury, Oxford and Peterborough and at venues such as St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Cathedral and St John's Smith Square. As a conductor and solo organist he has premiered many works by leading composers including Richard Allain, David Bednall, Gavin Bryars, Geoffrey Burgon, Dave Heath, Francis Jackson, Gabriel Jackson, Naji Hakim, George Lloyd, James MacMillan, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Tarik O'Regan, Arvo Pärt, Howard Skempton and Giles Swayne. He is increasingly active as a composer himself and some of his works have been recorded for commercial release and broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

Beth Mackay

Beth Mackay studied at the University of Leeds, from which she graduated in 2004 with first-class marks for performance, and in 2007 was awarded a Postgraduate Diploma (Vocal Studies) with distinction from the Royal Northern College of Music, where she was a recipient of the Annie Ridyard Scholarship and a finalist in the Frederic Cox award for young singers. She now studies with Irene Drummond in Edinburgh.

Beth has performed with the Leeds Baroque Orchestra, sung at the Suffolk Villages Festival, and has twice participated in Classic FM's Mostly Mozart Festival finale with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. Her opera roles include the Baker's Wife in *Sondheim's Into the Woods*, Rihova in *Dvořák's The Stubborn Lovers*, Morgan Le Fay in *Michael Babb's Avalon*, Lapak in *Janáček's The Cunning Little Vixen* and Larina in *Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin*. The RNCM's excerpt series has seen her as Polinesso (*Ariodante*) and Nancy (*Albert Herring*) and in the title roles in *Handel's Ariodante*, *Britten's The Rape of Lucretia* and *Rossini's L'Italiana in Algeri*.

Beth will continue her postgraduate studies at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama on the Opera Studies course in September 2008.

Bartholomew Lawrence

Bartholomew began his musical career at an early age when he became a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral at the age of 9. He later sang as a Lay Clerk in the Cathedral. He was a member of Chantage, a London-based choir (currently BBC Choir of the Year), before commencing studies at the RSAMD, first with Ian Thompson and subsequently with George Gordon. He sings with various choirs including *Laudibus*, *Glasgow University Chapel Choir*, *The Sixteen* and the *National Youth Choir of Great Britain*, of which he has been a member since 2002 and has recently been appointed Bass 2 Section Leader. He has appeared on *Delphian* in the NYC's recordings of choral music by *Heinrich Schütz* and *Giles Swayne*.

Bartholomew has been a finalist in the *Frank Spedding Lieder Prize*, runner-up in the *Jean Highgate Competition* and highly commended in the *Margaret Dick* award. He has recently understudied the role of *Prince Gremin* in the RSAMD production of *Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin*. Bartholomew has also worked with the *Scottish Baroque* players as a soloist in *Bach's B Minor Mass* in *Glasgow City Halls* directed by *Graham Taylor*. He performs regularly as a member of the vocal octet *Dieci*.

James Akers

James studied the lute at the Royal College of Music with Jakob Lindberg and at Trinity College of Music with Jacob Heringman and David Miller, with additional lessons from Paul O'Dette. Since graduating he has performed internationally with many leading ensembles and soloists including Fretwork, The Parley of Instruments, the Scottish, English and Irish Chamber Orchestras, The King's Consort, The Hanover Band, Emma Kirkby and Michael Chance, and has broadcast on BBC Radio 3, BBC1, BBC News 24, France Musique and RTÉ Lyric FM (Ireland).

Christopher Sheldrake

Christopher studied with Edward Brookes and Robert Sutherland at the Royal College of Music where he was a prize winner. He has performed with various consorts including the Monteverdi Choir and the Gabrieli Consort as well as being in demand as a soloist both in the UK and abroad. Christopher is currently Vicar Principal at Wells Cathedral having previously been a Lay Clerk at The Queens Free Chapel, Windsor Castle.

Christopher teaches piano at Downside School.

The Exon Singers

Soprano

Mary Chelu
Ali Darragh
Audrey Dean
Anna Dichmont
Tracey Hansford
Lyndsey Key
Rachel Shouksmith
Kate Taylor

Alto

Claire Duckworth
Karl Gietzmann
George Haynes
Matthew O'Malley
Ben Sawyer

Tenor

William Blake
Bryan Dadson
David Goodenough
Chris May

Bass

Julian Poppleton
John Robinson
Christopher Sheldrake
Graham Wood



Song of Songs

Laudibus, Mike Brewer *conductor*
(DCD34042)

The Song of Songs stands apart from its Biblical surroundings as one of the supreme love poems of world literature, a celebration of erotic love in the form of a dialogue between a bridegroom and his bride, invoking all the senses – especially smell, in the fragrance of wine, blossom, fruits and spices. Ranging widely over five centuries, from the relative asperity of Dunstaple to the lush exoticism of Daniel-Lesur and the intensely touching simplicity of Howard Skempton's settings, this cherry-picked assortment of sweetmeats is given exultant life by Mike Brewer and Laudibus.

'The music, performances and sound on the disc are warm, sensitive and luminous' – BBC Music Magazine, September 2007

'Laudibus seems to be not one chamber choir but several on this CD'
– International Record Review, September 2007



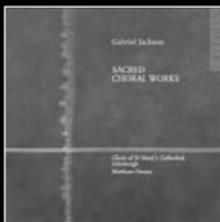
Francis Jackson: Sacred Choral Works

The Exon Singers, Matthew Owens *conductor*
(DCD34035)

Now in his early nineties, Francis Jackson remains one of the finest, best loved and most versatile church musicians of our age. The eleven works on this disc, none of them previously recorded, have all the colour, emotional depth and attention to structural detail that are consistent hallmarks of his style. Working closely with the composer, the Exon Singers bring their customary blend of virtuosity, intense commitment and subtle responsiveness to this portrait in sound of a very special composer.

'as touching and rewarding a compendium of very English 20th-century church music as one could wish for'

– Gramophone, December 200



Gabriel Jackson: Sacred Choral Works

Choir of St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh

Matthew Owens *conductor*

(DCD34027)

The culmination of a four-year association between the choir of St Mary's Cathedral and British Composer Award winner Gabriel Jackson, this disc presents nine world premiere recordings. Whether gentle and meditative, brilliantly exuberant, or soaring in ecstatic contemplation, Jackson's vividly communicative music is brought thrillingly to life by a choir at the peak of its powers.

'Beautifully crafted music ... Owens has trained this choir to an exceptionally high standard and the sound can only be described as luxurious'

– Gramophone, December 2005

'This disc will knock you out'

– Cathedral Music, November 2005 (Editor's Choice)



Sir Peter Maxwell Davies: O magnum mysterium/Magnificat & Nunc dimittis

Choir of St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh

Matthew Owens *conductor*, Michael Bonaventure *organ*

(DCD34037)

In the 1960s few would have predicted that Peter Maxwell Davies would eventually write a set of Evening Canticles; yet religious texts have always been of fundamental importance to the composer, as this disc vividly demonstrates by bringing together sacred masterworks from both ends of his career. Tough, uncompromising and of surpassing beauty, Davies' major contributions to the Anglican repertoire are given thrilling voice by these fearless champions of contemporary liturgical music.

'boldly sculpted conceptions ... The Edinburgh choristers, well trained by Matthew Owens, make light of the music's demands, and the recordings couple abundant atmosphere with a fair degree of natural clarity.'

– Gramophone, Awards issue 2006

