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Spem in Alium Nunquam Habui:

Performance Practice, History, and Mystery of Thomas Tallis' Forty-Part Renaissance Motet

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Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium* has been regarded as one of the most grand and virtuosic pieces of sacred polyphony from the renaissance era. It is marked as a tour de force of sorts by many musicians and conductors from the past and the present. As one looks deeper into this piece, they will notice just how striking it really is in comparison to almost any other piece from the same time. One of the most incredible qualities is the fact that it is a polychoral, forty-voice motet, the only of its time. What makes this Tallis work particularly intriguing to delve into, is the mystery of there being no clear date of when this piece was composed or published. It is almost like this piece is completely frozen in time. One of the most exciting things about this piece is the fact that it has a very particular performance practice reputation, which continues to challenge and astound all who attempt to study it, teach it, and sing it; both past and present. This paper will seek to discuss the various different theories surrounding when Tallis actually wrote *Spem in Alium*, what he might have written it for, as well as some of his inspirations at the time. There will also be a broad scope of theoretical elements within the piece that are of importance to note, as well as an in depth history of the performance practice of it, both past and present. Challenges regarding the modern-day rehearsal and performance logistics of the piece will also be discussed.

When it comes to studying Renaissance music, one of the most difficult elements is the dating of compositions. For Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium*, this is particularly evident. For centuries, there have been countless theories surrounding Thomas Tallis' purpose for writing this virtuosic motet, as well as theories surrounding when exactly it was written in correlation with significant events that were occuring in England around it's possible composition. As of today, there are really five major theories one can evaluate in reference to when and why Thomas Tallis might have written *Spem.*

One of the most widely speculated and believed notions by historians in reference to the writing of *Spem in Alium,* was that it must have been written for a specific occasion or special ceremony. This is due in part, by the fact of how large the piece is both physically and musically, and what an undertaking it would be to coordinate the performance of it, especially in reference to the space. These elements of the piece all hint at the fact that it was written for a special occassion of sorts. In opposition to this theory though, is the fact that at this time in England, sacred polyphony was highly restricted to religious, ritualistic, or small services. This can be seen in the compositional elements of mostly all other pieces of sacred polyphony of the renaissance era, such as voicings, specified religious text, etc. Pretty much all except for *Spem in Alium,* were considered "normal."

Going with the widely accepted theory that *Spem in Alium* must have been written for a special occasion, most people think that it was written for the funeral of Mary or the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I in 1559. But, the first theory revolves around the possibility of Tallis writing *Spem* as a thank you to Queen Elizabeth I because of a royal gift that she gave him. As stated by Paul Doe in the journal entry *Music & Letters: Tallis' 'Spem in Alium' and the Elizabethan Respond-Motet*, "The most recent theory has been put forward by Denis Stevens, who has drawn attention to the entry "in bonis Thomas Tallis 40" in the royal household accounts of 1558-9"(Doe 5). This entry suggests that Queen Elizabeth awarded Tallis a bonus of 40 pounds while he was a gentleman of the Chapel Royal. A possible motivation from Queen Elizabeth to give him this reward was the fact that at this time in England, Catholicism was wavering and the country was in the process of adopting a Protestant Religious Settlement. The Queen might have been nervous and wanted to make sure that Tallis would still continue his job during this time of religious shifting, so she gave him the bonus. The validity that this theory has

is the fact that the sum of the bonus 40 pounds was found in the royal household accounts, and that amount might have been the reason behind Tallis writing a 40-part motet to bid the Queen thanks. An objection to this theory is the matter of Thomas Tallis being considered a well-off man, and that a bonus of 40 pounds from the Queen for doing his normal job would not be enough motivation to write such a grand work as *Spem.* Also, at early time of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, England was still using the Tudor system of "forced loans" on people, and that the 40 pounds in correlation to Thomas Tallis, might have just been a record of a forced loan being paid back to Tallis from the Queen.

The second theory behind Tallis' writing of *Spem in Alium* revolves around the piece likely being composed far after 1559, and most likely even later than 1570. This is due to the fact that the form of the piece in reference especially to the text and structure, is quite ahead of its time. *Spem in Alium* has a text form of response, verse, response. These respond texts were typically used by English composers with a preference for them being used between 1540 and 1580. This more modern and elaborate and text setting, exemplified in *Spem in Alium,* is a clear departure from the traditional cantus firmus of the late 1560's. One might wonder why Tallis was able to make this departure from the traditional cantus firmus of the time? With this theory, it seems that this piece would not be used for normal liturgical use, but possibly that these types of responses, including *Spem,* might have been "...performed in the queen's chapel before or after services, as expressly permitted in her injunction in 1559"(Doe 8).

The next two theories go hand in hand, with the motivations for Tallis writing *Spem in Alium* being those of his expression of his feelings toward politics, religion, patriotism for England, and simply spotlighting his sheer talent as a composer. During the late 1500's, Catholicism was at odds with the people of England, especially in reference to the Queen. There

was even a Papal Bull of Excommunication in 1570 to try and gather up Catholic opposition to Queen Elizabeth I. This movement ultimately failed because at the same time in England, there was a major rise in the spirit of patriotism on behalf of English Catholics. It is proposed that Tallis might have written this "over exaggerated" motet around this time, as a means of showing his true expression of his religion and patriotism. A similar theory behind Tallis writing *Spem in Alium* is his purpose of making a statement on behalf of Queen Elizabeth's musicians, whom Tallis was one of, in response to how they felt about some growing issues that the country was facing at the time. Among Queen Elizabeth's musicians around 1570, there appeared to be a growing sense of confidence in their musicianship and skills, and they felt, Tallis included, that the music they were performing was far too easy for them and they were lacking in recognition, opposed to other groups of musicians in Europe at the time. So, continuing on with these feelings, Tallis possibly decided to write *Spem in Alium* to make a statement to Queen Elizabeth and the people, about just how talented her musicians were. This theory is supported by a possible performance of *Spem* sometime in September of 1573 followed by a possible petition of the musician's complaints about recognition and growing national inflation. Thus leading to said petition being "…granted on 22 January 1575 in the form of a license to print and publish music"(Doe 13).

The last, and oddly enough least elaborate, but most widely accepted theory behind Tallis' motivation for writing *Spem in Alium* was for Queen Elizabeth I's fortieth birthday on September 7th, 1573; hence the forty parts. No matter which of the theories is true, the composition dating of this piece still remains a mystery especially because up to Tallis' death, no composer wrote a polychoral piece before or after it that was in any way similar. Some even question if *Spem in Alium* was composed by Tallis at all.

Truthfully for some, at first glance and listening to Tallis' *Spem in Alium*, it can be a lot to handle and interpret. When one first hears a description of *Spem in Alium* and they are told that it is forty parts, they might wonder how that is possible. Here are some very important musical and theoretical aspects of this piece to better understand the levels of depth which Tallis has layered in. This piece is divided into eight choirs, each with five voices which makes for a total of forty individual parts. Throughout the piece though, not all forty voices are singing at the same time all of the time. There are only a few moments in which all forty voices are all singing together. *Spem in Alium* begins with a single voice on the word 'spem' sung by the second voice of Choir I, which is then echoed a fifth higher by voice one of Choir I two beats later. There is a slight duet in mixolydian mode between the two upper voices of Choir I until more parts start to enter in. From the top of page one until the top of page 4, there is a literal waterfall effect occurring in the music. Little by little, the lower choirs start to enter like a steady stream of flowing water. Starting with Choir I at measure one, Choir II at measure four, Choir III at measure eleven, Choir IV at measure sixteen, Choir V at measure 23 and choir VI at measure 24. At this point at measure 25, the uppermost choirs stop singing and the music travels all the way down to choirs VII and VIII. These sorts of shapes of music occur throughout the entire piece and sometimes go the opposite direction, with the bottommost choirs starting and the music ascending to the upper choirs. Music theorists and historians have even made color graphs to show the progression and flow shapes of the music throughout this piece to show the whole contour. The first, and probably most grand musical moment of the entire piece is at measure forty, beat two, when all forty voices come in on the word 'praeter.' All eight choirs continue to sing all together until measure forty-five. Then, a musical ascent begins from choir VIII in measure forty-five up until page ten, measure sixty-five. All eight choirs sing together again at measure sixty-nine on the

words ‘et omnia.’ This entrance of all forty voices is less surprising than the first tutti entrance, as the voices ease slower into this tutti. Then, at the pickup to measure seventy-five, all choirs are silent for one beat and then they dramatically enter all at once on the words ‘in tribulatione.’ This tutti entrance is by far the most shocking because it feels as though it is coming out of nowhere and the listener is being hit by sound. This tutti is also the shortest because it only lasts one full measure. Starting on page twelve, the mood and form of the piece begins to shift. There is now imitative polyphony as well as call and response between the groups of choirs. For example, on measure eighty-eight, choirs III and IV sing a passage on ‘domine deus’ and is then echoed by choirs VII and VIII a measure later. This imitative call and response continues all through the top of page sixteen. The call and response begins between two choirs at a time echoing each other, but it then switches to groups of four choirs at a time doing the imitation. There is yet again another major musical moment at measure one-hundred-nine in which “This conversation of giants finally comes to an end in C Major, followed by two slow beats of breathtaking silence(or reverberation, if you are lucky in your choice of hall). Then an incredible moment - an A major chord, sung by all 40 parts, made all the more sensational by the absence of any true hint of A major up to now”(McElheran 27). Jaako Mantyjarvi revealed something quite interesting in his video commentary entitled *Thomas Tallis: Spem in Alium. A Mystery in 40 parts*. He revealed that if you add up the measure numbers of the two first tutti moments which is measures forty and sixty-nine, that equals one-hundred-nine, which is the measure that the surprising tonal center of A major occurs on the words ‘respice humilitatem nostram’ meaning “regard our humanity.” There is then one more final ascent beginning with choir IV at measure 115 on page seventeen, and continuing until the top of page eighteen at measure

one-hundred-twenty. The final tutti goes until the end of the piece starting at measure one-hundred-twenty-two and ends on a grand, full G major chord.

As one can see, Thomas Tallis' *Spem in Alium* has some remarkably unique qualities as far as the many different theories surrounding its compositional purpose, as well as the many symbolic and hidden musical ideas hidden within the motet. One of the biggest areas of exploration in regards to this piece is the history of the very unique performance practice of it. The most obvious subject matter to address is the fact that the motet features eight choirs with five voice parts each, making for a total of forty individual parts. One might wonder how the eight choirs would be in formation with each other. During the renaissance and especially later on, sacred musicians developed and practiced a "polychoral" or "Venetian" style of singing which means that the singers would be spread out in groups or clusters among all different areas of the cathedral. This would make for a "surround sound" concert. Even though this style of singing wasn't really put into practice until the early baroque period, many have speculated that *Spem in Alium* would have been performed in a similar style. Many have speculated that the very first performance of this motet occurred at London's Arundel House which was owned by the Earl of Arundal. Jaako Mantyjarvi in his video commentary, proposes another, possibly even more likely place in which *Spem in Alium* was first performed. The Earl of Arundel actually owned a second property which was called Nonsuch Palace, and in the catalogs of the household possessions included a copy of the motet. Not only that, but the palace had an octagonal dining hall, which would have been a perfect space to perform it, with the singers surrounding the guests in an octagonal shape. There is also major evidence to support the fact that when Thomas Tallis was writing this motet, he had meant for it to be performed in a circle surrounding an audience because of the way in which the music literally moves around the different choirs in a

complete circle as seen in the ascents and descents of the music in the score. Jaako Mantyjarvi elaborates perfectly by stating "but this was never really the point with these gargantuan pieces. It was more a question of composers and musicians exploring space as a musical element." Another curious thing to note is the clearly noticeable size of the score of *Spem in Alium*. All eight choir systems are directly under each other and each page contains one full row of all eight choirs. There have been some ideas tossed around that due to physical size of the score, part books were made to be used in rehearsal and performance of this motet, but this idea quickly goes out of the window when one sees just how many part books would have to be made, as well as the difficulty it would be for the singers because there are a lot of rests and moments in the music when certain choirs do not sing for a considerable amount of time.

As one might assume, this motet is still in print and performed by choirs today. Due to the virtuosic nature of this piece though, there are many challenges that conductors and singers alike end up encountering when they begin delving into it. Most of the choirs that attempt to perform this piece in the modern day are usually select chamber ensembles in which there is one person per part, or highly advanced collegiate choirs, sometimes having two or three people maximum per voice part. John Stuhr-Rommerein quotes Pam Perry in his *Choral Journal* article "Thomas Tallis's Spem in Alium and the "ultimate musical experience," saying that for choral musicians in today's world, "the ultimate musical experience… is, the small ensemble" (Stuhr-Rommerein 21). Stuhr-Rommerein and Perry argue that there is no choral setting more rewarding than the small ensemble. This scenario would allude to the fact that each of the singers would need to have very high musicianship skills and to be able to take on a piece like *Spem*, they would each be held accountable for their own part. They also argue that this in turn will lead to a much higher feeling of achievement on behalf of the singers once they have "conquered the

beast." This type of ensemble environment though is very rare to be found, especially in the reality of the school system in today's world. So, one might wonder how an ensemble and conductor could approach taking on a project such as *Spem in Alium* in today's reality. Actually, there is quite a wealth of resources, rehearsal suggestions, and performance practices that have aided various choirs in presenting this piece. American conductor Brock McElheran from the Crane School of Music offered quite a few rehearsal and performance suggestions and techniques in reference to *Spem* in his 1983 entry in *The Choral Journal* entitled "Thomas Tallis' Spem in Alium Nun Quam: Grandeur in 40 parts." Due to the physically large size of the sheet music, it is quite difficult for singers to hold the music while rehearsing as well as following a single part since there are so many on each page. McElheran as well as other conductors have suggested cutting up the full score into pieces so that each piece of paper only has one full choirs' line (five parts). This will make it much easier for singers to follow their line in the music as they will only be looking at five parts at a time opposed to forty. He also suggests that singers use a highlighter to highlight their individual part so that they will always know where they are in the music. As far as logistics are concerned, it is also very important to spread musicianship strengths throughout the various choirs so that there will be choral leaders in each choir. This will also aid the process of sectional rehearsals as well by having choir leaders in all eight choirs. McElheran also has a very straightforward and stress-free suggestion of how to first introduce the motet to the choir. He suggests that "For the first rehearsal have a general catch-as-catch-can run-through. Then let them listen to a recording to hear the finished product" (McElheran 28). In rehearsal and performance in order to aid the singers in keeping their place in the music, it has been suggested that a conductor should give some sort of visual cue at the start of every new page. John Stuhr Rommerein also weighs in on his experience with preparing and rehearsing

Spem in Alium with a choir. He states “The work’s unique construction necessitates special rehearsal methods which not only call for a rearrangement of the rehearsal schedule but also innovative approaches to the rehearsal itself” (Stuhr-Rommerein 21). Stuhr-Rommereim mentions the many benefits that can come with rehearsing this piece though. He mentions due to their being eight divided choirs, it allows an opportunity for the singers to work in a small group environment with each other. It also allows for a rearrangement of the choral rehearsal schedule so that the conductor can have individual time with each choir, which can have some major benefits. He also recalls that singing the piece in a rounded, polychoral formation makes for a much more fascinating performance, especially when it comes to showcasing some of the musical effects that Tallis put in this work such as the sound traveling in a circle. In reference to his choir Stur-Rommereim stated “We found it much easier to perform on the risers, but the fascinating architectonic effects were lost” (Stuhr-Rommerein 22). All of these are just some of the difficulties, challenges, and options that come with ensembles performing *Spem in Alium* in the modern-day world.

To this day, Tallis’ *Spem in Alium* continues to astound musicians, conductors, and listeners alike. Whether it is because of its mysterious and indefinite compositional history, the hidden symbols and and musical effects found within it, or the very abnormally special performance practice of it, it absolutely stands alone as one of the most virtuosic and epic pieces of music from the renaissance era. Though it appears to be a great challenge to rehearse and perform for all who are involved, it is truly a feat when it is conquered and makes for a musical journey that highlights the epitome of Thomas Tallis’ writings and the time in which he did so.

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