

Britten, Kodály and Taverner

Britten Pears Chamber Choir
Francesca Massey organ
James Davy music director

John Taverner (c.1490–1545)

Dum transisset Sabbatum

8'

John Taverner

The Western Wynde Mass

33' (total)

i. Gloria

William Byrd (c.1540–1623)

Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la

4'

Antonio de Cabezón (1510–1566)

Pange lingua (pub'd 1578)

4'

John Taverner

The Western Wynde Mass (continued)

ii. Credo

iii. Sanctus & Benedictus

iv. Agnus Dei

INTERVAL

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Missa Brevis, Op.63 (1959)

11'

Kyrie – Gloria – Sanctus & Benedictus – Agnus Dei

Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967)

Missa Brevis (1942)

32'

*Introitus – Kyrie – Gloria – Credo – Sanctus & Benedictus –
Agnus Dei – Ite, missa est*

Despite being separated by more than four centuries, the three settings of the Latin mass in this afternoon's programme share several features: each draws material from pre-existing music, whether sacred or secular; each deploys means of musical organisation that come from outside the texts being set; and each responds imaginatively to its self-imposed limitations, whether of performing forces or musical material. Of course, the careers of the three composers concerned, and therefore their relationship to the mass form, were very different. Neither Kodály nor Britten ever held a church position, and for each, this *Missa brevis* ('short mass', ie without a Credo) is their only setting of the mass text. The **Western Wynde Mass**, by contrast, is one of six surviving settings by John Taverner, and he may have completed several more: little is known about his life or career before or after his brief period of employment in Oxford.

Taverner was approached by the Bishop of Lincoln in late 1525 to become the first instructor to the choristers at Cardinal College, precursor of today's Christ Church, the magnificent new foundation that Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was currently establishing. After some hesitation, Taverner formally took up duties a year later when the college was opened, and duly presided over a choir of 12 chaplains, 12 lay clerks and 16 choristers – large by the standards of the time, and offering possibilities for ambitious music-making of which Taverner took full advantage. His period in Oxford was short-lived, however: the choir's resources began to diminish after October 1529, when Wolsey lost his position as Henry VIII's first minister, and the following year Taverner decided to return to his native Lincolnshire, where he probably spent the rest of his life.

The *Western Wynde Mass* makes extensive use of the early 16th-century secular song after which it has been named. The words to which this melody were generally sung are probably several centuries older in origin; a modern translation reads as follows:

Western wind, when will thou blow
The small rain down can rain
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

The suggestive nature of this text, alongside the affinity of Taverner's approach to the use of vernacular material in Lutheran music, and the fact that two younger composers possibly known to Taverner (Christopher Tye and John Sheppard) composed masses using the same melody, has led to speculation that the *Western Wynde Mass* dates from after Wolsey's fall from grace, when composers became less restricted by Catholic orthodoxy. There is no firm evidence to prove this suggestion. What is not in dispute, however, is the ingenuity with which Taverner uses his chosen melody, whose distinctive profile begins with a rising perfect 5th followed by a gradual descent down the first five degrees of the minor scale. It is sung 36 times in total, with no gaps between repetitions: nine times in each of the four movements (counting the Sanctus and Benedictus as a composite movement), most often in the soprano part but on occasion by tenors or basses (never by altos). Such is Taverner's ingenuity that the melody's numerous repetitions carry no risk of monotony: rather, they bring musical unity to a setting otherwise characterised by imaginative variety of treatment and texture.

Kodály's *Missa Brevis* was first performed in dramatic circumstances. From late 1944, the composer and his wife were forced into hiding in the vaults of the Budapest Opera House as Soviet and Romanian forces besieged the city; on 11 February 1945, a group of the house's soloists, accompanied by a harmonium, came together to sing the mass in one of the cloakrooms, with gunfire audible in the background. After the war was over, Kodály reworked the mass in a version for full orchestra, premiered in Worcester Cathedral at the 1948 Three Choirs Festival.

The setting comprises six sung movements, framed by two organ solos. It reveals the breadth of Kodály's musical interests, with references not only to Gregorian chant and distant precursors such as Palestrina, Bach and Handel, but also to Hungarian folk music (to whose collection and classification Kodály, alongside Bartók, devoted so much energy) and to Ernst von Dohnányi's 1930 *Missa in dedicatione ecclesiae* (intriguing in light of the criticism the senior Hungarian composer drew for working in Germany well into the Nazi years). But the work also displays an overall stylistic unity, with themes from the Kyrie and Gloria satisfyingly reworked in the Agnus Dei, that counteracts any sense of eclecticism.

Britten was inspired to write his *Missa Brevis* for upper voices by hearing the boys of Westminster Cathedral Choir sing his *A Ceremony of Carols* under George Malcolm in early 1959. He enjoyed the choir's full-bodied, 'Continental' tone, very different from the thinner sound then prevalent in Anglican cathedrals: 'the whole choir sang with a brilliance & authority which was staggering – owing to you, my dear, I know', he told Malcolm. Britten noted down his first ideas for the exuberant Sanctus in a pocket diary, and quickly added other movements to complete the short but highly effective setting that Malcolm premiered with the choirboys at a celebration of the Mass on 22 July 1959. As with Kodály's work, Britten's debt to plainchant is obvious, but this source is transformed in each of the movements, from the ebullient 7/8 Gloria to the sombre Agnus Dei, with a virtuosity that is unmistakably Britten's own.

This afternoon's programme opens with one of John Taverner's two surviving large-scale Easter anthems with the title **Dum transisset Sabbatum** ('When the Sabbath was over'), setting the verses from Mark's Gospel that describe Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' visiting Christ's tomb on Easter Sunday, only to find that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. Like the other 16th-century works in the concert, the piece is built around a pre-existing melodic line: here, a slow-moving plainchant *cantus firmus* sustained by the tenors. Between the masses of Taverner and Britten we hear two short organ pieces with two short organ pieces by 16th-century composers from the generations after Taverner. Byrd's **Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la** takes its title from the names given by the 11th-century monk and music theorist Guido of Arezzo to the first six notes of the major scale (modern versions of the system replace 'Ut' with 'Doh'). These six notes provide the piece's framework in the same way that 'Western Wynde' does for Taverner's mass, but over them Byrd weaves a joyful fantasia that sounds almost improvisational, despite its intricacy. In the *glosado* or 'gloss' by the blind Spanish composer and organist Antonio de Cabezón, meanwhile, the backbone of the music is supplied by the well-known medieval hymn, **Pange lingua** ('Sing, my tongue').