

Rosa Mystica

SOMMCD 0617

Callum Alger^a organIsabella Abbot Parker^b, Imogen Russell^c sopranos

Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir

Paul Spicer conductor

1	John Tavener (1944-2013)	Mother of God, here I stand	3:15
2	Nicholas Ludford (1485-1557)	Ave cujus conceptio	8:24
3	Anton Bruckner (1824-96)	Ave Maria	2:49
4	Martin Dalby (1942-2018)	Mater salutaris ^a	4:42
5	Ola Gjeilo (b.1978)	Second Eve	6:00
6	George Dyson (1883-1964)	Magnificat in F ^{ab}	3:33
7	Benjamin Britten (1913-76)	Rosa Mystica (from AMDG)	4:24
8	Herbert Howells (1892-1983)	Magnificat (Chichester Service) ^a	7:24
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10	Healey Willan (1880-1968)	I beheld her, beautiful as a dove	2:16
11	Judith Bingham (b.1952)	Ave virgo sanctissima ^{C*}	5:08
12	Pierre Villette (1926-98)	Hymne à la Vierge ^C	4:01
13	Trond Kverno (b.1945)	Ave maris stella	5:06
14	Cecilia McDowall (b.1951)	Of a Rose [*]	2:24

* First Recordings

Total Duration: 62:45

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Portraits
of the
Blessed
Virgin
MaryRoyal Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir
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Rosa Mystica

Portraits of the Blessed Virgin Mary in music

The worship of the Blessed Virgin Mary is as old as Christianity itself. The Council of Ephesus in 431 sanctioned the cult of the Virgin as Mother of God and images of the Virgin then began to flourish. Theologians also recognized the parallel between the physical suffering of Jesus on the cross and of Mary's spiritual and maternal suffering – an emotional crucifixion perhaps best represented through the words of the *Stabat Mater*.

Programmes devoted to settings of texts venerating the Virgin Mary are commonplace. What I wanted to do in presenting such a programme was to demonstrate something of the range of styles which have inspired composers from the 16th to the 21st centuries. It is a truly international offering, too, with composers from the UK, France, Switzerland, Austria, Norway and Canada represented. The varied styles range from the austere, hushed, mystical atmosphere created by John Tavener through one of the most glorious pieces of Renaissance polyphony in Nicholas Ludford's *Ave cujus conceptio*, to Herbert Howells at his most unsettling and enigmatic, Bruckner in dramatic mode, Carl Rütli making our hips swing, George Dyson giving us a serene soprano solo, Pierre Villette's mouthwatering sensuous harmonies, Benjamin Britten in mother veneration mode and much more besides. It is a world of aural experience.

John Tavener (1944-2013) has one of the most distinctive voices in British 20th-century music. His *The Veil of the Temple* was written in 2003 and its first performance at the Temple Church in London lasted some seven hours during the night. Tavener called it "the supreme achievement of my life". ***Mother of God, here I stand*** is a short extract from this monumental work which is entirely typical of Tavener's prayerful choral style. The text is by Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41). Tavener marks it to be sung "hushed, with infinite tenderness".

Nicholas Ludford (1485-1557) is perhaps one of the least known but also one of the most celebrated of the Tudor composers. His music survives through copies in the *Peterhouse Partbooks* (Cambridge). He has been described by musicologist David Skinner as "one of the last unsung geniuses of Tudor polyphony". ***Ave cujus conception*** ('Hail whose conception') is a large-scale motet setting a text based on the five corporal joys of Our Lady – her Conception, Nativity, Annunciation, Purification and Assumption. It is in two sections with the first in a triple and the second in a quadruple meter. The tenor line is missing and has been recomposed in the edition used for this recording by Nick Sandon.

We move from the 16th to the 19th century and to Anton Bruckner (1824-96), one of the major composers of the period and one whose work as an organist and choirmaster in Linz, Austria informed his prolific output of choral music. His well-known setting of the much-set Marian text, ***Ave Maria*** (the Angelic Salutation), was written in 1861 when Bruckner was working

at Linz Cathedral. It is a dramatic setting with exciting contrasts of texture and dynamic. The upper voices of the opening are followed by lower voices, giving a feeling of both antiphonal and double-choir layering. The build-up through all the voices – which ends in a cacophonous shout of “Jesus” left to echo into the distance – is typical of Bruckner’s understanding of the effect of voices in a great acoustic. It is as if the building’s reverberation is another voice part in the texture.

Martin Dalby (1942-2018) was a Scottish composer and Head of Music at the BBC in Scotland from 1972-91. His beautiful setting of medieval words translated by Brian Stone in ***Mater salutaris*** was commissioned by Glasgow High School and first performed in 1981. It is a passionate and lyrical setting for choir and organ which moves us effortlessly from the 19th into the 20th century, where we encounter the music of Ola Gjeilo (*b.1978*). Gjeilo is a Norwegian composer whose music has become very popular with choirs all over the world. He studied in London at the Royal College of Music and the Julliard School in New York and now lives and works in the USA. ***Second Eve***, commissioned by the Riverside City College Chamber Singers, was written in 2012 and is typical of his rich harmonic language which combines apparent simplicity with a sophisticated palette of harmonic colours and an eight-part texture.

Sir George Dyson (1883-1964) was one of the movers and shakers of his generation and especially in the world of music education as Director of the Royal College of Music – the first of its alumni to achieve this distinction.

He wrote a great deal of choral music including some wonderful large-scale choral/orchestral works especially for the Three Choirs Festivals. He wrote two SATB settings with organ of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis which are amongst the most performed of all these evening canticle settings in the cathedral repertoire. They are very contrasted settings: the earlier D major one being almost symphonic in its scale and ambition, and the F major setting sung here being gentle and feminine as befits the sentiment of the canticle.

The ***Magnificat*** is the text in which Mary thanks God for being chosen to be the mother of Jesus. It has had as many approaches as there are composers of this incredibly fertile text. Dyson’s F major setting was written just following the Second World War for Hereford Cathedral. He felt the need for a peaceful setting after the mayhem of the previous few years. The soprano solo which features throughout is a representation of Mary’s own voice and Dyson seems to encapsulate her very human vulnerability in this timeless setting.

Benjamin Britten (1913-76) enriched the choral repertory with many significant and original works. ***Rosa Mystica*** (from which this recording takes its name) is from a set of pieces called *AMDG* – an abbreviation of the motto of the Jesuit order, ‘Ad Maiorem (spelled ‘Majorem’ in Britten’s score) Dei Gloriam’ – to texts by Gerard Manley Hopkins, who belonged to their number. This work was one of Britten’s first projects completed when he arrived in the United States in self-imposed exile in 1939. It was written for Peter Pears’ Round Table Singers but the set was never performed as a whole. *Rosa Mystica* is the second

movement and is a passionate, questing, questioning piece asking eventually if Mary is “that rose” the title alludes to but concluding that Christ Jesus our Lord must still take precedence. One senses a deep connection in this setting with Britten’s own mother in the way that he sets the words “mother of mine” like a very personal mantra throughout.

Herbert Howells (1892-1981) wrote 20 settings of the **Magnificat** and Nunc Dimittis – an extraordinary achievement in their sheer variety. His setting for Chichester Cathedral was written in 1967 and is deeply troubled in mood. Howells was deeply affected by the world events taking place around this time including Russian nuclear testing, the Cuban missile crisis and the later assassination of President John F Kennedy. He noted in his diary on August 31, 1961: “grave bomb-testing news from Russia” and this became an often-repeated theme in subsequent diary entries. This led to Howells reflecting this mood in the music written around the time. The fragility of the opening double-soprano music (like Dyson, reflecting the female voice of Mary), the discordant music following, but the ultimately heady music of the Gloria all combine to make this one of the most haunting, challenging and sadly least-performed of all his settings.

We take something of an aural leap from Howells at his darkest as we move to the music of the Swiss composer Carl Rütli (b.1949) whose choral music effortlessly blends the English choral tradition with jazz and blues. His gorgeous setting of the **Ave Maria** text is exactly this and is deeply contrasted with the music of Healey Willan (1880-1968) who was born in London but

emigrated to Canada in 1913 to become one of that country’s most significant church musicians and composers. His concise motet ***I beheld her, beautiful as a dove*** was one of three motets written for the Feast of Our Lady. It sets a text from the Responsories from an Eighth-century Office of Our Lady.

The simple purity of this setting is like a palette-cleanser between Rütli’s bluesy dancing and a new work by Judith Bingham (b.1952), one of the most successful contemporary composers of choral music working in the UK. Bingham was for many years a member of the BBC Singers and so understands the voice and its effective use as well as anyone. Her motet ***Ave Virgo Sanctissima*** (‘Hail, Holy Virgin’) was written in 2011, commissioned by St Thomas the Apostle Catholic church in Los Angeles, and sets words by Prudentius, St. Ambrose and an anonymous writer. French in its influence, it has a rich palette of colour and harmony which sets a devotional tone in praise of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A soprano soloist floats effortlessly above the texture at key points, once again reminding us of the singularity of Mary’s situation.

The French composer Pierre Villette (1926-98) was born in Normandy. He studied with Maurice Duruflé and developed a highly personal style of which his ***Hymne à la Vierge*** is both a prime example and his most popular composition. Rich, chromatic harmony and an almost hedonistic approach to word setting treads a thin line between spirituality and sensuality. We have taken Villette’s suggestion that the second verse may be sung by a soprano soloist with the choir humming to add variety to the three verses of the piece.

Trond Kverno (b.1945) is the second Norwegian composer in our programme. His beautiful and unusual setting of ***Ave Maris Stella*** ('Hail, Star of the Sea', recognising Mary's role as protector of sea-farers) was written in 1976. It begins in a hymn-like manner for upper voices. The lower voices take over the same figure being joined by the upper voices strongly and in canon to end the first section. A new mantra-like figure from the tenors and basses moves the piece into a new arena of sound and speed. Almost breathless in its urgency, the upper voices appear to momentarily falter in bringing this novel expression to a conclusion. More contrasts follow, leading to a quiet, plainsong-like ending.

We conclude with a setting of anonymous 14th-century words by Cecilia McDowall (b.1951), one of the most respected of her generation of composers in the UK. McDowall has composed in a wide variety of genres but her choral music is central to her output. ***Of a Rose*** is medieval in its inspiration and sense of dance, but subversive elements never let us forget that this is seriously contemporary music. Lovely, lilting sections are pitted against more straightforward rhythmic units. Stark dynamic contrasts and chasing melodic lines all characterise this short but highly effective carol which brings our programme celebrating the Virgin Mary to an uplifting ending.

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1 Mother of God

John Tavener (1944-2013) / Mikhail Lermontov (1814-41)

Mother of God, here I stand now praying,
Before this icon of your radiant brightness,
Not praying to be saved from a battlefield,
Not giving thanks, nor seeking forgiveness
For the sins of my soul, nor for all the souls.
Numb, joyless and desolate on earth,
But for her alone, whom I wholly give you.

2 Ave cujus conceptio

Nicholas Ludford (1485-1557)

Ave cujus conceptio
Solemni plena gaudio
Celestia terrestria
Nova replet letitia.

Ave cujus nativitas
Nostra fuit solemnitas,
Ut lucifer lux oriens
Ipsum solem preveniens.

Hail, thou whose Conception,
filled with devout joy,
makes heaven and earth
replete with a new gladness.

Hail, thou whose Nativity
was our celebration,
like the morning star, a dawning light
preceding the sun itself.

*Ave pia humilitas,
Sine viro fecunditas,
Cujus annuntiatio
Nostra fuit redemptio.*

*Ave vera virginitas,
Immaculata castitas,
Cujus purificatio
Nostra fuit purgatio.*

*Ave plena in omnibus
Angelicis virtutibus,
Cujus fuit assumptio
Nostra glorificatio.*

[3] Ave Maria

Anton Bruckner (1824-96)

*Ave Maria, gratia plena,
Dominus tecum.
Benedicta tu in mulieribus
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui,
Jesus.*

*Sancta Maria, mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.
Amen.*

Hail, thou humble obedience,
fertility without man's intervention,
whose Annunciation
was our redemption.

Hail, thou true virginity
spotless chastity,
whose Purification
was our purgation.

Hail, thou filled with all
angelic virtues,
whose Assumption
was our glorification.

Hail Mary, full of grace;
the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb,
Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
Now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

[4] Mater salutaris

Martin Dalby (1942-2018) / Anon. trans. Brian Stone

*Holy Mary, mother mild,
Mater salutaris,
Fairest flower of any field
Vere nuncuparis.*

With Jesus Christ you were with child;
You drive me from my musings wild
Potente,
Which make me go to death I know,
Repente.

Gentlest Queen of chosen sway,
Be before me night and day
Precantis!
Give me grace to see the face
Infantis!

That through your sweetest prayers I may,
Tutrix orphanorum,
Leave this world's vexatious way
Solamen miserorum;

And to you, Lady, I take
My sins and them thereby forsake
Volente,
And so not miss your heavenly bliss:
Poscente.

5 Second Eve

Ola Gjeilo (b.1978) / Anon.

*Sancta Maria, Regina caeli,
Dulcis et pia, o mater Dei:
Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Ut cum electis videamus.
Ave Maria, gratia plena,
Dominus tecum:
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui,
Iesus Christus.
Amen.*

Holy Mary, Queen of heaven,
gentle and holy, mother of God:
pray for us sinners,
that with the chosen we may see you.
Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with you:
blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb,
Jesus Christ.
Amen.

6 Magnificat in F

George Dyson (1883-1964)

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
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 forever.

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.

7 Rosa Mystica

Benjamin Britten (1913-76) / Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89)

The rose in a mystery, where is it found?
Is it anything true? Does it grow upon ground?
It was made of earth's mould but it went from men's eyes
And its place is a secret and shut in the skies.

Refrain

In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
Find me a place by thee, mother of mine.

But where was it formerly? which is the spot
That was blest in it once, though now it is not? –
It is Galilee's growth: it grew at God's will
And broke into bloom upon Nazareth hill.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
I shall look on thy loveliness, mother of mine.

Tell me the name now, tell me its name.
The heart guesses easily: is it the same? –
Mary the Virgin, well the heart knows,
She is the mystery, she is that rose.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
I shall come home to thee, mother of mine.

Is Mary the rose then? Mary the tree?
But the blossom, the blossom there, who can it be? –
Who can her rose be? It could be but one:
Christ Jesus our Lord, her God and her son.
In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
Shew me thy son, mother, mother of mine.

Does it smell sweet too in that holy place? –
Sweet unto God, and the sweetness is grace:
O Breath of it bathes great heaven above
In grace that is charity, grace that is love.
To thy breast, to thy rest, to thy glory divine
Draw me by charity, mother of mine.

8] Magnificat (Chichester Service)

Herbert Howells (1892-1983)

For text, see track 6]

9] Ave Maria

Carl Rütli (b.1949)

For text, see track 3]

10] I beheld her, beautiful as a dove

Healey Willan (1880-1968) / Anon.

I beheld her beautiful as a dove, rising above the water-brooks;
And her raiment was filled with perfume beyond all price.
Even as the springtime was she girded with rosebuds and lilies of the valley.
Who is this that cometh up from the desert like a wreath of sweet smoke,
Arising from frankincense and myrrh?
Even as the springtime was she girded with rosebuds and lilies of the valley.

11] Ave virgo santicissima

Judith Bingham (b.1952)

*Dei Mater piissima,
Maris stella clarissima.
Salve semper gloriosa,
Margarita pretiosa,
Sicut lilium formosa,
Nitens, olens velut rosa.*

Hail, holy virgin, Most blessed Mother of God,
Brightest star of the sea.
Hail, ever glorious,
Precious pearl,
Beautiful as the lily,
Shining and giving perfume like the rose.

12 Hymne à la Vierge

Pierre Villette (1926-98) / Roland Bouhéret (1930-95)

*Ô toute belle Vierge Marie,
Votre âme trouve en Dieu le parfait amour
Il vous revêt du manteau de la Grâce comme une fiancée
Pareé de ses bijoux.*

*Alléluia, alléluia. Je vais chanter ta louange, Seigneur,
Car tu as pris soin de moi,
Car tu m'as enveloppée du voile de l'innocence,
Car tu m'as faite avant le jour,
Car tu m'as fait précéder le jaillissement des sources.*

*Vous êtes née avant les collines
Ô sagesse de Dieu, porte du Salut
Heureux celui qui marche dans vos traces
Qui apprête son cœur à la voix de vos conseils.*

*Avant les astres vous étiez présente
Mère du Créateur au profond du ciel.
Quand Dieu fixait les limites du monde
Vous partagiez son cœur étant à l'œuvre avec lui.*

O beautiful Virgin Mary,
In God your soul discovers perfect love.
It cloaks you with the mantle of Grace like a betrothed
Adorned with her jewels.

Alleluia, alleluia. I will sing your praise, Lord,
for you have looked after me,
for you have covered me with the veil of innocence,
for you have made me before the day,
for you have made me go before the gushing of fountains.

You were born before the hills,
O wisdom of God, the way to salvation.
Happy is he who walks in your footsteps,
Who prepares his heart to listen to your advice.

You were present before the stars,
Mother of the Creator, in the very depths of heaven.
When God was creating the world,
Working with Him you shared His heart.

13 Ave maris stella

Trond Kverno (b.1945)

*Ave, maris stella,
Dei mater alma,
Atque semper virgo,
felix coeli porta.
Sumens illud ave Gabrielis ore,
Funda nos in pace,
mutans Hevae nomen.
Solve vincula reis,
profer lumen caecis:
Mala nostra pelle
bona cuncta posce.
Monstra te esse matrem:
sumat per te preces,
Qui pro nobis natus,
tulit esse tuus.
Virgo singularis, inter omnes mitis,
nos culpīs solutos,
mites fac et castos.
Vitā praesta puram, iter para tutum:
Ut videntes Iesum
semper collaetemur.
Sit laus Deo Patri
summo Christo decus,
Spirituī sancto,
tribus honor unus.*

Hail, star of the sea,
dear Mother of God
And always a virgin,
the blessed gate of heaven.
Taking up that "Hail!" from the lips of Gabriel,
Switching round Eve's name,
firmly establish us in peace.
Loose the chains from sinners,
hold out light to the blind,
Drive our ills away,
ask all good things for us.
Show that you are a mother:
Let him accept our prayers through you
Who was born for us
and is called your son.
Unique virgin, mild above all others,
Make us, freed from our sins,
Mild and chaste.
Grant us a pure life, prepare the way to you,
So that, seeing Jesus,
we may always rejoice with you.
Praise be to God the Father,
glory to Christ on high,
and to the Holy Spirit,
One honour to the three.

14 Of a Rose

Cecilia McDowall (b.1951) /Anon.

Listen, Lordinges, old and yonge,
How this rose began to sprynge;
Such a rose to mine lykyng
In all this world ne knowe I non.
Alleluia.

The aungel came for hevene tour
To greet Marye with gret honour,
Seyd she should bere the flour
That should breke the fiends bond.
Alleluia.

The flower sprong in heye Bethlem,
That is bioth brht abnd schen:
The rose is Marye, hevene qwene,
Out of here bosom sprong.
Alleluia.

The ferte braunche is ful of myth,
That sprong on Chrystemesse nyht,
The sterre schon over Bethlem bryt
That is bothe brod and long.
Alleluia.

The seconde braunche sprong to helle,
The fiends power doun to felle:
There in myth non soule dwelle;
Blyssd be the time the rose sprong!
Alleluia.

The thredde braunche is good and
swote, crop and rote,
There to dwell and ben our bote;
Every day it scheweit in prystes hond.
Alleluia.





Photograph: Daniel Clayton and Reinaldo Ribeiro

Paul Spicer is one of the UK's most widely respected choral conductors. He came to international recognition through his many recordings, broadcasts and concerts with the Finzi Singers. He conducts the Birmingham Bach Choir and is a regular guest conductor with the BBC Singers. He was one of the first people to begin formal choral conducting teaching in the UK, devising a Masters degree course for the Royal College of Music in London where he taught between 1995

and 2008, also conducting their chamber choir. He later instigated a similar course at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire where he teaches choral conducting and conducts the Chamber Choir, well known for its many recordings on SOMM Recordings, and at Oxford and Durham Universities.

He has written biographies of his composition teacher, Herbert Howells, Sir George Dyson, and currently, Sir Arthur Bliss. Following the ongoing success of his guide to James MacMillan's choral music he was commissioned by the Britten-Pears Foundation and Boosey & Hawkes to write the first practical guide to all Benjamin Britten's choral music for the Britten centenary in 2016.

As a composer his *Easter Oratorio* was hailed by *Gramophone* as "the best of its kind to have appeared... since Howells's *Hymnus Paradisi*". His choral symphony, *Unfinished Remembering*, commemorating the centenary of the First World War, was premiered to considerable acclaim in Symphony Hall, Birmingham in September 2014. Much of his choral music is published by Boosey & Hawkes.

His English Choral Experience courses are models of their kind both in the UK and Europe. A conducting course for aspiring choral conductors is part of the annual ECE week at Dore Abbey in Herefordshire.

Paul is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, an Honorary Research Fellow of Birmingham University, an Honorary Fellow of University College, Durham and the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, a Trustee of the Finzi Trust, Chairman of the Sir George Dyson Trust and lay member of the Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral.

CALLUM ALGER is currently Organ Scholar at Westminster Cathedral where he regularly accompanies and directs the world-renowned cathedral choir. He recently graduated from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire with First Class honours in Music Performance, where he studied the organ with Henry Fairs and David Saint, and choral conducting with Paul Spicer. Callum was fortunate to spend a semester studying at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater 'Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy' in Leipzig under the tutelage of Martin Schmeding.



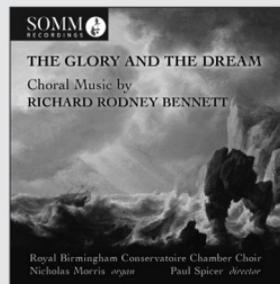
Photograph: The Cambridge Photographer

He has previously held positions at St Peter's Collegiate Church, Wolverhampton, Portsmouth Cathedral (in conjunction with the Portsmouth Grammar School) and St Matthew's Church, Northampton.

Callum has performed extensively as a soloist in the UK. He won first prize at the inaugural IAO/RCO Organ Playing Competition and Dame Gillian Weir Messiaen Competition in 2018 and was twice a finalist in the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition. Recent recital venues have included Westminster Abbey, St John's Smith Square and St Albans Cathedral (St Albans International Organ Festival). He is an Associate of the Royal College of Organists and Trinity College, London, and has performed on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4.

In 2019, Callum released his debut CD *Klangreden* with Regent Records, featuring the Garnier organ at the University of Birmingham and the Walker organ at St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham. *Klangreden* is centred on the performance of Lutheran chorale-based repertoire in which Callum's music-making has been described as "unfailingly elegant" [*Choir and Organ*].

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