

# Brighton Early Music Festival 2024

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Saturday 7 December, 6pm

St Paul's Church

## O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM

European Christmas music from the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries

### BREMF Consort of Voices

James Elias *director*

Thomas Tallis 1505–1585

Introit: O nata lux *processional*

William Byrd c.1540–1623

O magnum mysterium

Puer natus est nobis

Michael Praetorius 1571–1621

Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen.

Puer natus in Bethlehem

Jacobus Clemens non Papa

c.1510–c.1566

O magnum mysterium

Pastores quidnam vidistis

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

c.1525–1594

Puer natus est nobis

Interval



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|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Tomás Luis de Victoria c.1548–1611  | O magnum mysterium<br>Quem vidistis pastores        |
| Palestrina                          | O magnum mysterium<br>Hodie Christus natus est a 4  |
| Giovanni Gabrieli 1554/57–1612      | O magnum mysterium<br>Angelus ad pastores ait       |
| Samuel Scheidt 1587–1654            | O Jesulein süß                                      |
| Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck 1562–1621 | Angelus ad pastores ait<br>Hodie Christus natus est |
| Scheidt                             | Puer natus in Bethlehem <i>recessional</i>          |

## The music

This concert provides a chance to hear two contrasting Christmas pieces by a selection of European composers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The contrast comes from focussing on a different element in the Christmas story. In the first, typified by the words of *O magnum mysterium*, we are right in the stable, in simplicity and naturalness, yet also reverence and awe: '*O how great a mystery, and what a wonderful sacrament, that the animals should see God, as a new born boy, lying in a manger*'. The scene is one that inspires stillness and quietness. Imagining ourselves there, in the middle of a starlit night, in the presence of the intimacy between a new mother and her child, it's almost as if we are intruding on the scene, and we certainly wouldn't want to wake the baby! The compositions often reflect this feeling, as do works that focus on the fragile humanity of the baby Jesus, or the blessedness of the womb of Mary, and although some of these pieces do end with an alleluia, they tend to be more restrained.

The other part of the story is what happens outside the stable, and is quite the opposite of quiet, with initially the shepherds, but then latterly and metaphorically the whole Christian church, being almost excited to spread the news that, '*Puer natus in Bethlehem!*'. From the almost breathless questioning of the shepherds in *Quem vidistis pastores* – '*What did you see? Speak! Tell us who has appeared!*' – to the great chorus of angels in the sky in a variety of texts, the words lend themselves to a much more exuberant celebration of the Christmas story, and each alleluia (or Noé, its less common synonym) is joyful and exultant. In some ways, the contrast is between a devotional lullaby/prayer and something of an attention-grabbing fanfare, and each of these master composers captures something of both in the language of *a cappella* polyphony.

As the quote (from one David Thompson) has it, "The origin of the words 'O magnum mysterium' is, in itself, a great mystery". They started to be used in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as the words to the responsories for Matins on Christmas morning, but because they are not biblical, there is a lot more leeway in how the words can be used in musical settings.

Some composers, like Victoria, only use the main body of the text; Byrd combines them with the opening words of *Ave Maria*, and Palestrina switches in the middle of the polyphony to the words from *Pastores quidnam vidistis*, effectively putting *O magnum mysterium* into the mouths of the shepherds. For economy of space, we have here printed the main body of the various texts, without all the variations. Translations of the two German carols follow the Latin texts.

James Elias

## The texts

### **O magnum mysterium**

et admirabile sacramentum,  
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum  
jacentem in praesepio.  
O beata Virgo, cujus viscera meruerunt  
portare Dominum Jesum Christum..  
Alleluia!

O great mystery  
and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals should see the new-born Lord  
lying in a manger!  
O blessed is the Virgin, whose organs  
were worthy to bear Christ the Lord.  
Alleluia!

### **Puer natus est nobis**

et filius datus est nobis  
cuius imperium super humerum eius  
et vocabitur nomen eius  
Magni consilii Angelus.

A boy is born to us,  
and a son is given to us,  
upon whose shoulders authority rests,  
and His name will be called  
'The Angel of Great Counsel'.

### **Puer natus in Bethlehem**

unde gaudet Hierusalem,  
Alleluia.

A boy is born in Bethlehem,  
rejoice therefore, Jerusalem,  
Alleluia.

Hic jacet in praesepio  
qui regnat sine termino,  
Alleluia.

Within a manger doth he lie  
who reigns eternally on high,  
Alleluia.

Cognovit bos et asinus  
Quod puer erat Dominus,  
Alleluia.

The ox and the ass knew  
that the boy was the lord.  
Alleluia.

Reges de Saba veniunt,  
aurum, thus, myrrham offerunt,  
Alleluia.

From distant Saba came three kings,  
gold, incense, myrrh their offerings,  
Alleluia.

De matre natus virgine,  
Sine virile semine,  
Alleluia.

Born from a virgin mother,  
Without the seed of a man,  
Alleluia.

In hoc natali gaudio  
Benedicamus Domino,  
Alleluia.

Laudetur sancta Trinitas,  
Deo dicamus gratias,  
Alleluia.

**Pastores quidnam vidistis?**

Annuntiate nobis in terris quis apparuit.  
Natum vidimus et choros angelorum  
collaudantes et dicentes:  
Gloria in altissimis Deo, et in terra pax  
hominibus bonae voluntatis.

**Quem vidistis pastores dicite,**  
annuntiate nobis in terris quis apparuit?  
Natum vidimus et choros angelorum  
collaudantes Dominum. Alleluia.

Dicite quidnam vidistis?  
et annuntiate Christi nativitatem.  
Natum vidimus et choros angelorum  
collaudantes Dominum. Alleluia.

**Hodie Christus natus est**  
hodie Salvator apparuit:  
hodie in terra canunt Angeli,  
laetantur Archangeli  
hodie exsultant iusti, dicentes:  
Gloria in excelsis Deo.  
Alleluia.

**Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen**  
aus einer Wurzel zart,  
als uns die Alten sungen,  
von Jesse kam die Art  
und hat ein Blümlein bracht  
mitten im kalten Winter  
wohl zu der halben Nacht.

Das Röslein, das ich meine,  
davon Jesaias sagt,  
ist Maria, die reine,  
die uns das Blümlein bracht.

For this joyous birth  
let us bless the Lord,  
Alleluia.

Let the Holy Trinity be praised,  
let us give thanks to God,  
Alleluia.

What did you see, shepherds?  
Tell us who has appeared on earth.  
We saw the new-born and choirs of angels  
praising the Lord together and saying:  
Glory be to God in the highest, and in earth  
peace, goodwill to all men.

Whom did you see, shepherds, say,  
tell us who has appeared?  
We saw the child new-born and choirs of angels  
praising the Lord. Alleluia.

Pray say, what did you see?  
And tell us of Christ's nativity.  
We saw the child new-born and choirs of angels  
praising the Lord. Alleluia.

Today Christ is born:  
today the Saviour appeared:  
today on earth the angels sing,  
archangels rejoice:  
today the righteous rejoice, saying:  
Glory to God in the highest.  
Alleluia.

A spotless Rose is blowing,  
sprung from a tender root,  
of ancient seers' foreshowing,  
of Jesse promis'd fruit;  
its fairest bud unfolds to light  
amid the cold, cold winter,  
and in the dark midnight.

The Rose which I am singing,  
whereof Isaiah said,  
is from its sweet root springing  
in Mary, purest Maid;

Aus Gottes ew'gem Rat  
hat sie ein Kind geboren  
und blieb ein' reine Magd.

for through our God's great love and might  
the Blessed Babe she bare us  
in a cold, cold winter's night.

**O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!**  
Deins Vaters Willen hast du erfüllt,  
bist kommen aus dem Himmelreich,  
uns armen Menschen worden gleich.  
O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!

O little one sweet, O little one mild,  
thy Father's purpose thou hast fulfilled;  
thou cam'st from heav'n to mortal ken  
equal to be with us poor men,  
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!  
Deins Vaters Zorn hast du gestillt,  
du zahlst für uns all unser Schuld  
und bringet uns in deins Vaters Huld.  
O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!

O little one sweet, O little one mild,  
with joy thou hast the whole world filled;  
thou camest here from heaven's domain  
to bring men comfort in their pain,  
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!  
Du bist der Lieb ein Ebenbild.  
Zünd an in uns der Liebe Flamm,  
dass wir dich lieben allzusamm.  
O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild!

O little one sweet, O little one mild,  
in thee love's beauties are all distilled;  
then light in us thy love's bright flame,  
that we may give thee back the same,  
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

## The performers

**BREMF Consort of Voices** was founded by Deborah Roberts in 2009 and is a consort of semi-professional, student and experienced amateur singers. Dedicated to giving dramatic and exciting performances of music from the Renaissance and early Baroque, the ensemble gives several concerts each year in collaboration with BREMF. It has taken part in music ranging from 15th-century chant and polyphony, to the spectacular 1589 Florentine Intermedi with renaissance orchestra and great Venetian works with The English Cornett & Sackbut Ensemble. Now directed by James Elias, for the 2024 Brighton Early Music Festival the choir joined Netherlands-based ensemble Cappella Pratensis in a programme of 15th-century music by Dufay, Dunstable and Frye.

[bremf.org.uk/ensembles/bcv](http://bremf.org.uk/ensembles/bcv)

**James Elias** has been singing in choirs for nearly half a century, studying under James O'Donnell, George Guest and Richard Marlow in various Cambridge choirs, before singing and conducting regularly in churches, concerts, recordings and broadcasts in London and abroad. Now a specialist in *a cappella* choral music, his negligible claims to musical fame include being three yards away from José Carreras on stage in a performance of Bizet's *Carmen*, and singing at the Sydney Opera House.

## BREMF Consort of Voices

**Sopranos:** Liz James ⊕  
Naomi Law \*  
Pam Mason ❄️ +  
Rebecca Rees  
Cathy Rowlands

**Altos:** Maria Birch \*  
Janet Gascoine  
Bibi Lees ❄️  
Silvia Reseghetti  
Natasha Stone ❄️ +  
Liz Webb ⊕

**Tenors:** Nick Boston ❄️  
Dan Hodd +  
Peter Larcombe ❄️  
Graeme Smith  
David Waterhouse ⊕

**Basses:** Terry Cannon \*  
Jeff Coventry-Fenn +  
Reuben James ❄️  
Tony Jay ⊕  
Simon Madge  
Matthew Ryan \*

\* soloists in Praetorius: Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen

❄️ soloists in Praetorius: Puer natus in Bethlehem

⊕ soloists in Gabrieli: Angelus ad pastores ait

+ soloists in Scheidt: O Jesulein süß