



Liverpool
Renaissance
Singers

Director: Liam Owens

O GREAT
MYSTERY:
The Word Made
Flesh

Byrd, Robert White,
Tallis and Sheppard

6th December 2025 7.30pm
Liverpool Parish Church L2 8GW

www.liverpoolrenaissancesingers.org.

Welcome

O Great Mystery: *The Word Made Flesh*

This evening's programme invites you into the stillness and expectation of Advent and Christmas as expressed in the rich tapestry of English sacred music from the late 15th to early 17th centuries. Woven between ancient plainsong and polyphonic masterpieces, the concert traces an arc from yearning and penitence to the awe-filled mystery of the Incarnation—the Word made flesh.

We begin with the ancient **plainsong *Rorate Caeli***, a cry from Isaiah that echoes the desolation of exile and the hope for redemption: "*Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness.*" This plaintive call sets the tone for William Byrd's exquisite five-part setting of the same text. Byrd (1540-1623), a recusant Catholic composing under a Protestant regime, channels the spiritual hunger of his time into music of poignant intensity, layering expressive dissonances over imitative textures that seem to plead for divine intervention.

The theme of penitence continues in Byrd's ***Ne Irascaris Domine***, a setting of another passage from Isaiah (also used in the plainsong), which laments, "*Be not angry, O Lord, to the uttermost.*" The repeated cries of "*Sion deserta est*" (Zion is a wilderness) carry a haunting weight, reflecting both scriptural sorrow and the plight of persecuted English Catholics in Byrd's day.

From this place of longing, the ancient **plainsong *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*** offers a turning point—an Advent hymn of hope and promise. Its minor modality captures the anticipation of Christ's coming, linking ancient prophecy to the joy of fulfilment.

A high point of Marian devotion and mystery is heard in **Robert White's (1538-1574) *Magnificat***, a grand, antiphonal setting of the Virgin Mary's song. The interplay of the choral writing reflects both the intimacy and grandeur of the moment when Mary accepts her role as the Mother of God.

That sense of divine mystery is deepened in **Thomas Tallis's (1505-1585) *Videte Miraculum***, composed for the Feast of the Purification. Through long, sustained lines and spacious harmonic writing, Tallis invites us to contemplate the miraculous paradox: a Virgin bears a Son, and the ancient prophecy is fulfilled in the child she carries.

Byrd's *Ecce Natus Est* - "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" - completes the set of three reflections on the mystery of the incarnation.

The plainsong ***Puer Natus Est***—the Introit for Christmas Day—grounds this proclamation in liturgical tradition; its simple chant setting is a precursor to the mystery of the Word.

Byrd returns with his setting of ***O Magnum Mysterium***, meditating on the wondrous mystery that animals should witness the birth of Christ. Byrd's setting is deeply expressive, suffused with awe, humility, and wonder.

The mystery of the Incarnation is brought into sharp focus in **John Sheppard's (1515-1558) *Verbum Caro***, a setting of the famous prologue to St John's Gospel: "*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*" Sheppard's rich, sonorous textures unfold slowly, as if to give space to the weight of the theological meaning of what is being sung.

The programme concludes with the ***Agnus Dei*** from **Tallis's *Missa Puer Natus Est***, a Mass likely written for the Catholic Queen Mary, which is thought to have been sung on Christmas day in 1554, an occasion when Philip of Spain was in England.

The Mass's cantus firmus—"A child is born"—threads quietly beneath the solemn plea for mercy and peace. In this final movement, Tallis brings together themes of birth, sacrifice, and redemption, ending our journey in a profound reflection on the Lamb of God, born to take away the sins of the world.

Liam Owens
Musical Director

Programme

Rorate Caeli

Anon

(plainsong)

Refrain: *Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down the Just One.*

Be not angry, O Lord, and remember no longer our iniquity: behold the city of the Holy One is become a desert: Sion is become a desert: Jerusalem is desolate: the house of thy sanctification and of thy glory, where our fathers praised thee.

We have sinned and are become as one that is unclean: and we have all fallen as a leaf, and our iniquities like the wind have carried us away: thou hast hidden thy face from us, and hast crushed us in the hold of our iniquity.

Behold, O Lord, the affliction of thy people, and send forth Him Who is to come: send forth the Lamb, the ruler of the earth, from the Rock of the desert, to the mount of daughter Sion: that he may take away the yoke of our captivity.

Be comforted, be comforted, my people: thy salvation cometh quickly: why art thou consumed with grief: for sorrow hath estranged thee: I will save thee: fear not, for I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer.

Rorate Caeli

William Byrd (1540-1623)

Trans: *Drop dew ye heavens from above, and let the clouds rain the just: be the earth opened, and bud forth a saviour. O Lord thou hast blessed thy land: thou hast turned away the captivity of Jacob. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.*

Ne Irascaris Domine

William Byrd (1540-1623)

Trans: *Be not angry, O Lord, nor remember our iniquity forever.
Behold, look upon us, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities are
deserted. Zion has become a wasteland, Jerusalem a
desolation.*

Veni, Veni Emmanuel

Anon

(plainsong)

*O Come, O come, Emmanuel, release captive Israel, who
mourns in exile deprived of God's Son.*

Refrain: *Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall be born for you, O Israel.*

*Come, O come, king of the nations, come, Redeemer of all:
that Thou may save the family from the guilt of their sins.*

*Come, O come, O dawn, our Sun at its coming: dispel the
shadow of night, and destroy our darkness.*

*Come, key of David, open the Kingdom of Heaven: make safe
the heavenly way, and shut the infernal way.*

*Come, O rod of Jesse: from the clutches of the enemy, and
from the snares of hell, and from the depths of the netherworld
lead forth thine own.*

*Come, O come, O Adonai, who to thy people on Sinai's summit
did give the law in glorious majesty.*

*Come, O Wisdom, who arranges all things; come, that thou
may teach us the glorious paths of wisdom.*

Magnificat**Robert White (1538-1574)**

Trans: *My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*
Because He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid: For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is His name. And His mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear Him.
He hath shewed might in His arm: He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich He hath sent empty away. He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His mercy. As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.
Glory be the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forever and ever, Amen.

Videte Miraculum**Thomas Tallis (1505-1585)**

Trans: *Behold the miracle of the mother of the Lord: a virgin has conceived, though she knows not a man. Standing burdened with her noble charge is Mary, and she rejoices to find herself a mother, not knowing that she was a spouse. In her chaste womb she has conceived one beautiful beyond the children of men and, for ever blessed, has brought forth for us God and man. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.*

Ecce Virgo Concipiet**William Byrd (1540-1623)**

Trans: *Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel. Alleluia.*

-----pause -----

Puer Natus Est**Anon****(plainsong)**

Trans: *A child is born unto us; a son is given.
Whose Government is upon his shoulders; and his name shall
be the angel of great counsel.*

*Sing unto the Lord a new song because of the wondrous things
he has done.*

*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.*

O Magnum Mysterium**William Byrd (1540-1623)**

Trans: *O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, that beasts should
see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger. O blessed virgin,
whose womb was worthy to bear Christ our Lord. Hail, Mary,
full of grace, the Lord is with thee.*

Verbum Caro**John Sheppard (1515-1558)**

Trans: *The word was made flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld
his glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost.*

Agnus Dei**Thomas Tallis (1505-1585)**

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

Liverpool Renaissance Singers

Musical Director – Liam Owens

<i>Sopranos</i>	<i>Altos</i>	<i>Tenors</i>	<i>Basses</i>
Deborah Casewell Anna Cumbers Alison Edis Soru Kuczala Sarah Lea Chris Lloyd Jane Lockyer Katherine Owens Valerie Pedlar Helen Strickland Victoria Sumner Barbara Vogel Elisabeth Winder Karen Whyte	Helen Altshul Joy Buchanan Kirsten Butcher Jean Cunningham Elfriede Derrer-Merk Brigitte Jurack Malu Prates Lorna Randall Chris Smale Nina Ward	Simon Blundell John Davies Will Hadwen Philip Josling Ken Lowe Coby O'Brien	Steven Ash Barry Butcher Stephen Henders John Huthnance Donal Sarsfield Chris Turnbull

With thanks to the churchwardens and PCC of Liverpool Parish Church for allowing the Liverpool Renaissance Singers to use Our Lady and St Nicholas.

Date for your diary

Our Easter recital will take place on Sunday 22nd March 2026 at 7.30 pm in Liverpool Parish Church:

In the Midst of Life: Songs of Farewell (music by Mundy, Parsons, Byrd, Taverner, Sheppard and Howells).

If you would like to be kept informed of all the Liverpool Renaissance Singers' future concerts, please make sure that you hand your contact details in at the entrance desk.