

# Christmas Meditations

Our knowledge of High Mass on Christmas Day as it might have been celebrated at Sherborne Abbey in c.1520 comes from the highly ornate Sherborne Missal (British Library MS Add.74236). From this manuscript it is possible to reconstruct the service as it would have been performed at Sherborne Abbey in this period. The melodies of the chants are supplied in the main from another Benedictine manuscript, the Crowland Gradual (British Library, MS Egerton 3759), except for the Pater noster and the 'incipits' (starting phrases for the Gloria and Credo), which are from the Missal.

- 1 *Introit* Puer natus est nobis
- 2 *Kyrie* Deus creator omnium
- 3 GLORIA *Missa tecum principium* – Robert Fayrfax (d. 1521)
- 4 *Gradual* Viderunt omnes
- 5 *Alleluia* Dies sanctificatus
- 6 CREDO *Missa tecum principium*
- 7 *Offertory* Tui sunt celi
- 8 SANCTUS *Missa tecum principium*
- 9 *Pater noster*
- 10 AGNUS DEI *Missa tecum principium*
- 11 *Communion* Viderunt omnes

## Magdala

Directed by **David Skinner**

Recorded in Saint Giles' Church, Brugge, and  
Magdalen College, Oxford, July 2004

*Missa Tecum principium* edited by David Skinner  
Liturgical reconstruction by Anna Parsons

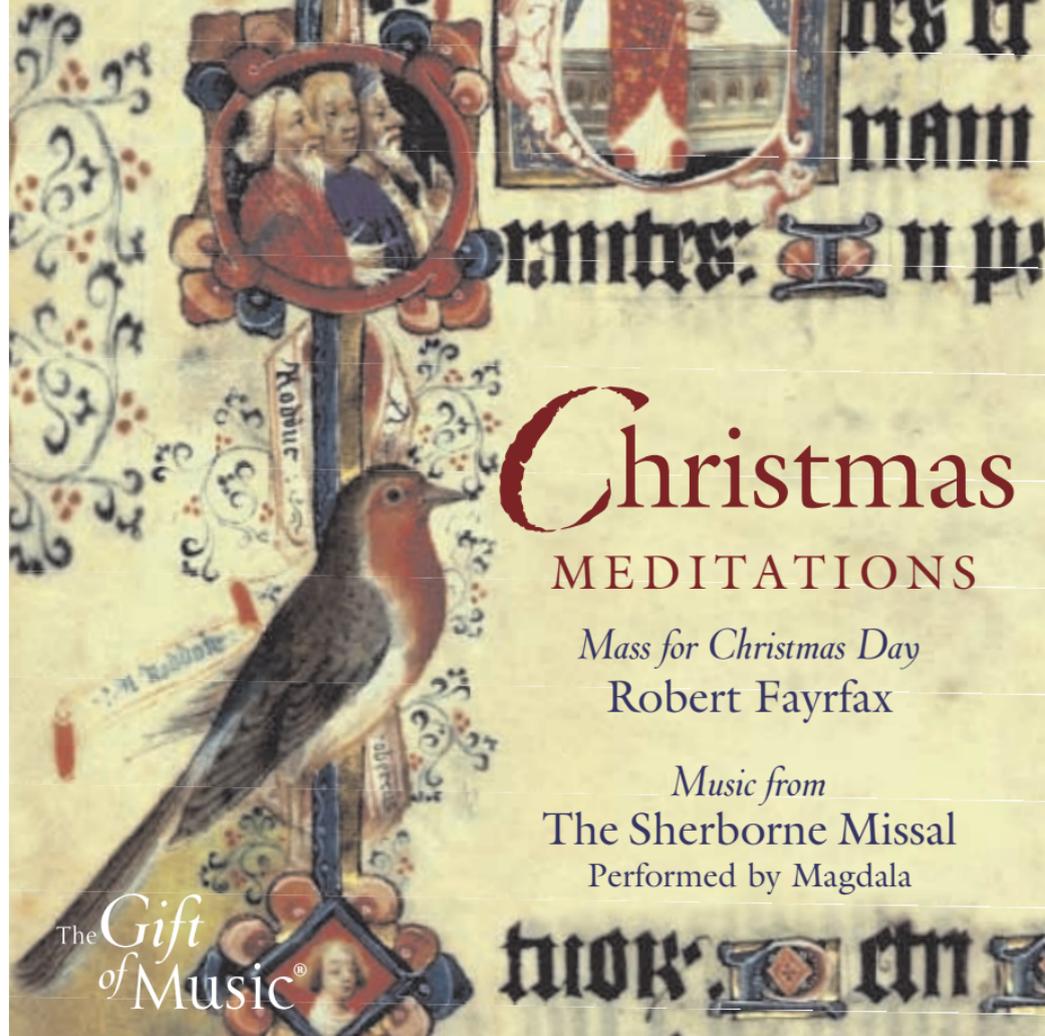
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Cover image: *Robin* The Sherborne Missal,  
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## Music for a Medieval Christmas Mass

For religious communities inhabiting monasteries and priories across medieval England, a large part of the day was occupied by the singing of the eight services of the Divine Office and one or more Masses. The music of monastic worship ranged from prayers sung to simple tones to elaborate and extended chants for important feast days. The main chants of the Mass were divided into two types: the texts of the Mass Ordinary chants (Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei) remained constant, while the texts and melodies of the Mass Proper chants (Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Sequence, Offertory and Communion) altered daily or weekly in accordance with the season or feast.

From the late fifteenth century up to the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s, monastic houses across England began increasingly to use choirs of secular singers within the liturgy. These choirs of men and boys sang polyphony alongside the plainchant of the monks enhancing the liturgy at the daily Lady Mass and also at principal services in quire, such as High Mass on a major festival. There is little surviving evidence regarding the cultivation of polyphonic music at Sherborne Abbey in Dorset but it seems more than likely that the abbey would have employed a secular choir for the performance of polyphony in this way during the last few decades of the Middle Ages.

This disc is therefore a reconstruction of High Mass on Christmas Day as it might have been celebrated at Sherborne Abbey in c.1520. Our knowledge of the plainsong propers for the Mass comes from the highly ornate Sherborne Missal (British Library, MS Add.74236) which contains the full texts of the Mass throughout the year. From this manuscript it is possible to reconstruct the service as it would have been performed at Sherborne Abbey in this period. The melodies of the chants are supplied from another Benedictine manuscript, the Crowland Gradual (British Library, MS Egerton 3759).

The movements of the Mass Ordinary are taken from Fayrfax's 'Tecum principium', a five part Mass based on a plainsong Vespers antiphon for Christmas. Robert Fayrfax (d.1521), was a gentleman of the Chapel Royal and was also linked to the musical establishment at the Benedictine abbey of St Albans. He was one of the finest composers of his generation, his Masses, Magnificats and votive antiphons surviving in a number of manuscripts from institutions across the country.

Anna Parsons

MAGDALA, directed by Dr David Skinner, was formed in 2002 as the first professional mixed-voice choir based at Magdalen College, Oxford. The choir is currently one of the finest ensembles of its type in Oxford and Cambridge, and specializes in music of the 15th and 16th centuries. Choral Vespers is performed by Magdala on Tuesdays in Magdalen College Chapel during term time. Magdala was ensemble in residence at the Victoria & Albert Museum 'Gothic' exhibition, and frequently gives concerts at home and abroad.

### *Sopranos*

Venetia Bridges, Alexandra Coghlan, Alison Coldstream, Victoria Davies,  
Jessie Holder, Rachel Parris, Anna Parsons

### *Altos*

William Budd, Susanna Fairbairn, Ceri Owen, Fiona Shand, Rose Page

### *Tenors*

Noel Hunwick, Andrew McAnerney, Kevin Skelton, Jon Stokl

### *Baritones*

Alexander Gray, Michael Molan, Edward Watkins, Tim Whiteley

### *Basses*

Paul de Cates, Benedict Rundell, David Smith