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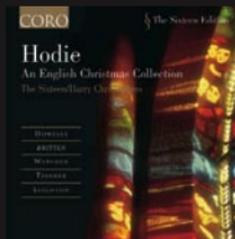
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BBC RADIO 3, CD REVIEW

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CORO

§ The Sixteen Edition

**The Voices of Angels**  
Eton Choirbook Volume V  
The Sixteen/Harry Christophers

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LAMBE

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DAVY

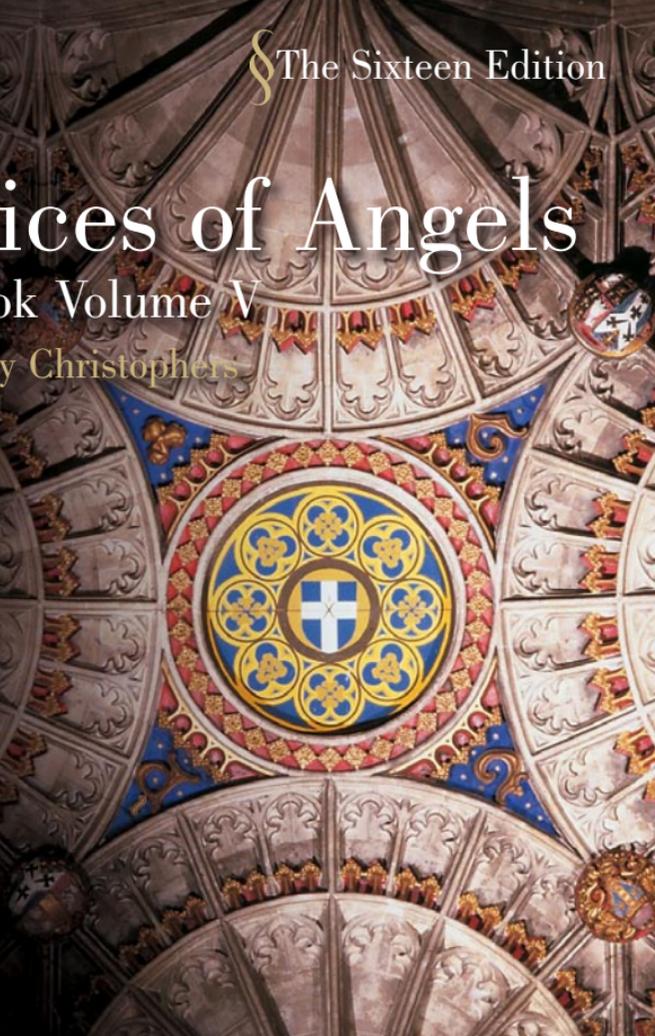
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PLUMMER

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WILLIAM OF  
STRATFORD

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# § The Sixteen

## *Treble:*

Caroline Ashton, Fiona Clarke,  
Ruth Dean, Carys Lane

## *Mean:*

Libby Crabtree,  
Sally Dunkley, Rebecca Outram

## *Tenor:*

Simon Berridge, Philip Cave,  
Duncan MacKenzie,

Neil MacKenzie,

Nicolas Robertson, David Roy

## *Bass:*

Robert Evans,  
Timothy Jones, Simon Birchall,  
Michael McCarthy,  
Robert Macdonald,  
Charles Gibbs

Producer: Andrew Keener  
Engineer: Mike Hatch

Recorded January 1995 at St Bartholomew's, Orford.  
Originally released as  
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Series deviser: John Milsom  
Translations: Jeremy White  
CD re-mastering: Julian Millard  
Photography: Hugo Maertens  
Design: Richard Boxall Design Associates

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COMPACT  
disc  
DIGITAL AUDIO

I remember well, some years ago, sitting in the library at Eton College with Christopher Page and recording a programme for BBC Radio 3 about the Eton Choirbook, by far the most outstanding of a handful of choirbooks to survive the Reformation.



We turned the parchment pages of this vast book, admiring the vividly illuminated capitals, marvelling at some of the, obviously frequently performed, motets, the corners of which were heavily thumbed by fingers of a past century. My abiding thought was how incredibly talented these sixteen choristers must have been to sing this highly complex music, difficult by any standard, while crowding around a lectern, straining to read by candlelight. Today we have modern editions, electricity and aids for failing sight and it still seems difficult!

Our edition represents very much the grass roots of our work and our overwhelming desire to rejoice in the survival of this great music.

*Harry Christophers*

On a lectern in a chapel stands a great book of music, its pages bright in the glowing candlelight. Opened up, the book is vast in every respect: more than two feet tall, well over three feet from side to side, a thick weight of fine parchment pages. Its contents, too, are impressively large. Words and music stand out in bold calligraphy, easy to read even from a distance of several feet. Black ink and red ink alternate in a glorious medley. Fine capital letters, vividly coloured, add to the air of luxury.

Around the lectern stands a choir of between ten and twenty singers. Boys in their teens are at the front, peering up to the tops of the pages where their music is written. Around them stand the men. One of them beats time, directing the performance. Another turns the book's pages, each time sending the candles into a frenzy. All eyes are on the page, for the light is fickle, the music unpredictable, and a moment's error will place the whole performance in jeopardy.

Around the year 1500, the scene just described might have happened at any one of several dozen locations in England. Certainly it took place at Eton College; and in the library there you may still see the great choirbook made expressly for use at

Eton, a precious relic of music-making in the college's chapel during the early decades of the sixteenth century. Equally talented choirs were developed and nurtured elsewhere, although virtually all traces of their equivalent choirbooks have vanished. Similar books (and choirs) existed at cathedrals such as Durham, Canterbury, Exeter, Lincoln, and at St Paul's Cathedral in the city of London. Colleges within the universities of Cambridge and Oxford could also boast high musical standards. It is likely, for instance, that Richard Davy's 'Salve Regina' was created for the choir of Magdalen College, Oxford. Arguably at the very pinnacle of the profession were the choirs associated with the Tudor royal family. At the Royal Collegiate Chapel of St George's, Windsor, for example, Walter Lambe served as master of the choristers. Almost certainly his ornate setting of the 'Salve Regina' was made expressly for use by his own team of singers.

Those teams were bonded by superb professionalism. To sing music as complex as they did, early Tudor choirs had to work together with breathtaking precision, much as a large flock of birds will fly in perfect unanimity. The secret of their success lay in the rigorous routine of training that faced every boy chorister. Then as now, a good

voice and an ability to read music were basic requirements. For sixteenth-century choristers, however, there were other skills to be learnt. Plainchant melodies, the staple diet of all choral services, had to be performed in faultless unison – no easy task, as many twentieth-century singers have discovered to their cost. Against those plainchants, boys were shown how to improvise various forms of unwritten counterpoint, some of them simple, others florid and ornate. And, of course, they were trained to sing compositions by their elders.

We can imagine a typical day at a choral foundation in the 1470s, when Walter Lambe and Richard Davy were themselves still choristers. There were old plainchant melodies for the boys to sing from memory, and new ones to be learnt by heart, or read from the book. Then came the daily dose of improvisation, guided by the master of the choristers. Not only did that improvisation train the boys' ears and minds in basic musicianship, it introduced them to the very foundations of composition, giving them a firm grounding in skills that made them competent composers in their turn.

At services in chapel, the boys would listen to their adult colleagues singing music by fashionable composers such as

John Plummer, a member of the royal household chapel. As they listened and learnt, so they imagined new sounds, new possibilities. Within a few years, they too would be turning the pages of the choirbook, beating time for the choir, watching over the standard of singing, teaching their inherited skills to new ranks of choirboys, putting pen to paper and challenging their colleagues with music of ever-increasing splendour.

That last point is an important one. Between the music of Plummer on one hand and Lambe or Davy on the other lies a distance of perhaps only thirty or forty years; yet the difference between them is astounding. It is probably true to say that this difference represents the most profound advance in musical style ever made by any one generation of English composers. Why it happened it is hard to say, but of one thing we can be sure: the impetus was home-grown. The new music of early Tudor England was quite unlike anything coming out of Italy, France or the Low Countries. Foreigners who heard English choirs around the year 1500, when the Eton Choirbook was new, were as surprised as they were impressed. One of them claims never to have heard finer singing in this world. Another describes the

sound as 'more divine than human'. Not even the voices of angels could be more exquisite to the ear.

Plummer's music is full of the sweetness so typical of all fifteenth-century English music. What it does not yet possess, however, is the dare-devil complexity, the density of texture, above all the sheer size and scale of music in the 'Eton style'. The Magnificat by William, Monk of Stratford – presumably the Cistercian Abbey of Stratford-atte-Bowe in Essex – represents a major advance, for the music has a density and exuberance quite different from Plummer's grace and lucidity. It is, however, a work scored for men's voices alone. Only in the pieces by Davy and Lambe do we hear what could be expected of the new generation of choirboys. By the 1480s and 90s, clearly they were being used as virtuosos of the highest order, for the music tests their concentration, stamina and vocal technique in a way no choral repertoire had ever done before.

Both settings of the 'Salve Regina' text are large-scale works. In Walter Lambe's version it is possible to hear an occasional allusion to the plainchant melody of 'Salve Regina', and the piece is unusual for being in duple metre throughout. Richard Davy's setting, by contrast, is apparently freely composed without any reference to plainchant. Neither work, however, can compare in its dimensions or distinction with Davy's 'In honore summae matris'. This extraordinary meditation on the mysteries of the Virgin birth must rank among the most inventive works ever devised by an English composer, and it is one of the greatest treasures of the Eton Choirbook. Hearing it sung with assurance and animation, we can perhaps understand how, in the astonished minds of those eye-witness accounts of the early 1500s, music such as this might seem fit only for the voices of angels.

## 1 SALVE REGINA

Salve regina, mater misericordiae;  
vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve.  
Ad te clamamus, exules filii Evae.  
Ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes  
in hac lacrimarum valle.  
Eia ergo, advocata nostra,  
illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte;  
et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui,  
nobis post hoc exsilium ostende.

Virgo mater ecclesiae,  
Aeterna porta gloriae,  
Esto nobis refugium  
Apud patrem et filium.

O clemens.

Virgo clemens, virgo pia,  
Virgo dulcis, o Maria,  
Exaudi preces omnium  
Ad te pie clamantium.

O pia.

Funde preces tuo nato,  
Crucifixo, vulnerato,  
Et pro nobis flagellato,  
Spinis puncto, felle potato.

O dulcis Maria, salve.

*Hail, O Queen, mother of mercy;  
our life, our sweetness and our hope, hail.  
To you we cry out, exiled children of Eve.  
To you we sigh, groaning and weeping  
in this vale of tears.  
Ah then, our advocate,  
turn those merciful eyes of yours towards us;  
and show us Jesus, the blessed fruit of your womb,  
after our exile here.*

*Virgin mother of the church,  
Everlasting gate to glory,  
Be for us a refuge  
Before the Father and the Son.*

*O clement.*

*Virgin clement, virgin holy,  
Virgin sweet, O Mary,  
Give ear to the prayers of all  
Who cry to you with devotion.*

*O holy.*

*Pour out your prayers to your Son,  
Crucified, wounded,  
Scourged for our sake,  
Pierced with thorns, given gall to drink.*

*O sweet Mary, hail.*

## 2 MAGNIFICAT

Magnificat anima mea Dominum:  
et exsultavit spiritus meus in  
Deo salutari meo.

Quia respexit humilitatem  
ancillae suae:  
ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent  
omnes generationes.

Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est:  
et sanctum nomen eius.

Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies:  
timentibus eum.

Fecit potentiam in brachio suo:  
dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.

Deposuit potentes de sede:  
et exaltavit humiles.

Esurientes implevit bonis:  
et divites dimisit inanes.

Suscepit Israel puerum suum:  
recordatus misericordiae suae.

Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros:  
Abraham et semini eius in saecula.

Gloria patri et filio,  
et spiritui sancto:  
sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper,  
et in saecula saeculorum.

Amen.

*My soul glorifies the Lord:  
and my spirit has rejoiced in  
God my salvation.*

*For he has looked upon the lowliness  
of his handmaid:  
see, from henceforth all generations  
will call me blessed.*

*For he who is mighty has raised me up:  
and his name is holy.*

*And his mercy lasts from generation to generation:  
upon those who fear him.*

*He has shown the power of his arm:  
he has put the proud-hearted to flight.*

*He has put the mighty from off their thrones:  
and has raised up the lowly.*

*The hungry he has filled with good things:  
and the rich he has sent away empty.*

*He has taken his servant Israel under his protection:  
remembering his mercy.*

*As he promised to our fathers:  
to Abraham and his children for ever.*

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son,  
and to the Holy Spirit:  
as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,  
world without end.*

Amen.

③ TOTA PULCHRA ES

Tota pulchra es amica mea,  
et macula non est in te;  
favus distillans labia tua,  
mel et lac sub lingua tua,  
odor unguentorum tuorum  
super omnia aromata.

Iam enim hiems transiit,  
imber abiit et recessit;  
flores apparuerunt,  
vineae florentes odorem dederunt,  
et vox turturis audita est in terra nostra.

Surge, propera, amica mea;  
veni de Libano,  
veni, coronaberis.

*You are all lovely, my love,  
and in you no stain is found;  
your lips are a dripping honeycomb,  
milk and honey are on your tongue,  
and the scent of your perfumes  
is lovelier than all fragrances*

*Now the winter has passed,  
the rain is over and gone;  
the flowers have appeared,  
the vines in bloom have given their scent,  
and the voice of the dove is heard in our land.*

*Arise, make haste my love;  
come from the mount of Lebanon,  
come, and receive your crown.*

④ SALVE REGINA - SEE TEXT FOR TRACK 1

⑤ ANNA MATER MATRIS CHRISTI

Anna mater matris Christi,  
Nos pie considera,  
Quae Mariae meruisti  
Propinare ubera.  
O quam digne veneraris  
Ab humano germine,  
Quae Mariam mundo paris,  
Magno Dei munere.

Nam tu confers spem medelae  
Sacro puerperio;  
Esto memor clientelae  
Huius in exilio.

Anna felix ascendisti  
Supra cuncta sidera;  
Tu in hora mortis tristi  
Nos ab hoste libera.

Sic matrona singularis  
Digneris succurrere;  
Extans mater salutaris,  
Fac nos Christo vivere.

Amen.

*Anne, mother of the Mother of Christ,  
Graciously look upon us,  
You who were found worthy  
To suckle Mary at your breast.  
O how rightly are you honoured  
By all the race of man,  
Who bore Mary for the world,  
By the great gift of God.*

*As you offer the hope of healing  
By this sacred childbirth;  
Be mindful of your servants  
Here in exile.*

*Happy Anna, you have ascended  
Higher than the highest star;  
Now in the sad hour of our death  
Free us from the enemy.*

*Thus, O lady beyond compare,  
Grant us your aid;  
Most eminent mother of salvation,  
Make us live in Christ.*

*Amen.*

6 IN HONORE SUMMAE MATRIS

In honore summae Matris  
Parientis Verbum Patris  
Iubilemus Domino:

Qui omisso carnis iure  
Ex venire virginis purae,  
Ut sponsus e thalamo,

Processit, semper servata,  
Immo magis ampliata,  
Matris integritate.

Rubus ardens non uritur,  
Vellus rore perfunditur  
Caelesti pietate;

Et quae virum non patitur  
Mater Dei efficitur  
Non laesa castitate.

Vitrum sole fit inlaesum,  
Virgo parit Christum Jesum  
Caelesti pietate.

In hoc partu non turbetur  
Mens humana, sed laetetur  
Virginem concipere;  
Et si contra carnis iura  
Virginis est genitura,  
Id tamen perficere

Deus potest ex virtute  
Potestatis infinitae,  
Cui nihil impossibile.

*In honour of the most-high Mother  
Who brings forth the Father's word  
Let us joyfully sing to the Lord:*

*Who set aside the law of the flesh  
And from the womb of a pure virgin  
Like a bridegroom from his chamber,*

*Has come forth, ever preserving,  
Indeed greatly increasing  
His mother's virginity.*

*The burning bush is not consumed  
The fleece is sprinkled with the dew  
Of heavenly piety;*

*And she who knows no man's embrace  
Is made the Mother of God,  
Her chastity unharmed.*

*The glass is left unharmed by the sun's ray,  
The Virgin bears Christ Jesus  
In obedience to heaven.*

*Let not this birth disturb  
The mind of man, but let him rejoice  
That a virgin has conceived;  
Though against the law of the flesh  
Be this virgin birth,  
Yet can it be brought to pass*

*By God in the might  
Of his boundless power,  
For whom nothing is impossible.*

Quis tam caecus ut non credat  
Quod virgo Deum pariat?  
Modo Deus hoc voluit.

Videat nascendi formas,  
Distinctas valde duas miras  
Ut sciat quis genuit:

Num qui finxit ex pulvere  
Hominem et limo terrae  
Absque ullo semine;

Et qui ex Adae latere  
Potuit Evam educere;  
Numquid pari virtute

Ipse ex matre virgine  
Potuit carnem sumere  
Pro nostra salute?

Hoc fateri, hoc crede firmiter:  
Christus sic homines dilexit sinceriter  
Quod voluit ex Virgine nasci benigniter  
Ut sua nos gratia recreet suaviter.

Quare Fili Virginis qui nos redemisti,  
Succurre nobis miseris propter quos venisti,  
Et tu Dei genitrix quae Deum genuisti,  
Impetrato famulis ut  
sint Jesu Christi  
Cohederes post egressum  
ab hoc mundo tristi.

Amen

*Who is so blind he would not believe  
That a virgin might bear our God?  
God has simply willed it.*

*Let him but see these two forms of birth  
Different and most wonderful,  
To know their father's nature:*

*Can not He who fashioned man  
From the dust and clay of the earth  
Without any seed;*

*And who from Adam's side  
Had the power to bring forth Eve;  
Can not He by the same power*

*From a virgin mother  
Take flesh Himself  
For the sake of our salvation?*

*Profess this, and believe it firmly:  
Christ so profoundly loved mankind  
That He graciously willed to be born of the Virgin  
To re-create us by his grace in gentleness.*

*Therefore, Son of the Virgin who have redeemed us,  
Help us in our distress for whose sake you came;  
And you, Mother of God who bore the Godhead  
Plead for your servants that they may be  
with Jesus Christ  
Co-heirs, when they take their leave  
of this sad world.*

Amen.