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anthems for the 21st century

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VASARI SINGERS
JEREMY BACKHOUSE

ANTHEMS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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All tracks are world premiere recordings

* Vasari Singers' 25th Anniversary commission

VASARI SINGERS

†JEREMY FILSELL organ

JEREMY BACKHOUSE conductor

ANTHEMS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

An Introduction by Jeremy Backhouse

To celebrate its first twenty-five years of vibrant music making, the Vasari Singers commissioned ten composers each to write an anthem that might reflect the state of our world at the start of the new millennium. My brief further suggested that their work should be able to sit comfortably within the context of a cathedral Evensong, but that it could also look beyond any constraints of Liturgy or formal religious doctrine to embrace a wider, more ecumenical audience; something more humanistic perhaps, that might connect more relevantly with multi-cultural, multi-faith societies of the world in the 21st century. To our great delight, what we received was a group of pieces of immense breadth and scope.

All the composers commissioned have musical connections either with the choir or me: Stephen Barlow I have known and admired as a musician since our paths crossed as choristers at Canterbury Cathedral under the hugely influential and expert guidance of Allan Wicks; the Canterbury connection also linked us with Gabriel Jackson, Philip Moore (Assistant Organist during my time there) whose choral music Vasari recorded on CD; Barrie Bignold was introduced to us by a member of the choir and played jazz piano on our best-selling CD of close harmony songs, 'Deep Purple'; Richard Blackford has been an ardent supporter of the choir and we had long talked about him writing something for the choir; Humphrey Clucas is perhaps the longest standing friend of Vasari and has written us numerous works, some of which we have recorded; Jeremy Filsell has been associated with the choir for many years as the choir's most regular and inspiring accompanist in concert and on CD; Ward Swingle, personal friend for many years, is the Patron of Vasari Singers and remains one of its closest colleagues; Will Todd was introduced to the choir through one of our members and will feature strongly in our programmes in coming years.

Our commission from Francis Pott, who has featured regularly in Vasari Singers' programmes over recent years, grew into a much more substantial work so has not been included on this CD. The Vasari Singers will give the premiere this major choral work, 'The Cloud of Unknowing', in 2006.

In addition to our commissions, we have included on this CD three gems by composers at the cutting edge of contemporary choral music: Jonathan Dove, James MacMillan and Jonathan Rathbone. Together these twelve anthems constitute a fascinating musical document, rich in stylistic diversity.

The texts themselves are as richly varied and striking in impact: there are verses from contemporary poets (including two specially written by Bob Cassidy and Tony Vincent Isaacs), traditional Psalms, a translation of a Sufi mystic and an adaptation of a Welsh hymn (by the present Archbishop of Canterbury), Mediaeval texts, William Blake, even just the vowels from the one word "Hosanna".

For the Vasari Singers, this set of anthems represents a celebration of our achievements over the last 25 years through the music of some of those who have travelled with us along the way; it also looks to the future, strengthening our commitment, our responsibility, to be a channel for the creation of new music. We have been thrilled that every one of the pieces written for us (and also the non-commissioned numbers) has a powerful message to convey. Getting to the heart of the music and communicating it to our audiences is something for which the choir has become renowned over the years and we relish the challenge of bringing the soul of these glorious new works to life.

© Jeremy Backhouse, 2005

Bless the Lord, O my soul

Music: Jonathan Dove

Words: Psalm 104 (paraphrase of vv. 1-4)

'Bless the Lord, O my soul' was commissioned by a group of people whose early lives were dedicated to choral singing (Eton College Old Choristers' Association). I wanted their millennium anthem to be a celebration of song, and Psalm 104 provided a wonderful sequence of expansive imagery. The organ part is quite virtuosic, beginning with a flourishing fanfare suggesting a heavenly vision, which provokes the choir into a wordless cry of wonder; in contrast, their first words are hushed, awe-struck. The organ creates a backdrop of twinkling stars for "who coverest thyself with light" and a calm sea for "who layest the beams of his chambers in the waters". The hushed "bless the Lord" returns, but now fast and loud, ushering in the most dramatic imagery: the chariot of clouds, the wings of the wind, and finally the depiction of God's ministers as a "flaming fire".

© Jonathan Dove/Peters Edition.

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Bless the Lord, O my soul,

Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment:

Who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

Who layest the beams of his chambers in the waters:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

Who maketh the clouds his chariot:

Who walketh upon the wings of the wind:

Who maketh his angels spirits:

His ministers a flaming fire!

Absolon, my son

Music: Jonathan Rathbone

Words: 2 Samuel 18. v.33

'Absolon, my son' was written for the choir of Girton College, Cambridge, during the term when I was their stand-in musical director. We performed a concert which included 'When David Heard' by Tomkins. I had always found this, and the Weelkes setting, to be very powerful pieces. Both were written in the first half of the 17th century. The words are as powerful as ever, and I wanted to make a more contemporary version, with a slightly more romantic approach and using more powerful harmonies which were not at the disposal of either Weelkes or Tomkins (well, not if they wanted to keep their jobs!).

The loss of a child must be devastating. David's army had won a great victory in battle, yet he could not even congratulate them, being preoccupied by the loss of his own son. He went away and wept. I have tried to paint a picture of his emotions during this outpouring. First of all, quietly as he takes the news in - then gradually the full impact of it hits him and he gets more and more distraught and angry; he cries out that he wishes he himself had died in Absolon's place. Finally, after this tirade, I picture him in the corner of the room - his energy spent - he can do no more than repeat the words "Absolon, my son".

© Jonathan Rathbone, 2005

When David heard that Absolon was slain, he went up to his chamber over the gate, and wept:

And thus he said: O my son Absolon, my son, my son Absolon.

Would God I had died for thee, O Absolon, my son, my son.

Angel Song II

Music: Will Todd

Words: "Hosanna"/wordless

'Angel Song II' is inspired by the idea of angels singing on Christmas night. The music weaves a gentle melody over the aleatoric textures of the accompanying voices. The text is designed to create the echo of the word 'Hosanna', but with no consonants, so that the music feels as if it comes from 'on high'. It is hoped that this movement might one day form part of a larger choral work inspired by the idea of voices from heaven.

© Will Todd, 2005

Mysterium Christi

Music: Jeremy Filsell

Words: Alice Meynell

The inspiration to use the poetry of nineteenth-century poet Alice Meynell (1847-1922) in 'Mysterium Christi' came initially from the Dean of Windsor, the Very Revd David Conner (a co-dedicattee of the piece), who based a sermon in St George's Chapel in June 2004 on her poem 'The Unknown God'.

The poet finds herself in church, observing a stranger approach the altar rail, receive communion and return to his place to pray. David Conner, in his sermon, spoke of Meynell's vision of Christ within another human being, in a neighbour, a stranger or a friend. Through this particular stranger, the poet recognizes Christ's presence and perceives within him, humanity's struggle for spiritual liberation. He represents the locus found in us all of Christ's struggle to be born within us: the identity of the human spirit straining for expression and release.

For Meynell, the stranger becomes a source of blessing: "From that secret place, And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!", seen, no less than the eucharistic bread and wine so recently consumed, as a means of grace and a sacramental presence. The

poem awakens an acknowledgement that all people through whom Christ struggles for expression are the means by which a healing, restorative and redeeming power can be mediated. Even the stranger here forms the channel through which a profound sense of human solidarity is communicated and shared.

The musical setting opens in mysterious dissonance, a strong sense of tonality only emerging at the first appearance of the motto chordal idea "O Christ in this man's life". The second verse is set in animated fashion with the organ's toccata figurations underpinning fugal and syncopated vocal writing above. The gathered momentum is suddenly interrupted by verse 3's harmonic stasis and the motto idea returns at "Christ in his unknown heart" (verse 4). The evocations successively of 'battle' and 'peace' in the fourthverse are set in musically characteristic antithesis before an affirmatory passage incorporates the motto chordal idea once again (verse 5). The predominantly rhythmic countenance of this music dissipates to recall the earlier-heard tri-tonal falling 'peace' phrase ("Christ in his mystery") and a coda recalls both the atmosphere and music of the opening.

© Jeremy Filsell, 2005

One of the crowd went up,
And knelt before the Paten and the Cup,
Received the Lord, returned in peace, and prayed
Close to my side. Then in my heart I said:

"O Christ, in this man's life -
This stranger who is Thine - in all his strife,
All his felicity, his good and ill,
In the assaulted stronghold of his will,"

"I do confess Thee here,
Alive within this life; I know Thee near
Within this lonely conscience, closed away
Within this brother's solitary day."

“Christ in his unknown heart,
His intellect unknown - this love, this art,
This battle and this peace, this destiny
That I shall never know - look upon me!”

“Christ in his numbered breath,
Christ in his beating heart and in his death,
Christ in his mystery! From that secret place
And from that separate dwelling, give me grace!”

Hear my crying, O God

Music: Humphrey Clucas

Words: Psalm 61 (vv. 1 & 3) and Psalm 115 (vv. 17 & 18)

‘Hear my crying, O God’ is scored for eight-part unaccompanied choir, though the full eight parts are not employed all the time. Certain ideas recur, the Scotch snap and the rising and falling scales of the opening, for instance. Almost throughout, there is simultaneous crotchet and quaver movement. It is a piece full of fear; the concluding ‘Praise the Lord’ is distinctly muted. It is an attempt to contain a deal of drama in a rather small space.

© Humphrey Clucas, 2005

Hear my crying, O God; give ear unto my prayer.
For thou hast been . . . a strong tower for me against the enemy.

The dead praise not thee, O Lord, neither all they that go down
into silence.
But we will praise the Lord from this time forth for evermore.
Praise the Lord.

When I see on Rood

Music: Stephen Barlow

Words: Anon. late 13th/early 14th century

There is something about this anonymous 13th/14th-century poem that seems timeless, and dramatically highly evocative. Its concision belies undercurrents of powerful emotion, mixing ritual with a very human outpouring of shock, pain and grief. The language itself seems achingly beautiful to me, the words resonate, the vowel sounds invite a sense of lyricism. I was particularly drawn to the idea of a crowd reaction, a unified response to an image that draws from all of us at the very least a deep rooted personal revulsion, and a shudder of responsibility. It is certainly an immaculately conceived poem, encapsulating a piercingly painful recognition of what makes us human.

© Stephen Barlow, 2005

When I see on Rood
Jesu, my leman,
And beside him stonden
Mary and Johan,
And his rig iswongen,
And his side istungen,
For the love of Man,
Well ought I to wepen
And sins for to leten,
If I of love can,
If I of love can,
If I of love can.

When I see on the Cross
Jesu, my lover,
And beside him stand
Mary and John,
And his back scourged,
And his side pierced,
For the love of Man,
Well ought I to weep
And sins to abandon,
If I know of love,
If I know of love,
If I know of love.

Now I have known, O Lord

Music: Gabriel Jackson

Words: Al-Junaid

For this very special commission I wanted to write a piece that reflected the particular character of the Vasari Singers - transparent, refined and meticulous, but also possessed of great fervour and virtuosity. Jeremy Backhouse proposed a text that was sacred, but not liturgical, which led me to the great Sufi mystic Al-Junaid. Couched in language that is as erotic as it is spiritual, the text seemed to demand a setting of great inwardness. The piece is largely restrained and intimate; intertwined melismatic tendrils of melody alternate with hushed homophony and self-communing murmurs, rising to a climax of fierce brightness and intensity before sinking back to the meditative calm of the opening.

© Gabriel Jackson, 2005

Now I have known, O Lord,
What lies within my heart;
In secret, from the world apart,
My tongue hath talked with my Adored.

So in a manner we
United are, and One;
Yet otherwise disunion
Is our estate eternally.

Though from my gaze profound
Deep awe hath hid Thy Face,
In wondrous and ecstatic Grace
I feel Thee touch my inmost ground.

Al-Junaid (10th century); English translation by A.J. Arberry (1905-73)
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Chosen

Music: James MacMillan

Words: Michael Symmons Roberts (from 'Her Maker's Maker')

This carol/anthem sets powerful verses by the contemporary poet Michael Symmons Roberts, a frequent collaborator with James MacMillan (most recently 'Parthenogenesis', also in collaboration with Archbishop Rowan Williams). The bleakness of the opening section reflects the Virgin Mary's lonely nocturnal doubts over whether she could really be carrying the infant Christ. Blazing and glorious reassurance comes with the rising sun as the fruit of the womb makes His presence felt. Meanwhile, in the fields Joseph wanders, himself a lonely figure, tending his fruit whilst repeating the question: "Why was my chosen one chosen?"

Last night I had that dream again,
that I was empty and alone,

no seed-child in my womb, no secret
son, tight as a thumbnail, yet complete,

no angel at my feet, just the shadow
of a great bird stretched out

in the evening light, no voice,
no message from the Lord, no kiss,

no sickness, tiredness, no joy,
just me, as hollow as a gourd.

That dream comes every night,
but when I wake, I have no doubt:

I feel the rush of Gabriel's
wings, the shock that he should kneel,

the whispered question. I sing prayers
into myself, share my days, my fears

with him, helpless master, unmade maker,
God and man, my son and father,

carried in me, weightless, faceless,
Lord of life, of seas, skies, stars.

Figs are ripe. Blood red roses swell
their buds. The world is rich and full.

My Joseph walks his days alone
among his fig trees, cypress, pine.

He does not tend or cut or make,
but wallows in their shade

and chokes on his unanswered question
'Why was my chosen one chosen?'

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I saw him standing

Music: Philip Moore

Words: Anne Griffiths, trans. Rowan Williams

The words of 'I saw him standing' are a translation, by Rowan Williams, of a Welsh hymn by Anne Griffiths. She was a farmer's wife without formal education, who died in 1805. She wrote a small number of hymns that are remarkable for their bold and extravagant imagery and sustained emotional density. The translation is not literal but is instead an attempt to create something of the energy of the original.

The words fall naturally into three sections and this is reflected in the music; the first and third sections are slow and sustained, while the middle section is fast and energetic. In the first section there is dialogue between the tenor and basses, and the altos. The sopranos' first entry is delayed until the words "It will be Oh, such a daybreak." The central section of the work is generally less chordal and more contrapuntal, with sometimes fairly thin textures.

© Philip Moore, 2005

Under the dark trees, there he stands,
There he stands; shall he not draw my eyes?
I thought I knew a little
How he compels, beyond all things, but now
He stands there in the shadows.
It will be Oh, such a daybreak, such bright morning,
When I shall wake to see him as he is.
He is called Rose of Sharon, for his skin
Is clear, his skin is flushed with blood,
His body lovely and exact; how he compels
Beyond ten thousand rivals. There he stands,
My friend, the friend of guilt and helplessness,
To steer my hollow body over the sea.
The Earth is full of masks and fetishes,
What is there here for me? Are these like him?
Keep company with him and you will know:
No kin, no likeness to those empty eyes.
He is a stranger to them all, great Jesus.
What is there here for me? I know
What I have longed for. Him. To hold
Me always.

© Rowan Williams. Reproduced by permission of the author.

On Another's Sorrow

Music: Richard Blackford

Words: William Blake

I write 'On Another's Sorrow' on September 2nd 2004, the day after the school siege in Beslan in North Ossetia. Broadcast images of terrified children fleeing to escape Chechen gunmen influenced my perception of Blake's simple song of innocence and gave it deeper significance. It became for me a poem about compassion, about our ability to feel the suffering of others, to be willing to cry "Never, never can it be" should we become uncaring. How God could allow such suffering then and after the recent tsunami disaster also made me wonder about Blake's serene acceptance of God's presence at times of sorrow. The Archbishop of Canterbury's response, that "we must focus on a passionate engagement with the lives that are left" seemed to be the best of what we are capable.

My setting starts with a unison chromatic theme in uneasy alternating 7/8 and 5/4. Call and response of sopranos and altos with tenors and basses lead to the first outburst of "No, never, never can it be." The material develops and climaxes on the second "O! never". The final contemplation of God's presence is hushed and returns to the original theme, but with altered intervals. The final "O! he gives to us his joy" is sung pianissimo in sustained harmony before returning to the unison of the opening.

© Richard Blackford, 2005

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow filled?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, never! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

And can He who smiles on all
Hear the wren with sorrows small,
Hear the small bird's grief and care,
Hear the woes that infants bear.

And not sit beside the nest,
Pouring pity in their breast,
And not sit the cradle near,
Weeping tear on infant's tear?

And not sit both night and day,
Wiping all our tears away?
O! never, never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

He doth give his joy to all:
He becomes an infant small,
He becomes a man of woe,
He doth feel the sorrow too.

Think not, thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not by:
Think not, thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.

O! He gives to us his joy,
That our grief He may destroy:
Till our grief is fled and gone
He doth sit by us and moan.

Peace

Music: Barrie Bignold

Words: Bob Cassidy

This motet is all about the poem. Any temptation I might have had to show off was subjugated by the power and simplicity of 'Peace', which I commissioned from my old friend, film editor, poet and general Renaissance Man, Bob Cassidy. It poses many questions about spirituality, religion and identity in the 21st century. The setting is simple but emotionally engaged, the soloists used as much for verbal clarity as for the symbolism of their being often locked in octaves, but physically as far apart as possible. The piece offers a resolution of sorts, but even then with a wry sting in the tail: "Let your wounded angels sleep in new-built holy houses".

© Barrie Bignold, 2005

Where can we walk and make our feet belong?
And where take breath to deserve the air we breathe?
Where take bread and need to eat no more?
Where to lie and sleep the sleep of kings?
Where to stop and never need to move on?
Search on
Drive on
There is no place
No peace.
When the wires still cry at four a.m.
Sending, carrying, receiving
Sad songs
Reverbing out across the big curve
Prayer echoes lost in god's star-sown furrows.
Tied by the knot of life.
Drifting to heaven.
God bridge this fractured world
Where the flame tongues of dragons
Rise from the cracks to lick our sun.
Devour our morning star and break the light.
Where can we walk and make our feet belong?

And where take breath to deserve the air we breathe?

Search on
Drive on
There is no place
No peace.
Bring peace to mend the pieces
And let your wounded angels sleep
In new-built holy houses.

© Bob Cassidy, 2005

Give us this day

Music: Ward Swingle

Words: Tony Vincent Isaacs

I was lucky to have a poem written for the occasion by Tony Vincent Isaacs. Tony had previously put words to the music of Scott Joplin for the Swingle Singers 'Rags and all that Jazz' album. For this new poem, called 'Give us this day', I've written a very simple four-part setting so that the words (and their important message) are quickly understood.

© Ward Swingle, 2005

Scudding clouds of crimson flush
Skim the azure
Evening sky
Boding well the morrows dawn
To a cloudless glowing morn
Dragonfly
Neon's treasure
Strafes the pool in summer's hush.

Give us this day
That we may see
The beauty before our eyes
Give us this day
That we may cherish
The earth before it dies.

Curfew closing on the light
Pungent woodsmoke
Curling by
Autumn leaching summer cold
Breathing out in red and gold
Flocking high
Over tall oak
Storks migrating full in flight.

Give us this day ...

All along the trestle bough
Incandescent
To the touch
Icy chandeliers ablaze
To the suns retreating rays
In the clutch
Omnipresent
Of the northwind's bitter vow.

Give us this day ...

Morning creeps upon the day
Stars pay homage
To the sun
Tumult in the swelling bud
Ripening with verdant blood
Surging through
Winter's damage
Weaving tendrils on its way.

Give us this day ...

For biographical and publication details of each composer, please visit the Vasari Singers' website on www.vasarisingers.org

Jonathan Dove - Peters Edition
Jonathan Rathbone - Peters Edition
James MacMillan - Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.
Humphrey Clucas - Animus
Will Todd - Tyalgum Press
Richard Blackford - Chester Novello

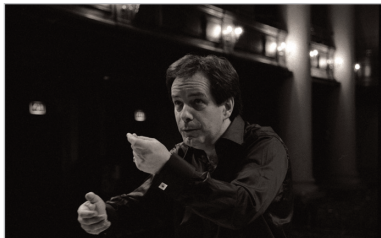
BIOGRAPHIES

JEREMY BACKHOUSE

Jeremy Backhouse enjoys a growing reputation in the UK and overseas for inspiring vivid, passionate performances from choirs and choruses in a wide range of repertoire. Equally at home with Renaissance music through to contemporary commissions, he is widely recognised as one of Britain's leading choral conductors. He has been the sole Music Director of the award-winning chamber choir Vasari Singers since 1981 and is also Conductor of the 150-voice Guildford Philharmonic Choir.

Head Chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, he studied music and composition at Liverpool University and began his career as a Music Editor with EMI. From 1998 to December 2004 he was Conductor of the Wooburn Singers. He has also worked with the BBC Club Choir, the Kent Youth Choir, the Brighton Festival Chorus, London Choral Society, Trinity College of Music Chamber Choir and the Philharmonia Chorus. He has conducted the BBC Singers on BBC Radio 3 in several programmes of music by Lennox Berkeley, Holst, Rubbra, Bax, Massenet and Delibes.

Recent recordings with Vasari Singers include the world premiere of Dupré's 'De Profundis' and 'La France au Calvaire' (both selected as Editor's Choice in Gramophone) and 'Deep Purple', a medley of swing and jazz choral arrangements from Ward Swingle and John Rutter to Bob Chilcot and George Shearing. He has recorded choral music for EMI, Cala/United, Guild and Signum record labels.





VASARI SINGERS

Described by Gramophone magazine as “one of the most accomplished small choral groups of our time”, Vasari has performed in most of London's major concert venues and taken part in numerous commercial concerts and festivals, including the BBC Proms. The choir can be heard regularly on BBC Radio 3 and has featured on BBC TV. Choral evensong is a major part of Vasari's schedule and the choir sings regularly in Canterbury Cathedral at the request of the Dean and Chapter and at other main English cathedrals.

Vasari's substantial discography features recordings across a wide range of periods and styles, from Palestrina and Lotti, to Britten, Fauré, Kodály, and Swingle. The Gramophone Award-nominated Howells Requiem and Frank Martin Mass was re-released by Signum in 2004 and the recent recordings of works by the French composer Marcel Dupré both received Gramophone's 'Editor's Choice' accolade.

Vasari Singers gratefully acknowledges financial support from the PRS Foundation, the RWW Trust, the Holst Foundation, the Michael Marks Foundation, the Leche Trust, the Kenneth Leighton Foundation and valuable assistance from our sponsors including La Sologne Publications, Sim Canetty-Clarke Photography, Metro Imaging and SLDesign.

Vasari Singers is a UK Charity 1071299.
www.vasarisingers.org

Soprano

Nicola Balzan
Alysha De Itonno
Jenny Filsell
Emma Hardie
Lizzie Isherwood
Laura Kirkup
Julia Mackinder
Fiona McWilliams
Jess Stansfield
Susan Waton

Alto

Elizabeth Atkinson
Alison Benton
Julia Field
Sarah Kendrick
Julia Ridout
Helen Riley

Tenor

Peter Belasyse-Smith
Daniel Burges
Simon Burges
David Jackson
Chris Riley
Paul Robertson

Bass

Andrew Angus
Matt Bernstein
James Cross
Malcolm Field
Chris Hunter
Ben Pilling
Paul Newis
Matt Wood

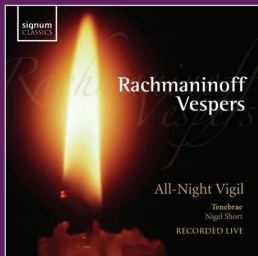


Vocal Coach and Repetiteur - David Bray
Producer and editor - John H. West
Balance Engineer - Limo Hearn
Recorded - Tonbridge School Chapel 18-20 February 2005
All artwork and design - Woven Design
Cover image - Creatas
Choir Photography - Sim Canetty-Clarke
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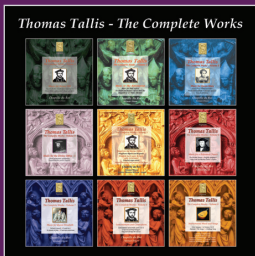
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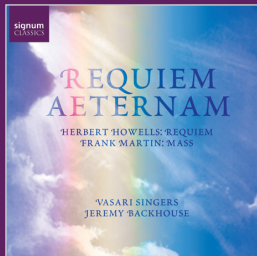
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Requiem Aeternam SIGCD503

A deeply intimate recording of personal and moving works by Howells and Martin. Howells: **Requiem** (1935) and the motet, **Take him, earth, for cherishing**. Martin: **Mass** (1922/6)