

# Music from Heaven

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ALLEGRI MISERERE  
BRITTEN ST CECILIA  
BACH  
POULENC  
BARBER  
BYRD



*The Choir of Ormond College directed by Douglas Lawrence*

**1** *Miserere*  
Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652) 12'52"

**Three pieces by**  
William Byrd (1543-1623)

**2** Sing Joyfully unto God 2'30"

**3** Beata viscera 2'22"

**4** Hæc dies 2'22"

**Four motets for Christmas**  
Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

**5** O magnum mysterium 2'51"

**6** Quem vidistis pastores 2'16"

**7** Videntes stellam 2'46"

**8** Hodie Christus natus est 2'10"

**9** *Hymn to Saint Cecilia*  
Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) 9'41"

**10** *Agnus Dei*  
("Adagio for Strings")  
Samuel Barber (1910-1981) 6'47"

**Singet dem Herren ein neues Lied**  
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

**11** Singet dem Herren ein  
neues Lied 4'48"

**12** Chorale: Wie sich ein  
Vater erbarmet 4'34"

**13** Lobet den Herrn in seinen  
Thaten 3'28"

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After listening to the Choir of Ormond College, a German critic wrote that during the concert she had felt "at the centre of the world". The Berliner Morgenpost said "Twenty four young singers from Melbourne showed the Germans how to sing Bach". "One of the most virtuosic chamber choirs in the world" wrote Denmark's Berlingske Tidende.

Indeed since its inception in 1982 the Choir of Ormond College, directed by Douglas Lawrence, has become the first Australian choir to receive ongoing international recognition. Most of the singers are, or have been resident in Ormond College and come from schools where music education has occupied an important part in the curriculum. The choir rehearses twice a week, sings each Sunday evening during the university year in the college chapel and presents an annual concert series.

Apart from concert tours, which have taken place every two years, the choir undertakes an ever increasing number of engagements for festivals and concert organisations within Australia. During 1995 the choir was featured on national radio twice in hour-long broadcasts.

This is the choir's fifth recording.

**G**regorio Allegri was born in Rome in 1582. He sang as a boy at the church of San Luigi Dei Francesi in Rome, later taking lessons in composition and becoming a priest. At the age of 47 he was appointed as a tenor singer in the Chapel of Pope Urban VIII, and sang there for 23 years until his death in 1652. **1** The *Miserere* is his best known work, and was traditionally sung in the Pontifical Chapel as a part of Holy Week before Good Friday.

The *Miserere* is really made up of two pieces, one in five parts which is normally sung by the large choir, and one in four parts normally sung by soloists. As well, every second verse is sung by the male singers in plainsong. The nineteen verses of Psalm 51 are thus sung in the following manner:

*v1a Choirv1b Plainsongv2 Soloistsv3  
Plainsong  
v4 Choirv5 Plainsongv6 Soloistsv7  
Plainsong*

and so on. This happens almost five times. To finish the piece, Allegri uses the choir music for the first part of verse 19, and composes new music for the second part, where the pattern otherwise would have required plainsong. There are no specific references in the music to particular words of the text, but the mood of the piece is slow and meditative.

The most famous aspect of the *Miserere* is the first soprano line in the solo music that soars up to a high C,

requiring a soprano with exceptional skill and high notes. It is possible that this part was improvised and not actually part of the original written score. It would not be the first or last time that the most famous aspect of a piece was not a part of the composer's original conception.

The *Miserere* was closely guarded by the Pontifical Chapel, and there are unsupported stories of such dire punishment as excommunication for copying it. Mozart is supposed to have copied it from memory after hearing it once in 1771 at the age of 14. In 1790 Charles Burney obtained a copy and published it in his *La musica della Settimana Santa* (The Music of the Seventeenth Century).

For the words of the *Miserere*, refer to Psalm 51.

**W**illiam Byrd was born in the English cathedral town of Lincoln about 1543, and studied under Thomas Tallis. In 1575 Queen Elizabeth I gave Byrd and Tallis a 21 year monopoly on printing music and music paper, one would hope because of the two composers' undeniable talent.

## **2** Sing Joyfully

*Sing joyfully unto God our strength; sing loud unto the God of Jacob. Take the song, and bring forth the timbrel, the pleasant harp and the viol. Blow the trumpet in the new moon, even in the time appointed,*

*and at our feast day. For this was made a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob.*

The first of the three pieces presented here shows that while he was a Catholic, Byrd could also write excellent music in English. The text of *Sing joyfully unto God* is from Psalm 81, which invokes the Hebrews to praise God with a variety of musical instruments. Byrd depicts the instruments with great skill, using a quick rising phrase for the words 'pleasant harp', a characteristic slower phrase for the words 'and the viol' and an extended fanfare for the words 'blow the trumpet in the new moon'. This is all incorporated into an effortlessly manipulated six-part contrapuntal texture.

## **3** Beata Viscera

*Blessed is the womb of the Virgin Mary, which bore the Son of the Eternal Father. Alleluia.*

Byrd's Catholic heritage is more apparent in the Latin motet *Beata Viscera*. It is a simple adoration of the Virgin Mary in five parts, with a particularly beautiful *Alleluia* at the end.

## **4** Hæc Dies

*This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Alleluia.*

*Hæc Dies* is one of Byrd's most famous motets on the famous words from Psalm 118. It is in three contrasting sections. The first section, on the words "This is the day that the Lord has made" has all the parts entering in imitation. Throughout the section different voices may be heard singing the same melodies in close succession. The next section on the words "We will rejoice and be glad in it" is in a different meter, and puts ideas in 6/8 time together with others in 3/4 time, creating a complex texture. The last section on "Alleluia" is slower again and all the entries of the theme with its long note on the first syllable of 'Alleluia' can easily be heard, and the whole piece ends on a beautifully resonant chord.

**P**oulenc's *Four motets for Christmas* are a complementary set to his *Four motets for a time of penitence*. He wrote them between December 1951 and May 1952 in Paris, Marseille, Aix en Provence and Noizay. The texts are not from the Bible but from the Catholic liturgy, and offer commentaries on various aspects of the incarnation and birth of Christ.

**5** *O magnum mysterium*  
*How great a mystery and wonderful*  
*sacrament that beasts should see a new-*  
*born Lord lying in a manger.*  
*O Blessed Virgin, whose body was worthy*  
*to bear the Lord Jesus Christ. Alleluia.*

The first motet is called *O Magnum Mysterium* and concerns the great mystery of God becoming human in the incarnation of Christ. It begins with quiet, low chords that express the sense of awe that other composers also have sought to express when setting the same text. Poulenc's mysterious harmonies also help maintain the mood.

**6** *Quem vidistis*  
*What have you seen, shepherds, tell us the*  
*news; who has just appeared on the earth?*  
*We have seen a newborn child,*  
*and a chorus of angels*  
*praising the Lord together.*  
*Tell what you have seen,*  
*and proclaim the birth of Christ.*

The second, *Quem vidistis*, asks the shepherds what they have seen and they reply. Then all Christians are urged to proclaim the birth of Christ.

**7** *Videntes Stellam*  
*Seeing the star, the wise men rejoiced*  
*greatly, and entering the house gave the*  
*Lord gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

*Videntes Stellam* deals with another important aspect of Christmas, the story of the wise men following a star and finding the infant Christ. Poulenc uses some particularly unusual chords at the words "gold, frankincense and myrrh" (*aurum, thus et myrrum*).

**8** *Hodie Christus natus est*  
*Today Christ is born: today the Saviour*  
*appears: today on earth angels are*  
*singing, archangels are rejoicing: today*  
*the just people are crying out in exultation:*  
*glory to God in the highest, alleluia.*

The last of the motets uses the famous text *Hodie Christus natus est*, which is a joyful celebration of the arrival of Christmas Day. The first text phrase is declaimed loudly and confidently, in this case by the altos and later by the tenors. As each text phrase builds on the last, Poulenc repeats phrases louder and louder, gradually building up the excitement until the end.

**B**eing the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia could hardly escape the attention of composers. It was a British tradition to compose odes to St. Cecilia on poetry of the day, with examples by Blow, Handel and most famously Purcell. Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia* is his most extensive piece for unaccompanied choir, and was completed "At sea, M. S. Axel Johnson, April 2nd 1942". The poem, written by Auden for Britten in 1940, is complex and could be interpreted in many different ways.

**9** Britten: *Hymn to St. Cecilia*  
 (W.H. AUDEN)  
 I –  
*In a garden shady this holy lady*  
*With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,*

*Like a black swan as death came on  
Poured forth her song in perfect calm:  
And by ocean's margin this innocent virgin  
Constructed an organ to enlarge her  
prayer,  
And notes tremendous from her great  
engine  
Thundered out on the Roman air.*

*Blonde Aphrodite rose up excited,  
Moved to delight the melody,  
White as an orchid she rode quite naked  
In an oyster shell on top of the sea;  
At sounds so entrancing the angels  
dancing  
Came out of their trance into time again,  
And around the wicked in Hell's abysses  
The huge flame flickered and eased their  
pain.*

Refrain:  
*Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions  
To all musicians, appear and inspire:  
Translated Daughter, come down and  
startle  
Composing mortals with immortal fire.*

The first part is concerned with traditional images of Saint Cecilia, and the healing and redemptive powers of music. The notes from her organ inspire Aphrodite to rise from the water in a scene reminiscent of Botticelli's *Venus di Milo*. The spiritual powers of music cause angels to dance, and relieve the pain of the wicked in Hell. Britten's musical setting is mainly

descriptive, with the female voices singing all the words together while the male voices weave a seamless line beneath in longer note values. The loud outburst to the words "notes tremendous thundered out" is notable, as is the delicate depiction of angels dancing about 20 seconds later.

II –  
*I cannot grow;  
I have no shadow  
To run away from,  
I only play.*

*I cannot err;  
There is no creature  
Whom I belong to,  
Whom I could wrong.*

*I am defeat  
When it knows it  
Can now do nothing  
By suffering.*

*All you lived through,  
Dancing because you  
No longer need it  
For any deed.*

*I shall never be  
Different. Love me.*

Refrain: *Blessed Cecilia, etc.*

The rest of the poem is more obscure and difficult to interpret. One interpretation is

that the second part is talking about the poet himself, regretting the way he is, but saying that this is ultimately connected with his identity. He is asking to be loved despite his faults; he cannot change his identity, but to suffer permanently for it would be defeat. The music is in a skipping tempo that suits the playful nature of the first stanza. At the end, the words "Love me" are sung by the first sopranos alone, which emphasises the poet's loneliness.

III –  
*O ear whose creatures cannot wish to fall,  
O calm of spaces unafraid of weight,  
Where sorrow is herself, forgetting all  
The gaucheness of her adolescent state,  
Where Hope within the altogether strange  
From every outworn image is released,  
And Dread born whole and normal like a  
beast  
Into a world of truths that never change:  
Restore our fallen day; O re-arrange.*

In the first stanza of the third part the poet seems to be imagining a place or state where emotions are pure. Sorrow is true to herself, Dread is normal and unchangeable, but there is Hope everywhere. He looks for restoration through music via the ear mentioned in the first line. While the basses declaim the words, the higher voices create a slow-moving ethereal texture that complements the mood of the words very appropriately.

IV –  
*O dear white children casual as birds,  
Playing among the ruined languages,  
So small beside their large confusing  
words,  
So gay against the greater silences  
Of dreadful things you did: O hang the  
head,  
Impetuous child with the tremendous  
brain,  
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the  
stain,  
Lost innocence who wished your lover  
dead,  
Weep for the lives your wishes never led.*

The second stanza grieves for innocent people the poet may have harmed. A beautiful soprano solo is heard above the rest of the choir, and the musical motif of quicker notes grouped into twos gives the impression of weeping.

V –  
*O cry created as the bow of sin  
Is drawn across our trembling violin.  
O weep, child, weep, O weep away the  
stain.*

*O law drummed out by hearts against the  
still  
Long winter of our intellectual will.  
That what has been may never be again.*

*O flute that throbs with the thanksgiving  
breath*

*Of convalescents on the shores of death.  
O bless the freedom that you never chose.*

*O trumpets that unguarded children blow  
About the fortress of their inner foe.  
O wear your tribulation like a rose.*

In this section Britten picks up on Auden's allusions to musical instruments, and has soloists from the choir imitating them. The violin reflects the pain of sin and suggests that weeping and tears can help remove the stain of sin. The next part suggests that one should not use one's intellect for moral guidance, as the mind is inclined to rationalise evil and selfish desires. Auden may be suggesting that the heart is more aware of moral truths and drums them out like timpani. Its message is a strong wish that past errors should not be repeated. The flute is powered by the breath of people who have nearly died but recovered. It tells these people to be thankful for their life and freedom, especially as they did not have the choice to live or to die. Perhaps Auden considered that he had nearly died spiritually and was rejoicing in his newly found freedom. People guard their inner pain zealously as if with a fortress and trumpets. The trumpet's message is that one's tribulations should not be hidden, but worn like a rose, displaying the thorns as well as the petals.

Each part concludes with a refrain invoking the spirit of Cecilia to inspire musicians to look beyond temporal things

and to try to communicate a sense of the eternal and transcendental. As former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating said: "Compared with the great composers, most of us are wasting our time."

VI – Final refrain: *Blessed Cecilia etc.*

**S**amuel Barber's *Agnus Dei* began life as the slow movement of his String Quartet (1936). The conductor Thomas Beecham was struck by the piece and suggested to Barber that he arrange it for string orchestra. Beecham took the *Adagio for Strings* on his world orchestral tours and made it Barber's most famous piece. Despite the simple melody and harmony, Barber achieves an intensity and beauty rarely found before or afterwards in music. He was moved to arrange the music for choir on the death of a dear friend, and in the original string version there seem to be human longings for mercy and peace that make its transcription to the words of the *Agnus Dei* particularly appropriate.

**10** Barber: *Agnus Dei*  
*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the  
world, have mercy on us.*  
*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the  
world, have mercy on us.*  
*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the  
world, grant us your peace.*

**B**ach's motet *Singet den Herrn ein neues Lied* is the second piece on this disc that Mozart is known to have heard. When he heard it performed in Leipzig, it so struck him that he asked to be shown the music, and sat for a while in the back room putting the music together in his head from the choir's individual parts. Though Bach was not as famous and as well known as he now is, Mozart was able to glimpse the incredible beauty and joy that Bach was expressing in his finest motet. The motet is written for two four-part choirs, and Bach uses them both in a number of different ways.

**11** Bach: Singet dem Herrn  
*Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied:  
die Gemeinde der Heiligen sollen ihn loben.  
Israel freue sich des, der ihn gemacht hat:  
die Kinder Zion sei'n frölich  
über ihren Könige.  
Sie sollen loben seinen Namen in Reihen:  
mit Pauken und Harfen sollen sie ihm  
spielen.*

*Sing unto the Lord a new song: let the congregation of the saints praise him. Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: and let the children of Sion be joyful in their King. Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with tabret and harp. (Psalm 149, 1-3)*

The first movement begins with the second choir (heard on the left) repeating the

words 'singet' (sing), and the first singing different, much more florid material. The emphatic repetitions of 'singet' can be heard throughout the movement. The choirs then swap and the second choir sings the more florid material. After some rapid interchange between the choirs, a section begins where the choirs exchange long phrases to the words 'Die Gemeinde der Heiligen sollen ihn loben'. Both choirs then join together in a rich eight-part texture for the words "Israel freuet sich, des der ihn gemacht hat". The rest of the words of the first verse are introduced gradually into a long fugal section that finishes the movement. While the second choir continues to repeat the words 'Singet den Herrn', the first choir sings a fugue on the words 'Die Kinder Zion...'. The number of parts in the texture is constantly changing, subtly undulating between three parts and eight parts. Another section begins with the male voices answering each other with the word 'Singet', but now at a distance of one note, which gives the impression of a close echo. While this movement is one of Bach's greatest technical achievements, the best way to appreciate the music is to listen and to feel the joy that he was trying to convey.

**12** Chorale (Choir)  
*Wie sich ein Vater erbarmet  
über seine junge Kinderlein,  
so thut der Herr uns allen  
so wir in kindlich fürchten rein.*

*Er kennt das arm Gemächte,  
Gott weiß, wir sind nur Staub,  
gleichwie das Gras vom Rechen,  
ein' Blum' und fallend Laub.  
Der Wind nur drüber wehet,  
so ist es nicht mehr da,  
also der Mensch vergehet;  
sein End, das ist ihm nah.*

*Like as a Father taketh pity on his young children so doth the Lord take pity on us all, and thus like children stand we in awe of Him. He knows how weak is all our strength; God knows we are but dust, like grass gathered up by the rake, a flower or falling leaves; the wind hath only to blow over it, and it is gone: thus doth man perish; his end is ever near.*

Aria (Soloists)  
*Gott, nimm dich ferner unser an,  
denn ohne Dich ist nichts gethan  
mit allen unsern Sachen.  
Drum sei du unser Schirm und Licht,  
und trügt uns unsre Hoffnung nicht,  
so wirst du's ferner machen.  
Wohl dem, der sich nur steif und fest  
auf Dich und Deine Huld verläßt.*

*God have mercy on us in time to come, for without Thee is nothing done with all our worldly cares. Be thou therefore our shield and light, and if our hope disappoint us not, wilt Thou also keep Thy word. Blessed is the man who casts himself utterly on Thee and Thy grace.*

The second movement is in a simpler alternating style, where one choir sings a chorale on the weakness and mortality of humans compared to the strength and power of God, and the other sings an 'aria' asking God for mercy and help through life. Bach carefully chose both texts to complement each other, and the messages of both are interweaved into his own personal statement.

**13** *Lobet den Herrn in seinen Thaten, lobet ihn in seiner großen Herrlichkeit. Alles, was Odem hat, lobe dem Herrn, Hallelujah!*

*Praise him in his noble acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. (Psalm 150, 2) Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord, Hallelujah!*

The third movement returns to the joyful mood of the first movement. The first phrase is sung by the first choir and copied directly by the second choir. After this there is no more direct imitation, with the 'following' choir singing variations on what the 'leading' choir has sung. Then both choirs briefly sing in 8-part harmony before joining as a unified group to sing the words 'Alles, was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn, alleluja' (Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Alleluia). In the third last bar the sopranos jump to a high B flat, their highest note in the whole piece, and the piece finishes.

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*Digital recording:* Martin Wright, Vaughan McAlley

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*Program notes:* Vaughan McAlley with help from Douglas Lawrence, Lucy Monie and Grantley MacDonald

*Poulenc translation:* Vaughan McAlley

*Bach translation:* Grantley MacDonald

*Cover illustration:* Choir members near the Basilica at Sion, from the camera of David Iser

*Sky background:* Howard Birnstihl

*Image manipulation:* Simon Wright

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***Decani (Choir 1)***

Soprano: Katherine Abrat, Tessa Brown, Alison Dunn, Bronwyn Henderson, Nina Wellington  
Alto: Kate Brian, Helena Simpson  
Tenor: Joel Gladman, Grantley MacDonald  
Bass: David Iser, Jonathan Wallis, Jamie Wallis

***Cantoris (Choir 2)***

Soprano: Rosie Iser, Lucy Monie, Katrina Renard, Raechel Schlaghecke, Sophie Weddell  
Alto: Amée Baird, Alice Jamison  
Tenor: Matthew Flood, Vaughan McAlley  
Bass: Samuel Furphy, Christopher Johnston, Edward Morgan

***Soloists:***

Allegrì Miserere, small group:

Soprano 1: Nina Wellington  
Soprano 2: Alison Dunn  
Alto: Helena Simpson  
Baritone: Grantley MacDonald, Jonathan Wallis

Britten Hymn to Saint Cecilia

Soprano: Alison Dunn  
Alto: Amée Baird  
Tenor: Matthew Flood

Bass: Jonathan Wallis

Bach Singet dem Herrn, small group:

Soprano: Katherine Abrat, Raechel Schlaghecke  
Alto: Helena Simpson  
Tenor: Joel Gladman  
Bass: Samuel Furphy, David Iser