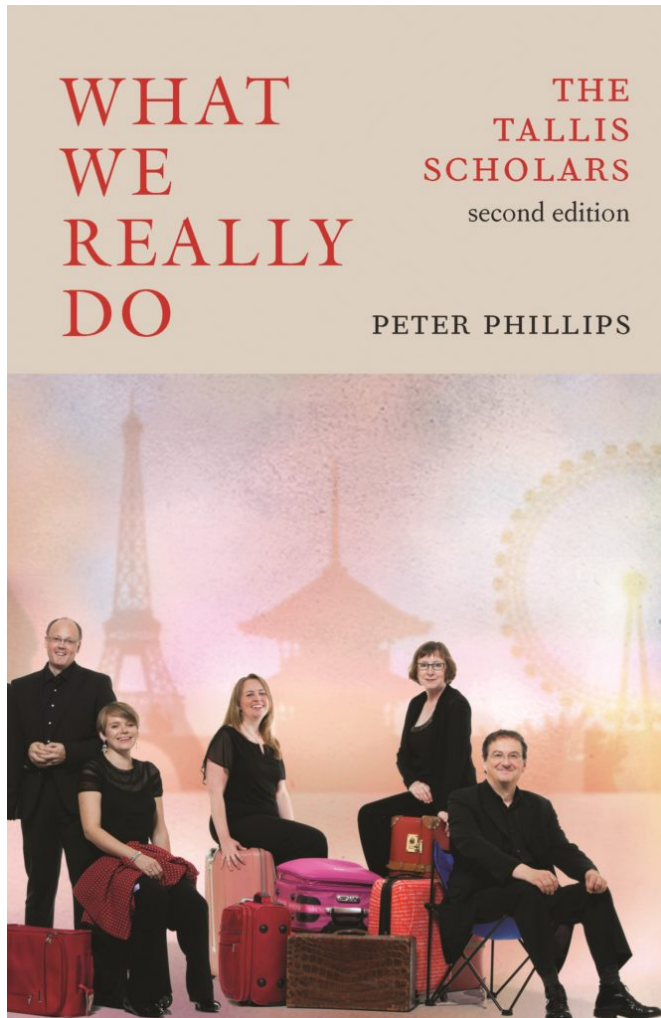


Peter Phillips: What We Really Do

Review by Graham Lack, composer & ICB Consultant Editor



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It seems such an innocent question: “So what do you really do?”, but it carries a sting in the tail. Although singers might appear to lead charmed lives, most will have been asked this on one occasion or another. And ill feeling might have been engendered where no offence was meant. That one can make one’s living by singing renaissance polyphony is simply

something many audience members and even some sponsors at a post-concert reception find it hard to believe: the profession would seem to beg such an ingenuous enquiry. In *What We Really Do*, Peter Phillips attempts to take stock of forty years in the business, and explain how the perception and performance of this repertoire has fared since he founded the ensemble, or at least the proto-Tallis Scholars, back in 1973.

He recounts how entire concerts of polyphony were rare in those days, and what it is like to have dedicated one's working life to this unusual music. He seems surprised that it has lasted this long. Parallel to the history of this renowned ensemble he tells the history of Gimell Records, part and parcel of the story. Without this enterprise, things might have turned out differently. This second edition is, one assumes, more or less identical with the first, with the exception of chapter six, 'On tour II', written in 2012 especially for the present publication.

Any vocal group that rehearses in a church with the moniker St Andrew's-by-the-Wardrobe must in some way be special. It is where the Tallis Scholars keeps its library too. For four decades now Peter Phillips has sought not to pursue fashionable theories of singing a *cappella* polyphony but to survive them. And the book reveals how his 'just do it' approach is tempered by much-needed choral discipline and that any overreaction to later thinking is out of place. Regarding the Scholars' singing style, the reader will gain a fascinating insight, Phillips explaining how he would: "call this sound 'modern': clear enough to benefit from digital recording...strong enough to fill 3000-seat concert halls without amplification or distortion, subtle enough to do justice to the religious texts involved".

This is a candid account, warts and all, of life on the road – two chapters are dedicated to the vagaries of touring –, but of concert life back home too, in Britain, with all the concomitant difficulties, biased attitudes, occasionally quite

bigoted opinions and, thank goodness, enough shards of light to make a parlous enterprise seem worthwhile after all. The volume might well be unique in terms of its canny analysis of how art and commerce, rehearsals and concerts, recordings and singers can exist side by side and even be made to interact in order to produce some sense of security. Of greatest import is just how educated audiences are in the Far East: what matters are the western magazine reports, the awards, and the reviews – all of which concertgoers would seem to take at face value, in a desire to experience the music for themselves.

A melancholy thread runs through the pages, and events long consigned to history seem quite immediate: student singers arriving late for an Oxford concert after an inappropriately long and heavy repast, or amateur performances of *Spem in alium* with “massed tenors and basses” sounding like a “vacuum cleaner with attitude”. But the hint of things to come is patently there, and Phillips vindicates how Tallis was the perfect repertoire choice.

Some parts of the chronicle come as a surprise, especially the tale of how shabbily the ensemble was treated by the BBC in the early days, and the historic confrontation with the actors’ and hence singers’ union Equity during the Thatcher era. It was, as Phillips puts it, a “routine hostility”. The real break came with the *Gramophone* Record of the Year award in 1987 for the two Josquin masses. And although it was not downhill all the way, one glimpses how crucial were the roles of first France and then Australia, Japan and North America in the development and subsequent international success of The Tallis Scholars.

With hindsight, the writer is able to shed much light on the early music revival of the 1970s, telling with relish some stories about ‘beany music’ and *faux* Latin pronunciation. Again, there can not be many books that are so demure and yet which reveal how the music business really works. But *What We Really Do* is not taken from the blogosphere, thank the Lord,

and it is much more than a diary. What it is, is a compendium, and should be read as such. A stricter editor might have caught the occasional if hilarious repeated anecdote, taken a stance on personal pronouns, and possibly assigned some musicianly commentary on matters theoretical to a different chapter, where it might better belong.

But any book that proffers words like 'alarums', 'deracinated' and 'ineffable' must be worth its weight in gold, and only a Beckmesser would make a tally of the somewhat overused 'overall' and 'umpteenth'. In a day and age in which proofreading is almost a lost art, it is encouraging to note how well this has been done for the present publication. The number of literals may be counted on the fingers of one hand: 'millenium' (p. 49, possibly less an oversight and more a disbelief that it derives from *annum*), 'accomodate' (p. 116), 'dobbed' for 'dubbed' (p. 151), and 'difficut' (p. 233). Whilst we are on the subject of odd words, there are 'spreng' and 'wonga', but these have proper denotations, found in a most surprising chapter on 'Singers' Argot'.

Peter Phillips has written for the *Spectator* for some three decades now, and he has included some excellent articles acting as a gloss on the main text. All in all, *What We Really Do* should be required reading for students of cultural history, and it can be thoroughly recommended for both hardened professionals or anyone for whom the sacred *a cappella* renaissance repertoire still remains a draw.

The Tallis Scholars encapsulate a kind of Britishness that can be read about in historical studies of the 19th century, the prototype being, as Phillips put it, the "radical artisan", people who had a "skill and a brain", and who were "proud people who cost a specified sum, instinctively suspicious of fine language or abstractions, very often with a dry, ironic sense of humour, especially when management was making their lives hell". The author turns time and again to this model, of

jet-lagged, hungry, cold and ill singers, still going for it hell for leather, because they owe it to themselves, their colleagues and the music they believe in. They are not going to take it easy. No wonder the success rate has been so high.