

# The Tallis Scholars at Forty – An interview with Peter Phillips

*By Graham Lack, composer & ICB Consultant Editor*

**Graham Lack:** How do you account for the sound of the Tallis Scholars?

**Peter Phillips:** Well, after all these years, it seems I just stand there and it happens. But we did take years to build up that sound, even if now all I usually need to do is tweak it. It is like an instrument that is there for me, one with which I can interpret the music. If another conductor were to take my place, the singers would produce a different sound. I suppose it is the sheer physical presence of me, and that this links to the vast number of recordings we have done. The second that singers arrive, they know just what to do.



*Peter Phillips*  
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**GL:** But that sound was surely not there at the start?

**PP:** Indeed no, it was not. I had to create it, quite a long time ago now. The current singers realize instinctively what they should do...

**GL:** ...and what should they do?

**PP:** For a start, they should listen to as many CDs as they can, from the early ones that the Tallis Scholars recorded to more recent ones.

**GL:** A good example of music reception theory...

**PP:** ...quite, and I do look after the back catalogue. And this was not with the aim of making big bucks. The importance of a back catalogue is, to put it simply, that all the recordings are still available. The famous Allegri recording was made in 1980, 33 years ago!

**GL:** And are there any singers from those days who still sing in the ensemble?

**PP:** Interestingly, there is one singer who still does sing *with* the ensemble, a regular guest these days. Actually he was singing with us in 1973.

**GL:** What is so special about the Allegri recording? Does it all seem a long time ago?

**PP:** The fact that the top notes were taken by the soprano Alison Stamp, and that her daughter – 28 years later – turned up to audition, and is now singing in some projects.

**GL:** So there is an amazing sense of continuity then?

**PP:** Absolutely. Despite the hectic world in which we live. The music we sing and the sound we produce remain the same.

**GL:** But there must have been problems along the way...

**PP:** ...of course there were. As voices get older, there is a need to renew the ensemble, which calls for great diplomacy. Incipient illness remains a problem, especially if a singer wants to have a long career.

**GL:** So how do you surmount difficulties when other vocal things go wrong? Ones not related to health or vocal stamina...

**PP:** ...we simply try to be a step ahead of the game. The selection process for the Tallis Scholars is incredibly rigorous. But there will always be that 10% we call the chemistry which needs to play a role. People just have to fit in...

**GL:** ...with their neighbour, as you sing two to a part...

**PP:** ...that's the trick. Two to a part is the hardest, but the most subtle.

**GL:** The most subtle, what an interesting way to put it...

**PP:** ...well, it is simply the subtlest sound that can be found between one to a part and several voices to a part. The former is challenging – well amazingly strenuous psychologically and physically – but a wonderfully transparent sound can soon become insipid...

**GL:** ...and the latter?

**PP:** For me, the latter means an ardent sound. It is *the* choral sound. It is the one that we want. It has the best of both the chamber choir sound and the sound produced by a group of vocal soloists.

**GL:** The voice is of course such a personal thing. How do you deal with individual singers in rehearsal?

**PP:** I've never said to anyone: "You are not making the sound that I want." I just don't say things like that. What I do say is: "Don't go on stage with lots of theory in your head."

**GL:** Like *musica ficta* for example?

**PP:** Gosh, yes. I mean can't we just rely on the editor to write the wretched sharps in the score and then go and sing the music with verve and conviction...and without these hang ups?

**GL:** A good word that, verve. It says a lot about the Tallis Scholars sound. But I can't let you rest on your laurels too much when it comes to things theoretical. Take the cases in late Tallis where an *f natural* in one register may clash on the beat with an *f sharp* in another, if you are singing in mean tone, not equal temperament, the diminished octave will be smaller, and hence less dissonant.

**PP:** Of course, we know that major thirds should be smaller and that minor thirds should be sharper. But these calculations have to be done in rehearsal. We do sing for large audiences you know, sometimes there are almost 3000 people out there, and more at the Proms.



*The Tallis Scholars in*

*Oxford, 1977*

**GL:** If you cast your mind back to 1973, what did you do differently? What marked you out from other ensembles?

**PP:** For a start, we stood in a semi-circle, in just one row, so that everyone taking part could see each other. This was very unusual at the time. And we did only Renaissance polyphony, again something certainly not par for the course back then.

**GL:** And you sang two to part...

**PP:** ...which is another thing that marked us out from the rest. This was unique – or almost so I would guess – forty years ago. The traditional collegiate and cathedral churches in Britain had boys on the top line. But we were a different kind of formation and were producing a different sound.

**GL:** A perennial problem are tessitura and ranges. So many Renaissance motets have vocal parts extending an octave and a fifth, sometimes over an even greater range. How do you cope with this?

**PP:** We actually sing some works with inner parts extending over almost two octaves. So somebody is always going to suffer. Our pragmatic answer is to mix the voice parts – for example altos with tenors, or baritones with tenors, or sopranos with altos and have singers drop out as the line becomes too high to manage, or the converse.

**GL:** But do you think this actually reflects performance practice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries?

**PP:** I think they didn't sing it the way some musicologists would have us believe.

**GL:** Meaning that singers back then would 'rove' to another

part?

**PP:** I'm sure roving is a modern answer to the fact that originally they sang in a different way from us – much softer, a kind of crooning, which would have rendered roving unnecessary.

...

**GL:** ...which means that clef codes and vocal ranges were merely a kind of conceit on behalf of the composer?

**PP:** Exactly, they might represent just a theoretical construct...

**GL:** ...one thought out by the composer in order to prove he was up to date with the latest trends in music notation and *au fait* with all manner of arcane practices?

**PP:** Probably, and although we will never know, it seems the most plausible explanation...

**GL:** ...especially concerning vocal ranges...

**PP:** ...quite.

**GL:** So what is next?

**PP:** What is next is many more years, I hope, of touring the globe making renaissance polyphony interesting to ever larger audiences. It is a huge repertoire. One project which means a lot to me is to record all of Josquin's Masses – we have done ten of them, there are six to go. And I want to record some 21<sup>st</sup> century music, firstly by Arvo Pärt. But there will be others: this year we have commissioned Eric Whitacre, Gabriel Jackson, Nico Muhly and Michael Nyman.



*Peter Phillips, Gabriel  
Jackson, Eric Whitacre  
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*"...The rock stars of Renaissance vocal music..."*

(The New York Times)

*"...an uncanny ability to increase emotional intensity so subtly that you don't realise it's happening. Then, suddenly, pow! The music's blazing; so are you..."*

(The Times)

The Tallis Scholars were founded in 1973 by their director, Peter Phillips. Through their recordings and concert performances, they have established themselves as the leading exponents of Renaissance sacred music throughout the world. Peter Phillips has worked with the ensemble to create, through good tuning and blend, the purity and clarity of sound which he feels best serve the Renaissance repertoire, allowing every detail of the musical lines to be heard. It is the resulting beauty of sound for which The Tallis Scholars have become so widely renowned.

The Tallis Scholars perform in both sacred and secular venues, giving around 70 concerts each year across the globe. In 2012-2013 the group will tour the USA twice and Japan once, as well as visiting festivals and venues across the UK and Europe. They will continue their association with the Choral at Cadogan series, of which Peter Phillips is Artistic Director giving two performances in the Hall. The group celebrates their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 with two commissions from Gabriel Jackson and Eric Whitacre, extensive touring and special CD releases. They will also be giving a unique celebratory performance of Tallis' *Spem in alium* in St Paul's Cathedral, London on 7 March 2013.

The Tallis Scholars' career highlights have included a tour of China in 1999, including two concerts in Beijing; and the privilege of performing in the Sistine Chapel in April 1994 to mark the final stage of the complete restoration of the Michelangelo frescoes, broadcast simultaneously on Italian and Japanese television. The ensemble have commissioned many contemporary composers during their history: in 1998 they celebrated their 25th Anniversary with a special concert in London's National Gallery, premiering a Sir John Tavener work written for the group and narrated by Sting. A further performance was given with Sir Paul McCartney in New York in 2000. The Tallis Scholars are broadcast regularly on radio (including performances from the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall in 2007, 2008 and 2011) and have also been featured on the acclaimed ITV programme *The Southbank Show*.

Much of The Tallis Scholars reputation for their pioneering work has come from their association with Gimell Records, set up by Peter Phillips and Steve Smith in 1980 solely to record the group. In February 1994 Peter Phillips and The Tallis Scholars performed on the 400th anniversary of the death of



Palestrina in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, where Palestrina had trained as a choirboy and later worked as Maestro di Cappella. The concerts were recorded by Gimell and are available on both CD and DVD.

Recordings by The Tallis Scholars have attracted many awards throughout the world. In 1987 their recording of Josquin's *Missa La sol fa re mi* and *Missa Pange lingua* received GRAMOPHONE magazines Record of the Year award, the first recording of early music ever to win this coveted award. In 1989 the French magazine DIAPASON gave two of its critical Diapason d'Or de l'Année awards for the recordings of a mass and motets by Lassus and for Josquin's two masses based on the chanson *L'Homme armé*. Their recording of Palestrina's *Missa Assumpta est Maria* and *Missa Sicut liliun* was awarded GRAMOPHONE's Early Music Award in 1991; they received the 1994 Early Music Award for their recording of music by Cipriano de Rore; and the same distinction again in 2005 for their disc of music by John Browne. Released on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gimell Records in March 2010, The Tallis Scholars' recording of Victoria's *Lamentations of Jeremiah* received critical acclaim, and to further celebrate the anniversary, the group released three 4 CD box sets of "The Best of The Tallis Scholars", one for each decade. The ongoing project to record Josquin's complete cycle of masses, when completed, will run to 9 discs.

These accolades & achievements are continuing evidence of the exceptionally high standard maintained by The Tallis Scholars, and of their dedication to one of the great repertoires in Western classical music.

[www.thetallisscholars.co.uk](http://www.thetallisscholars.co.uk)

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