

BATHEASTON PLAYING DAY for singers and players of lower register instruments  
JUNE 9TH 2012

SPEM IN ALIUM by THOMAS TALLIS

'Spem in Alium' ('I have never put my hope in any other but you') is unique in the annals of English Church Music, written in the later years of Tallis' life. Written polyphonically for 8 choirs each of 5 parts, it was thought to be intended as a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday tribute for either Queen Mary or Queen Elizabeth. It followed Tallis' hearing of Striggio's 40 part motet *Ecce Beatae Lucem* performed in London in 1567.

Last Saturday was a day much looked forward to by early music singers and players within reach of Bath: it was the 16<sup>th</sup> such June day conducted by Ann Lyall and was an unforgettable musical experience. 'Epic', one contrabass player said.

Ninety people had booked to be in the beautiful village church at Batheaston. Coffee and tea breaks meant we met many like-minded and sociable people; the home-made cakes (Bath SRP) were as good as the playing and in some cases as eagerly anticipated. On the one sunny day of this soaking week, it was a pleasure to leave the authentic Anglican chill of the stone church and warm ourselves on the sun baked tombstones outside.

The organisation of the day was superb: our parts were on the chairs in colour coded files; singers were matched with players and all could see the conductor. The balance of instruments from curtal to cello, with plenty of lower range recorders, and the participation of excellent sight singers worked splendidly. In the rests, each player could hear the polyphony shifting around them from choir to choir.

The discipline and forethought of all those involved in the planning and preparation enabled us all to enjoy our share in this memorable music making. Ann's preparation was immaculate. Not only did we work at *Spem in Alium*, but at intervals throughout the day we played shorter well-known Tallis Motets. Here we each played or sang from a score; while in *Spem*, players had individual parts, and the singers had the score for their own choir. Again – superb preparation which made the day manageable for all whatever their standard of sight reading. Ann revealed the hidden structures and climaxes in a way that anchored us to the essentials of the music.

She took us through the structure and glories of the piece so that we were able by the end to perform it, not only without breaking down, but much more significantly, with that sense of having participated in a memorable musical and dramatic experience. As the last chord arrived there was a sense of poignant nostalgia already that this superb day was over.