

Thomas Tallis

*Spem in Alium*

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Through the dawn of the Renaissance and into the Baroque age of music, music had become transformative and experimental. It began to transcend and reach new heights that were unforeseen to those of the traditional age of music and composing songs of love, songs for the church, and drunken tavern songs. Thomas Tallis, a composer of the late Renaissance, was composing works that are still sung in choirs around the world today. His most experimental piece, the piece that got him most fame with Queen Elizabeth I, is *Spem in Alium*. This piece was written for 40 voices in 5 parts. This was unheard of and never seen before until Thomas made it a reality. Through the course of this paper, we will find the reasoning as to why this piece was forgotten for so long and to the reason of its popularity amongst historians.

Thomas Tallis, an English composer during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, doesn't have a lot of information about him. He is much like a ghost in terms of record keeping. The only thing that lives about him today, is his music. Tallis wrote a lot of different pieces that pertained to the church and were written for the English church at the time. His primary emphasis was vocal music, and he is highly regarded as one of England's greatest composers because of how much music he could write both for vocals and organ. His peak point in composition as most historians have it, is the 40-part *Spem in Alium* which has been regarded as the most unique piece in musical literature.

In regard to the piece itself, most reviewers of this work claim it to be one that could not be possibly performed unless with a lot of preparation and if it was for some extravagant event. Looking at the structure of the piece, it is written for 40-parts divisible into groups of five for a total of eight varying groups. Each part has its own line of music creating different intros, different chord structure, and different harmonies that would all resonate together in harmony.

From the beginning, we hear two voices that come in on the word Spem, meaning hope.

Musical score for Soprano I, Alto I, and Tenor I. The Soprano I part starts with a whole rest followed by a half note D5. The Alto I part starts with a half note G4. The Tenor I part has a whole rest. The lyrics are: Spem in a - li - um nun -

We hear the Alto 1 voice come in on a G and then hear the Soprano 1 come in on a fifth above them on a D which then both match in a drone of a fifth apart for three beats until the Alto 1 voice changes to be an octave apart and outlines what is presumably a V7 chord. Subsequently later, more voices join in creating complex harmonies, but yet keeping harmonic contrast amongst the voices. As the motet progresses through its first half, we only hear 20 of the 40 voices give out in harmony in the motet. The latter half of the motet starts out similarly to the first and then subsequent voices are added until 40 voices are in union singing. Based off of the score, we can see that this motet is separated by a choir of 20 voices divided into groups of 5.

Soprano I	Soprano II	Soprano III	Soprano IV	Soprano V	Soprano VI	Soprano VII	Soprano VIII
Alto I	Alto II	Alto III	Alto IV	Alto V	Alto VI	Alto VII	Alto VIII
Tenor I	Tenor II	Tenor III	Tenor IV	Tenor V	Tenor VI	Tenor VII	Tenor VIII
Baritone I	Baritone II	Baritone III	Baritone IV	Baritone V	Baritone VI	Baritone VII	Baritone VIII
Bass I	Bass II	Bass III	Bass IV	Bass V	Bass VI	Bass VII	Bass VIII

Each voice has its unique role to play within the motet and they enter and leave as needed to move the motet forward in its antiphony in exchanges of voices. The score that is edited by

Philip Legge believes that the entrances of each choir is to setup the sound coming in from all angles of north, south, east, and west.<sup>1</sup> That as the two groups of 20 can be arranged based on the space and the occasion. The next seven measures show an introduction of the next voices and the intrinsic voices as they enter one by one and their counter melodies.

The image displays a page of musical notation for a motet. It consists of multiple staves, each with a line of lyrics underneath. The lyrics are in Latin and include the phrase "Spem in alium nunquam habui". The notation shows various musical symbols, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "ff". The text is arranged in a way that suggests the entry of different voices or groups of voices.

Looking at it, we see the differences in the voices and where the first, second, and third group enters in and elaborates on the text of “Spem in alium” As the piece advances, it starts to become more and more complex as voices come in and enter. At measure 19, we start to see more of the antiphony and movement of the motet as more voices are added from groups four and five. Two choirs always seem to be singing at the same time most of the times when looking

<sup>1</sup> Legge, Philip. *Spem in alium nunquam habui A motet for 40 voices by Thomas Tallis*. Choral Public Domain Library

over the motet. Examining the piece, Thallis illustrates the illustrious ambition of

The image displays a page of musical notation for a motet. It features multiple systems of staves. The top system includes vocal staves with lyrics in Latin, such as 'in - ter - ra - rum', 'qui - bus', 'non - quae', 'in - ter - ra - rum', and 'in - ter - ra - rum'. Below the vocal staves are several systems of piano accompaniment, including grand staff notation (treble and bass clefs) and individual instrumental parts. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with various note values, rests, and bar lines.

combining voices to match and align to create the harmonies that are complex with multiple voices singing the same vocal part but singing on different pitches. Moving along, the vocal parts start to hand off the baton to the other choirs as was started with choir one, it moves all the way down to choir eight by measure 31 we finally hear from choir eight. The addition of all the other voices spread through the motet, adds a layer of complexity that hasn't been seen before in previous motets. It leads to the question of why was this written as such and for what purpose? This is yet only the first half of the motet and not the entirety of it. In measure 40 we finally hear all the voices together, coming in on a GM triad that adds overtones because all the voices are united on that one chord.

The image shows the first part of a musical score, consisting of eight staves. Each staff represents a different choir. The lyrics are written below the notes. The music is in a complex, polyphonic style with many overlapping lines. The lyrics include words like "Deus", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et".

The image shows the second part of a musical score, also consisting of eight staves. The lyrics are written below the notes. The music continues the complex, polyphonic style. The lyrics include words like "Deus", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et", "Et".

The strong emphasis on the G solidifies all eight small choirs as they sing in unison for the one bar before they part ways in measure 46 where only half of the choirs are singing. The complexity of this piece is shown yet again as a handoff from the lower four choirs, choirs five, six, seven, and eight, is passed right on back to the upper choirs of one, two, three, and four from measure 47 to 68. The motet continues to follow this pattern of having voices from the different choirs join and sing with one another while also passing the torch of which choirs sing. This continues through the piece where it eventually hits a restart at measure 115 where there is only one choir singing.

As a lot of scholars have pointed out in various letters and articles, this motet is one that has a lot of speculation towards its origins. Scholars tend to refer to this piece as a “work of

art”<sup>2</sup> because of its technical skill in both writing and on the behalf of the vocalist. Some scholars see this as a cry out against religious changes, others see it as a religious setting piece, while others see it as the crowning jewel for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth I.<sup>3</sup> Investigating further into these claims, we see little evidence for the first accusation of it being a piece against the reformation in England. Looking at the second accusation, the way the motet is structured does reflect that of a religious motet with the simplicity of individual vocal parts that would be learned and the way that the harmonies sound. The other claim of it being for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth has more evidence in its favor. Scholars have analyzed what the piece and other pieces like it that have firm dates and Tallis’ *Spem in Alium* is a bit freer in its response which is what the liturgical attitude was pushing away from as it strived to go back to its original roots. This just shows that this motet was created later than is initially thought which backs up the claim that it was written for the coronation of the new ruler, Queen Elizabeth I. With this, it has also been speculated that its primary use was for private recreational singing rather than normal anthems that could be sung for any occasion.<sup>4</sup> This piece and others similar in style fit into their own special category. Many have researched into this piece and have looked at its style, its writing, and its harmonies, but have had a hard time pinpointing when it was written. Like most composers of the Renaissance era, there isn’t much on *Spem in Alium*. Most historians argue over which edition of *Spem in Alium* is the purest of them since there are

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<sup>2</sup> Doe, Paul. *Tallis’s ‘Spem in Alium’ and the Elizabethan Repond-Motet*. Music & Letters: Oxford University press, 1970

<sup>3</sup> Doe, Paul. *Tallis’s ‘Spem in Alium’ and the Elizabethan Repond-Motet*. Music & Letters: Oxford University press, 1970

<sup>4</sup> Collins, H.B. *Thomas Tallis*. Music & Letters: Oxford University press, 1929

a lot of different editions of this piece. With that in mind, let's review what author Suzanne Cole has put together about *Spem in Alium*.

Suzanne Cole enlightens readers on Tallis' *Spem in Alium* and the many confusions behind the authenticity of what to believe on its date. Most scores that we have are all but manuscripts of the original, some written by unknown scribes. The first manuscript she discusses, and the one that has the most credibility, is one that is in the British Library, and it is titled Egerton MS 3512. This edition of the motet is believed to be from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. As well, its layout of the manuscript follows that of an arranged score, with all soprano parts together, followed by the rest of voice parts arranged together. Each vocal part is then numbered indicating which choir they are divided into. The text although, is not the original Latin it was written in, but an unrelated English transcription that honors the Princes Charles and Henry. Examining the text of this version, shows that the original Latin text was included, but only for the bass part and then at the end of the manuscript. Now this leads to speculation because the original text is only included in one part and not even the full text for that matter. The line that is included at the end of the manuscript reads, "Thomas Tallis, gentleman of King Henry the Eyght's Chapple, King Edward Queen Mary and of her Majesty that now is Queen Elizabeth, the maker of this Song of forty partes."<sup>5</sup> Looking over the phrase 'her Majesty that now is' suggests that it was from an Elizabethan source which hints to the writing of this piece originally for Queen Elizabeth and not for the Royal Princes. But again, the replaced text also indicates it was for the princes around 1612 when they were still alive, and it was done as an honor to them. Now this is all an assumption as there isn't enough evidence to truly back up the

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<sup>5</sup> Cole, Suzanne. *Thomas Tallis and his Music in Victorian England*. Boydell Press, 2008



claim that it was written for the princes at this time. As time passed by, this performance edition was performed, but later lost to time by the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Another score that has been preserved, which is like the score that has been cited in this paper, is more of a fair modern score in its composition and arrangement of vocal parts. The Latin text is kept with the score as originally written. The score has similar arrangements to what Egerton had, but again, was lost to the centuries. Most scores are like this where they had a debut, but slowly faded away with time and were later lost until they were bought by museums, independent collectors, or thrift shops. This urges the question, why was such a piece that at its time, was considered a masterpiece, was then later lost to time? Observing everything we have discussed, analyzed, and researched the song was popular amongst the royal courts, but outside of that setting, was not used for liturgical masses or settings. However, this motet is one considered to be the best piece that came has come from an English composer during the renaissance era. The complexity of it, the harmonies, and the intrinsic way the vocal parts move all aligned within this one piece that left the listeners stunned with awe. The piece was Thomas Tallis' crowning piece through his career, the one that was talked about the most for its uniqueness that it provided. To this day, this piece is still one that is remarkable and is still sung in societies today for the Chapel Royal.

Modern music critics on the other hand do not agree with the statements of their predecessors from the Renaissance and Baroque era. One review from 1836 states that, "[t]his composition chiefly owes its fame to tradition...the forty parts so much talked about, are found, on examination, to consist of barely four – very ill written and ill digested...the 'forty-part song' would never make endurable to modern ears."<sup>6</sup> Harsh criticism from a modern critic whereas

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<sup>6</sup> Cole, Suzanne. *Thomas Tallis and his Music in Victorian England*. Boydell Press, 2008

most of the historians have deemed this motet “a remarkable feat.”<sup>7</sup> When looking at both points of view, they each have insights that can provide the frame of mind for each perspective. As a critic, they are to judge whether this is something an average listener would enjoy hearing and seeing again. A music historian is mainly there to preserve its authenticity and credibility. Most music historians want to analyze it as it was when it first was debuted in the Renaissance era, which by all is a masterpiece. In our modern day, we have other pieces that are considered master pieces. Which this illustrates the modern-day performance practice which is to get it as close as possible to the way it was written and performed when it was released. Overall, this piece is regarded as astonishing to watch, just not pleasing to the ears.

As we end on the world of Thomas Tallis, reviewing the piece and its complexity, seeing through the lens of a historian as to whom this piece was written for, seeing why it has been lost in time, and its short revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thomas Tallis was talented for writing this remarkable piece, but unfortunately was only ever used a handful of times due to its complex nature and non-liturgical use, it became a lost relic that was later rediscovered in the hands of scribes and merchants who had no idea as to its worth. As it tried to make a revival, most critics in the contemporary era of music were not fond of its delicate style and workings that it was harshly criticized and put back on the shelf of display to be remarked as it was in the Renaissance, a masterpiece. For its time, this work was a work of entertainment, possibly even a practice piece for sight reading and challenging the minds and abilities of young musicians. Still, it is unknown whether this was truly written for Queen Elizabeth or for the young Princes Harry and Charles. It is also unknown to us as to why Thomas chose to write it as a 40-piece motet and not just a single choir trading voice parts. With its complexity, the piece was certainly

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<sup>7</sup> Stevens, Denis. *Spem in Alium. Letters to the Editor*. The Musical Times: Musical Times Publications, 1981

one of high regard and nature. Only sung for the royals of the time. In sheer difficulty, this is on piece that will go down in history as highly regarded in its writing and its musicalized style and uniqueness to other motets of its time. No other composer has come close to a writing such as this that has left a mark of high regards and high criticisms from the modern age point of view. *Spem in Alium*, is truly Thomas Tallis' greatest work that have historians stumped on its origins. It will also be the one piece that will live on in its confounding ways as to how it served the Renaissance era, a time that was pushing back for the old ways.

## Annotated Bibliography

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