

Spem in alium — probably composed c.1570
by **Thomas Tallis** (c.1505–1585)

Few church musicians have endured such a tumultuous series of strictures as did Thomas Tallis, the supreme English composer of the mid-sixteenth century. When Tallis began his career at the Benedictine priory in Dover in 1530/1, King Henry VIII was in the process of severing the Catholic Church in England from its connections to the pope in Rome. Even after the formal dissolution in 1534, worship in England followed standard Catholic norms: texts were frequently in Latin, and compositional styles continued essentially unchanged. After brief periods at St. Mary-at-Hill in London, Waltham Abbey in Essex, and Canterbury Cathedral, Tallis finally gained a post at the Chapel Royal in 1544. This was the king's personal chapel, the most prestigious group of musicians in England. Tallis thus found himself at the musical center of decades of religious controversy.

After Henry's nine-year-old son, Edward VI, became king in 1547, Protestantism gained a firmer hold. Liturgical worship was performed in English and church music became simpler in construction. Edward became fatally ill in 1553, and his eldest sister, Queen Mary I, assumed the throne. She vigorously attempted to restore England to Catholic worship, going so far as to marry the Catholic King Felipe II of Spain and to order the deaths of prominent dissenters. "Bloody" Mary died in 1558, the crown falling to her half-sister, Elizabeth I, who slowly and steadily established England as a Protestant state. Amid all of these changes, Tallis adapted his compositional style to suit the dictates of each monarch, excelling at every step. He deftly rose in prominence at the Chapel Royal, gaining the illustrious post of Organist in 1570. Scholars now believe that Tallis was at heart a recusant Catholic, but this assertion is based on mostly circumstantial evidence; in any case, his personal beliefs never obstructed his always professional music-making.

In June 1567, the Italian composer Alessandro Striggio passed through London. Among his compositions which gained a hearing on that sojourn may have been his forty-voice motet *Ecce beatam lucem*. That someone could conceive of music in forty independent polyphonic lines was extraordinary (then and now). The Duke of Norfolk is believed to have commissioned Tallis to match Striggio's accomplishment, and the result was *Spem in alium*, one of history's most remarkable musical edifices. Early performances may have taken place at either of the principal residences of the Earl of Arundel: Arundel House in London, with its long gallery; or Nonsuch Palace, his country estate, with an octagonal hall complete with first-floor balconies. It was also possibly performed for the fortieth birthday of Queen Elizabeth I in 1573.

Tallis divided his forty parts into eight choirs of five voices each, which lends some credence to the possibility of early performances at Nonsuch Palace. He handles these forces in various ways. First he builds from the upper voices of Choir 1 downward to the lower voices of Choir 8. At the fortieth measure, all forty voices sing together, after which Tallis builds in the reverse order. He then tosses the music back and forth among the different choirs. The word "respice" ("consider" or "reflect") yields a particularly magical moment, as Tallis chooses the unusual harmony of A major, which melts into A minor as C-naturals and C-sharps briefly cohabit. The work concludes with a grand statement of all forty voices.

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Spem in alium nunquam habui
praeter in te, Deus Israel,
qui irascaris, et propitius eris,
et omnia peccata hominum,
in tribulatione dimittis.
Domine Deus, creator caeli et terrae,
respice humilitatem nostram.

Hope in another never have I,
but in you, God of Israel,
who becomes angry, and then gracious,
and who all the sins of mankind,
in his suffering, you do forgive.
Lord God, creator of heaven and earth,
consider our humbleness.

—adapted from the respond at Matins after Trinity, from the Sarum Breviary