

*The Evening Hour*  
**The Choirs of Jesus College Cambridge**  
**Directed by Mark Williams**  
**Benjamin Morris and Bertie Baigent (organ)**  
**Signum, 2016: SIGCD 446**

This new disc from Mark Williams and the choir of Jesus College, Cambridge on Signum Classics is an attractively selection of 16th and 20th century British choral music with a loosely evening theme, under the title *The Evening Hour*. The 16th century composers included are John Sheppard, William Byrd, Robert Whyte, Orlando Gibbons, John Blitheman and Thomas Tallis, whilst the 20th century composers are Philip Radcliffe, Edward Bairstow, Richard Rodney Bennett, Gabriel Jackson, Lennox Berkeley, Henry Balfour Gardiner, Gustav Holst, John Tavener, William Harris, Philip Moore and Edward Bairstow. The selection of 20th century composers is not really one to frighten the horses, but it showcases the choir very well and within the works performed are some rather striking yet lesser known works.

In fact the disc showcases more than one choir, as Jesus College has a chapel choir and a college choir. The chapel choir is men and boys whilst the college choir is mixed with the men of the tenors and basses in common. The 16th century music all has a very distinctive style to it. Perhaps because all the pieces set texts associated with evening services, Williams favours a lovely calm, beautifully controlled performances style with great smoothness and blend. This suits works like Sheppard's lovely *In manus tuas* and Robert Whyte's *Christ qui lux es et dies* admirably, whilst Byrd's *Miserere mihi Domine* has a fine sense of the parts moving round the long soprano line. It is the feeling of calmness which really impresses, conveying the disc's theme. Orlando Gibbons *Behold thou has made my days* suits the chapel choir and features a neat tenor solo from Jaliya Senanayake. John Blitheman was a name new to me, he succeeded Thomas Tallis as organist of the Chapel Royal, his *In pace* is simple yet effective, whilst Tallis's own *Miserere nostri* conceals intense constructional complexity underneath its poised surface beauty.

The disc opens with the short *God be in my head* by Philip Radcliffe who was a University lecturer in music at Cambridge; the harmonies are luscious and the performance poised. Edward Bairstow was organist of York Minster, and his *Save us, O Lord* is very much in the English romantic school with lovely harmonies and well modulated sense to it.

Richard Rodney Bennett's *Song at evening* is sung by the choristers. It has a substantial organ part (played by Bertie Baigent) and an interesting wandering melody, sung with admirable even tone and fine diction by the boys.

Gabriel Jackson's *Creator of the stars at night* was written in 2000 setting an anonymous 7th century text. It has a beautifully calm opening section with some magical textures, and more drama in the middle; a finely crafted piece given a performance which glows. Lennox Berkeley's *The Lord is my Shepherd* for the 900th anniversary of the foundation of Chichester Cathedral. There is a lovely clarity to the harmony and some nicely spikey bits too.

Henry Balfour Gardiner was a member, along with Percy Grainger of the Frankfurt gang, and the great uncle of the conductor John Eliot Gardiner. He was self critical and gave up composing in 1925. His *Evening Hymn* was written in 1908 and sets the Latin evening hymn by St Ambrose of Milan. Sung by the combined choirs, it opens with a big sound and some lush chromatic harmonies. It is a big, complex work that is English romantic in style but with twist. Gustav Holst's *Evening Watch* sets a dialogue by the metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, a dialogue between body and soul during the transition from wakefulness to sleep. Written for eight part choir with two soloists (tenor Jake Dyble and alto Elizabeth Edwards) it is highly mystical in rather an RVW vein, and rather mysterious. The choir give a terrific performance with a lovely sense of placement of Holst's complex harmonies. John Tavener's *The Lord's Prayer* was written in 1999 and sets the English text. It is a gentle, thoughtful piece.

William Harris' *Bring us O Lord God* is a terrific double-choir anthem written in 1959. Anyone listening to it will recognise the style if they know Harris's *Faire is the Heaven*, full of rich harmonies and complex enharmonic changes, but with hints of the mystic too.

Philip Moore was also organist at York Minster. His *Evening Prayers* is the last of his *Three Prayers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* written in 1980. There is a sense of calm intimacy to the piece with a nice tang to the harmony. There is a nice baritone solo at the opening from Max Cockerill and a high clear soprano solo from Sapphire Armitage.

The final work on the disc is another piece by Edward Bairstow, *Blessed city, heav'nly Salem*, a grand, large-scale piece with a complex organ part (played by Benjamin Morris).

The whole disc adds up to a satisfying programme with its interesting mixture of calm 16th century polyphony, English Romanticism and quirkier 20th century pieces. It forms a fine showcase for the choirs, under Mark Williams fine direction. But it is far more than that, and worth investigating for the combination of intelligent programming and fine singing.

*Robert Hugill, PlanetHugill*

This most enjoyable release features different combinations of the Choir of Jesus College, Cambridge. In order of appearance: the College Choir (nine pieces), the Chapel Choir (four pieces), the Choristers (just Richard Rodney Bennett's "Song At Evening"), and the Combined Choirs (three tracks). Bertie Baigent and Benjamin Morris contribute organ accompaniment as required. The theme of the collection is, as is clear from the title, music for the evening with the added focus of confining the repertoire from the 16th and 20th centuries. While it is easy to comment on what has been omitted - this reviewer has a soft spot for Arthur Sullivan's "The Long Day Closes", for example - we should instead enjoy what has been included.

We open with Philip Radcliffe's "God Be In My Head" and Edward Bairstow's "Save Us, O Lord" for the 20th century although both, it has to be said, have more than an echo of the 19th. Then we go back to the 16th century for John Sheppard's "In Manus Tuas". Already we can see a pattern emerging: if the title is in Latin the composer is from the 16th century, a theory that holds up until we get to Orlando Gibbons' "Behold Thou Hast Made My Days". By and large the music from the two eras sits comfortably together and, for this listener, the only time the two ages clashed was when we moved from Richard Rodney Bennett's "Song At Evening" ("Matthew, Mark, Luke and John / Bless the bed that I lie on") which is sweet to the point of sickliness and is followed by William Byrd's magnificent "Miserere Mihi Domine". (Note to self: next time I play this CD, programme the Tudors as one sequence to be followed by the moderns). The mood throughout is reflectively contemplative, descending at points into melancholy but always worth hearing because of the craftsmanship of the composers allied to the excellence of the singing.

*Stephen Whitehead, CrossRhythms*

This new release from Signum Classics follows a particular theme: evening reflections. Every piece on the CD has something to say about the evening, night time, sleeping or rest. They were written for the Anglican service of Evensong, which combines elements of text and liturgy from Vespers and Compline. These two services were (and still are) sung in monasteries. However, in the 16th century, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was tasked with creating services that could be used in parish churches for the general population. The result was, among others, Evensong. The words and order of service were formalised in the Book of Common Prayer in 1662, and have remained largely unchanged ever since.

This new CD from The Choir of Jesus College Cambridge (of which, incidentally, Thomas Cranmer was an alumnus), is a beautiful demonstration of how the music written for this service in the 16th century remains as powerful and applicable as that written more recently in the 20th century. If anything could show the continuity of Evensong through more than four centuries, then it is this CD, with its remarkable blend of ancient and modern classics.

Perhaps the most iconic examples for the 16th century on the CD are *Christe qui lux es et dies IV* and *Miserere nostri* by Thomas Tallis. The first piece clearly reflects the monastic roots of Evensong in making use of a plainchant setting. The second is an extraordinary seven-part canon with an extremely rich and complex texture. In both cases, the Latin texts are sung with an impressive clarity of diction that underlines the character and depth of music that is already stunningly beautiful.

The 20th century choices are no less expertly performed, with the trebles standing out in particular as they soar effortlessly above the men's voices; it's hard not to at least try and sing along in places! Listen, for example, to what is surely a 'show piece' for the trebles, *The Lord is my Shepherd* by Lennox Berkely, as they expertly master the exposed treble melodies. *Evening Hymn* by Henry Balfour Gardiner provides another masterful performance of the crunchy harmonies and uplifting organ writing, blended expertly by the music director Mark Williams. Finally, *Blessèd city, heav'nly Salem* by Sir Edward Bairstow is perhaps a slightly rousing conclusion to an otherwise calmer, more contemplative CD, but it is nonetheless a quintessentially Anglican composition that clearly reflects the legacy of Victorian church music in its style and structure.

Beautiful, tranquil, inspiring, uplifting. The recordings on this CD form an ideal backdrop for winding down in the evening and – perhaps – reflecting on the endurance of Evensong and the magic of the music composed for it.

*Laura Ball, NEMM*

This program of mixed Renaissance and 20th century British choral music is similar in terms of repertoire to those of many other British cathedral choir releases, yet there are aspects that set it apart from the common run. First and foremost is the organization of the program around the evening hour. This may entail several types of music: pieces for evening liturgies as well as those more generally touching on the evening of a day or of a life. But the program maintains a consistent tone throughout: it is calm, devotional, rather melancholy, and after a while, considerable power coalesces. Variety is added by the combination of choirs: it's not clear from the packaging, but the Choir of Jesus College, Cambridge, comprises two subgroups, the all-male Chapel Choir and the mixed-gender College Choir, and these two groups perform separately and together. There's some unusual music on the 20th century end: you might sample the 1908 *Evening Hymn* (track nine) of Henry Balfour Gardiner, uncle to the indefatigable conductor John Eliot Gardiner. And finally there's the engineering work of the Signum team, working in the Jesus College chapel itself and exquisitely capturing the shades of sound here. A fine, genuinely reflective disc, highly recommended.

*James Manheim, AllMusic*

Back in the days when the major record companies like Decca and EMI dominated the market a handful of Oxbridge collegiate choirs, such as King's or St. John's, Cambridge could be heard in recordings. However, a choir such as that of Jesus College, Cambridge would have struggled to make its mark. It's one of the many benefits of the rise of independent labels that we can now hear discs from choirs such as this and I hope that anyone who hears this disc will agree with me that this is a very good thing. This is, I believe, the choir's fifth CD for Signum. I've heard and enjoyed most of their previous releases (review ~ review ~ review).

As is clear from the title of the album, the programme features a good deal of music associated with the liturgies celebrated by the Christian Church towards the end of the day though some pieces have different nocturnal associations. The contents have been chosen with discernment so that a few pieces that may be less familiar nestle among better-known items.

Most people familiar with the Anglican liturgies will know Bairstow's impressive anthem *Blessèd city, heav'nly Salem* but his *Save us O Lord* may be less familiar. Prior to his long tenure as organist of York Minster (1913-1946) Bairstow held similar posts first at Wigan Parish Church and then at Leeds Parish Church. *Save us O Lord* is a Compline anthem, dating from his Wigan days. It's a rather beautiful, prayerful setting and its organ part, sensitively played here by the College's

Assistant Organist, Benjamin Morris, is suitably subdued. At the other end of the programme stands the imposing *Blessed city, heav'nly Salem*, which is clearly the work of a man who was accustomed to playing the mighty organ of York Minster. Here Benjamin Morris gets the chance to show what he can do with a frankly spectacular organ part and he doesn't disappoint. Nor do the singers who, according to the demands of this varied piece, offer singing that is either full-throated or sensitive.

*Blessed city, heav'nly Salem* is one of three pieces on the disc that is sung by the College's Combined Choirs. Jesus College is, I believe, unique among Oxbridge colleges in maintaining two choirs. There's the Chapel Choir, the existence of which can be traced back to the foundation of the college in 1496; that choir includes boy trebles. Since 1982 the college has also boasted the College Choir, which includes female undergraduates on the top line. The two choirs share the duties of weekly singing serves in the college chapel and sometimes perform together as the Combined Choirs. To me this seems like having your cake and eating it, which is something of which I heartily approve.

The Combined Choirs also sing the Berkeley setting, which is one of so many that came about through the enlightened patronage of Walter Hussey, sometime Dean of Chichester Cathedral. It's a most attractive piece and it's very nicely done. In his very useful notes Philip Borg-Wheeler refers to Balfour Gardiner's Evening Hymn as "a classic of English church music." I agree, and I greatly enjoyed the present performance by the Combined Choirs. The unaccompanied central section has the right degree of mystery but it's the grand, sweeping outer sections that really make a mark. This is a splendid performance.

"Classic" is a word which I would also use in respect of *Bring us O Lord God* by Sir William Harris. It's a wonderful work which Mark Williams and the College Choir do very well. Harris's piece is justly renowned but Philip Moore's *Evening Prayers* may not be so well known. It's a setting for unaccompanied four-part choir of three short prayers by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Moore based the setting on the chorale *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, a favourite of Bonhoeffer's. Moore's achievement in this lovely and eloquent work is to let the essential humanity and strong faith of the prayers' author shine through. The College Choir makes a fine job of it. They also impress in Gabriel Jackson's *Creator of the stars of night*, realising Jackson's airy, luminous textures very successfully. I'm also grateful to them for introducing to me a lovely little piece I didn't know, Philip Moore's *God be in my head*.

The Chapel Choir has fewer items on this programme but what they have to sing comes across very well. They do well in Tavener's setting of The Lord's Prayer, a piece written for the Tallis Scholars and I enjoyed their account of Blitheman's *In Pace*. Mention should also be made of the little setting by Richard Rodney Bennett for trebles and organ. This merits its inclusion here for two reasons: firstly because it's a very good piece and secondly because it was commissioned by Jesus College. The boys sing it with great confidence.

Once again, as in the case of previous discs that I've heard, the singers of Jesus College give great pleasure and they are well supported by the two organists. The recording was engineered by Mike Hatch so it's no surprise to find that the sound is pleasing and truthful.

There's a lot of lovely music on this CD to which Mark Williams and his excellent choirs do full justice.

*John Quinn, Musicweb International*

The mixed voices of Jesus College Choir and the male voices of the Chapel Choir produce a gorgeous blended sound in their home chapel, captured vividly by the Signum engineers. The early works are particularly idiomatically sung, with lovely accounts of Sheppard's exquisite *In manus tuas* and Byrd's diaphanous *Miserere*. Robert Whyte's *Christe qui lux es* is also given a delicious reading although notwithstanding some very fine solo singing from tenor Jaliya Senanayake, Orlando Gibbons' beautiful *Behold thou has made my days* sounds rather more hesitant,

perhaps due to the lay-out of the forces. It is a pleasure to hear a substantial choral work, *In pace*, by William Blitheman, a composer better known to me as a writer of music for organ. The College Choir even manages to make real music out of the rather formulaic and unpromising setting of *Miserere* by Thomas Tallis. This is generally a rather melancholy programme of music for the end of the day but also for the end of life, but the atmospheric singing of the choristers is of a high standard, and Jesus College is to be congratulated in supporting two such fine choral groups. It is fascinating to hear the very different sounds produced by the respective choirs as well as the combined sound of both singing together.

*D. James Ross, Early Music Review*