

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 14 May 2025
7.30pm

Palestrina: In praise of women at St James's, Spanish Place

The Sixteen

Harry Christophers director	Daniel Collins alto	Nicholas Madden tenor
Julie Cooper soprano	Edward McMullan alto	Steven Harrold tenor
Charlotte Mobbs soprano	Stephanie Franklin alto	Ben Davies bass
Emilia Morton soprano	Kim Porter alto	Tim Jones bass
Alexandra Kidgell soprano	Mark Dobell tenor	Eamonn Dougan bass
Kirsty Hopkins soprano	Jeremy Budd tenor	Robert Macdonald bass
Katy Hill soprano		

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525-1594)

Kyrie from *Missa Regina coeli* (pub. 1601)

Beata Barbara (pub. 1572)

Tota pulchra es (pub. 1584)

Vulnerasti cor meum (pub. 1584)

Sicut liliun inter spinas (1569)

Assumpta est Maria (pub. 1593)

Gloria from *Missa Assumpta est Maria*

Susanna ab improbis (pub. 1575)

Adjuro vos filiae Jerusalem (1584)

Caput ejus aurum optimum (pub. 1584)

Dilectus meus descendit (pub. 1584)

Salve regina a5 (pub. 1584)

The Sixteen respectfully requests that audience members reserve their applause until after each group of pieces, as indicated, rather than after each piece.



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Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, whose 500th anniversary we mark this year, lived and worked in a world where women were largely excluded from official religious life. As a composer, singer, and eventually *maestro di cappella* at key Roman churches – including the Cappella Giulia at St Peter's – Palestrina was deeply embedded in the Catholic Church at the height of the Counter-Reformation. This was a period marked by reinforced orthodoxy, moral discipline and centralised authority, particularly in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545–63), which shaped the future of Catholic liturgy and doctrine, including its music.

A conservative vision of womanhood was prevalent in the Catholic Church of Palestrina's time: women were to be modest, obedient and morally uplifting. They were excluded from all clerical and ecclesiastical authority – there were no female priests, no official roles within the Vatican hierarchy. Yet, despite these constraints, women remained spiritually visible. Convents offered spaces of learning, devotion and music making, and laywomen played key roles in patronage, mysticism and community worship. Most importantly for today's programme, the feminine was idealised in religious art and music. The figure of the Virgin Mary loomed especially large: Queen of Heaven, intercessor, and mediator of grace, symbol of love and compassion. Alongside her stood female saints and biblical heroines, who symbolised purity, wisdom and spiritual fortitude.

Tonight's programme, comprised entirely of works by Palestrina, offers a meditation on these sacred feminine ideals, through the lens of three powerful figures: Mary, Saint Barbara and Susanna. In doing so, it celebrates not only their stories but the poetic, expressive possibilities they inspired in Renaissance music.

It begins with the 'Kyrie' from *Missa Regina coeli*, a mass based on the jubilant Marian antiphon for Eastertide, *Regina caeli*. The 'Kyrie' is both serene and luminous, with interweaving lines that evoke Mary's gentle intercession and the radiance of the Resurrection season. This is followed by *Beata Barbara*, a motet honouring Saint Barbara, a Christian martyr of early legend. According to tradition, Barbara's pagan father locked her in a tower to shield her from the world. She converted to Christianity in secret, was denounced, and ultimately executed by her father, who was then struck down by divine lightning. Palestrina's setting eschews dramatic retelling in favour of devotional reverence, offering a portrait of spiritual strength and dignity under persecution.

From here we move into the lyrical language of the *Song of Songs*, a love poem reinterpreted by the Church as a sacred allegory in which the bride is seen to be Mary. Much of the imagery in these works is linked to the Virgin, such as the 'lily among thorns', describing Mary's purity in a sinful world. In *Tota pulchra es, Vulnerasti cor meum* ('You have wounded my heart') and *Sicut liliū inter spinas* ('As a lily among thorns'), Palestrina's music captures the balance of sweetness and solemnity, setting texts of longing and beauty with radiant

counterpoint. These works present love as divine and mystical, not sensual, aligning human affection with spiritual desire.

Mary returns in glory in *Assumpta est Maria*, a motet celebrating the Virgin's assumption into heaven. Its ascending lines and bright harmonic palette evoke a celestial procession. From the *Missa Assumpta est Maria*, based on the motet, the 'Gloria' is imbued with grandeur and celebration, its flowing lines and luminous textures embodying the joy of Mary's triumph.

The motet *Susanna ab improbis* introduces a different kind of heroine. Susanna, whose story appears in the Book of Daniel (chapter 13), is a virtuous woman falsely accused of adultery after resisting the advances of two corrupt elders. Her story was immensely popular in Renaissance art – partly because it allowed for the depiction of female nudity in a biblical context, but also for its powerful moral themes. In music, the narrative's emotional range and dramatic potential made it an especially attractive subject. Orlando di Lasso's chanson *Susanne un jour* became one of the most widely disseminated secular works of the period, its expressive harmonies capturing both Susanna's innocence and the moral outrage of her ordeal. Palestrina's own setting of the story is more restrained and devotional, but no less expressive. He conveys the spiritual gravity of Susanna's virtue under threat and her eventual vindication through divine justice. In doing so, he presents her not only as a moral exemplar but as a symbol of female strength and righteousness.

The programme concludes with further motets that return us to the *Song of Songs*, reinforcing themes of longing, love and divine presence. In *Adjuro vos, filiae Jerusalem* ('I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem'), we hear a gentle plea for restraint and spiritual readiness – do not awaken love before it is time. *Caput ejus aurum optimum* ('His head is finest gold') and *Dilectus meus descendit* ('My beloved has gone down into his garden') continue this rich metaphorical tradition, setting vivid images of beauty and desire with elegant, flowing lines. Though overtly romantic, these texts were understood as representing the soul's yearning for God. Finally, *Salve regina* offers a concluding prayer to the Virgin Mary. This five-voice setting of the familiar Marian antiphon is sincere and tender, filled with quiet confidence. It gathers the programme's themes – devotion, intercession, beauty and grace – into a final gesture of reverence and hope.

Across these works, we hear the many ways in which women inspired some of the most expressive and spiritually rich music of the Renaissance. Whether divine, martyred or symbolic, they are not passive figures but voices of strength, wisdom and transformative love. In a church that denied women positions of institutional power, they nonetheless stood at the centre of its most exalted imagery.

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Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

(c.1525-1594)

Kyrie from *Missa Regina coeli* (pub. 1601)

Liturgical text

Kyrie eleison.	Lord, have mercy on us.
Christe eleison.	Christ, have mercy on us.
Kyrie eleison.	Lord, have mercy on us.

Beata Barbara

(pub. 1572)

Liturgical text

Beata Barbara,
ad locum certaminis ducta,
genibus flexis,
inclinato capite
martyrii,
consummationem accepit.
Gloriosam mortem,
magis quam odibilem
vitam
complectens,
voluntarie, praeibat ad
supplicium,
genibus flexis,
inclinato capite
martyrii,
consummationem accepit.

Blessed Barbara

Blessed Barbara,
led to the place of strife,
with bended knee,
head inclined for
martyrdom,
she accepted her fate.
Embracing a glorious death,
better than a hateful
existence,
she went forward,
voluntarily kneeling in
supplication:
with bended knee,
head inclined for
martyrdom,
she accepted her fate.

Tota pulchra es

(pub. 1584)

Liturgical text

Tota pulchra es, amica mea,
Et macula non est in te;
Veni de Libano, sponsa mea,

veni de
Libano,
veni
coronaberis,
de capite
Amana,
de vertice Sanir et
Hermon,
de cubilibus leonum,
de montibus
pardorum.

All fair thou art

All fair thou art, my love,
there is no fault in thee.
Come forth from
Lebanon,
my bride, come from
Lebanon,
come, thou shalt be
crowned,
come from the peak of
Amana,
from the heights of Sanir
and Hermon,
from the lairs of lions
and the mountains of the
leopards.

Vulnerasti cor meum

(pub. 1584)

Liturgical text

Vulnerasti cor
meum,
soror mea, sponsa;
vulnerasti cor meum
in uno oculorum tuorum,
et in uno crine colli
tui.
Quam pulchrae sunt
mammas tuas,
soror mea sponsa.
Pulchriora sunt ubera tua
vino,
et odor unguentorum
tuorum
super omnia aromata.

Thou hast ravished my heart

Thou hast ravished my
heart,
my sister, my bride,
thou hast ravished my heart
with one of thine eyes,
and with one hair of thy
neck.
How beautiful are thy
breasts,
my sister, my bride.
Thy breasts are more
beautiful than wine,
and the fragrance of thy
scent
is above all perfumes.

Sicut lilium inter spinas

(1569)

Liturgical text

Sicut lilium inter spinas,
Sic amica mea inter
filias
Sicut malus inter ligna
silvarum,
Sic dilectus meus inter
filios.
Sub umbra illius
quem desideraveram sedi,
et fructus eius dulcis gutturi
meo.

As the lily among the thorns

As the lily among the thorns,
So is my love among the
maidens.
As the apple tree among
the woods,
So is my beloved among
young men.
I sat beneath the shadows
of him whom I desired,
and his fruit was sweet to
my tongue.

Assumpta est Maria

(pub. 1593)

Liturgical text

Assumpta est Maria in
caelum:
gaudent Angeli,
laudantes benedicunt
Dominum.
Alleluia.

Mary has been taken

Mary has been taken up
to heaven:
the Angels rejoice,
they bless the Lord
praising him.
Alleluia.

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Gloria from *Missa Assumpta est Maria*

Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.	Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men.
Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te.	We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you.
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.	We give thanks to you for your great glory.
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus pater omnipotens: Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu	Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty. Lord, only-begotten Son, Jesus
Christe Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.	Christ, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, Miserere nobis: qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram: qui sedes ad dexteram patris, miserere nobis.	You who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us, you who takes away the sins of the world, receive our prayer. You who sit at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy on us. For you alone are holy,
Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei patris. Amen.	you alone are the Lord, you alone are the most high, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Susanna ab improbis (pub. 1575) *Liturgical text*

Susanna ab improbis senibus obsessam se videns, qui forma eius capti eam, nisi sibi obsequeretur adulterii se accusaturos minitabantur, ingemuit et ait: Angustiae mihi sunt undique. Si enim hoc egero, mors mihi est. Si autem non egero, non effugiam manus vestras.	Susanna, seeing herself beset by the old men, and a captive, unless she submitted to the accusation of adultery with which they threatened her, sighed and said: I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death unto me; and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands.
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Sed melius est mihi in manus vestras absque opere incidere, quam peccare in conspectu Domini

It is better for me to fall into your hands, and without doing it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord.

Adjuro vos filiae Jerusalem (1584) *Liturgical text*

Adjuro vos, filiae Jerusalem, si inveneritis dilectum meum, ut nuntietis ei quia amore langueo. Qualis est dilectus tuus ex dilecto, O pulcherrima mulierum? Qualis est dilectus tuus ex dilecto, quia sic adjurasti nos? Dilectus meus candidus et electus ex milibus.

I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem

I charge you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him I languish with love. What is thy beloved more than another, O thou most beautiful of women? What is thy beloved more than another, that you so charge us? My beloved is white and ruddy, chosen from thousands.

Caput ejus aurum optimum (pub. 1584) *Liturgical text*

Caput eius aurum optimum. Comae eius sicut elatae palmarum, nigrae quasi corvus. Oculi eius, sicut columbae super rivulos aquarum, quae lacte sunt lotae, et resident juxta fluenta plenissima.

His head is as the finest gold

His head is as the finest gold. His locks are as the tops of palms, black as the raven. His eyes are as doves by the water brooks, eyes washed with milk, there by the bursting streams.

Dilectus meus descendit (pub. 1584) *Liturgical text*

Dilectus meus descendit in hortum suum ad areolam aromatum, ut ibi pascatur in hortis, et lilia colligat. Ego dilecto meo, et dilectus meus mihi, qui pascitur inter lilia.

My beloved is gone down

My beloved is gone down into his garden to the beds of spices, as there to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine, he who feeds among the lilies.

Salve regina a5

(pub. 1584)

Liturgical text

Salve Regina, misericordia:
Vita dulcedo, spes nostra
salve.

Ad te clamamus,
exsules,
filii Euae.

Ad te
suspiramus
gementes et flentes
in hac lacrimarum valle.

Eia ergo, advocata nostra,
illos tuos
misericordes oculos ad nos
converte.

Et Iesum, benedictum
fructum ventris tui,
nobis post hoc exsilium
ostende.

O clemens:

O pia:

O dulcis Virgo Maria

Hail, Holy Queen

Hail, Queen of mercy:
our life, our sweetness
and hope, hail.

To thee we cry, the
banished ones,
children of Eve.

To thee we send up our
sighs,
mourning and weeping
in this our vale of tears.

Thou, therefore our
advocate,
turn thine eyes of mercy
towards us.

And show us Jesus, blessed
fruit of thy womb,
after this our
exile.

O kind,

O merciful,

O sweet Mary, ever Virgin.