

The music

John Tavener	<i>Mother of God, here I stand</i>
Sulpitia Cesis	<i>Stabat Mater</i>
Robert Parsons	<i>Ave Maria</i>
Sarah Rimkus	<i>Mater Dei</i>
Hildegard of Bingen	<i>O viridissima virgo</i>
Alison Willis	<i>I sing of a maiden</i>
Michael Praetorius	<i>Es ist ein Ros entsprungen</i>
Josquin des Prez	<i>O virgo virginum</i>
Benjamin Britten	<i>A Hymn to the Virgin</i>
Alonso Lobo	<i>Ave regina caelorum</i>
Matthias Werrecore	<i>Inviolata, integra et casta es Maria</i>

For hundreds of years, composers have dedicated sacred vocal music to Mary, mother of Jesus. This programme gathers together some of the finest examples of this tradition, including works by a medieval nun, Renaissance cathedral musicians, two of the best known British composers of the 20th century, and two of the most talented choral composers working today. In some cases these are pieces in honour of Mary and the numerous virtues ascribed to her, while in others the words ask for her guidance or intervention. In addition to their common theme, all of these works possess an intensity that springs from the thoughtful setting of each word of text.

John Tavener (1944-2013) *Mother of God, here I stand*

The description of Mary as “Mother of God” is most often used today by Eastern Christians, whose theology and musical heritage are at the heart of John Tavener’s work. *Mother of God, here I stand* is a short work taken from the composer’s seven-hour magnum opus *The Veil of the Temple*. Tavener sets the humble prayer by the 19th-century Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov in a simple hymn-like style.

Sulpitia Cesis (1577-post 1619) *Stabat Mater*

Sulpitia Cesis was born into a noble family and in 1593 she became a nun at the convent of St Geminiano in Modena. Here the nuns were renowned for their music, both in terms of singing and of playing instruments such as lute, sackbut and organ. Cesis’ setting of *Stabat Mater*, for Good Friday, was published in a volume of her work in 1619. It’s scored for four singers, and while it alternates between sections in two-time and three-time, the piece maintains a plangent tone throughout.

Robert Parsons (c1535-1571/72) *Ave Maria*

Robert Parsons’ setting of *Ave Maria* dates from the 1560s, when he was a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. In Protestant England, Queen Elizabeth’s chapel was one of the few places where Latin-texted anthems such as this could still be sung. Parsons’ life was tragically cut short while he was still in his mid-thirties when, according to the records of the Chapel Royal, he drowned in the River Trent. His *Ave Maria*, a setting of a traditional prayer dedicated to Mary, shows him to be at the height of his powers, composing in highly elegant counterpoint. The motet concludes with a lengthy Amen of extraordinary beauty.

Sarah Rimkus (b1990) *Mater Dei*

Sarah Rimkus’ *Mater Dei* explores a different, more tangible dimension to the idea of Mary as mother. Rimkus writes that “this piece uses WB Yeats’ poem *The Mother of God*, tied to the traditional ‘Ave Maria’ text and plainchant, to explore the human side of Mary, mother of Jesus. The interweaving florid melodies use the outline of the plainchant to express her intense wonder, terror, and love. Throughout the centuries, Mary has been praised for her divine purity, and as a vessel used by God; this piece attempts to give the woman herself a more meaningful voice.”

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) *O viridissima virgo*

O viridissima virgo, a mesmerising piece of plainsong by the 12th-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen, begins with the conceit of the springing root, hailing Mary as the ‘greenest branch’. As the flowing melodies proceed, the emphasis of the text shifts towards the idea of Mary as the fertile earth giving new life to mankind in the form of the Messiah.

Alison Willis (b1971) *I sing of a maiden*

The text of *I sing of a maiden* comes from an anonymous 15th-century poem, now held in the British Library. Alison Willis uses bare, quasi-medieval, harmonies in her setting, in combination with the richer sonorities of 20th-century music. Melodies are passed around the voice parts, while the other singers accompany on plain vowel sounds, allowing the haunting text to be clearly heard.

Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*

The anonymous words of this hymn are most often sung to the melody and harmonies given to it by Michael Praetorius in 1609. Mary is compared to a rose, springing forth from the Root

of Jesse, herself giving life to Jesus Christ. Praetorius’ shapely tune and wistful choice of chords are a perfect match for the poetic text.

Josquin des Prez (1450-1521) *O virgo virginum*

2021 marks 500 years since the death of Josquin, widely accepted to be the most celebrated composer in Europe in the first part of the 16th century. In this evocative version of the final *O Antiphon*, traditionally sung during Advent, Josquin uses six voices in a range of imaginative textures. Particularly striking are the long *melismas*, chains of notes all sung on one syllable, and a surprising section in three-time shortly before the end of the piece.

Benjamin Britten (1913-76) *A Hymn to the Virgin*

Benjamin Britten takes a medieval text as the basis for his *A Hymn to the Virgin*, which he composed when he was just 16. The macaronic words are divided between two choirs, with one singing in Latin and the other in English. The anthem builds to a climax at the words ‘thou bare Jesu, Heaven’s King’, before the tension gradually dissipates in graceful phrases.

Alonso Lobo (1555-1617) *Ave regina caelorum*

Alonso Lobo’s *Ave regina caelorum* reveals a fiery devotion that places it firmly within the Counter-Reformation movement. Lobo places the two sopranos in canon, singing the same music but eight beats apart, and weaves the other parts around this in an intense and bold expression of the text. The motet is something of a tribute to Francisco Guerrero, under whom Lobo worked at Seville Cathedral; Guerrero’s celebrated Marian motet *Ave virgo sanctissima* is scored for the same voices and employs the same canon.

Matthias Werrecore (1500-post 1574) *Inviolata, integra et casta es Maria*

Inviolata, integra et casta es Maria is a five-part setting of a Marian hymn. The composer, Matthias Werrecore, spent almost three decades as Master of the Music at Milan Cathedral. Seen by some of his contemporaries as a musical heir to Josquin, Werrecore’s music reveals the influence of the older composer in this motet, quoting from Josquin’s own music at the words ‘O benigna! O Regina! O Maria!’. Here, Werrecore takes Josquin’s framework and turns it into a sequence of cascading, ecstatic devotion.

The artists

SIGLO DE ORO: Ailsa Campbell, Helena Thomson
soprano Christine Buras, Rebekah Jones *alto*
Chris Fitzgerald-Lombard *tenor* Patrick Allies *baritone*
Piers Kennedy, Ben Rowarth *bass*

Siglo de Oro is one of the leading vocal ensembles of its generation, praised for its golden tone, seamless blend, and innovative programming. The group made its professional debut in 2014 at the Spitalfields Festival, of which the *Financial Times* said: "Siglo de Oro, under the assured direction of Patrick Allies, performed with vivacity and poise". Since then, the group has given concerts across the UK, performed live on *BBC Radio 3's* 'In Tune', and taken up invitations to sing at festivals in Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland and Malta. Siglo de Oro's upcoming plans include concerts in Belgium and Germany, the group's debut at London's Wigmore Hall, and the ensemble's first US tour.

The group has made four critically acclaimed recordings with *Delphian Records*, ranging from music written for Milan Cathedral in around 1500, to new commissions written for Siglo de Oro. The group's world premiere recording of a mass by Hieronymus Praetorius, released in 2018, was *BBC Music Magazine's* Choral and Song Album of the Month. The disc was placed on the longlist for the 2019 *BBC Music Magazine Awards*.

Patrick Allies, Artistic Director, was born in London and started his musical education as a chorister under Stephen Layton at the Temple Church. He was a choral scholar at Gloucester Cathedral and then at King's College London, where he studied music. He went on to take a Master's degree in choral studies at the University of Cambridge.

Patrick founded Siglo de Oro while an undergraduate and has directed the group ever since, as well as holding conducting roles at Morley College and with West Sussex Music. He's also currently a PhD student in music at the University of Oxford, researching 15th-century choirs and their performance spaces.

www.siglodeoro.co.uk

Concert dedicated to our friend and colleague, Geoff Clare.

Festival Patron: David Matthews

Grateful acknowledgements

We thank all those who have helped with the Festival or supported us financially and in other ways. Special thanks to the funding bodies, sponsors and supporters listed below, without whose generous help there would be no Festival.

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Next year's Festival

The 2022 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 7th to Sunday 16th October.

Festival website

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- Email: tickets@little-missenden.org
- Phone: 01494 958148 between 11am and 8pm

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- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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61st Little Missenden Festival



SIGLO DE ORO

3pm, Sunday October 17th 2021
Little Missenden Church

Programme Notes