

A Different Kind of Magic

Thomas Tallis Returns To Dover

by Jack Woolford

As regular readers are aware, I habitually use the word "magic" in describing the Connaught Hall concerts organized by the Dover Music Society, especially when Oliver Poole is performing. The same word is (at least) as appropriate for the packed Tallis Concert in the Refectory of Dover College on the beautiful evening of Saturday 10th May.

Presented by the Dover Society as a contribution to the 2008 Festival of Dover, it was superbly performed by no less than the Canterbury Cathedral Choir with soloists from Glyndebourne (!). By my count there were forty choristers, boys and girls, men and women, all suitably clad in modest black, but all continuously and smilingly delighted to sing and to form and re-form into different groups for different items under the benign but authoritative and athletic or even balletic choirmaster...

It was a truly unique occasion. The remarkably surviving Refectory of Dover Priory, now Dover College, in which the Tallis Concert was performed, dates from 1132 (its gigantic Romanesque bareness gives it an echo more worthy of a cathedral than a dining room). Four hundred years



later (1532) Thomas Tallis, born in Kent some 500 years ago (c.1505), served there as organist and composer in the Chapel (also surviving) for six years and ate in that same Refectory. Then he proceeded via Waltham Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral to the Chapel Royal where, in remarkable succession, he served Kings Henry VIII and Edward VI, and Queens Mary and Elizabeth, all through the spiritual and temporal turmoil of the Protestant Reformation. His music, however, both sacred and profane, was uniformly superb, brilliantly furthering the development from plainchant to polyphony: the motet *Spem in alium* (with which the choir skillfully ended both the first and second parts of the Concert) is in no less than forty parts: eight groups of five, as we could see, as well as hear. Unique?

Part I was, properly, Tallis alone. Part II demonstrated his influence, first on his younger friend and pupil, William Byrd, and then, not only on 18th century Gabrieli, but also on living composers Tavener and Ridout - not to mention Vaughan-Williams' *Fantasia*. Unique indeed!