

The music

William Byrd	Exsurge, Domine
Thomas Tallis	In manus tuas
Thomas Tomkins	O Praise the Lord
Orlando Gibbons	Hosanna to the Son of David
John Sheppard	I give you a new commandment
Tomás Luis de Victoria	Recessit pastor noster
Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina	Peccantem me quotidie Surge, propera amica mea Cantantibus organis
Cheryl Frances-Hoad	A Gift of Heaven
INTERVAL	
Cristóbal de Morales	Jubilate Deo
Orlando Gibbons	O clap your hands together
William Byrd	Retire my soul
Giaches de Wert	Gaudete in Domino
Clemens non Papa	Ego flos campi
Josquin des Prez	Salve Regina a 5
Huw Watkins	The Phoenix and the Turtle

The Golden Renaissance

Tonight’s concert brings together many of our favourite works, and provides a fascinating window onto the different styles of sacred choral music which flourished around Renaissance Europe.

We begin with music by **William Byrd** (1540-1623), perhaps England’s greatest Renaissance composer. Byrd chose a dangerous course amid the religious turmoil of the Reformation: even as he served in Queen Elizabeth I’s Protestant Chapel Royal, he became the musical mouthpiece of the underground Catholic community, publishing a series of bitter Latin motets whose texts unmistakably respond to the plight of his fellow Catholics. One such work is *Exsurge, Domine*: here the frustrated psalmist demands that God rouse himself to help his persecuted people. Byrd’s music positively bristles with righteous indignation.

Thomas Tallis (1505-1585) was Byrd’s close friend and colleague, even standing as godfather to Byrd’s son (also named Thomas). The two composers collaborated on the first ever book of music to be printed in England, the *Cantiones Sacrae* of

1575. Tallis’ *In manus tuas* appears in that volume; a setting of words appropriate for the late-night service of Compline, it is a perfect example of the older composer’s exquisitely balanced style. A particular highlight is the piquant dissonance at cadence points – once condemned by a horrified Victorian editor as “an intolerably harsh effect”. By contrast, *O Praise the Lord* by **Thomas Tomkins** (1572-1656), written for 12 solo voices, is a riot of chaotic energy.

The next group of pieces is appropriate to Holy Week. **Orlando Gibbons**’ (1583-1625) lively *Hosanna to the Son of David* captures the exuberance of the crowd which welcomed Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. **John Sheppard**’s (c.1515-1558) *I give you a new commandment* for lower voices sets words from the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday. Written in the early stages of the Reformation, its austerity reflects the wishes of Thomas Cranmer that music should not be “full of notes but, as near as may be, for every syllable a note; so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly”. The climax of the Holy Week liturgy is the set of *Tenebrae* services for which the Spanish composer **Tomás Luis de Victoria** (c1548-1611) wrote his famous *Tenebrae Responsories* in 1585. *Recessit pastor noster* is a key moment in the sequence, simultaneously lamenting the death of Christ and anticipating his eventual triumph.

2025 marks 500 years since the birth of **Palestrina** (c1525-1594), and we continue with three contrasting works by this quintessential master of the *stile antico*. *Peccantem me quotidie* is a dark-hued, penitential motet published in 1572; its anguished tone contrasts sharply with the exuberance of *Surge, propera amica mea*, taken from a 1584 collection of Song of Songs settings. The lavish *Cantantibus organis* is a 1585 motet for the feast of St Cecilia, patron saint of musicians.

We end our first half with another tribute to Palestrina: **Cheryl Frances-Hoad**’s (b1980) *A Gift of Heaven*, composed especially for Stile Antico’s Palestrina anniversary celebrations. The composer writes: “I was delighted to be asked by Stile Antico to write this new piece, but also rather daunted: responding to a composer of the stature of Palestrina makes one feel doomed to fail. I was therefore thrilled to discover that some of Palestrina’s letters and other writings survive, and it occurred to me that it would be wonderful to set some extracts to music, so that we hear words as well as notes from the master’s pen. Palestrina’s dedication to Philip of Austria especially appealed to me because of its tone, and I immediately felt a kinship with this great composer of centuries past upon reading it. It is tremendously reassuring to know that we composers are all the same, buttering up our patrons in the hope of securing more work and more money!”

There are few pieces of Renaissance music where we can be certain of the occasion of the first performance, but the festive *Jubilate Deo* by **Cristóbal de Morales** (1500-1553) is a happy exception: it marks a (short-lived) peace treaty made between Charles V of Spain and Francis I of France in 1538. The motet was commissioned by Morales’ employer, Pope Paul III, and it is he who is credited in the text with brokering the peace. Morales includes a ‘cantus firmus’ in the tenor line, consisting of repetitions of the word ‘Gaudemus’ – ‘rejoice’ – firstly in slow notes, and then, towards the end of the piece, at double tempo.

Orlando Gibbons’ irrepressible setting of Psalm 47, *O clap your hands together*, has a strange history: two accounts relate that it was written for his friend William Heyther to present in order to supplicate for his DMus at Oxford in 1622. It seems unlikely that this was intended as genuine subterfuge; rather, Gibbons’ anthem probably served to fulfil a formality, since Heyther’s was an honorary degree. It is however a joyously appropriate work with which to commemorate the composer in the 400th anniversary of his death. We pair it with a beautiful late work by William Byrd, *Retire my soul*, whose autumnal text seems highly appropriate for a composer by then in his seventies.

Flemish musicians were some of the most renowned and sought-after composers of the Renaissance, and often found employment abroad. **Giaches de Wert** (1535-1596) and **Josquin des Prez** (c1450-1521) both spent much of their careers working in Italy. De Wert was in charge of music at the court in Ferrara, where a young Claudio Monteverdi was among his employees. His brief *Gaudete in Domino* unfolds as a single burst of energy. Josquin was the first international superstar composer, working chiefly in Milan and Rome. His five-part *Salve Regina* was particularly admired by his contemporaries for its technical accomplishment: one of the inner parts is entirely pre-composed, consisting exclusively of ostinato repetitions of the word ‘Salve’ at pre-determined intervals, whilst the highest part is a close paraphrase of a plainsong. Despite these twin constraints – akin to composing with one hand tied behind his back – Josquin manages to create a motet full of variety and colour, by turns muscularly rhythmic and tenderly reflective.

Between these two works we sing a particular group favourite: *Ego flos campi* by **Clemens non Papa** (c1510-1556). It was probably written for a community of nuns at ‘s-Hertogenbosch; their motto ‘sicut lilium inter spinas’ (like a lily among thorns) is heard clearly, twice over, at the centre of the motet. The music is characterised by crystalline, slow-moving harmony, never straying far from the warmth of the tonic chord; the effect is akin to admiring a jewel from every possible angle.

We finish with a work written for *Stile Antico* in 2014 by **Huw Watkins** (b1976). *The Phoenix and the Turtle* sets words by Shakespeare and describes the funeral rites of a phoenix and turtle dove, symbols of perfection and devoted love. The poem is clearly intended as an allegory of some sort, and it has been suggested that the two birds might represent two Catholic martyrs, Anne and Roger Line. If that is correct, then the 'bird of loudest lay' mentioned in the first stanza might well represent William Byrd. Watkins cloaks Shakespeare's dense words in music of propulsive drive and lyrical beauty.

Notes by Andrew Griffiths

The artists

STILE ANTICO: Helen Ashby, Kate Ashby, Rachel Ambrose-Evans *soprano* Emma Ashby, Amy Blythe, Rosie Parker *alto* Oscar Golden-Lee, Andrew Griffiths, Benedict Hymas *tenor* James Arthur, Nathan Harrison, Gareth Thomas *bass*

Stile Antico's repertoire focuses on the astonishingly rich legacy of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century polyphonic composition. It encompasses not only the music of Palestrina and his Italian, Flemish and Spanish contemporaries, but also the fascinating and diverse English school, from the dazzling complexity of the *Eton Choirbook* to the masterpieces of Taverner, Sheppard, Tallis and Byrd, and the Elizabethan madrigalists. Just as no single voice predominates in the polyphonic style, *Stile Antico's* collaborative working method allows all its members to contribute artistically in crafting its performances. The results have been described as 'wonderfully vivid' – a direct, personal interpretative approach to the choral repertoire, conveying both the beauty and the drama of the finest polyphonic music of the Renaissance.

Stile Antico is firmly established as one of the world's most accomplished and innovative vocal ensembles. Working without a conductor, its 12 members have thrilled audiences on four continents with their fresh, vibrant and moving performances of Renaissance polyphony. Its bestselling recordings have earned accolades including the Gramophone Award for Early Music, Diapason d'or de l'année, Edison Klassiek Award, and Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik. The group has received three Grammy® nominations, and performed live at the 60th Grammy® Awards at Madison Square Garden.

Based in London, *Stile Antico* has appeared at many of the world's most prestigious venues and festivals. The group enjoys a particularly close association with Wigmore Hall, and has performed at the BBC Proms, Buckingham Palace, Amsterdam

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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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The 2026 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 2nd to Sunday 12th October.

Festival Website little-missenden.org

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- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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Committee: Angela Bishop, Polly Buston, Martin Cunningham, John Glasson, Beth Neill, Liz Wager, Dick Wells, Rachel Wilcox

Programme Notes

STILE ANTICO

The Golden Renaissance



8pm, Saturday October 11th, 2025
Little Missenden Church

65th Little Missenden Festival

Concertgebouw, the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Cité de la Musique, Luxembourg Philharmonie, Leipzig Gewandhaus, and Madrid's Auditorio Nacional. Stile Antico is frequently invited to appear at Europe's leading festivals: highlights include the Antwerp, Bruges, Utrecht and York Early Music Festivals, the Lucerne Easter Festival, and the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival.

Since its 2009 North American debut at the Boston Early Music Festival, Stile Antico has enjoyed frequent tours to the US and Canada. The group performs regularly in Boston and New York, and has appeared at the Ravinia Festival, Washington's National Cathedral and Library of Congress, Vancouver's Chan Centre, and in concert series spanning 25 US states. Stile Antico has also appeared in Mexico, Colombia, South Korea, Macau, and Hong Kong.

Stile Antico's performances are often praised for their immediacy, expressive commitment, and their sensitive and imaginative response to text. These qualities arise from the group's collaborative working style: members rehearse and perform as chamber musicians, each contributing artistically to the musical results. The group is also noted for its compelling programming, which draws out thematic connections between works to shine new light on Renaissance music. In addition to its core repertoire, Stile Antico has premiered works by Kerry Andrew, Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Joanna Marsh, John McCabe, Nico Muhly, Giles Swayne, and Huw Watkins. The group's diverse range of collaborators includes Fretwork, the Folger Consort, Marino Formenti, Lemn Sissay, B'Rock, Rihab Azar, and Sting.

Alongside its concert and recording work, Stile Antico is passionate about sharing its repertoire and working style with the widest possible audience. After many years in residence at Dartington International Summer School, the group now leads courses at the Music Summer School at Gresham's, and holds regular *Come and Sing* days open to all. Stile Antico also works extensively with younger singers in university and school settings and with the Rodolfus Foundation. The support of the charitable Stile Antico Foundation has enabled the group to offer bursaries to talented young ensembles, and to run an annual Youth Consort course. Stile Antico is proud to be a member of the European early music network REMA.

During 2025 Stile Antico celebrates 20 years as a professional ensemble with gala performances at Wigmore Hall, the Boston Early Music Festival, and for AMUZ Antwerpen. The group also marks the 500th birthday of Palestrina, the quintessential master of the stile antico, with a series of concerts and the release of a new album for *Decca Classics*.