

**Andrew Nethsingha and The Choir of St John's College,  
Cambridge release world premiere recording of specially  
commissioned cycle of works by Michael Finnissy**



**Signum Records | 14 August 2020 | SIGCD624**

On 14 August, The Choir of St John's and its Director of Music Andrew Nethsingha release the world premiere recording of Michael Finnissy's *Pious Anthems & Voluntaries* on Signum, capturing the three-year composition of his 9-part cycle commissioned by the Choir across three academic years.

Commissioning new music has long been part of life at the Choir, with commissions by previous directors George Guest, Christopher Robinson and David Hill. Andrew Nethsingha has taken this tradition one step further, developing the commissioning of new music into one of the cornerstones of the Choir's ethos. Since becoming Director of Music of the world-class collegiate choir in 2007, Nethsingha has commissioned over 50 pieces. He has been commissioning new choral works throughout his career and brought this practice to St John's early on in his tenure. Following intermittent Advent commissions from his predecessors, Nethsingha started the Choir's annual tradition of commissioning new music for their famed Advent services. This tradition led to commissions from leading composers such as Julian Anderson, Jonathan Harvey, Roxanna Panufnik and Judith Weir.

In recent years, the Choir has also given students at Cambridge a chance to try their hand at composing for the Choir, with recent commissions including Sophie Westbrooke's *Quiet Stream* for

choir and recorder, performed as part of one of their services in March. Westbrooke is a current undergraduate at Cambridge, and is just one of many students Nethsingha has commissioned music from.

Pairing choral music with unusual instrument combinations has also been a theme of the Choir's commissioning. This album sees the use of solo flute and violin alongside organ and choir. Their previous commissions have made use of solo instruments such as harp, marimba, timpani, double bass, saxophone and electronics to pair with vocal music, exploring sound worlds rarely touched by other choral ensembles.

Michael Finnissy became part of this rich commissioning practice in 2014, with his piece *John the Baptist*, which the Choir performed at that year's Advent service. Nethsingha approached Finnissy once again in 2017 - unusual for the Choir, as it generally doesn't commission more than one piece from any single composer, to maximise the number and variety they work with. The Choir's relationship with Finnissy, therefore, is a unique one, allowing the vocal ensemble to develop a deep reciprocal understanding of his music, and him the Choir's sound.

The cycle of nine works was written over a three-year period, with premieres of the individual pieces taking place in intervals from May 2017 in the Chapel of St John's College, Cambridge. In June 2019 the Choir premiered the entire cycle to celebrate 150 years since the Chapel's consecration.

Finnissy said of the chapel, *"It is so special for its windows; your gaze freewheels from one to another - and this cycle of works is like that."*

The cycle is closely intertwined with the architecture of St John's College Chapel. The original chapel was built in 1280, followed by the founding of the College in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with new buildings and developments added across the centuries. The nine works of Finnissy's cycle reflect this architectural layering in musical terms, with some of the pieces based on 16<sup>th</sup> century Responds and Votive Antiphons, which in turn had been built upon plainsong melodies from the centuries before.

Andrew Nethsingha, the Choir's Director of Music, said, *"This is extremely beautiful music - rich, deep, full of colours, emotions and allusions. The music requires time to marinate in the listener's mind. It has been fascinating to observe the cycle's evolution, to develop a deep relationship with one composer and to gain an insight into his compositional processes. We are privileged to have had Michael as the College's Composer in Residence for the past three years."*

Church music is often associated with traditionalism and ancient ritual, and although the cycle references this rich history, there is, as Nethsingha describes, an innovation in Finnissy's writing that is not often heard within church walls.

The Choir is famed for championing contemporary music within its heavily varied repertoire, spanning over 500 years of music. This album comes just 4 years since their wildly successful Jonathan Harvey album, which won a BBC Music Magazine Award. Nethsingha was keen to continue challenging both singers and listeners with this commission, saying:

*"I feel it is our duty as modern musicians to push the boundaries of choral music, so that it can continue to grow and develop as an art form."*

The disc will be available from 14 August 2020 on Signum Records.

[www.sjcchoir.co.uk](http://www.sjcchoir.co.uk)

**-ENDS-**

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## Notes to Editors

### Track listing

#### CD1

- 1 **Dum transisset Sabbatum**
- 2 **Dum transisset Sabbatum – double**
- 3 **Videte miraculum**
- 4 **Videte miraculum – double**

#### CD2

- 1 **Commentary on ‘*Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*’**

#### **Cantata: ‘*Herr Christ, der einge Gottessohn*’**

- 2 I. ‘*Herr Christ, der einge Gottessohn*’
- 3 II. ‘*Ach führe mich, o Gott*’
- 4 III. ‘*Ach, ziehe die Seele*’
- 5 IV. ‘*O Wunderkraft der Liebe*’
- 6 V. ‘*Bald zur Rechten*’
- 7 VI. ‘*Für uns un Mensch geboren*’

- 8 **Commentary on BWV 562**
- 9 **Plebs angelica**
- 10 **Plebs angelica – alternativo**

**Glen Dempsey** Organ <sup>CD1: 2, 4/CD2: 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10</sup>

**James Anderson-Besant** Organ <sup>CD2: 3, 5, 7, 10</sup>

**Sarah O’Flynn** Flute

**Cecily Ward** Violin

**Andrew Nethsingha** Director

## The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge

### Trebles

Adam Ahmad  
Felix Bamford  
William Buttery  
Jaylen Cheng  
Lewis Cobb  
Joshua Davidson  
George Ducker  
Lorenzo Granado  
Alfred Harrison <sup>CD1: 3/CD2: 3</sup>  
Harry L'Estrange <sup>CD1: 3</sup>  
Toby L'Estrange  
Jonathan Mews  
Lucas Nair-Grepinet  
Ewan Tatnell  
Philip Tomkinson <sup>CD1: 3</sup>

Thomas Watkin

### Counter Tenors

Hugh Cutting <sup>CD1: 3/CD2: 4</sup>  
Richard Decker  
Alec D'Oyly  
Laurence Trowsdale-  
Stannard  
Thomas Watts

### Tenors

Jack Bazalgette  
Benedict Flinn  
Gopal Kambo <sup>CD2: 5</sup>  
Henry Laird  
Louis Watkins

### Basses

James Adams <sup>CD2: 6</sup>  
Thomas Butler  
Jamie Conway  
Matthew Gibson  
Simon Grant  
Oliver Morris <sup>CD1: 3</sup>  
William O'Brien

*Numbers indicate soloist credits for each track*

## The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge

The Choir of St John's College, Cambridge is one of the finest collegiate choirs in the world – known and loved by millions from its broadcasts, concert tours and 100 recordings. Founded in the 1670s, the Choir is known for its rich, warm and distinctive sound, its expressive interpretations and its ability to sing in a variety of styles. Alongside this discipline, the Choir is particularly proud of its happy, relaxed and mutually supportive atmosphere. The Choir is directed by Andrew Nethsingha following in a long line of eminent Directors of Music, recently Dr George Guest, Dr Christopher Robinson and Dr David Hill. Their first release on their imprint with Signum Classics, *Deo*, won the Choral Award at the BBC Music Magazine Awards 2017.

### Andrew Nethsingha

Performing in North America, South Africa, the Far East, and throughout Europe, Andrew Nethsingha has been Director of Music at St John's College, Cambridge since 2007. He has helped to set up a new recording label, 'St John's Cambridge', in conjunction with Signum. His first disc on the new label, *DEO* (music by Jonathan Harvey), was a 2017 BBC Music Magazine Award winner. Andrew Nethsingha was a chorister at Exeter Cathedral, under his father's direction. He later studied at the Royal College of Music, where he won seven prizes, and at St John's College, Cambridge. He held Organ Scholarships under Dr Christopher Robinson at St George's Windsor, and Dr George Guest at St John's College, before becoming Assistant Organist at Wells Cathedral. He was subsequently Director of Music at Truro and Gloucester Cathedrals, and Artistic Director of the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival.

### Michael Finnissy

Michael Finnissy was born in South London in 1946. He studied at the Royal College of Music with

Bernard Stevens and Humphrey Seale, and in Italy with Roman Vlad. Much of his early work was first performed in France and the Netherlands, while he was working as a freelance répétiteur and pianist for dance-classes. He then taught at the Royal Academy of Music (London), at the universities of Sussex and Southampton, and at the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven. He has also given summer courses at Dartington, and been resident artist at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne (Australia). He has been featured composer at the Huddersfield Festival several times, at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and many other places across the world, most recently at SICPP in Boston USA. He was president of the ISCM from 1990-96, and is now an honorary member. His work is most consistently recorded by Metier/Divine Art and NMC, and published by Verlag Neue Music GmbH (Berlin), Oxford University Press, United Music Publishing and Universal Edition.