

# FEARILY RISERS

The Tallis Scholars have been bringing Renaissance sacred music to the forefront for over 30 years. **Claire Jackson** meets the ensemble's founder, Peter Phillips, and newest member, Amy Haworth

The term 'early music' generally denotes the soundtrack of the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods, an era rich in motets, chants and the *Ars nova*. It was a time when sacred music was top of the agenda, when purity of sound and clarity of tone was paramount. It is this period that the Tallis Scholars have dedicated their lives to, exploring Byrd, Allegri, Da Palestrina and all the composers in between. Director Peter Phillips set up the group in 1973, and, since then, the Tallis Scholars have toured widely, performing in both secular and sacred venues, challenging preconceptions and bringing early music to the fore. Here, we meet the longest-standing member, Peter, and the group's recent addition, Amy.

**The *New York Times* once described the Tallis Scholars as 'the rock stars of Renaissance vocal music'. Is that a label you are comfortable with?**

**Peter:** I love it. It suggests that we have been able to bring Renaissance music to new audiences and been commercially successful in the process. My only concern is that rock stars tend to fade away...

**Do you feel under pressure to package early music in a certain way in order for it to be accepted?**

**Peter:** No, not at all. We make a point of performing our music without any dressing-up or clever tricks. We believe it is great enough music to stand comparison with any of the more established later repertoires and just needs to be heard completely straight. Our job is to stand there and deliver it as well as we possibly can.

**Amy:** The Tallis Scholars was one of the first groups to take early music to the mass market and, as a result, has been able to present the music for what it is – that is, without the additional trappings of trying to impose new interpretations on the music.

**Peter, it's been 30 years since you and Steve Smith set up Gimell Records to record the group's music. How has the independent recording scene developed over that period?**

There are now many more independent labels

around than there were 30 years ago. We were one of the very first and in those days it wasn't such a good idea; your standing as an artist was related to which major record label you were recorded by. We had little option but to go it alone since not only had nobody heard of us, they hadn't heard of the music either. Now the scene is very different and the group has benefited from the longevity of Gimell, that ironically, in a specialised way, is now seen as an established label.

**How will you celebrate your anniversary year in 2010?**

We will release a disc of very special music by the Spanish Renaissance composer Tomás Luis de Victoria and hopefully have a party! Meanwhile, our touring schedule will continue unabated.

**Gimell has received numerous awards – congratulations! Is this recognition important?**

Very. It tells us that what we do is rated by the experts. Nowadays, these awards don't dramatically increase the number of discs we sell, though they used to, but I reckon that we are still benefiting from winning the Gramophone Record of the Year in 1987. At that early stage in our career the music we perform needed that kind of official support. It would have been quite different if our main composer was someone like Mozart.

**Much of your repertoire focuses on European church music from the 15th and 16th centuries; do you believe that listeners need to be religious to enjoy this genre?**

**Peter:** No, definitely not. I am not religious. We sing as often as not in secular halls in international concert series that include string quartets and pianists. We love to perform in churches too, but it is not essential.

**Amy:** I don't think you need to be religious to enjoy this genre of music, particularly in the context of a concert performance, as much of it is so well written. That said; I do believe that those who are religious may experience listening to the performance differently, particularly when we perform in religious buildings. While it works in concert halls, it always feels more appropriate

when performed in the great surroundings of the various cathedrals and churches we are lucky enough to perform in.

**How relevant is sacred vocal music of the Renaissance era to the developing generations of music fans in the 21st century?**

**Amy:** The popularity of Renaissance music has seen a great return to the concert platform in the last 30 to 40 years and has a continuing impact on many other genres of music. Composers over the centuries have again and again turned to the music of this era as inspiration for their own work and this continues to be true today. It is always reassuring that, at our concerts throughout Europe, the US and Japan, a considerable part of the audience is in the younger age bracket.

**Peter:** I think this genre is more relevant than ever. This music was designed to relax people. As the world gets more and more hectic, music lovers will turn increasingly to this repertoire for some kind of respite. Whether you find it takes you out of yourself into a different space – maybe as a quasi-religious experience – or whether it seems like climbing into a hot bath, this music does a much-needed job.

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**Tell us about your work with the National Centre for Early Music's (NCEM) composers award.**

**Peter:** This has been a real bonus to our annual round. The idea was to encourage young composers to write for the Tallis Scholars in