

# Bethlehem Carol Concert

December 13<sup>th</sup> 2005, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church

*In aid of ABCD Bethlehem and PSC*

Music performed by London Finzi Consort

## Programme Notes

### A Spotless Rose :: Herbert Howells

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was a contemporary and colleague of R. Vaughan Williams, and in fact both composers came from Gloucestershire. Howells was inspired, like RVW, by both folk idioms and by the music of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The effect of both is clearly evident in *A Spotless Rose*, with its graceful flowing lines and nostalgic harmony.

### O Magnum Mysterium :: Morten Lauridsen

Morten Lauridsen was born in 1943 and is one of America's favourite and most successful contemporary composers. First performed in 1994, his exquisite and haunting setting of *O Magnum Mysterium* evokes the wonder of the text with carefully-placed dissonance and a sparse texture.

### Puer Nobis :: Richard Rodney Bennett

In addition to composing concerti, symphonies, film scores and (here) sacred music, Richard Rodney Bennett (b. 1936) is a successful jazz pianist. He studied in Paris under Pierre Boulez, and his music is known for its richness of invention and development.

*Puer Nobis* is firmly within the English choral idiom, with harmonic shifts and cadences reminiscent of Vaughan Williams and Finzi in particular, and the relatively simple treatment of the text is beautifully effective.

### Verbum Caro Factum Est :: John Sheppard

As recently as 1970, very little was known of the music of John Sheppard (c.1520-c.1560). The Oxford Companion to Music (in its tenth edition that year) has only this to say of him: "...*the remains of his work are, unfortunately, rather scanty, and in some instances fragmentary*". Since then, thankfully, there has been a rediscovery of his work, to the extent that today he is seen increasingly as a peer of Thomas Tallis.

From the little that is known of Sheppard, it seems that he was something of a rebel. He was disciplined on several occasions by the college authorities during his time as choirmaster at Magdalen College, Oxford, and there are even anecdotes of him kidnapping a small boy to sing in the choir. Certainly, his frequent use of unprepared dissonances and barely disguised parallel fourths and octaves suggests that he didn't feel the need to bow to musical convention.

*Verbum Caro Factum Est* is one of his most exuberant motets, and makes use of a 'trademark' high treble part, soaring above the texture, imitated by the alto and mean (soprano). The tenor line supplies a central thread of *cantus firmus* in the form of the plainsong melody, around which the other parts are woven (the word 'tenor' in Latin means 'a holding on', hence holding the 'tune'). The music alternates between rich imitative polyphony and plainsong, with the repeated contrapuntal sections becoming shorter on each occasion, giving the effect of increasing joy and exuberance for the subject of the motet: The Word Made Flesh.