

MICHAEL FINNISSY

{*1946}

vocal works 1974-2015

»Fantasies ... about music, about love and death, about the voice«

EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble

James Weeks *conductor*

Gesualdo: Libro Sesto {2012-13}

Juliet Fraser, Amy Moore *soprano*

Lucy Goddard *mezzo soprano*

Tom Williams *countertenor*

Stephen Jeffes, Jonathan Bungard *tenor*

Finnissy wrote this set of madrigals in response to a commission for **EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble's** tenth birthday concert in 2012; originally a single, short pièce d'occasion {now the first piece

in the cycle}, Gesualdo:

Libro Sesto grew into a major, seven-movement work as Finnissy's pre-occupation with the madrigal genre, and with the Gesualdo source material, increased. His programme note for the cycle is succinct: 'Gesualdo's sixth Book of Madrigals provides a source for this piece, the texts and a few fragments of his music. Beyond that the fantasies are mine: about music, about love and death, about the voice.' So Gesualdo: Libro

Sesto is not primarily a transcription {there are only flashes of recognisable Gesualdo here and there} but a free meditation on some of the central themes of Finnissy's life-work: the expression and exploration of our humanness in all its carnal and spiritual splendour, our urge to communicate, to couple, to connect. These 'fantasies' are vividly dramatic and, as befits a Gesualdo cycle, painfully and unambiguously erotic. Some are latent operas: the first move-

ment {Se la mia morte brami} depicts a suave trio of madrigalists 'in the chamber' being continually soured and overlaid by rawer and more urgent cries 'from the street'. No. IV {Quel "no" crudel} is a classic female mad scene or revenge aria {albeit for two sopranos, for added force}, and no. VI {Resta di darmi noia} moves from declamatory madrigal to ardent verismo duet between florid soprano and tenor soloists. Other movements offer surprising vocal combina-

tions: No. II {Volan quasi farfalle} offers the bizarre juxtaposition of two soprano and two bass voices, the latter narrating the text while the former flit around overhead like the Cupids/moths of the poem – or perhaps the flame itself. Its counterpart, No. III {Beltà, poi che t'assenti} uses the other four singers – two altos {here, mezzo and countertenor} and two tenors – overlapping strangely and uncomfortably in a tangle of different vocal colours.

The only two tutti movements stand out from all this subjective, individualistic writhing as monolithic 'choral' statements – the whole company coming together to articulate emphatic block-chords. But this emphatic-ness is ambiguous: the 'joy' we are offered in the final poem is undercut by the wistful emptiness of the work's conclusion, as if to say that such simple certainties are never quite graspable in the mess, pain and yearning of this world.



Cipriano {1974}

Emma Tring *high soprano*

Juliet Fraser, Rebecca Lea *soprano*

Lucy Goddard *mezzo soprano*

Kate Symonds-Joy *contralto*

Stephen Jeffes {solo}, Jonathan Bungard *tenor*

Jonathan Saunders *baritone*

Simon Whiteley, Jimmy Holliday *bass*

Finnissy describes Cipriano, his first major work for vocal ensemble, as ‘a kind of ‘dramatic madrigal’ after the manner of Monteverdi’s Seventh and Eighth Books’. The text was collated by Finnissy from Calderón de la Barca’s play *El Mágico Prodigioso* {1637}, and projects us into a dramatic confrontation between St Cyprian {played by a solo tenor} and a Demon, who tempts him to give into fantasies of the flesh and yield to its offers of ‘the wisdom of the old world, sweet oblivion of all thought, and the love of beautiful women’. At the beginning of the work Cyprian is alone on stage, bravely resisting his own carnal desires by holding himself chaste within a single tone; the Demon, played by the rest of the ensemble, begins off-stage, shouting, grunting, flexing, writhing about, forcing Cyprian to redouble his will. As the hallucinatory temptations intensify, the singers join Cyprian on the stage one by one, led by a vision of female love, Justina, sung by the mezzo soprano. At the end of Finnissy’s scena Cyprian does seem finally to overcome the demon’s temptations as the chorus finally dissolves, turning their backs on him. But Cyprian’s final statements of resolution and faith ring ambiguously into the emptiness: as he dedicates his body to God rather than the pleasures of the flesh, his voice breaks and lashes out, his final word – ‘cuerpo’ – ‘body’ – screamed into the silent abyss. Cipriano was first performed by Peter Hall {tenor} and other members of the John Alldis Choir, conducted by John Alldis, at the Wigmore Hall in London in December 1975 and subsequently toured widely. After a gap of more than 30 years it was revived by EXAUDI for this performance in March 2016, from which this live recording is taken.

Tom Fool’s Wooing {1975-1978 / 2015}

Emma Tring* *high soprano*

Juliet Fraser, Rebecca Lea,

Amanda Morrison *soprano*

Lucy Goddard {solo} *mezzo soprano*

Kate Symonds-Joy*, Cathy Bell *contralto*

Tom Williams *countertenor*

David de Winter {solo}, Stephen Jeffes *tenor*

Jonathan Bungard, Jonathan Saunders *baritone*

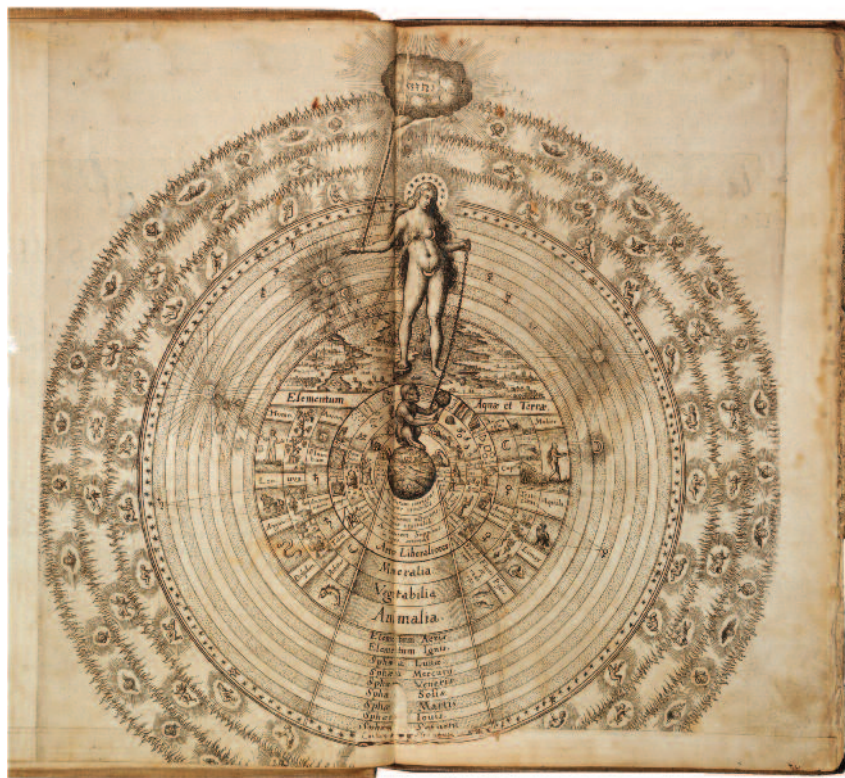
Simon Whiteley, Jimmy Holliday *bass*

* *conga*

In response to the John Alldis Choir’s enthusiasm for Cipriano and its success with audiences, Finnissy began work on another even more transcendently demanding vocal ensemble work in 1975, completing the score of *Tom Fool’s Wooing* in 1978. But circumstances prevented a performance from taking place at the time, and the manuscript lay unpublished and unperformed until 2016, when it was finally given its premiere {of which this is the live recording}, with substantial revisions to the original score having been made the previous year. These revisions concern the central *Mummer’s Play*, which was originally rendered in an expressionist ‘music-theatre’ style a little reminiscent of Maxwell Davies; Finnissy’s misgivings led to a complete rewrite in a very different style, provocatively contrasted with the music that surrounds it.

Tom Fool’s Wooing is a work of stupendous musical and technical challenges, almost unmatched in the vocal ensemble repertory. But it is also a work of supreme expressive directness and physical energy, as the fourteen singers perform extreme vocal gymnastics in sensual response to the work’s theme of marriage and the joys of love. Three contrasted panels form the piece’s structural outline. The outer panels create a montage of texts about amorous desire and courtship from various folk sources {Romanian, Greek, Turkish} while two singers {mezzo and tenor soloists} assume the roles of Bride and Groom, singing passages from Spenser’s *Epithalamion*. The opening section, based on Swedish *kulning* {cattle-calling} and featuring dialogues between onstage and offstage female

voices, seems to be set just prior to the wedding itself, with its presentation of groups of first women and then men {shades of *Les Noces*}, though there is no explicit sequence of events, and a literal marriage ceremony is not depicted. Instead, in the central panel, Finnissy replaces it with an astonishing *coup-de-théâtre*: an extended sequence of an English Mummer's Play rendered in an idiom of simple homorhythmic textures accompanied by crude drum patterns, casting us abruptly out of the erotic reverie and into a paradoxical 'real world', reminiscent of the appearance of the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. After a somewhat perfunctory resolution to this absurd action, the music stages another swift cinematic dissolve, this



time into a revolving, starry universe of quiet, blissful consummation – and some of the most remarkable music ever conceived for an ensemble of voices.

Kelir {1981}

Juliet Fraser, Amy Moore *soprano*

Lucy Goddard *mezzo soprano*

Stephen Jeffes *tenor*

Simon Whiteley *baritone*

Jimmy Holliday *bass*

'Kelir' is the name given to the curtain onto which shadow-puppets are projected in Javanese *wayang kulit* {puppet theatre}; by extension, writes Finnissy of his 1981 work, 'it is also a curtain onto which our interpretations of the world, and our fantasies, are projected.' The text

of the work consists of colourful ritual formulae declaimed before the start of the play, which, when set to florid, microtonal melodies accompanied by buzzing drones, seem at first to suggest an evocation of some far-off, exotic ceremony. But as Finnissy suggests above, far more is at play here: as the piece progresses the evocative, folkloric aspect of the material becomes increasingly counterbalanced by the sense of an abstract investigation of the materi-

als – the pitch and rhythm patterns themselves, and their combination into various different textures. In fact, the piece does not use Javanese or any other folk music as its source material, but invented sequences of pitches and rhythms which are constantly shaped and reshaped by the composer into

his 'interpretations of the world, and our fantasies'. As with comparable works of Xenakis, these fantasies are deeply concerned with archetypes, with a 'return to source'; so we hear initially the 'primal' categories of melody and drone, setting up a tension between static and mobile, foreground and background, 'melodic' and accompanimental, that is explored virtuosically throughout the work. The piece unfolds as a succession of sharply-defined textures; the writing is forceful and blazing, the vocal demands extreme. Widely regarded as one of the composer's masterpieces, *Kelir* was first performed by London Sinfonietta Voices in 1982, lay unperformed for 30 years, and was revived by EXAUDI at Wigmore Hall, London in 2015, the day before the present recording was made.

— JAMES WEEKS

EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble

EXAUDI is one of the world's leading vocal ensembles for new music. Founded by James Weeks (director) and Juliet Fraser (soprano) in 2002, EXAUDI is based in London and draws its singers from among the UK's brightest vocal talents.

EXAUDI's special affinity is for the radical edges of contemporary music, at home equally with maximal complexity, microtonality and experimental aesthetics. The newest new music is at the heart of its repertoire, and it has given national and world premières of Sciarrino, Rihm, Finnissy, Fox, Posadas, Oesterle, Crane, Eötvös, Ferneyhough, Gervasoni, Skempton, Pesson, Poppe, Mažulis and Fox among many others. Through its commissioning scheme, EXAUDI is particularly committed to the music of its own generation, and is proud to champion the work of significant voices including Aaron Cassidy, Evan Johnson, Bryn Harrison, Amber Priestley, Matthew Shlomowitz, Joanna Bailie, Cassandra Miller, Andrew Hamilton, James Weeks and Claudia Molitor.



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EXAUDI is also strongly involved with the emerging generation of young composers, and regularly takes part in composer development schemes and residencies such as Voix Nouvelles Royaumont, IRCAM Manifeste Academie and Aldeburgh composer residencies, as well as workshops at universities and conservatoires throughout the UK. EXAUDI has particularly strong links with the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and City, University of London, where it is an Ensemble in Residence.

EXAUDI's many international engagements include Wittener Tage, Darmstadter Ferienkurse, Musica Viva (Munich), Muziekgebouw (Amsterdam), IRCAM (Paris), Festival d'Automne (Paris), Voix Nouvelles (Royaumont), Pharos (Cyprus), Musica (Strasbourg), MAfestival (Bruges), CDMC (Madrid), Milano Musica, Fundació BBVA (Bilbao) and Quincena Musical (San Sebastià). The ensemble has also collaborated with many leading ensembles including musikFabrik, Ensemble Modern, L'Instant Donné, London Sinfonietta, BCMG, Talea and Ensemble InterContemporain. The ensemble has appeared at many leading UK venues and festivals, including BBC Proms, Aldeburgh, Spitalfields, Bath, Manchester International Festival and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festivals, Wigmore Hall, Café OTO, Kings Place and South Bank. EXAUDI broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3 and European radio stations, and has released twelve critically acclaimed recordings on Winter&Winter, NMC, ÆON, Métier, Mode, Confront and HCR. This is EXAUDI's third recording for Winter&Winter.

— www.exaudi.org.uk

James Weeks

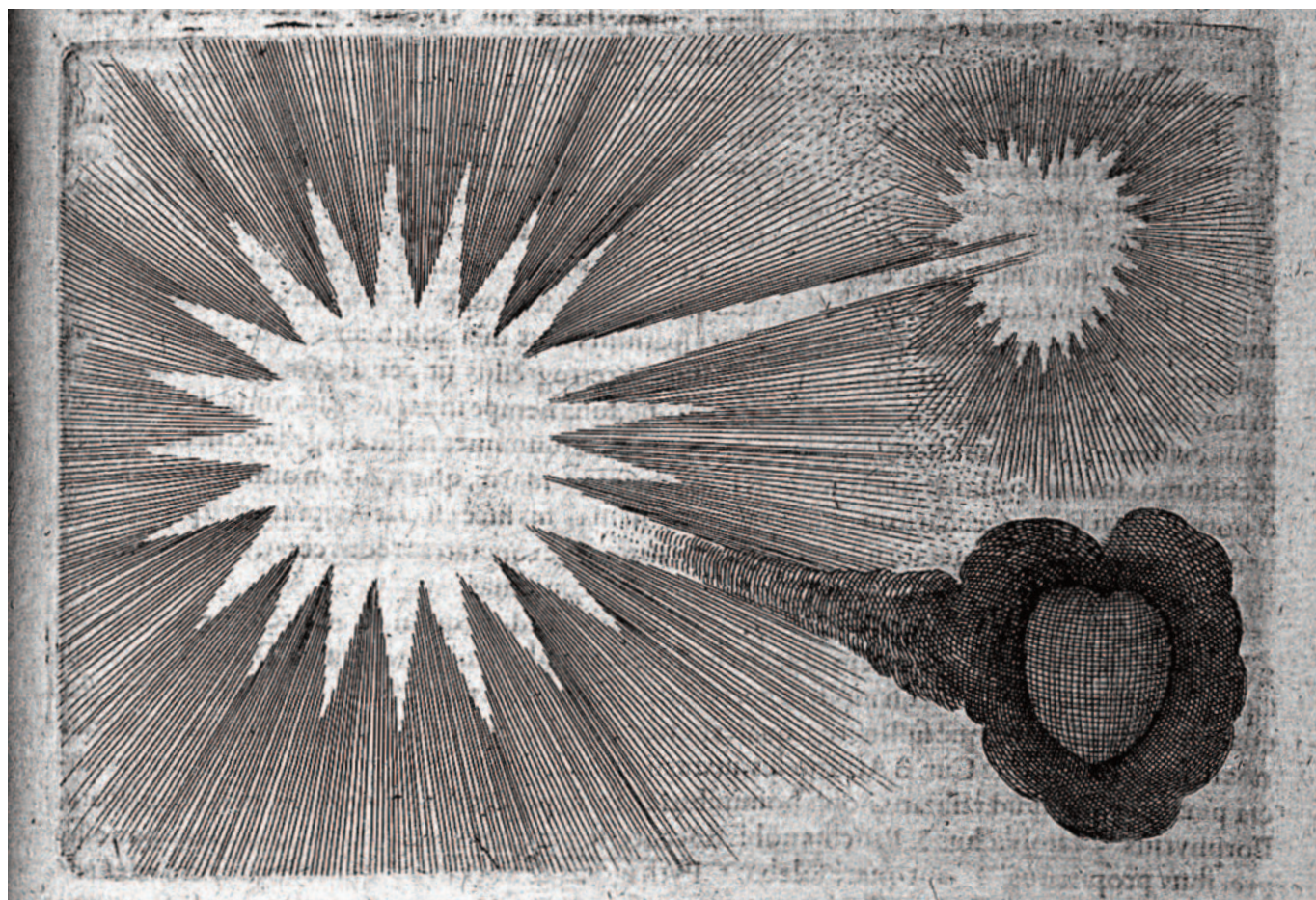
James Weeks is a composer and conductor specialising in new music, based in the UK. His music is performed and broadcast worldwide and four portrait discs of his work have been released to date: *Mala punica/Walled Garden* (Winter&Winter, 2017), *Signs of Occupation* (Métier 2016), *mural* (confront 2015) and *TIDE* (Métier 2013). He has written for many leading ensembles and soloists including Plus-Minus, Quatuor Bozzini, London Sinfonietta, New London Chamber Choir, Phoenix Piano Trio, EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble, Ekmeles, Mira Benjamin, Alison Balsom, Apartment House and Anton Lukoszevieze.

His work is typically focused on music for soloists or small ensembles, exploring pared-down, 'primary' musical syntaxes and systems, with particular interests in modality, microtonality, modularity and indeterminacy. Major works include *Schilderkonst* (mixed ensemble, 2003-4), *TIDE* (ensemble and electronics, 2007-10), the South London Harmonies series (various ensembles, 2008-11), *Mala punica/Walled Garden* (8 voices and ensemble, 2008-9/2015), *The Freedom of the Earth* (chorus and instruments, 2011), *Three Trios* (piano trio and tapes, 2010-11), *Radical Road* (voices with stones, 2014) and *Primo Libro* (6 voices, 2012-16).

In 2002 he founded EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble with soprano Juliet Fraser, now regarded as one of the world's leading vocal ensembles for new music. As well as maintaining a busy international touring and recording schedule with EXAUDI Vocal Ensemble, he is in great demand as a guest conductor, working regularly with instrumental ensembles and orchestras such as Royal Northern Sinfonia, BBCSSO, London Sinfonietta, musikFabrik, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and L'Instant Donné. He has also worked extensively with amateur musicians, particularly for CoMA (www.coma.org) for whom he is artistic director of the CoMA Partsong Project.

Previously Associate Head of Composition at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London, he took up the post of Associate Professor of Composition at Durham in October 2017.

— www.jamesweeks.org



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