

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



For William, whenever we may find him

by **Anonymous** (age 24) – joint Third Prize

on William Cornysh's *Magnificat*

Given the candid nature of her article, the writer has asked that we share this anonymously.

I never really talk about the music I like. This is mostly because I don't think anyone is that interested, but also because it's hard to explain your genuine and deep love for medieval plainchant to other twenty-somethings without sounding like an aspiring alchemist or, honestly, a bit of a weirdo. I don't mind, though. In a world where everyone seems to be a broadcaster, it's nice to have a little piece of me that is mine alone.

As an undergraduate, these personal listening utopias fast become a lifeline. When overwhelmed with the pressure to do more, more, more until exhausted from trying to be everything at once, I find my phone and dial up the escape pod. The volume slides higher until I'm cradled in a surreal surround sound of glorious choral textures, performed just for me in locations from Tottenham Hale escalators to my rickety student bathroom. My favourite destination is the neglected *Magnificat* of William Cornysh.

So little is known about the composer that we're not even sure which William Cornysh, Elder (c. 1430 - 1502) or Younger (1465 - 1523) wrote it. I like it this way. Contemporary artists are a story unfolding before us, well-known artists a story already written. Both seem impossible to untangle from our listening ('Should We Cancel Wagner/Beethoven 250/Other White Man?' is a circular debate I know well), but not here. The music is just music to me - and what unbelievable music it is.

In the bleak, blank space that follows another panic attack, I carefully unfold each of the vocal lines as if listening for the first time. Each of the six movements opens, reassuringly, dependably, with a unison chant. From here I tread the soaring harmonies and watch, enthralled, as the impossible ornamentation is tamed into legato lines by the sheer skill of the performers. I savour the two-part, four-part, six-part, two-part again, the glowing brilliance of Cornysh's sweet treble lines. Cornysh has constructed a world unusually wide for the period (three octaves and a fifth), which combines with the otherworldly sounds of musical conventions older than our own, to create a liminal space, a not-quite-reality for attendees to reset and regroup. Like my musical taste, I rarely speak about anxiety or my frequent panic attacks, and I don't resent them either. To have this space to recover is another of the many things I am grateful for.

Diagnosed or not, the world has been held in the same collective intake of breath since last March. I'm used to keeping an eye on the mental health of friends but worries for my parents and younger cousins stand as a new addition to my permanent kit bag of concern. The NHS were kind to me but, under-resourced and over-stretched, they will not be able to reach everyone.

What would we say to William, if we met him now? His is a world away from our hyperconnectivity, before peace and quiet became marketable commodities. And yet parallels exist: having lived through Europe's most devastating plague, William reminds us that pandemics end, grief can be survived, and this is okay. In some ways I suspend my modernity to listen to this music, but I also bring a little of the medieval back with me. While the destinations of my musical mini-breaks are my secret, I know I'm not alone in taking them. We have all been caught unaware by the song that lifts us out of where we were, just for a moment, before normality weighs back in.

I remind myself: breathe, it will all be okay. The *Magnificat*, over five hundred years old, carries on.

Anonymous