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Magnificat

The Magnificat, also known as the Song of Mary, or the Canticle of Mary (Luke I: 46–55), forms part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church, sung at Vespers, or in the Eastern Orthodox churches during morning services. Traditionally in the Anglican Church the Magnificat is the first canticle, the second being the Nunc dimittis. Its name is the first word of the text ‘Magnificat anima mea Dominum’ (‘My soul doth magnify the Lord’) – the Virgin Mary’s joyful response to the revelation that she is to be the mother of God’s Son. Hundreds of composers have set this text in concise form, but others, including J.S. Bach, Mendelssohn and Penderecki, have chosen a more extended structure.

CD 1

Josquin des Prez (c.1440–1521) is commonly known as Josquin. Born in Northern France, he would become one of the greatest Renaissance composers. Martin Luther admired his music, describing him as ‘master of the notes, which must do as he wishes; other composers must do as the notes wish.’ The expressive quality of Josquin’s music contrasts with the more abstract character typical of medieval music. The Magnificat quarti toni recorded here has been confidently ascribed to Josquin.

The Franco-Flemish Pierre de la Rue (c.1460–1518) enjoyed a long association with the Habsburg-Burgundian musical chapel. He was born in Tournai, but the details of the rest of his life and career as a singer and composer remain obscured. His style, favouring canonic writing, is quite close to Josquin’s, many works having been misattributed. He set the Magnificat on each of the eight traditional psalm tones.

Nicholas Gombert (c.1495–c.1560), another Franco-Flemish composer, was a major figure of the Renaissance period. He was employed as a singer – and possibly a composer – in the court chapel of Emperor Charles V. In 1540 he was convicted of sexual contact with a boy and sentenced to hard labour in the galleys but, according to one source, Charles V was so moved by his Magnificat settings that he granted him an early pardon. The first of his eight Magnificats, an intricate setting of striking individuality, is recorded here. Gombert’s use of double counterpoint anticipates Bach’s fondness for this device.

Netherlands-born Adrian Willaert (c.1490–1562) was maestro di cappella of St Mark’s Venice from 1527 until his death. Composers from all corners of Europe came to study with him. It has been suggested that it was he who first conceived the idea of antiphonal effects. If so, the appointment of this Northern European, steeped in the Franco-Flemish tradition of vocal polyphony, would have a profound effect upon the history of Venetian music.

The Flemish Jacobus Vaet (1529–1567) sang in the chapel choir of Charles V from 1550 then became kapellmeister to Maximilian II. He composed nearly eight motets, nine masses and a cycle of eight Magnificats. He was particularly attracted to parody and imitation techniques.

CD 2

William Mundy (c.1528–c.1591) was head chorister of Westminster Abbey, before being appointed Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1564. His richly scored Magnificat is one of his earliest surviving works.

The music of Robert Fayrfax (1464–1521), who became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1497, influenced later composers including Taverner and Tallis. Fayrfax enjoyed great esteem in own time, i. e. during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Later in life he was associated with St Albans Abbey. Fayrfax’s economical style illustrates the contemporary trend away from a more florid expression.

Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625) was the outstanding composer of English church music from the generation after William Byrd. He became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal and was appointed organist of Westminster Abbey two years before his early death. The Magnificat from the Second Service is more elaborate than the equivalent in his Short Service, distinguished by the textural variety typical of his finest works.

Born in St. David’s in Wales, Thomas Tomkins (1572–1656) studied with William Byrd before serving as Master of the Choir at Worcester Cathedral for 50 years. The posthumous collection *Musica Deo Sacra* (1668) includes his five settings of the morning and evening canticles.

Robert Parsons (1535–1572) became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1563, but he died prematurely from drowning in the River Trent. Of the small surviving quantity of his music, the richly textured Magnificat shows his fondness for canon and a heightened awareness of the dramatic potential of the concluding section of a relatively extended piece.

In just over ten years Thomas Tallis (c.1505–1585) progressed from organist of a Benedictine priory to a Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal. Living through the reigns of four monarchs, he had to skilfully manage his creative output during a turbulent period. He is now ranked among the very greatest English composers. The Magnificat from his ‘Short’ or ‘Dorian’ Service is one of the settings recorded here.

CD 3

Girolamo Cavazzoni (c.1515–c.1580 – very approximately) was one of the foremost Italian organists of his time. It is known that he worked in Venice and Mantua, but most of his biographical details are speculative. He published two collections of organ pieces which also include several settings of the Magnificat. His innovative approach involves imitation, while in the setting recorded here the decoration of each verse creates an overall effect resembling a miniature set of variations.

Claudio Merulo (1533–1604) was an outstanding organist, widely considered the finest of his day, and a prolific composer of keyboard works, though he also composed ten masses, 100 motets and 90 madrigals. He served as an organist at St. Mark's for about 27 years, but his departure in 1584 – leaving behind well-paid employment and a good reputation – is unexplained.

From the latter half of the 19th century onwards, the great revival of interest in early music has led to the elevation in status of many composers, above all that of Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). His *Vespers of 1610* (full title *Vespro della Beata Vergine* – Vespers of the Blessed Virgin) is now recognised as a masterpiece of 17th-century music. The Magnificat setting, with a separate movement for each verse, is typical of Monteverdi's extrovert, quasi-operatic style.

The Bolognese composer Adriano Banchieri (1569–1634) became a monk at the age of 19. Also a theorist, organist and poet, he is best known for his 12 'madrigal comedies' and for founding the *Accademia del Floridi*.

Born in Cremona, Costanzo Porta (1529–1601) wrote a great quantity of music for Vespers, in which he shows polyphonic virtuosity uncommon in sacred music of that time. His Magnificat alternates Gregorian chant and polyphony but, unusually, ends with Gregorian versicle.

Born in Asti, Giovanni Battista Fasolo (c.1598–c.1680) became known for his organ manual and later was employed as maestro di cappella to the Archbishop of Monreale. Little is known of his life and many of his compositions are only attributions. Of his eight Magnificat settings on the respective tones, *Sexti toni* is recorded here.

CD 4

Born near Brescia, Luca Marenzio (1553/4–1599) is most admired for his vast number of madrigals (500 in total), which were especially popular in his own day and very influential. He also composed masses, motets and *madrigali spirituali*.

Francesco Cavalli (1602–1672) was born at Crema in the Lombardy region. A disciple of Monteverdi, he was appointed maestro di cappella of St Mark's Venice in 1668. He was the leading opera composer – he wrote about 40 – at a time when this was a relatively new genre. His music was largely forgotten until a late-20th-century revival. His eight-part Magnificat, included in the *Musiche Sacrae* published in 1656, is representative of the Venetian polychoral style.

Born in Rome, where he worked for more than half of his career, Orazio Benevoli or Benevolo (1605–1672) eventually became maestro di cappella at the Vatican. He composed polychoral works for large forces – including the Magnificat scored for 16 vocal parts.

Giacomo Antonio Perti (1661–1756) spent 60 years as maestro di cappella of S. Petronio in his native Bologna. As well as many operas, oratorios and secular cantatas, he composed 12 Magnificat settings. His contemporary, the Bolognese aristocrat Pirro Capacelli Albergati (1663–1735) was a dilettante violinist and composer and a distinguished and popular citizen. He studied with Perti and befriended Corelli.

The little-known Amante Franzoni (born ?1575, flourished 1605–30) was employed by the Gonzagas at Mantua. The Magnificat recorded here is from his *Vespers for the Feast of Santa Barbara*.

CD 5

Born near Bergamo, Giovanni Legrenzi (1626–1690) settled in Venice around 1670. He was enormously influential in the development of Italian Baroque style, Vivaldi being one of his students. Though best known for his instrumental sonatas, he composed in most genres. His Magnificat is from his *Vespers, Op.1*.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525–1594) spent most of his career in Rome. In music of that period audibility of text was paramount, elaboration being avoided in favour of clarity, balance and moderation. Many composers of much later periods have been influenced by Palestrina's dispassionate style. The richness of his Magnificat *sexti toni* derives from the predominance of the lower voices.

Born in Luzzara, Maurizio Cazzati (c.1620–1678) was employed as music director of various Italian cities before settling in Bologna as maestro di cappella at San Petronio. The Magnificat recorded here was included in his *Salmi e messa, Op.1*.

Giovanni Gabrieli (c.1556–1612), nephew of Andrea Gabrieli, would become an influential teacher of many emerging composers, while his own music maximised the spatial possibilities of St. Mark's Venice. The 1615 collection of *Sacrae Symphoniae* includes three splendid Magnificat settings of which the version a14 is recorded here.

Born in Padua, Giovanni Battista Bassani (c.1650–1716) held successive positions as maestro di cappella and was also celebrated as a violinist. He composed operas, instrumental music and liturgical works. The Magnificat recorded here forms part of *Armonici Entusiasmi di Davide, Op.9*, a collection published in 1690.

CD 6

16th-century Spanish composers wrote some outstanding Magnificat settings. Born in Seville, Cristóbal de Morales (1500–1553) worked at the Vatican for ten years, but thereafter his difficult character proved to be an obstacle to sustained employment. His 18 Magnificat settings appeared in two volumes (Venice – 1542 and 1545) and soon became the most admired in Europe.

Joan Baptista Cabanilles (1644–1712) was born near Valencia, where he would maintain the position of cathedral organist for 45 years. In his day he was considered to be the greatest of Spanish Baroque composers. Only ten of his sacred choral works have survived, including the Magnificat a12, itself found incomplete.

Renaissance music by Portuguese composers was discovered belatedly. Manuel Cardoso (c.1566–1650) spent his life attached to a Carmelite order at Lisbon. His style, a blend of old and new, is well represented by the characterful Magnificat recorded here.

The Spanish composer Sebastián de Vivanco (c.1551–1622) was ordained as a priest in 1581 and later employed as maestro di capella in Lérida, Segovia, then Salamanca. His rich, eight-part Magnificat octavi toni (one of his 18 settings) belongs in the first of three substantial collections of his works, dating from 1607.

Francesco Durante (1684–1755) was unusual for a Neapolitan of his time in avoiding opera composition in favour of church music. He was internationally renowned as a teacher.

His Magnificat (once attributed to Pergolesi) is believed to date from the 1740s. Of the two versions, the one in four parts is performed here.

CD 7

Probably born in Basel, Ludwig Senfl (c.1486–1542/3) studied with Heinrich Isaac and became music director to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. Composing in the Franco-Flemish style, he eventually (1527) gained a position in the Hofkapelle of Duke William IV of Bavaria. While his secular songs anticipate future developments, his sacred music is more backward-looking.

Hieronymus Praetorius (1560–1629) – unrelated to the better-known Michael Praetorius – spent most of his life in Hamburg as an organist, while composing mostly in the Venetian polychoral style – some of the earliest music of this kind to be published in North Germany. He wrote nine or ten settings of the Magnificat.

Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) is regarded as the most important German composer before J. S. Bach. Influenced by Giovanni Gabrieli and Monteverdi, he is credited with bringing the Italian style into German music. Of his four surviving settings of the Magnificat, only one (the 'Sacred Concerto' recorded here) is in Latin. The rich texture of the double chorus and soloists is enhanced with instrumental accompaniment including trombones.

The music of Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729) has been revived, thanks to the efforts of Reinhard Goebel and other musician-scholars. Born near Weissenfels, he composed large quantities of orchestral, chamber and liturgical music. His joyful and thoroughly engaging Magnificat in A exposes the injustice of his previous neglect.

Johann Kuhnau (1660–1772) was Bach's predecessor at St. Thomas's Leipzig. He is best remembered for his keyboard music, but he also composed sacred works, most of them lost.

His grandly scored Magnificat in C is his largest-scale surviving work, concluding with an additional Gloria section.

CD 8

Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725), father of the more celebrated Domenico, was born in Sicily. His *Vespro della Beata Vergine* is a collection of psalm settings, a Magnificat and a hymn. Like Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*, it does not constitute a unified composition, but rather a compilation of pieces from different periods of the composer's life.

Contemporary with Lully, Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643–1704) was extremely prolific in most genres, especially sacred music. He composed up to a dozen settings of the Magnificat, the concise example recorded here, with its characteristic rhythmic vitality, probably dating from 1670.

Little is known of the life of the French composer Jean-Nicolas Geoffroy (1633–1694). He worked as an organist at St. Nicolas du Chardonner in Paris and, from 1590, at Perpignan Cathedral. His Magnificat is typical of the practice of antiphonal writing with an organ replacing the second choral group, while he also harmonises the plainchant passages.

Johann Philipp Krieger (1649–1725), elder brother of Johann Krieger, was a prodigious keyboard player and composer of a vast output including more than 2,000 cantatas. The scoring of his resplendent Magnificat includes trumpets, timpani and strings.

The Bohemian Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679–1745) played the double bass in the Dresden Court Orchestra from 1710. His compositions were long neglected until Smetana, in the mid-19th century, and several musicians in the latter half of the 20th century, rediscovered his often bold and characterful music. The typically individual Magnificat in D (1725) in three movements is one of his numerous settings which enhanced the Vesper services in Dresden. Zelenka added the splendid trumpet and timpani parts subsequently.

The Danish/German Dietrich Buxtehude (1637/9–1707) is associated with a famous story of Bach, whose admiration prompted him to travel 250 miles on foot to hear his organ-playing. His music also profoundly influenced Bach. The Magnificat recorded here has been dubiously attributed to Buxtehude.

CD 9

The list of compositions by Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) includes several hundred concertos, 90 sonatas and more than 20 operas. Most of his church music dates from the second decade of the 18th century onwards. His nine-movement Magnificat in G minor is numbered RV 610, but there are alternative versions with extra parts for solo voices – written for specific girls at the Ospedale where he worked in Venice.

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) was among the most prolific composers of any period. In his own time he was more famous than Bach or Handel and a major reassessment in the last few decades has justifiably enhanced his status. The typically attractive Magnificat *anima mea* in C, TWV 9:17 is one of a minority of Latin settings which he provided.

CD 10

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) would be the first name on one's lips in connection with the Magnificat. Of the two versions – in E flat (1723), and D (c.1732–5) – the second is the more

commonly performed. The multi-movement structure of this masterpiece allows for a most wonderful variety of scoring and wide expressive range.

Born in Weimar, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788) was the most individual of J. S. Bach's composer-sons. His superb nine-movement Magnificat in D, Wq215, one of the longest of all settings, dates from 1749, but this recording is of the Hamburg revision with added trumpets and timpani.

CD 11

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) composed a substantial amount of church music, most of it for the cathedral of his native Salzburg. His two settings of the Vespers – the *Vesperae solennes de Dominica in C*, K321 and the particularly impressive *Vesperae solennes de Confessore in C*, K339 – date from 1779 and 1780 respectively. K339 was the last liturgical work he wrote for Salzburg. The Magnificat K193 dates from 1774.

In his late teens, when he had already written several symphonies and the first four of his six masses, Franz Schubert (1797–1828) composed his Magnificat in C, D486, a work of delightful freshness and exuberance.

Jewish by birth, Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) converted to Protestantism at an early age. His oratorios *Elijah* and *St Paul* are his two most extended religious compositions, but he also composed more than 30 other sacred works, including a Bach-influenced Magnificat composed when he was 13.

The religious music of Franz Liszt (1811–1886), including the extraordinary, forward-looking *Via Crucis*, the oratorios *Christus* and *St Elisabeth*, and many shorter works, is very neglected. His sensitive setting of the Magnificat – brief, concentrating on the first two lines – concludes Part Two of his *Dante Symphony* (completed 1857).

Though Anton Bruckner (1824–1896) is best-known for his symphonies, his devoutly religious character is most overtly expressed in his three masses, several motets and other fine choral works. His rarely performed, rather Mozartian Magnificat (1852) was composed for St. Florian Monastery, where he was organist for ten years.

The German composer Hugo Distler (1908–1942) was also an organist and teacher. Increasingly ostracised, then persecuted, by the Nazi regime, he eventually committed suicide. His experience as a church musician strongly influenced his compositions. In his Magnificat, a brief section from his *Weihnachtsgeschichte* (Christmas Story), he borrows a melody from the German Mass psalmody.

CD 12

The 20th century saw a proliferation of notable English composers. Following personal tragedy, then the composition of *Hymnus Paradisi* (1938), Herbert Howells (1892–1983) showed a strong bias towards sacred works. This Magnificat is from his so-called St Paul's Service (1951), in which Howells takes account of the St Paul's Cathedral acoustic by writing in an expansive harmonic rhythm.

The music of Irish-born Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) is a regular feature of Anglican Church services. His Magnificat in B flat for double chorus, Op.164 (1918) was dedicated to Hubert Parry; the other setting recorded here (in C major, Op.115) dates from 1909.

Born in Bournemouth, Hubert Parry (1848–1918) composed in most genres and was a fine, broad-minded teacher and prominent academic. His spacious Magnificat in D from his Great Service dates from 1881/2 but remained unpublished for 100 years.

William Walton (1902–1983) never quite lived up to the stunning impact of his earliest works. His music became unfashionable, but nevertheless he continued to produce finely crafted works in many genres, one choral example being his Magnificat of 1974 (from the Chichester Service).

Born in Northampton, Edmund Rubbra (1901–1986) is now a neglected figure. Like many English composers of that time, he avoided progressive trends and became labelled 'old-fashioned'. His arresting Magnificat in A flat, Op.65 is established in the repertoire of many cathedral choirs.

Although of Italian/Jewish ancestry, Gerald Finzi (1901–1956) wrote music of quintessentially English flavour. He was a consistently fine composer for voice/s and a sensitive setter of words. His uplifting Magnificat, Op.36 (1952, orchestrated 1956) is a gem of English choral music.

Born in Wakefield, Kenneth Leighton (1929–1988) is a neglected composer, though his church works are performed less infrequently and he is relatively well represented on CD. His wish to free himself from what he saw as his 'narrowly British' background led to his absorption of some continental influences, including a period of study with Goffredo Petrassi in Rome. His Magnificat (1959, from his Magdalen Service) is typically impressive and satisfying.

In 1977 John Tavener (1944–2013) converted to the Russian Orthodox Church, but subsequently felt the need to explore the musical traditions of other religions. Together with the Nunc dimittis, his Magnificat (including interpolations from the Greek liturgy) was commissioned by Stephen Cleobury and the Choir of King's College Cambridge, and first performed in April 1987.

CD 13

The Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki (born 1933) espoused an uncompromising avant-garde style for many years, before moving away from experimentation in the mid-70s, finally entering a 'neo-Romantic' period. His Magnificat (1973–4) is among the most extended settings of all, a kind of choral symphony in several movements, scored for soloists, choruses and orchestra. The work only just predates what is recognised as the composer's third period stylistically, in which expressive, dramatic and lyrical elements became more dominant. Composed to celebrate the 1200th anniversary of Salzburg Cathedral, the Magnificat includes a passacaglia as its fifth section. The work builds to a powerful climax, but has a calm conclusion.

The composition list of Arvo Pärt (born 1935), the first Estonian composer to have achieved an international reputation – even enjoying cult status – is dominated by religious works. The style which he famously developed in the mid-1970s, which he called 'tintinnabuli', is inspired by the sound of bells and their overtones, and is exemplified in his Magnificat of 1989.

CD 14

John Rutter (born London 1945) is a prolific composer of choral music. In 1981 he formed his own choir, the Cambridge Singers. In his extended Magnificat of 1990, 'a bright Latin-flavoured fiesta' (his own words), he interpolates both the 15th-century English poem *Of a Rose, a Lovely Rose* and the Antiphon at Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary into the closing Gloria section.

In the 1950s the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928–2016) was specially honoured when Sibelius selected him for a scholarship to study in America. His list of works includes a substantial amount of choral music. Apparently, his compelling Magnificat of 1979 was the first setting of this text ever written in his country.

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Cover: ?Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), and others, *Virgin of the Rocks* (1495–1508, London version) [detail]
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