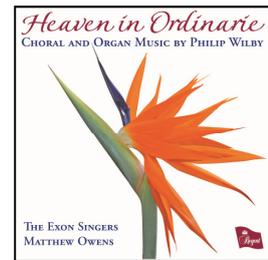


# CD Reviews: Heaven in Ordinarie

Choral and organ music by Philip Wilby

The Exon Singers ; Matthew Owens ; Jeffrey Makinson

Regent Records REGCD 338



## Gramophone December 2011

**A** versatile composer turns his hand to Anglican repertoire. Philip Wilby's versatility as a composer has encompassed all forms of instrumental and vocal music but he's particularly renowned for his brass band repertoire and choral works. His success lies in his ability to write attractive melodic lines which combine to produce rich chordal textures, plus harmony which has a luminous quality worthy of Herbert Howells. Also, his intelligent and sensitive response to familiar texts from the Anglican liturgy will gladden the hearts and minds of church musicians at both cathedral and parish church level.

Like Howells and Britten, Wilby is skilled at composing to order for specific buildings and choirs. With the *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* for St Paul's Cathedral the result is the most adventurous composition on this disc, with the chanting vocal phrases combined with organ arabesques in the manner of MacMillan, Messaien and Tippett. Elsewhere, the harmonic language has an unashamed warmth, especially in the *Two Choral Prayers* and *Two Wedding Anthems*, while the *Ave Maria* is as beautiful a setting as you'll hear from other composers.

In contrast, Wilby's organ music has spiky dissonances, typical of the neo-classical style of the 1960s and '70s. The predominantly heavy mid-19th-century sound of the Wells Cathedral organ isn't ideal for this repertoire but organist Jeffrey Makinson plays with superb brilliance, both as soloist and accompanist.

**The committed, expressive singing of the Exon Singers under the inspired direction of Matthew Owens will delight listeners as surely it must have pleased the composer. A rewarding and enjoyable CD, both for church musicians and for lovers of the Anglican repertoire.**

*Christopher Nickol*

## Choir and Organ Magazine February 2012

**B**etter known as an accomplished composer for brass bands, Philip Wilby's music for choir and organ is deserving of greater attention, as this more than agreeable quarter-century-spanning survey demonstrates. Showcasing the composer's signature gifts for directness, rhythmic vitality and harmonies of almost luxurious beauty, and placing him securely within the Anglican tradition, this long-overdue survey boasts **superb performances from all concerned – the Exon Singers perfectly blended by Matthew Owens** – and no fewer than 16 first recordings. The demanding *Prelude, Toccata & Fugue* for organ is despatched..... with virtuosic ease.

*Michael Quinn*

## Church Music Quarterly December 2011

**I**f you enjoy hearing the Exon Singers' vespers service broadcast each summer from Buckfast Abbey, you will not be disappointed with this CD. Philip Wilby's music is placed within the context of the Anglican evening service, with canticles written for St Paul's Cathedral, responses, a psalm setting and anthems. That apart, four other anthems are included, two of them for weddings, and two organ voluntaries including a Recessional on the hymn tune *Michael* of Herbert Howells, who encouraged Wilby to take up composition. Thank God that he did, because Wilby knows how to fill large stone spaces with splashes of sonic colour from singers and organ alike. **Both the tender and the exciting are here, expertly performed** and well recorded in Wells Cathedral. **This is a wonderful celebration from an excellent choir**, recorded (unlike their annual summer fixture) in deepest winter !

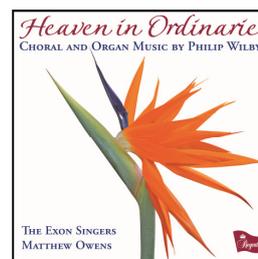
*Stuart Robinson*

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## Musicweb International Classical Reviews

April 2012

Philip Wilby was born in Pontefract in West Yorkshire. From 1972 he taught in the Music Department at Leeds University, eventually becoming Professor in 2002. I believe he has now retired from the university and moved to Bristol where his wife, an Anglican priest, is Precentor of the Cathedral. Active as a composer for over forty years, you may have heard of him in connection with his compositions for brass band and wind ensemble but it's clear from his list of compositions published by Chester Novello that he has composed in a wide variety of genres, not the least of which is church music.

The present disc is the result of a year-long association during 2009 with Matthew Owens and his fine choir, the Exon Singers. I like the way this programme has been put together. It would have been easy to assemble a loosely-related collection of short vocal pieces, perhaps breaking them up with a few organ items. Instead, whoever has put together this programme – most likely Matthew Owens and Wilby himself – has had the excellent idea of starting the programme by gathering together several pieces to form an Evensong. I think this is an inspired idea and it works very well in practice on disc – the music was all performed live at an Evensong, broadcast on BBC Radio 3 from Buckfast Abbey in Devon, on 29 July 2009. In particular, this approach shows that Philip Wilby is an excellent composer of music for the liturgy, rather than one who writes music that can be sung in church – there *is* a difference!

As I say, the Evensong works extremely well as a sequence on disc. It opens with a fine setting of the collect for 29 July, observed in the Anglican Church as the Feast of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, Companions of Our Lord. This setting was written specially for that broadcast evensong. The Psalm setting is a tremendous, exciting piece which is sung fervently by the choir. The independent organ part is superb and contributes, in particular, to the

thrilling end of the piece. I was particularly intrigued by the 'Mag' and 'Nunc' for treble voices – here the ladies of the Exon Singers. This setting is unique in my experience in combining elements of aleatoric writing (the organ part?) with choral writing that is heavily based on plainsong. Towards the end of the Evensong sequence we hear a very beautiful and prayerful eight-part *Ave Maria*. I should imagine it is challenging to sing but **it's expertly rendered** here. To conclude there's a spectacular organ voluntary on Herbert Howells's great hymn tune *Michael* ('All my hope on God is founded'). The tune is cunningly camouflaged until it proudly bursts through near the end (2:28). The piece is played with panache by Jeffrey Makinson and the Wells Cathedral organ is recorded with magnificent realism.

The rest of the programme, though composed of miscellaneous short works, is no less satisfying. *A Prayer for St Thomas* is impressive and includes a beautiful soprano solo, which is very well taken by Katie Lyscom, a choir member. The *Prayer* for men's voices is a setting of words by George Herbert from which is extracted the phrase that gives the CD its title.

From the notes I infer that Philip Wilby graced the weddings of each of his two daughters with a specially composed anthem. If so, what lovely wedding gifts they must have made. *Breathe on me, Breath of God* starts easefully, including another felicitous soprano solo (Ali Darragh another excellent soloist from within the choir), and it builds to a more fervent tone in the third stanza before achieving a quiet close. *Thou didst delight my eyes* is an eloquent setting of words by Robert Bridges – also set by Gerald Finzi. I was reminded a bit of Herbert Howells in this piece and though that may be fanciful on my part I believe that Howells gave Philip Wilby early encouragement to compose.

The programme ends with a short organ triptych, originally composed for Simon Lindley, the long-serving Organist of Leeds Parish Church. Here the music is entrusted to Jeffrey Makinson, whose

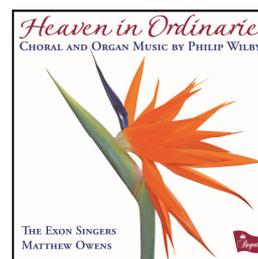
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playing throughout the disc is first rate. The Toccata that concludes this work, which has an overall Christmas theme, is entitled 'Et incarnatus est'. It's a scintillating piece and in putting the Wells organ well and truly through its paces Jeffrey Makinson brings this programme of Philip Wilby's music to a resounding conclusion

In November 2011 Matthew Owens stood down as conductor of the Exon Singers, a post he'd held since 1997. I don't know if there are any more recordings 'in the can' or whether this is his last disc with them. If it is then he's gone out on a high note. **The music on this disc is of a uniformly high quality and so are the performances. The Exon Singers sing with the precision, refinement and attention to detail that one has come to expect from them over the years. The commitment of all the performers to the music seems beyond question** and I'm sure Philip Wilby is highly delighted with the results. Quite a number of members of the choir are called upon as soloists, especially tenor Ashley Turnell, and all impress.

In his lively and interesting booklet note the composer writes that "working with and for the church and its music has been a constant thread in my creative life since I joined my local church choir at the age of 11." If I hadn't read that statement I think I might have guessed at it just from listening to the music for Wilby composes very naturally for the church. His music seems thoroughly steeped in the Anglican traditions but by no means fettered by it. Indeed, like all the best church music composers, his music enhances, renews and expands that tradition. **There's some fine music on this disc and it's hard to imagine it receiving better performances.**

*John Quinn*

A disc of fine music by Philip Wilby and it's hard to imagine it receiving better performances.