



Tallis, James and Music for Pleasure

Liz Thomson

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*So the Tallis Scholars' recording of Thomas Tallis's 40-part motet *Spem in alium*, written around 1570, has hit the top spot on the UK's Official Classical Singles Chart (a pretty meaningless listing) thanks to its unlikely association with *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Should we laugh or cry? Is it depressing, or a cause for celebration?*

One thing's for sure, it gives a whole new meaning to the phrase *Music for Pleasure* which (as older readers will surely recall) was the name of a budget-price record label (we're talking vinyl and 33 RPM here of course) set up in the 1960s by EMI with publisher Paul Hamlyn.

Tallis, who composed for four monarchs - Henry VIII and his progeny, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, largely steering clear of religious controversy - seems, on the face of it, an unlikely fixture in the "Playroom" iPod of EL James' bestseller. In a quote that cries out for editing, the author said: "I am delighted to have introduced so many of my readers to this amazing 16th century piece of music, it is absolutely wonderful and the recording from the Tallis Scholars is particularly special. A deserved number one!!"

Who introduced her to it, I wonder? And what would poor old Tallis have made of her choice?

Percy Grainger would have made more sense - the Australian composer whose life story was depicted in the biopic *Passion* was an enthusiastic sado-masochist, engaging almost exclusively with Nordic women. Peter Warlock, in addition to being given to naked motorcycle riding and black magic, composed dirty limericks and had an interest in flagellation.

In our own time, the singer-songwriter whose lyrics have always been littered with libidinous references is Leonard Cohen, whom my late friend and mentor, the *New York Times* critic Robert Shelton, used to refer to as "a cunning linguist". The song "Hallelujah", to which Cohen apparently wrote up to 80 verses and which appears on his album *Various Positions*, includes the lines "She tied you to a kitchen chair/She broke your throne/She cut your hair/And from your lips she drew the Hallelujah." But he's too classy and clever to be associated with Madame James. (Amusingly, some talent-show product released "Hallelujah" into the Christmas charts a few years back...)

As to poor old Tallis, as an impecunious musician, he'd probably be delighted at the royalties earned by the Tallis Scholars, whose Director, Peter Phillips, ranks *Spem* "alongside the best works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci and confirms Tallis as England's greatest composer. It's on my iPod!" But not, one imagines, in "the Playroom".

And now we're apparently into music for pleasuring, will we have a whole series of themed albums speeding up the Classic FM chart?

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