

O Light from Light

(*O nata lux*)

by

Thomas Tallis

SATB with Organ Accompaniment

Christmastide; Candlemas; Epiphany; Transfiguration; Lent

Many include *O nata lux* by Thomas Tallis (c1505–1585) among the finest of Tudor anthems, and I agree. It is haunting, ravishing, numinous. What is its key, we wonder. Is it g minor (B-flats) or G major (B-naturals)? If minor, is its mode Aeolian (E-flats) or Dorian (E-naturals)? And then in measure 6, our ear winces as E-flat and E-natural occur simultaneously! Is the dominant key D-major (C-sharps) or D-minor (C-naturals)? And then in measure 23 C-sharp and C-natural occur simultaneously, and we wince again.

The concluding eight measures (then repeated) commence in what seems to be the evocative Phrygian mode—rather like *The Third Tune* by Tallis, known in many hymnals as the music for "I heard the voice of Jesus say," and made famous in the orchestral *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Then the final two measures bring a straightforward cadence: from the dominant, D-major, to the tonic, G-major (F sharps). All might have been satisfactorily concluded in this way. But in the first of those final two measures Tallis retains a Phrygian F-natural in the tenor that first clashes against the sopranos' simultaneous G and then contradicts the sopranos' simultaneous F-sharp, and he retains a Phrygian E-flat in the tenor that clashes against the basses' simultaneous D.

At these points, known as "cross relations," attention to the anthem's text reveals that the harmonic discords accompany the words *redemptor* (redeemer), *perditis* (the lost), and *corporis* (Christ's body). By means of musical dissonance Tallis paints the suffering implied by each of these cardinal words of redemptive theology.

The anthem is filled with cross rhythms and cross accents as well as cross relations, giving the music a fluidity uncommon in homophonic chordal structure.

I have long been saddened that *O nata lux* is simply too demanding for parish choirs in which I have sung. Cross rhythms and cross accents are the first difficulty. Clarifying the cross relations are a second. These difficulties are compounded by the anthem's setting for five-part choir, SATTB. Many parish choirs can ill afford to split their tenor section. A *cappella* tuning of Tallis's rich and close harmonies is a daunting prospect. And then there's the Latin.

With this arrangement I have hoped to make this deeply affecting anthem more widely available to worship services. I have adapted the five vocal parts to SATB, and have assigned to an organ accompaniment Tallis's five-part harmonies in their fullness.

Tallis took his text for *O nata lux* from an anonymous hymn of the 10th century. The English translation here is mine. The setting preserves cross relations, cross rhythms, and cross accents of the original, and I hope that they may become a challenge for parish choirs that might earlier have found them an impossibility.

Albert Blackwell
February 10, 2012

O Light from Light
(O nata lux)

*O nata lux de lumine,
Jesu redemptor saeculi,
dignare clemens supplicum
laudes preces que sumere.
Qui carne quondam contegi
dignatus es pro perditis.
Nos membra confer effici,
tui beati corporis.*

O Light from Light, resplendent birth,
Jesus redeemer of the earth,
in mercy grant us this reprieve:
our prayers and praises to receive.
Thou who in flesh didst once appear
to set souls free from sin and fear:
gather us all, O Lord we plea,
in thy blest Body, one with thee.

O Light from Light

(*O nata lux*)

10th century Latin hymn
tr. Albert Blackwell

Thomas Tallis (c1505–1585)
arr. Albert Blackwell

Soprano

O Light from Light, re - splen - dent birth, Je - sus re - deem - er of
O na - ta lux de lu - mi - ne, Je - su re - demp - tor sea -

Alto

O Light from Light, re - splen - dent birth, Je - sus re - deem - er
O na - ta lux de lu - mi - ne, Je - su re - demp - tor

Tenor

O Light from Light, re - splen - dent birth, Je - sus re - deem - er
O na - ta lux de lu - mi - ne, Je - su re - demp - tor

Bass

O Light from Light, re - splen - dent birth, Je - sus re - deem - er
O na - ta lux de lu - mi - ne, Je - su re - demp - tor

Organ

7

S

the earth, in mer - cy grant us this re - prieve: our
cu - li, dig - nar - e cle - mens sup - pli - cum lau -

A

of the earth, in mer - cy grant us this re - prieve:
sea - cu - li, dig - nar - e cle - mens sup - pli - cum

T

of the earth, in mer - cy grant us this re - prieve:
sea - cu - li, dig - nar - e cle - mens sup - pli - cum

B

of the earth, in mer - cy grant us this re - prieve:
sea - cu - li, dig - nar - e cle - mens sup - pli - cum

7

13

S
— prayers and prais - es to re - ceive. Thou who in flesh
- des pre - ces que su - me - re. Qui car - ne quond -

A
our prayers and prais - es to re - ceive. Thou who in flesh didst
lau - des pre - ces qui su - me - re. Qui car - ne quond - dam

T
8
our prayers and prais - es to re - ceive. Thou who in flesh didst
lau - des pre - ces qui su - me - re. Qui car - ne quond - dam

B
our prayers and prais - es to re - ceive. Thou who in flesh didst
lau - des pre - ces qui sum - me - re. Qui car - ne quond - dam

19

S
didst once ap - pear to set souls free from sin and fear:
dam con - te - gi di - gna - tus es pro per - di - tis.

A
— once ap - pear to set souls free from sin and fear:
— con - te - gi di - gna - tus es pro per - di - tis.

T
8
— once ap - pear to set souls free from sin and fear:
— con - te - gi di - gna - tus es pro per - di - tis.

B
once ap - pear to set souls free from sin and fear:
con - te - gi di - gna - tus es pro per - di - tis.

19

25

S
ga - ther us all, O Lord we plea,
Nos mem - bra con - fer ef - fi - ci,

A
ga - ther us all, O Lord we plea,
Nos mem - bra con - fer ef - fi - ci,

T
8
ga - ther us all, O Lord we plea,
Nos mem - bra con - fer ef - fi - ci,

B
ga - ther us all, O Lord we plea,
Nos mem - bra con - fer ef - fi - ci,

29

S
in thy blest Bo - dy, one with thee.
tu - i be - a - ti cor - po - ris.

A
in thy blest Bo - dy, one with thee.
tu - i be - a - ti cor - po - ris

T
8
in thy blest Bo - dy, one with thee.
tu - i be - a - ti cor - po - ris.

B
in thy blest Bo - dy, one with thee.
tu - i be - a - ti cor - po - ris.