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How does Spanish polyphony sound?

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A history of performance practice using recordings through the Twentieth Century

Introduction

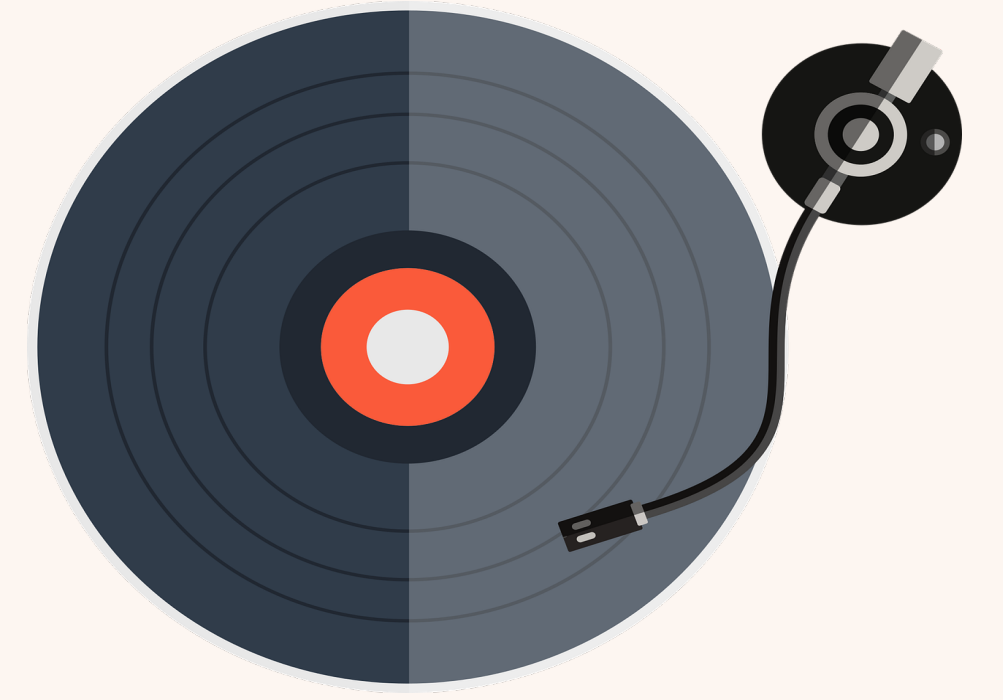
The revival of the Sixteenth-century Spanish polyphony is linked with the English choral tradition in cathedrals and universities.

In the 1960's, professional ensembles were born from the English choral institutions and they started recording Spanish polyphony in the same way that they perform English or Flemish polyphony.

The use of broadcasting and recordings spread a performance style which became dominant in the 80's.

Key words

- ❖ *Sacred Spanish polyphony*
- ❖ *History of performance*
- ❖ *Discology*
- ❖ *Recordings*



Two predominant performing styles

Oxbridge sound:

Characterised by a perfect blend, slow *tempi*, *non-vibrato* sound and a *capella* performances. It was born around choral tradition in the most important universities in England, specifically the choir of King's College, Cambridge and Magdalen College, Oxford. They were the seed that sprouted many professional ensembles from the 1970's, among others, The Tallis Scholars and The Sixteen.

Continental sound:

On the contrary, many choirs from Europe as well as England perform with a coloured sound, almost granny sound. Most have introduced instruments into their performances. Bruno Turner conducting Pro Cantione Antiqua, in England; *Hespèrion XX* and *La capilla real de Catalunya*, with Jordi Savall; or *Collegium Vocale*, *Ghent*, conducting by Phillippe Herreweghe are choirs with a continental sound that sung sacred Spanish polyphony.

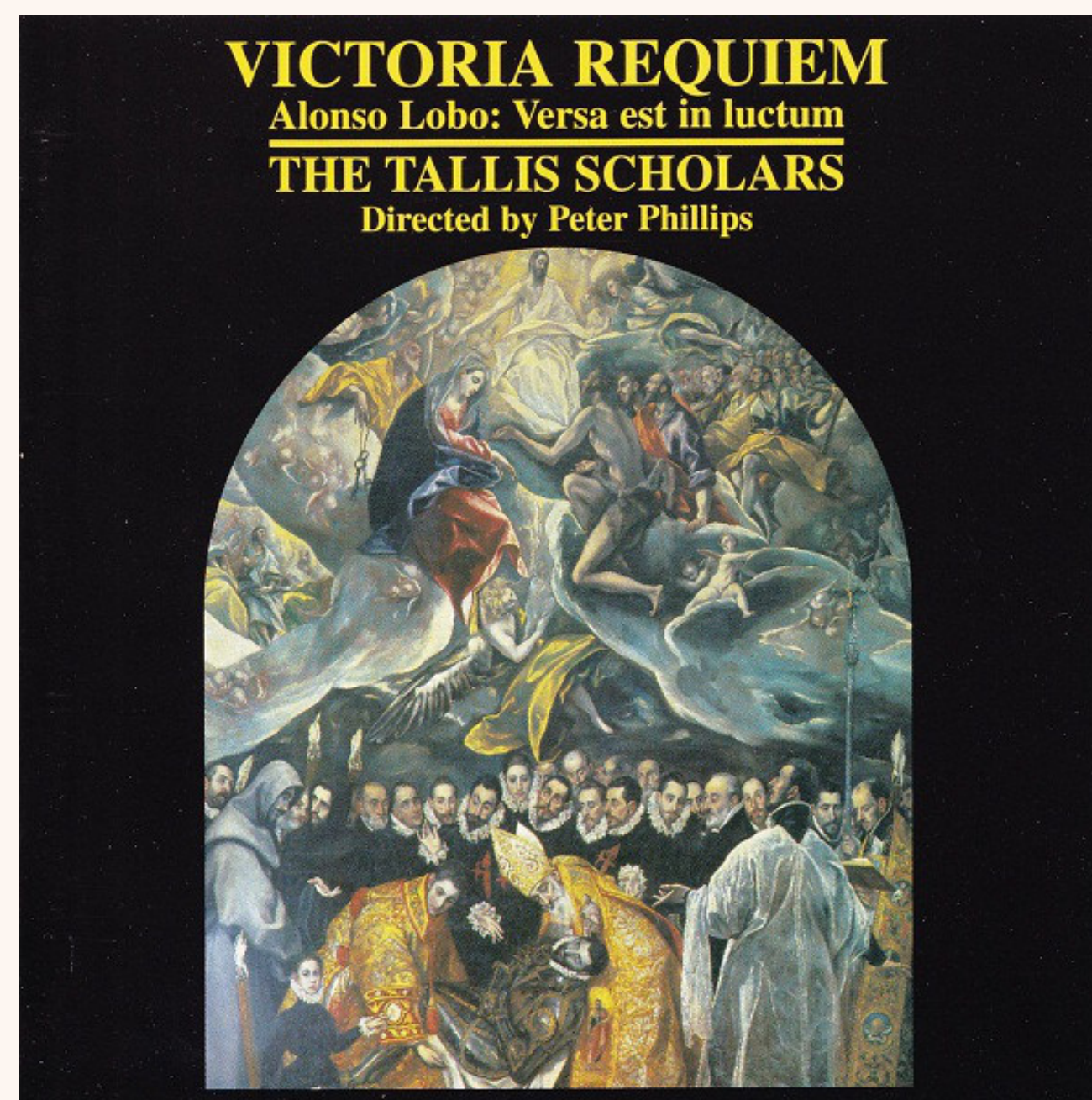
From the first recordings before 1950's, to the great LP's in the 1960's and beyond



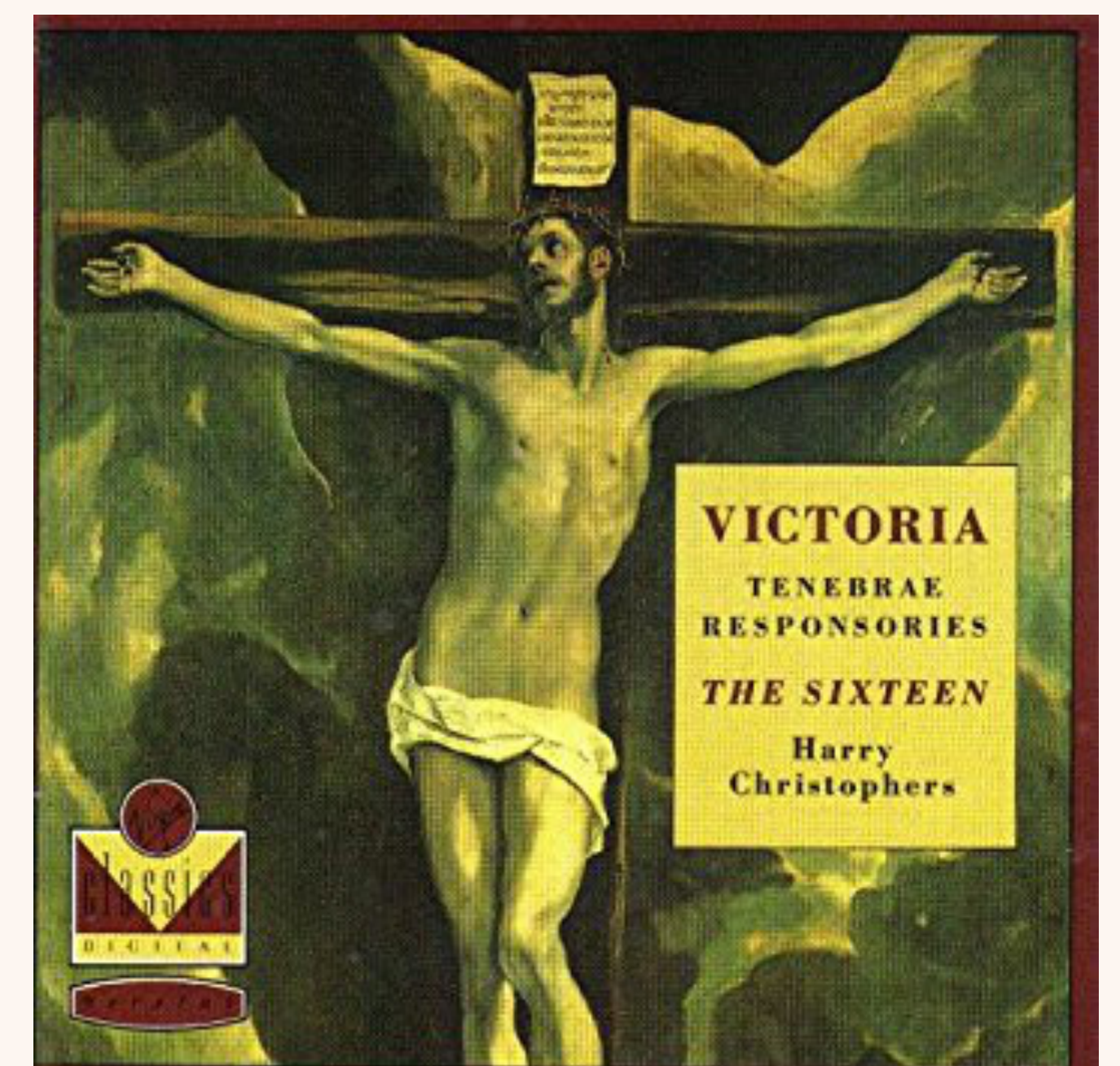
1954 *Missa pro defunctis Magnificat IV Toni*, by T. L. de Victoria. Choir of the Choral Accademy, Lecco, Italy. Camillucci, conductor. VOX PL8930. It's one of the first LP with music of Victoria. Alec Robertson thought that the recording allows us to clearly hear only the top and bottom parts and rather confused sounds in between.



1959 *Officium defunctorum*, by T. L. de Victoria. Netherlands Chamber Choir. Felix de Nobel, conductor. Columbia 33CX1641. From the English point of view, Alec Robertson wrote that the choir sung in a very expressive way, but he missed the choristers or *falsetti* (male soprano), used in the English choral tradition.

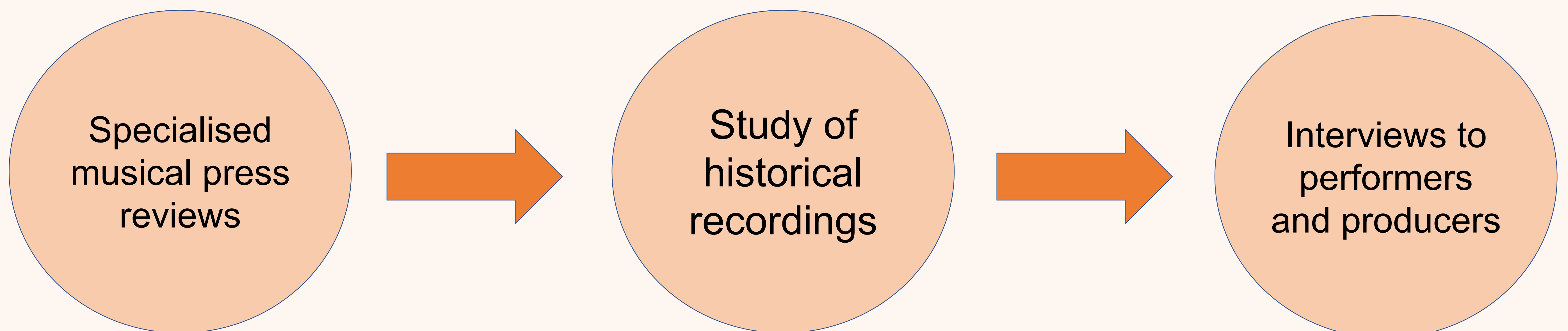


1987 *Officium defunctorum*, by T. L. de Victoria. The Tallis Scholars. Peter Phillips, conductor. Gimell, 1585T-12. Recorded the same year that the Choir of Westminster cathedral released an album with the same music, the recording by The Tallis Scholars was considered a cooler sound but superbly blended. Recorded with two voices per part, and 'boyish' women on the treble parts. (Jerome Roche)



1991. *Tenebrae responsories*, by T. L. de Victoria. The Sixteen. Harry Christophers, conductor. Virgin Classics VC 791440-2. In conductor's words, "Their music [Spanish composers] is mirrored in architecture: Spanish cathedrals are dripping with gold, and you feel that these composers have their heart more in the music than their Italian contemporaries. The penitential music of Victoria is particularly heart-rending."

Methodology



Discussion

- ❖ The choral institutions and foundations in England were the breeding ground for professional ensembles with a characteristic sound and a renowned quality in the 1980's.
- ❖ The recordings made in the 1950's and 1960's set the "typical" performing style when Spanish polyphony is performed.
- ❖ What features are more often used when choirs perform sacred Spanish music?
- ❖ Who is the responsible for the performing style and the sound: the conductor, the ensemble/singers or the producer?