



STRIVING FOR THE PERFECT SOUND

The Tallis Scholars return to Perth to remind us all how close to the angels music can take an audience.

Peter Phillips has an extraordinary talent. For 43 years, he has had a special sound rattling around in his head that finds its outward expression in the heart-stoppingly beautiful music produced by his choral group, Tallis Scholars.

For Peter, who founded the group in 1973 when he was an organ scholar at St John's College, Oxford, the polyphony of Renaissance vocal music is ever-present and very precise. He knows exactly the sound he wants to hear from his singers.

"The sound is so distinctive that over the years, yes, I suppose it's fair enough to describe it as a brand, it certainly has been widely imitated," he told *Medical Forum* from Lisbon where he had been holidaying before embarking on a tour of China, later to be followed by a national tour of Australia including Perth.

The challenges of keeping that sound pure over the decades has been no mean feat as singers come and go but, surprisingly, maintaining that sound has been getting easier as the Tallis Scholars discography gets bigger.

"The thing that never changes is the ideal sound that I have in my head. That's what we're all working towards. It was there in 1973 and it hasn't changed. What's changed is our ability to approximate and hit that sound more often than not when we're standing on a concert stage, battling, as we do so often, with jetlag," Peter said.

And when it comes to talent renewal, well, that's getting easier too.

"Young people who are coming into the group have grown up with our sound in their minds. Earlier on I had to indicate to people what was in my mind which was hard because I can't sing very well. If I could sing I'd be singing in the group but I can't. I even get asked to stop humming!"

"Singers these days have very good technique and training so you know immediately if they will make the grade. I have just had a 22-year-old countertenor do his first job for us and I have never heard a countertenor of any age sing as well as he did. It is heartening and exciting."

Peter says he never auditions singers but rather accepts them on trusted recommendations and once they are in the fold the music rules.

"That's one of the interesting things about Renaissance music – all parts are equal in the polyphonic web."

While much of the Tallis Scholars' repertoire is sacred music, Peter says it is not a religious group.

"We make our living in concert halls as much as churches. The one thing that binds us together is an appreciation of how good this music is. Part of its wonder is its ability to take people out of their busy lives to where things are much calmer and more relaxed. If you want to call that god, call it god."

As the mastermind of the ensemble, there is the challenge to keep the sound fresh and that has led to some collaboration with contemporary composers over the past few years.

"I should point out the repertoire is 95% Renaissance – 15 years ago it was 100% and even now our sound is Renaissance. When we have collaborated with modern composers, we have asked them for a sound that will suit the Tallis Scholars and fit in with our Renaissance program."

"That's interesting in itself but the sound world doesn't change much. The audience still gets to journey through different pieces of music with the same basic instrument, because I see the group as an instrument, like an organ or a harpsicord, where the sound is fixed."

American Composer Eric Whitacre took up such a challenge in 2013.

"I know it was a challenge for him, I was there!" Peter said. "It took a couple of goes but Eric took the trouble to conduct the ensemble so he could get the sound 'under his fingers' and write the music knowingly, which he did. I was really pleased about that."

In Perth, the Tallis Scholars will perform in the tranquil airiness of St Mary's Cathedral on November 8 in a program that includes Tallis, Pärt and Tavener. In Tallis's *Spem in Alium*, the Scholars will sing with members of the Perth Chamber Choir trained by Dr Margaret Pride. ●

By Jan Hallam

400 Years of Laughs

Tartuffe – or The Hypocrite and even some versions as The Imposter – is the enduring story of a vagabond, who disguises himself as a priest and ingratiates himself into a wealthy household, caused an uproar when it premiered in 1664, though Louis XIV is said to have loved it. Such was and perhaps still is

the tensions between state and church! Black Swan State Theatre Company is staging this classic satire as its finale to a successful 2016 season and Artistic Director Kate Cherry's swansong before departing the company to become head of National Institute of Drama Art in Sydney. Justin Fleming is responsible for this adaptation of "thumping English

verse" (so says the publicity spiel), so not a drop of wit will be spilt.

Medical Forum readers have a chance to win tickets to this production on Saturday, October 22, at the Heath Ledger Theatre. Email competitions@medicalhub.com.au before October 16.