

Music Listening for Corpus Christi

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This is the tenth of a series of articles on music which we might normally be hearing in worship services at this time. The Feast of Corpus Christi, the Body and Blood of Christ, customarily is observed on the Sunday following Trinity Sunday at Saint Mary's. The origins of this feast day can be traced back to mid thirteenth-century Belgium and, by the fifteenth century, it had become a major Catholic observance with processions and other pageantry. It is one of the very few Catholic commemorations which retains its medieval sequence, *Lauda Sion*, attributed to Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274) and found at 320 in *The Hymnal 1982*. Notable choral settings of other parts of the minor proper include William Byrd's introit, *Cibavit eos* (He fed them), published in his *Gradualia I* of 1605. Out of the wealth of choral and organ music reflecting on the Blessed Sacrament, I have chosen a few pieces to commend to your attention. The first is a singular early organ work, *Le Banquet Céleste* (1928), by the twentieth-century French composer Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen also completed a massive eighteen-movement organ work entitled *Le livre du Saint-Sacrement* in 1985, but that latter work would require more than an entire article of its own to discuss! However, the choral selections which follow continue with a motet by Messiaen: his *O sacrum convivium*. Four additional motets are then offered: pieces by Thomas Tallis, Colin Mawby, myself (David Hurd), and Maurice Duruflé. Of the texts represented by these pieces, *Ave verum corpus*, *O sacrum convivium* and *Tantum ergo* in particular have been set so many times, so distinctively, and by so many composers, that one could devote much time to comparing the different settings of the same texts, but that too would be a focus for several different articles. Instead, therefore, I offer one example each of several texts, all of which contemplate the body and blood of Christ and the Eucharist.

Organ Prelude

Le Banquet Céleste—Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

Olivier Messiaen is widely regarded as one of the most original voices among twentieth century composers for the organ. Born in Avignon, son of the poetess Cécile Sauvage, he was a student of Marcel Dupré and Paul Dukas at the Paris Conservatory where he became professor of musical analysis, philosophy, and aesthetics in 1942. His legendary tenure as titular organist of Trinité, Paris, began in 1931. The brilliant light and vivid colors of this magnificent church proved a defining stimulus for Messiaen's musical imagination for sixty years. Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste* (The Celestial Banquet) is one of his early organ compositions, dating from 1928, and based upon a movement of an unfinished orchestral work. It bears the quotation "*Celui qui mange ma chair et boit mon sang demeure en moi et moi en lui.*" (Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in them.) John 6:56. Its slow movement and reflective mood are suggestive of the timeless expanse of the heavenly meal.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5w6k4DQeb9s>

Five Motets

O Sacrum Convivium—Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

The text *O sacrum convivium* is traditionally attributed to the great theologian Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274). These words found a home in the Roman liturgical cycle as the antiphon for *Magnificat* at second Vespers of Corpus Christi but the text is very much at home in any Eucharistic celebration outside of Lent. It has been set repeatedly in Latin, as well as in vernacular translations, by distinguished composers of every generation. Olivier Messiaen's tenure as titular organist of Trinité, Paris, began in 1931, six years before he composed *O Sacrum convivium*. This four-voice motet has the rhythmic flexibility of chant and, although dwelling in the orbit of F-sharp major, it is formed in Messiaen's expansive harmonic vocabulary, pushing beyond standard tonal conventions in expressing the text.

O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur recolitur memoria passionis ejus; mens impletur gratia, et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur. Alleluia.

O Sacred Communion, in which the body of Christ is consumed: the memory of his passion is renewed: the mind is filled with grace and a pledge is given of the glory to come. Alleluia.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0_tgr7Tkc

Verily, verily I say unto you—Thomas Tallis (c.1505–1585)

Verily, verily I say unto you, a setting of John 6:53-56 for four voices, is by Thomas Tallis, one of the most foundational composers of English church music. Tallis' long life and musical career included service under four English monarchs—Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I—with all the shifts in the church's liturgical and institutional life which these different reigns occasioned. Along with William Byrd (c.1505–1585), Tallis enjoyed an exclusive license to print and publish music which was granted by Elizabeth I in 1575. He was one of the first musicians to compose for the new Anglican rites of the mid-sixteenth century. The preferred style of the time tended toward less florid liturgical music and favored clear text declamation. Tallis' *Verily, verily* models this restraint and desire for verbal clarity.

Verily, verily I say unto you: except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KaQ_DRvHqr8

Ave verum corpus—Colin Mawby (b.1936)

The words of Colin Mawby's setting of the fourteenth-century Eucharistic hymn *Ave verum corpus* are attributed to Pope Innocent VI (d.1362). This text has been sung consistently for centuries in various Eucharistic contexts as a meditation on the presence of Christ in the sacrament, and the relationship between suffering and redemption. It has been set to music by leading composers of sacred music since the late medieval period and up to the present time. Colin Mawby began his musical education in the choir school of Westminster Cathedral where he served as assistant to George Malcolm from age twelve. His immersion in plainchant and polyphony from an early age was supplemented by further study with distinguished teachers at the Royal College of Music. He was named Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral in 1961. His considerable contributions as a composer, especially of music for the English Catholic liturgy, have been widely recognized. His richly expressive *Ave verum corpus* for eight voice choir and organ, dating from 1995, is one of his best-known works.

Ave verum Corpus, natum de Maria Virgine: Vere passum immolatum in cruce pro homine: Cuius latus perforatum, unda fluxit sanguine: Esto nobis praegustatum in mortis examine. O dulcis, O pie, O Jesu Fili Mariae, miserere mei. Amen.

Hail, true body, born of the Virgin Mary, you truly suffered, sacrificed on the cross for mankind. Your side was pierced through, from which the blood flowed. Be to us a foretaste, at the agony of death. O sweet, O loving, O Jesus, Son of Mary, have mercy upon me. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUBh1egGQvY>

Anima Christi—David Hurd (b.1950)

My setting of *Anima Christi* (Soul of Christ) was composed for the institution of the Very Reverend Leighton J. Lee as Dean and Rector of the Cathedral of the Redeemer, Calgary, Alberta, on 7 February 2016. The text of this motet is an English translation by Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801–1890) of a fourteenth-century Latin prayer of unknown authorship. The musical setting is homophonic in texture, flexibly voiced from four to seven parts, and affords clear declamation and expression of the text. Although the texture remains consistent, a notable change of key marks the point in the prayer where the focus shifts from earthly concerns to the hope of being united with Christ in eternal life.

Soul of Christ, be my sanctification;
Body of Christ, be my salvation;
Blood of Christ, fill all my veins;
Water of Christ's side, wash out my stains;

Passion of Christ, my comfort be;
O good Jesus, listen to me;
In Thy wounds I fain would hide;
Ne'er to be parted from Thy side;
Guard me, should the foe assail me;
Call me when my life shall fail me;
Bid me come to Thee above,
With Thy saints to sing Thy love,
World without end.
Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLxGu3holts>

Tantum ergo—Maurice Duruflé (1902–1986)

The French composer and organist Maurice Duruflé was steeped in liturgical chant from his childhood as a chorister at the Rouen Cathedral choir School. He first entered the Paris Conservatory in 1920, becoming Professor of Harmony in 1943, a position he retained for nearly thirty years. He is remembered for his lifelong association with the stunningly beautiful church of St. Étienne-du-Mont, Paris, where he was named titular organist in 1929. The fourth of his *Quatre motets sur des thèmes Grégoriens* (1960) is his setting of *Tantum ergo*, the final two stanzas of the Eucharistic Hymn *Pange lingua*, a text attributed to Saint Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274). In his setting, Duruflé quotes the familiar *Pange lingua* chant melody in the soprano voice and provides elegant harmonic enhancement from three other voices. The music for both stanzas is identical, although the second stanza is followed by an *Amen*.

*Tantum ergo sacramentum
veneremur cernui;
et antiquum documentum
novo cedat ritui,
praestet fides supplementum
sensuum defectui.*

*Genitori, genitoque
laus et jubilatio,
salus, honor, virtus quoque
sit et benedictio,
procedenti ab utroque
compar sit laudatio. Amen.*

Therefore we, before him bending,
this great sacrament revere;
types and shadows have their ending,

for the newer rite is here;
faith, our outward sense befriending,
makes our inward vision clear.

Glory let us give and blessing
to the Father and the Son,
honor, thanks and praise addressing,
while eternal ages run;
ever too his love confessing
who from both with both is One. Amen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wi-ku9BNwco>