

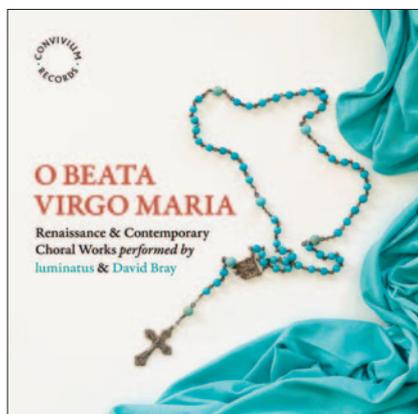
# Echoes of the Past, Voices of the Future

**M**ost musicians have their Damascene moment early on, whether through an encounter with a great recording or memorable lessons with an inspirational teacher. David Bray waited until his late twenties for his own awakening to the world of choral music. And when it came, it changed his life forever. While still a professional trumpeter, Bray was approached to represent the UK at a European choral event. “I had no experience of choral music at all,” he admits. “I think somebody dropped out!” It turned out to be one of the most important moments in his musical development. “I can remember sitting in this hall and a French choir came on singing the “Hodie Christus natus est” from Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols* – I thought it was amazing. Why had I never heard anything like this?”

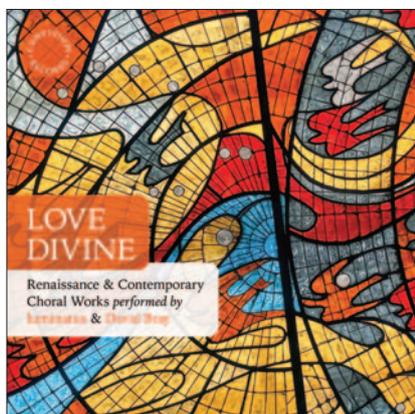
It led to a decision to take singing lessons, and an engagement with choirs such as Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge under Richard Marlow, as well as an

encounter with the Latvian choir *Ave Sol*, with subsequent trips to the Baltic states. Today, David Bray is a passionate advocate for choral music and has prizes in international choral competitions to his name. And since 2017, he has been the musical director of the professional chamber choir *Luminatus*, a powerhouse of unknown repertoire. Its recent recordings for Convivium Records have bridged the worlds of Renaissance and contemporary music to startling and revealing effect – in pairing these seemingly disparate styles, Bray and his musicians are making a deliberate statement about the enduring power of choral music across the centuries, and offering a window onto its constantly developing styles.

The album *O Beata Virgo Maria*, released in 2024, features neglected masses and motets by mid-to-late 16th-century European composers, such as Francisco Guerrero and Tiburtio Massaino, followed by a collection of new works by an all-female line-up of



**O Beata Virgo Maria** (CR090)  
Release Date: 2 February 2024



**Love Divine: Renaissance & Contemporary Choral Works** (CR102)  
Release Date: 7 February 2025

All photos: Mike Cooter



Melissa Dunphy, Kerensa Briggs and Cecilia McDowell. The very moment that ancient spills over into modern is, suggests Bray, entirely seamless and wholly magical. “For me, there’s no tension between the two,” he says, pointing to the modal quality of Melissa Dunphy’s *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*, the piece that follows on from a six-part setting of *O Beata Virgo Maria* by Massaino. “Dunphy is clearly not trying to be a Renaissance composer, but her canticles have elements which echo that style. I take a lot of care over the order of pieces within the sequence.”

Bray has continued this successful programming technique in *Love Divine*, released in early 2025. It begins with more Renaissance works, this time by Philippe de Monte, Cipriano de Rore and Ippolito Baccusi, before, almost imperceptibly, we enter the radiant



universe of contemporary music by, once again, a roster of contemporary female composers: Agneta Sköld, Becky McGlade and Eleanor Daley.

Bray's music selections reflect his natural curiosity, his choices of Renaissance repertoire often coming from research and, as he puts it, ferreting around in libraries. "I like testing new boundaries and looking at new things," he says, "and I'm interested in the idea of recording music that's perhaps been underrepresented or slightly marginalised. But it's not just obscure music for the sake of it," he insists. "People are perhaps vaguely familiar with Francisco Guerrero, but his *Missa Iste sanctus* is really an amazing piece of music – it's very high-quality." Guerrero's mass is typical of the Spanish composer's highly expressive style – there's a polyphonic complexity to the music, but at the same

time, a clarity that resonates with listeners. And it's this clarity of line that *Luminatus* convey with singing of impeccable accuracy and blend. "The same is true of the mass by Phillippe de Monte, which is an incredible piece of music," adds Bray.

Guerrero and many of the other Renaissance names on *Luminatus*' albums will be unfamiliar. For British audiences, choral music of the 16th century is dominated by William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, Orlando Gibbons and a few select others. Bray, however, is determined to shed light on overlooked yet significant composers from that time. "If you're from Belgium, Philippe de Monte may be very familiar to you. The links with William Byrd are perhaps obvious. I like the idea of choosing repertoire that's not obscure just for the sake of it, but music that's truly fantastic

but just hasn't been widely performed," he explains.

His choices of contemporary music spring from a mixture of research and chance encounters at concerts. "I heard some of Becky McGlade's music performed at a European festival a couple of years ago," says Bray. "I was really taken with it, and so I contacted her, and we had a really interesting and fruitful correspondence." The Cornwall-based McGlade suggested recording two pieces, including the album's title track, "Love Divine" and "I Saw a New Heaven", both richly scored for SATB in the vein of John Rutter, with whispers of Herbert Howells and John Tavener that add a delicious piquancy.

Eleanor Daley's music proves another of *Love Divine*'s highlights. "O Ye Who Taste That Love Is Sweet" is a magical, instantly appealing piece in the



David Bray

early 20th-century Anglican tradition. “Daley is a church organist and a teacher in Canada,” reveals Bray. “She’s written quite a lot of choral music, but because of the context that she’s writing it for, which is for her church in Toronto, it’s always just very singable and very accessible. And very beautiful.”

The UK is blessed with choirs that specialise in medieval and Renaissance music, and there are ensembles known for their performances of new works. But there are very few choirs that bring these two worlds into such direct dialogue. And so, in 2017, Bray founded Luminatus as a way of bridging this gap. There is, of course, no shortage of fine choirs in London and the south east, but things look different outside the capital. “There wasn’t really anything like Luminatus in the East Midlands,” says Bray, “so me and a couple of friends cooked up this idea of a specialist professional chamber choir.” Bray was determined to use local talent rather than rely on London-based singers. “We started off by doing auditions, and I put people into quartets and got them to sing as a group rather than individually.” It was a way, he says, of finding out whether singers are of the right quality and, just as importantly, whether they might work within an ensemble. “There are various criteria we’re looking for. One is obviously the ability to read music very accurately. The other is the quality of the voice.

But there are two others which are equally important. The first is being able

to blend with other people, by adjusting and adapting vocal sound. “If you can’t do that, then it doesn’t work when you sing the Renaissance repertoire,” says Bray. “I also like working with people who don’t have too big an ego,” he says of his final and no-less-important criterion. “Occasionally you can get to the situation where you’re working with somebody who’s more interested in themselves, in their own ideas, and it’s a bit disruptive. It’s a small group of people, and we need to work collaboratively.”

Bray’s plans for the future include a new album which he hopes to record in August. “I’m not totally decided on the repertoire yet. There is so much to choose from. We are probably going to be doing some more works by Ippolito

Baccusi. Again, it’s really interesting but totally forgotten about. We’ll perhaps record some more Massiano as well as some Francesco Stivori. And there is some fantastic Phillipe de Monte to look at. On the contemporary side, I’m looking at doing some pieces by Cheryl Frances Hoad, Kerry Andrew and possibly a young New Zealand composer called Rosa Elliott.”

Away from these inspired repertoire choices, Bray harbours ambitions for the ensemble that he hopes will give his talented singers a much wider currency. “Ideally, I’d like Luminatus to become more well known and a bit more mainstream,” says Bray. “The danger is always that we’re a bit of a sort of strange backwater up in the East Midlands, but I’d like the repertoire that we do to be more recognised and well known, and for us to broaden the range of places we perform in as well.”

Oliver Condy is the former editor of BBC Music Magazine, a post he held for 17 years. His debut book, *Symphonies of the Soul: Classical Music to Cure Any Ailment*, was released in November 2021 with Octopus Books. He is also a semi-professional organist, having previously given recitals in Bach’s churches across Germany. He is currently Head of classical copy at Apple Music & Apple Music Classical.



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