

## GREGORIO ALLEGRI

Born in 1582 in Rome; died there 7 February 1652

### *Miserere mei, Deus* (“*Have Mercy Upon Me*”) for Double Chorus (ca. 1638)

Gregorio Allegri is remembered almost entirely for a single composition, but that work became the stuff of legend and mystery. Allegri was born in Rome in 1582 and became a chorister at the age of nine at the city’s San Luigi dei Francesi, where he was committed to the priesthood and studied music with the church’s respected choirmaster, Giovanni Maria Nanino, with such efficacy that he was appointed a singer and composer at the cathedral in Fermo in 1607. After serving tenures in Tivoli and as *maestro di cappella* at Santo Spirito in Sassia in Rome, he was appointed to the Papal Choir as an alto in December 1629; he became its *maestro di cappella* in 1650. He died in Rome on February 7, 1652. Allegri, as required by his employment at the Vatican, composed his Masses and many motets in a conservative idiom still under the sway of Palestrina, but he also wrote several pieces for string ensemble that are among the earliest works of their kind.

*Tenebrae* — “darkness” — encompasses the most solemn moments of the Christian year. The name is applied to the combined Roman Catholic services of Matins and Lauds, which bracket daybreak, on Thursday, Friday and Saturday of Holy Week, during which fifteen candles signifying the ebbing life of Christ are extinguished one-by-one after the singing of the obligatory Psalms. The service closes “*in tenebris.*” For a Matins service of *Tenebrae* in the Sistine Chapel around 1638, Allegri made a setting of Psalm 51 — *Miserere mei, Deus* (“*Have Mercy Upon Me, O God*”) — for double choir (four and five voices) that alternates verses of plainchant and polyphony. Felix Mendelssohn recorded his impressions of the experience when he heard the work performed during his stay in Rome in 1831: “At each verse, a candle is extinguished.... The whole choir intones, *fortissimo*, a new psalm melody.... Then the last candles are put out, the Pope leaves his throne and prostrates himself on his knees before the altar; everyone kneels with him, and says what is called a *Pater noster sub silentio*.... Immediately afterwards, the *Miserere* begins, *pianissimo*. For me, this is the most beautiful moment of the whole ceremony. You can easily imagine what follows, but you could never form any idea of that opening.... During this *Pater noster*, deathly silence reigns throughout the chapel, after which the *Miserere* begins with the singing of a quiet chord of voices, and then the music unfolds in the two choirs. It was this opening, and in particular the very first sound, that made the greatest impression on me. After an hour and a half in which one has heard nothing but unison singing, and almost without modulation, the silence is suddenly broken by a magnificent chord: it is striking, and one feels a deep sense of the power of music.”

So profound was the impression of the *Miserere* (and so great the draw of this unique Roman experience for tourists) that Pope Urban VIII issued an edict forbidding the score to be copied or performed elsewhere upon pain of excommunication. The decree remained in force until the fourteen-year-old Wolfgang Mozart made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1770 to be made a Knight of the Golden Spur by Pope Clement XIV, and there heard Allegri’s *Miserere* and wrote it down from memory. Papa Leopold Mozart informed his wife, in Salzburg, “Wolfgang has copied it down and we would have sent it in this letter, if it were not necessary for us to be there to perform it because the manner of performance contributes more to its effect than the composition itself. Moreover, as it is one of the secrets of Rome, we do not wish to let it fall into the wrong hands.” The “manner of performance” Leopold mentioned concerns the elaborate ornamentation traditionally applied to the *Miserere* that was passed on by rote by the Papal Choir. Mozart’s manuscript is lost so it is unknown if he transcribed the ornamentation, but a copy of his score came into the possession of the English music historian Sir Charles Burney, possibly when they met in Bologna on the Mozarts’ return to Salzburg, and Burney published it in an undecorated version in London the following year. No record of the ornamentation from an authoritative source appeared until a Roman priest named Pietro Alfieri published an edition that included it in 1840. Allegri’s soaring *Miserere* soon entered the canon of Renaissance choral music and remains one of the most frequently performed and recorded items in that repertory.

(*chorus*) *Miserere mei, Deus: secundum magnam misericordiam tua.*

*Have mercy upon me, O God, after Thy great goodness.*

(*chant*) *Et secundum multitudinem miserationum tuarum, dele iniquitatem meam.*

(*chorus*) *Amplius lava me ab iniquitate mea: et a peccato meo munda me.*

*According to the multitude of Thy mercies do away mine offences.*

*Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin.*

*(chant)* Quoniam iniquitatem meam ego cognosco: et peccatum meum contra me est semper.

*(chorus)* Tibi soli peccavi, et malum coram te feci: ut justificeris in sermonibus tuis, et vincas cum judicaris.

*For I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me.*

*Against Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that Thou mightest be justified in Thy saying, and clear when Thou art judged.*

*(chant)* Ecce enim in iniquitatibus conceptus sum: et in peccatis concepit me mater mea.

*(chorus)* Ecce enim veritatem dilexisti: incerta et occulta sapientiae tuae manifestasti mihi.

*Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me.*

*But lo, Thou requirest truth in the inward parts: and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly.*

*(chant)* Asperges me hysopo, et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor.

*(chorus)* Auditui meo dabis gaudium et laetitiam: et exsultabunt ossa humiliata.

*Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

*Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.*

*(chant)* Averte faciem tuam a peccatis meis: et omnes iniquitates meas dele.

*(chorus)* Cor mundum crea in me, Deus: et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis.

*Turn Thy face from my sins: and put out all my misdeeds.*

*Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.*

*(chant)* Ne proicias me a facie tua: et spiritum sanctum tuum ne auferas a me.

*(chorus)* Redde mihi laetitiam salutaris tui: et spiritu principali confirma me.

*Cast me not away from Thy presence: and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.*

*O give me the comfort of Thy help again: and establish me with Thy free Spirit.*

*(chant)* Docebo iniquos vias tuas: et impii ad te convertentur.

*(chorus)* Libera me de sanguinibus, Deus, Deus salutis meae: et exsultabit lingua mea justitiam tuam.

*Then shall I teach Thy ways unto the wicked: and sinners shall be converted unto Thee.*

*Deliver me from blood-guiltiness, O God, Thou that art the God of my health: and my tongue shall sing of Thy righteousness.*

*(chant)* Domine, labia mea aperies: et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam.

*(chorus)* Quoniam si voluisses sacrificium, dedissem utique: holocaustis non delectaberis.

*Thou shalt open my lips, O Lord: and my mouth shall shew Thy praise.*

*For Thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it Thee: but Thou delightest not in burnt-offerings.*

*(chant)* Sacrificium Deo spiritus contribulatus: cor contritum, et humiliatum, Deus, non despicias.

*(chorus)* Benigne fac, Domine, in bona voluntate tua Sion: ut aedificentur muri Ierusalem.

*The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt Thou not despise.*

*O be favorable and gracious unto Sion: build Thou the walls of Jerusalem.*

*(chorus)* Tunc acceptabis sacrificium justitiae, oblationes, et holocausta: tunc imponent super altare tuum vitulos.

*Then shalt Thou be pleased with the sacrifice of righteousness, with the burnt-offerings and oblations: then shall they offer young calves upon Thine altar.*