**Preview: The Spy’s Choirbook**

***Workshop for singers, Saturday 31st January with tutor David Skinner***

One of the most magnificent musical treasures in the British Library is a sumptuously illuminated choirbook given the shelf-mark Royal MS 8.g.vii. It is magnificent for several reasons, not least its beauty and contents, but also its origin, history and ultimate destination. The book was devised and assembled in one of the finest music scriptoriums of all Europe: the workshop of Petrus Alamire. Alamire, aka Peter Imhoff or van den Hove, was not only a brilliant illuminator and music scribe. He was also a noted musician, singer and composer in his own right. As a businessman he adopted the ingenious marketing ploy to change his surname to ‘A-la-mi-re’, referencing the pitch ‘a’ within the hexachord system. Indeed, he often signed his name with musical notation.

There were many sides to Alamire. He was also a merchant, a mining engineer and, most notably, a diplomat and spy. Musicians of Alamire’s popularity and talent were often widely travelled, frequently visiting the various courts of Europe. Such a career was a perfect cover for sensitive political and diplomatic exchanges. A number of letters survive which show that Alamire acted as a spy for Henry VIII against Richard de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk and last member of the House of York, who openly sought claim to the English throne with the support of Louis XII of France. Alamire wrote to Henry VIII in May 1515 to inform him that his musician friends had spied on Pole and, presumably to gain favour and interest, he sent the king an ‘excellent’ composition for five voices, as well as six small part-books, a manicordium ‘cum pedale’ (thought to be a very early example of a clavichord with pedals) and thirteen crumhorns.

It is highly probable that the ‘magnificent parchment manuscript’ sent to Henry VIII in 1516 or 1517 is Royal MS 8.g.vii. The first layer of the book includes works which invoke the desire for childbearing. The first two motets – *Celeste beneficium* by Mouton and *Adiutorium nostrum* by Fevin – were originally composed for Louis XII of France and Anne of Brittany, and here modified for the English royal couple. Unable to produce a male heir, Anne of Brittany died in January 1514 and Louis XII married Henry VIII’s sister, Mary Tudor the following October. However, in less than three months Louis himself died. It seems to make sense that the choirbook was indeed originally prepared for Louis and Anne. Upon Louis’s death Alamire converted the dedication to Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, who similarly were attempting to produce a male heir, so the subject matter of the music was perfect.

The transformation was simple. In *Adiutorium nostrum* the names ‘Anna’, ‘Renate’ (intercessor for those desiring children, sons in particular) and ‘Ludovicus’ (Louis) were changed to ‘Katherina’, ‘Georgi’ (patron saint of England) and ‘Henricus’. Then the first opening of the book was adorned with beautifully executed illustrations of the arms of Henry VIII, with a Garter and motto, supported by a dragon and greyhound, with a red and white Tudor rose as well as a pomegranate (symbol of Catherine of Aragon. A sumptuous, albeit second-hand, royal gift.

***Taken, with permission, from the booklet accompanying the recently-released CD by the Alamire Singers, directed by David Skinner. A noted musicologist and Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, David will be leading our foray into the Spy’s Choirbook on 31st January in The Bishop’s Palace, Hereford. The application form is enclosed.***