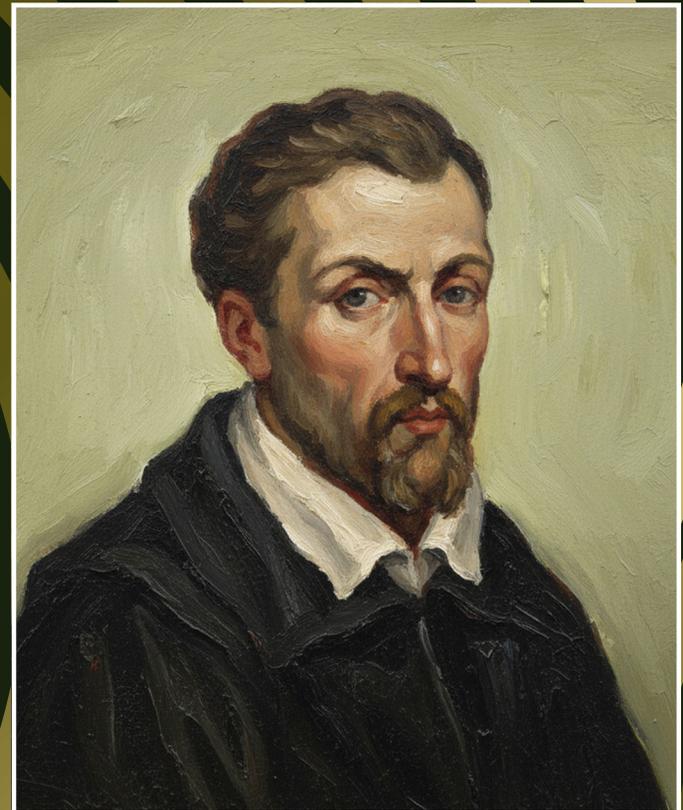


ALLEGRI

Miserere

Pro Cantione Antiqua

Mark BROWN



Grigorio Allegri (1582–1652)

Miserere mei, Deus (12:02)

**Solo quartet: Suzanne Flowers, Catherine Bott, *sopranos* •
James Griffett, *tenor* • Michael George, *bass***

Pro Cantione Antiqua

Mark Brown, conductor

**Michael Chance, Paul Esswood, Robin Tyson, Timothy Penrose, *countertenors*
Joseph Cornwell, Andrew Green, James Griffett, Ian Partridge, *tenors*
Michael George, Stephen Roberts, David Beavan, Adrian Peacock, *basses***

Recorded in 1987

Producer: Mark Brown

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Miserere mei, Deus, a nine-part sacred choral work setting Psalm 51 by **Gregorio Allegri** (1582–1652), was composed around the 1630s, during the reign of Pope Urban VIII's reign, originally for exclusive performance by the Sistine Chapel choir during Holy Week Tenebrae services.

The work reemerged in the late 20th century as a commercial success: it became one of the most popular Renaissance choral works on vinyl LPs and compact disc. At the time of its composition, however, its fame and reputation rested on elaborate, unwritten Renaissance-style ornamentations — particularly a high top C note by a soprano — that were at one time a closely guarded Vatican traditions, not fully captured in early manuscripts.

Allegri himself was a Sistine Chapel singer from 1629 until his death, and crafted the setting in falsobordone style, using simple chordal progressions enhanced by oral embellishments passed among choir members, reflective of a combination of Italian renaissance polyphony which had been on the wane at the time of its writing with the predominant and popular ornamented monodic style of the time.

Legends claim that the Pope banned transcription under threat of excommunication to preserve the work's mystique, with only three authorized copies supposedly existing: for Emperor Leopold I, Portugal's king, and Padre Giovanni Battista Martini. Copies nevertheless circulated in Rome and Europe, including London performances by the 1730s.

In 1770, 14-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart attended Tenebrae services in the Sistine Chapel, where he transcribed the full *Miserere* — including ornaments — from memory after a single hearing, then verifying his work the next day. A letter from Leopold Mozart confirms the precocious Wolfgang's feat — and noted papal awareness without punishment! The score reached musicologist Charles Burney, who published it in London in

1771, spreading it across Europe despite lacking full ornamentation.

In 1831, Felix Mendelssohn transcribed a version a fourth higher, with a scribal error introducing the iconic top C; this variant appeared in the 1880 Grove's Dictionary, influencing modern performances. A 1840 edition by Pietro Alfieri preserved Sistine practices.

Modern renditions of the *Miserere* generally blend original versions with evolutions, diverging from 17th-century authenticity. The present version attempts to combine the composer's original intent with a few modern concessions: two female soprano soloists and ornamentation suitable to the mostly male choral forces.

Audra Fendrick

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

The English vocal group **Pro Cantione Antiqua** was formed in 1968 by **Mark Brown**, **Paul Esswood** and **James Griffett** originally to perform music of the medieval, Renaissance and Baroque eras. Their first concert was at St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield with Brian Brockless conducting but, from an early stage, they were closely associated with conductor and musicologist Bruno Turner. During the last decades of the 20th century, they were the leading British ensemble focusing on *a cappella* vocal music, and were the model for ensembles of the next generation, including The Tallis Scholars, Ex Cathedra, Tenebrae, and many others.

These performers, all distinguished soloists in their own right, have made many recordings for ASV, deutsche harmonia mundi, HMV, Archiv Produktion, Carlton, Das Alte Werk, Ars Musici, hyperion, and other labels. Many of their most critically acclaimed recordings have been issued on CD and in digital format for download and streaming by Alto and Musical Concepts.

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