



WALTHAM TOWER

Waltham Abbey, not far from London, was the richest and last surviving monastery of the Reformation. Records suggest its final dissolution was in 1540, though herein I, Pietro Aron V, will refute and supplant this bogus diminuendo, with an audacious swansong.

Permit a statement of axioms henceforth important. First, such an irrational undertaking, to seek Heavenly intervention in this manner, was fuelled by Thomas Tallis's fabled divine inspiration and set aflame by the tensions of Reformation.¹ Secondly, the indefinite and complex resources required to construct the Tower is, in short, unfathomable and, therefore, inconvenient for explanation at this moment.² Thirdly, each inhabitant of Waltham Tower was named mason, and was either an ex-monk, an ex-villager or a descendent of the two. Outside the village the subject of this monstrous construction was banned from courts and public hearings across the land; a momentous gagging order maintained by successive monarchs. And finally, all members of the Tower studied song and stone daily, experts of both.³

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In 1539 we had silence. Beneath dark, obscure vaults of Waltham Abbey, designs for the Tower began with whispered gatherings of a troubled council; each member a philosopher of divine music, each member born with absolute pitch.⁴ They conspired to build a Goliath apparatus whose final form would utter the unearthly language of Angels; to summon God's direct attention and in return allow a man to hear his maker.⁵ The final Tower would reach where no birds could fly, nor clouds form. Monks and Abbey villagers were sealed from the outside world; like an inverted-siege. Behind a cloak, an uneasy covenant between church and kingdom, and

1 It is said a young Tallis had a visit from two Angels; a dream in which two giants lay on two golden platforms, themselves asleep. The air, slick and thick, was black, though the magnificent, daunting forms cut through. From their slumber the giants intoned with pure, layered pitch, voices which shook Tallis's soul. Awake, he devoted his life to recreating the voice of the Angels.

2 Varied resources include though not limited to food, stone, tools, fabric clothes, metal, medicines, water and timber. Had time and space allowed, a detailed account of the right and reasonable procurement of these elements would be offer to the listener and might include the story of the Winchers, a family of the Tower devoted to an innovative, staggered pulley machine, which scaled the outer shell.

3 Such was their focus of study, the masons held regular philosophy groups to question the essence of song and stone. A popular debate; the meaning of song and stones, the unavoidable material dichotomy; both substance a polar opposite. Was this by design, perhaps a symbol or detail expound during Tallis's visitations? Every now and then a group would conclude the reference meaningless, and then nervously reject their own conclusions citing hasty, toneless thought.

4 The council was led by Thomas Tallis and attended by Pietro Aron, Giuseppe Zarlino and William Byrd; Representatives of England and Rome. Tallis was the last organist at the Abbey prior to closing publicly in 1540.

5 Divine correlations between mathematics, astronomy and music were particularly resonant in the 16th Century.

under watch of Pietro Aron, my ancestor, the build began.

In 1585 we had Unison. Bulking stone ramparts encircled and sat upon what was once Waltham Holy Cross monastery, forming behemoth buttress foundations; unthinkable yet evident. Walls crept upward, having consumed the horizon long since, the base was wider than a village and taller than its width (Although, no mason I have known has been able say with honest heart he's seen our Towers base). It is said, under the direction of Tallis, the air suspended above the Tower grounds would tremble daily, warped with one sung choral tone, steadfast unison in sound, and, if pure, with beating pulse. In fabled chambers, whose form was that of a dappled sphere, stringently sculpted for purpose, would rest the masons, draped, tired. And in the borderlands of sleep they sought hallucinatory states of being, breathing deep, breath drawn from verity itself. They held and filled the Tower's spiralling staircases with unison sound, the tonal centre; tide-like rushes of resonant, precise pitch greeting curious birds atop the Tower.

Our home and Holy mission, the Tower, had vast concentric chambers, wrapped around a central hollow column, measuring many hundred yards across, the Sanctum Harmoniche. Here, the stone was pristine, the walls immaculate. This was not a plain cylindrical volume; the diameter grew and retracted according to Tallis's instructions. This epic inner surface was interrupted by cavernous vents, radiating out from the Tower's core, and at regular sequence. The precision of position and spacing of the vents and their diameters were mechanically fundamental to the mission. Only those few appointed inner-chamber masons possessed the delicate craft and pitch required to work the Sanctum's stone; room at the centre was limited. Outer-chamber communities provided the necessary labour to haul stone and construct living spaces.⁶

In 1605 we had an Octave Split. Into pallid skies the Tower tessellated. Twisting, repeating-itself; buttress and flying buttress braced stone outcrops, abreast the Tower's surface. Air had thinned, birds stopped visiting and the midst of clouds formed common neighbours with the Tower-top masons. Thomas Tallis died, and with him departed a sense of oneness amongst the masons. Two choirs emerged, with differing thought, and to reduce

⁶ Facilities of the Tower were varied and practical; spiral steps, sleeping rooms, refuse chutes, vast pulley systems, and resonant singing chambers layered in cascading shells, often doubling the Tower's width. Stairs were used as notation and singing practice tools: The masons used the levels of the stairs to visually separate and maintain tone. In early Tower history each revolution around the Sanctum Harmoniche would raise the same height but all the steps in between were uneven, as defensive and structural measures. The divisions, heights and arrangement of the steps changed over the generations - as they practiced more, they realised even intervals were easier to make and so singing and tonal separation took on an equal temperament. Among other things, statues, ornament and the class system of the chambers would influence the manner of the singing.

conflict, chores and masons grouped, living in separate areas of the Tower. One group worked the dark details down the ever-damp labyrinth, while the other braved the elements above. Agreed, both parties held the Tower's calibration as sacred, and so differences aside, they carried on. The death of Tallis shook the masons, nonetheless, my ancestors' zeal-wrought minds, aware of progress slumping, consented cannibalisation and slimming of the Tower; self-sourcing stone from shafts superfluities at lower levels. Old sleeping places, singing chambers, burial tombs, seat-like outcrops and decorations were all re-appropriated, oft inappropriately, for the top. With inhumane unease, the tragic significance of stripping the lowest steps remained understated. Still, the Song carried on.

In 1686 we became dissonant. For years, faith diminished among masons, the Tower disbanded, two choirs long since became legion. Remoteness estranged masons amongst the woven pathways and tucked dark chambers, and as hope became gloom, without purpose the Tower was a tomb. The masons chose to live as separate colonies, often several days walk apart, their leaders meeting only under moonless night.⁷ It is said that feral children squatted in squalid chambers far down; chambers which were once proud homes, alive and beautifully calibrated. It was my colony, those who built upon the Tower's top, who began sending missionaries down the bleak shafts in search for lost, trapped or injured persons. No one I knew had ever reached the fabled ground - for after a weeks journey down, all route's had their steps removed, giving way to curved and contained abyss. The only way was up.

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And that is what I, Pietro, can offer of my home's history; nothing more than that which is known by every child, woman and man in these chambers. I winched a block into place in the freezing air, desperately wheezing to breathe. A storm coursed against the Tower, about a days walk down. It raged and boiled too fast to be natural. I suppressed a shiver and focussed on the stonework. Every stone block, for generations, had a previous life, each was unique, a cubic palimpsest, and, for that reason, troublesome. This last piece had one surface smoothed by my ancestors' feet, the other side, in relief, a figure and long necked lute.

The storm clouds surrounded the Tower for six days more, rising, threatening with improbable shapes. At this height, the dark, vacant air weighed on the horizon; the sun had little effect on the sky. Then, at dusk on the sixth day, the menacing clouds constricted rapidly, the storm began. Ravenous howling winds,

⁷ Many of the colonies had forsaken the sun in search for truth in sound. Their decades in the depths of the Tower rendered their eyes not useless, but sensitive and the images incomprehensible

violently smashed ahead of the deeply dark plumes and sharp wisps on approach, the air now filled with black debris; hard to breathe. All of my fellow masons dived below, myself alone on top. The vile, impossible detail which followed has plagued my mind since; murder, murders of crows, lift from skies closer to the earth, thrown sideways against stone, mercilessly thumped and broken, wetting the walls with black and scratching thuds. The air was a hammer, the Tower, an anvil. Awash with light-stopping tar, the Tower's outer surface re-robed in sickly slick liquids. This stretched out for many passings of the sun, while, stood transfixed with gracious numbness, I watched blackness travel down the Tower meeting earth below and spread out across the green and blue rounded surface. Engulfed, the earth let go of the sky, as it too succumbed to the crude oil enveloping the celestial dome above. The sun somehow survived, somehow now a flattened shape, illumed but not luminous, as if inside the dome. Remotely aware of movement, my mind noted the earth had vanished, and the air stilled, though taught, then compressed, like a tide. Pressure built beyond what would crush that subtle apparatus inside your ear. Then the blackness latched around the Tower and collapsed in a cosmic re-structuring. Weeping, I stood transfixed, as the Tower spoke.

At first, meaningless tonal patterns arranged and scattered voluble sounds like a rain of thin shattered glass. High pitch wisps whipped the coarse, forceful winds. With light exhausted, eyes useless, I could somehow hear more clearly - my mind immersed in an a-musical maelström, my nerves unstrung, my body limp. The Tower violently projected a volume of air, vibrating, groaning with catastrophic resonance - a morbid, aural thing - a thing of death and judgement distressed my thoughts as I knew this as, at once, both the most beautiful and the final sensation. Unseen, a caressing force unceremoniously delivered my body into the Sanctum Harmonic's shaft. For seven minutes I fell, unable to scream, as a voice whispered instructions.

*So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And Music shall untune the sky*

John Dryden, 1687, the last verse of
Song for Saint Cecilia's Day