



Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
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School of Creative Arts

Scoil na nEalaíon Cruthaitheach

Assessment cover sheet
Department of Music

JF SF JS SS 1yr/visiting
Mus *Comp* *Tech* JH/TSM
SH
M.Phil.

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[your name] JF SH
Music History I MUU11010 (Andrew Johnstone)
Essay 1 of 2

How Did English Church Music Survive Tudor Religious Reform?

Whereas Martin Luther's German Reformation can be pinpointed to the single date of 31 October 1517, in England the church underwent a series of administrative and doctrinal revolutions that took place over decades if not centuries. During successive Tudor reformations under Henry VIII and his two Protestant heirs Edward VI and Elizabeth I, elaborate liturgical music was repeatedly censured by Humanists, Evangelicals and Puritans. Yet the activity and creativity of English church musicians prevailed, quickly to recover from mid-seventeenth-century deprivations, and to draw renewed strength from the Victorian high church movement. Although nineteenth-century developments were long held to be a revival of lost pre-Reformation glories, current historiography instead views the Anglican choral tradition as one of the most enduring products of the Reformation itself.

The possibility that England's leading mid-Tudor musician, Thomas Tallis, may have lost his job as organist of Dover Priory when that institution was dissolved in 1535 was long thought to be symptomatic of Henry's reforms. If Tallis had to forfeit his livelihood to the king's ruthless winding-up of medieval monasticism, then why not also hundreds if not thousands of his fellow musicians? Yet the reality was by no means so stark. Although from 1536 to 1540 more than 700 religious houses were dissolved, those that could afford to employ singers (and that were not in any case statutorily prohibited from using polyphonic music) numbered a mere twenty-six. Since of that number fourteen abbeys were re-founded as diocesan cathedrals; the choirs lost to Henry's dissolutions cannot have numbered more than twelve. Former monastic revenues, furthermore, were allocated to the new-foundation cathedrals generously to support choirs, consisting chiefly of lay singers, that flourish to this day (Marsh 2007: 52–97).

Though the old Latin liturgies were left untouched by Henry's reforms, his reign nonetheless saw the translation into English of the Bible and of the private prayer manual known as the Primer, and —most significantly from a musical point of view—the introduction of the first order of vernacular public liturgy. In 1544, facing war with France, the king felt that national prayers for victory would be more efficacious if they were not restricted to Latinists, and duly sanctioned an English translation of the Litany, then a processional form of service. A setting for five voices 'according to the notes used in the King's Majesty's Chapel' is known to have been printed in London on 26 June and immediately purchased for the choir of Durham Cathedral. No copies of that seminal publication are now known to exist, and the details of its imprint (documented in the early eighteenth century) mention no composer's name. Yet the music it contained was almost certainly the celebrated Five-Part Litany by Tallis, preserved for posterity in later prints and manuscripts (Johnstone 2016).

Later in 1544, in discussing drafts for further vernacular processions, the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer informed the king that 'in mine opinion, the song that shall be made thereunto would not be full of notes, but, as near as may be, for every syllable a note, so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly' (le Huray 1978: 5–6). Though the drafts came to nothing, Cranmer's words seem to corroborate the Humanist Desiderius Erasmus's objection that

modern church music is so constructed that the congregation cannot hear one distinct word; the choristers themselves do not understand what they are singing, yet according to priests and monks it constitutes the whole of religion: they have so much of it in England that the monks attend to nothing else (Froude 1894: 116).

Given that polyphony had been used only in a small minority of English abbeys, Erasmus's complaints were clearly far-fetched. There is nonetheless abundant evidence of a widespread distrust of elaborate church music during Edward's reign (1547–52): edicts proscribing the traditional repertory of votive antiphons; the ascetic adapted plainchant of John Merbecke's *Book of Common Prayer Noted*; the relentlessly syllabic new genre of the Short Service. But this is not the whole story: as well as showing that the syllabic style was not incompatible with musical subtlety,

Tallis and his shorter-lived contemporary John Sheppard sometimes set the new prayer-book texts on a grand scale, showing too that fugal elements and polychoral effects were not incompatible with verbal clarity (le Huray 1978: 8–9, 22, 198, 205–8).

Queen Mary I's undoing of her half-brother's radical reforms lasted less than six years, yet allowed her composers to indulge in a final flowering of the Henrician style. Following the accession of her half-sister Elizabeth in 1558, the rapid return from continental exile of an influential body of Protestants brought about an inevitable reversion to the English prayer-book and to its music, plain and fancy. To be sure, Puritanism quickly came to view such music as a 'popish abuse', one attack being levelled specifically at the division of cathedral choirs into *decani* and *cantoris* halves which 'toss the psalms in most places like tennis balls' (Fielde 1572: sig. C3v). But such diatribe was to go unheeded: only a few months into her reign, the queen had decreed that all choral foundations were to continue in their endowments, and that in addition to the liturgical requirements of The Book of Common Prayer choirs were permitted to sing anthems 'in the best sort of melody and music that may be conveniently devised' (Elizabeth I 1559: sig. C4r–v). The last of the Tudor monarchs had safely delivered church music into the new age.

925 words

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