

MUSICĀ SĀCRĀ

March 5 Concert Program Notes

For Renaissance Europeans, sacred choral polyphony had long suggested both mystery and certitude, realms unknown and the Guiding Hand that organized them. For composers and congregants in the Elizabethan Era (1558–1603), however, the deepened resources—typically five to eight distinct voices—and clarifying control of mature Continental style may also have evoked a serenity and emotional richness otherwise missing from everyday religious experience. As English composers absorbed the language of Palestrina, Victoria, and Lassus, we can trace its impact successively in the works of Thomas Tallis (c1505–1585), William Byrd (1543–1623), and Orlando Gibbons (1583–1625).

Religious experience itself was certainly made more complicated by the patchwork of changes that Henry VIII (r. 1509–47) set in motion when he assumed control over the church. Henry's motives were personal and political, not spiritual. Yet his efforts to wrest ecclesiastical powers from the Pope echoed a range of reform activities underway elsewhere. Churchmen like Martin Luther and Jean Calvin had produced adherents to Protestantism in the British Isles as well as the Continent, while the dissolution of English monasteries in the late 1530s contributed to a backlash by Catholic adherents there. (During Elizabeth's reign, Rome reacted by sending missionary Jesuits to England even as Puritanism gained ground among its people.) Amid this flurry of competing movements, further unrest arose from burgeoning nationalism; a prosperous but restless aristocracy and merchant class; and the impact of new technologies, e.g., the printing press. Elizabethan church musicians lived in interesting times.

Thomas Tallis became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1543, where he served a series of monarchs ending with Elizabeth I. Since the liturgy of the chapel was in near-constant flux, it proved an excellent training ground for composers. In 1575 Elizabeth granted Tallis and his protégé William Byrd an exclusive license to print and publish music, among the first such patents granted. With much ceremony they dedicated their initial (and only) volume, *Cantiones, quae ab argumento sacrae vocantur* ("Songs which are called sacred on account of their texts"), to the Queen.

Perhaps because it was the 17th year of Elizabeth's reign, each composer contributed 17 Latin motets to the volume. Outstanding among them is Tallis's five-voice *Salvator Mundi*. It employs imitative technique to create a mass of sound that, by repeating and overlapping motives and avoiding textural contrast, builds up a prayerful intensity expressive of the text. For *O Sacrum Convivium*, which celebrates the Eucharist, Tallis uses more clearly articulated points of imitation to provide a sense of joyful composure from beginning to end.

Tallis's colleague Byrd lived well into an era that demanded increasing personal courage and political agility. Like Tallis a committed Catholic, Byrd suffered increasing scrutiny as

the century wore to a close. He and his family were continually cited for “recusancy,” threatened with imprisonment, and required to pay crippling annual fines. (These appear to have been largely forgiven by Elizabeth or others who interceded on Byrd’s behalf, but the antagonisms persisted.) In spite of all that, Byrd chose not only to compose three new Mass settings in the 1590s but also to publish them. They were meant to give small amateur choirs reasonably up-to-date music for private worship in Catholic homes—the only places Catholics could hope to gather without being harassed.

The five-voice Mass, which relies more on imitative counterpoint than its Continental cousins would have done, is still less elaborate than the Latin motets Byrd wrote at this point. (Elizabeth liked Latin and presumably welcomed such motets at the Chapel Royal.) The *Haec Dies* à 6, published in 1591, eschews traditional motet style in favor of vivid, madrigalesque text painting, as does its English-anthem counterpart *Sing Joyfully*, also a late work. In both, professional-level performance standards are implied by the presence of merry 8th-note patterns and dancelike rhythms.

Given the richness of the Renaissance heritage, it may seem surprising that 20th- and 21st-century unaccompanied church music so often relies not upon counterpoint but rather on richly varied declamatory harmonies. Yet this can be seen as the outcome of historical processes underway even in the music of Orlando Gibbons, whose ostensibly polyphonic *O Clap Your Hands* à 8 aims for textual clarity by sacrificing any sustained attempts at contrapuntal activity. Tavener’s *The Lamb* begins with a modally inflected single voice but soon gives way to simple chordal recitation of the text. Paulus’s *Pilgrims’ Hymn* dispenses with an introduction, immediately offering the warmth and security of triadic harmonies that unfold into lush statements à 8.