

PROGRAM NOTES

Today's program explores music from one of the largest and most important extant sources of sacred English polyphony from before the Reformation, the *Peterhouse partbooks*—so called because they are now housed at Peterhouse, the oldest and smallest of the Cambridge colleges. The partbooks, which contain a large collection of Masses, Magnificats, and votive antiphons, seem to have been copied at Magdalen College, Oxford, in the latter years of the reign of Henry VIII, by the professional singer and music scribe Thomas Bull, just before Bull left Oxford to take up a new position in the choir at Canterbury Cathedral.

Bull wrote down, within a very short time, a great quantity of music in plain, carefully checked, and highly legible copies that were evidently intended to be used for liturgical performance, rather than for study or for presentation to a noble as a gift. (Presentation manuscripts normally feature illuminations and other fancy trimmings that added value beyond the musical contents.) He appears to have been commissioned to supply Canterbury Cathedral with a complete repertory of polyphonic music. The monastic foundation at Canterbury was dissolved by Henry VIII in April 1540, one of nearly a dozen great monastic cathedrals dissolved in the years 1539-40. Most were refounded as secular (i.e. non-monastic) institutions which were subject not to an abbot—a member of a religious order—but to a bishop and thence to the king, who had declared himself head of the Church of England. Monks sang mostly plainchant and did not generally attempt virtuosic polyphonic music, but the new foundation cathedrals aspired to more pomp and circumstance and so they needed to hire a choir of professional singers and to recruit and train choirboys. By the late summer of 1540 Canterbury Cathedral had assembled a roster of ten choristers, their master, and twelve vicars—choral or professional singers including Thomas Tallis and Thomas Bull. In addition to singers, the new choral establishment needed to acquire an entire library of polyphonic repertory. This Bull supplied, bringing nearly seventy works with him from Oxford and adding several more to the collection after arriving in Canterbury.

The music Bull copied includes works by the most famous masters of the early 16th century, such as Robert Fayrfax, John Taverner, and Thomas Tallis, and by less-celebrated but nonetheless first-class composers such as Nicholas Ludford and Hugh Aston. Also included are a number of wonderful pieces by musicians whose careers are less well documented and who have been virtually forgotten for the simple reason that so little of their work survives: Richard Pygott, John Mason, Robert Jones, Robert Hunt, and others. Several of these men, like Arthur Chamberlayne, cannot be identified with certainty. Chamberlayne's *Ave gratia plena Maria* is the only known piece ascribed to him, and the only known candidate for identification with the composer is a "Chamberleyne" documented as a chorister at Magdalen College in 1485-6.

The new choral institution at Canterbury would not last long. Henry died in 1547 and the Protestant reformers who came to power upon the accession of his young son, Edward, took a dim view of such popish decorations as professional choirs and the highly sophisticated Latin music they sang. All the elaborate polyphonic music of late medieval English Catholicism became, at best, obsolete; at worst it was viewed as a gaudy ornament to a despicable ritual. Many musical manuscripts were lost and many destroyed, and if a manuscript escaped deliberate destruction by zealots, it might yet be subjected to other indignities:

A great nombre of them whych purchased those superstycyouse mansyons [the former monasteries], reserved of those librarrye boke, some to serve theyr jakes [privies], some to scoure theyr candelstycques, and some to rubbe their bootes. Some they solde to the grossers and sope-sellers, & some they sent over see to the bokebynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full, to the wonderynge of the foren nacyons... I knowe a merchaunt man, whych shall at thys tyme be namelesse, that boughte the contentes of two noble lybraryes for .xl. shyllynges pryce, a shame it is to be spoken. Thys stuffe hath he occupied in the stede of graye paper [wrapping-paper] by the space of more than these .x. yeares, & yet he hath store ynough for as many yeares to come.

The Preface, "Johan Bale to the Reader," *The laboryouse Journey & serche of Johan Leylande for Englandes Antiquitees* (1549)

Very few collections of church music survived the upheaval. The main sources extant from the entire first half of the 16th century are a mere three choirbooks, four sets of partbooks, and one organ manuscript. (Compare this paucity to, for example, the *sixteen* choirbooks owned in 1524 by a single establishment, Magdalen College, Oxford, not one of which survives.) We do not know what happened to Bull's five partbooks (one each for the

standard five parts of early 16th-century English polyphony: treble, mean, contratenor, tenor, and bass) after 1547, but by the 1630s they may have made their way to the library of Peterhouse, where they would survive yet another cataclysm of destruction, that wrought by the Puritans in the 1640s.

Or, rather, most of Bull's five partbooks survived. By the time the books were described and catalogued for the first time in the middle of the 19th century, the tenor book had disappeared, along with several pages of the treble. Now, of the 72 pieces in the set, 39 are transmitted uniquely, while another dozen or so are incomplete in their other sources. The result is that some fifty pieces of music—a significant portion of what survives from pre-Reformation England—now lack their tenor, and some of these (including the works by Fayrfax, Aston, and Ludford on this program) are also missing all or part of their treble. We are able to sing the Peterhouse music nowadays thanks to the extraordinarily skilled recomposition of the missing parts by the English musicologist Nick Sandon. (Sandon also pieced together the story of the partbooks and their origins that I have related here.) Sandon finished his dissertation on the Peterhouse partbooks, including recompositions of most of the missing parts, in 1983. In the years since he has revised and refined his work and issued it in *Antico Edition*, completing the entire, monumental project in 2015.

Music for several saints

The splendid masses and antiphons copied into the Peterhouse partbooks offer dramatic support to the picture of late medieval English Catholicism drawn by Eamon Duffy in his 1992 book *The Stripping of the Altars*. Duffy shows that lay Catholicism in English parishes was deeply felt and thriving on the very eve of being officially extinguished. The Peterhouse music proves the same for “high culture” at Oxford and Canterbury as well. These are not the artistic products of a religious culture that was decaying, losing its sense of purpose, or doubting the efficacy of its traditional rituals. Quite the contrary: bold, confident, and technically demanding, these works demonstrate that Catholic culture in England remained vigorous in 1540 and beyond, and, as Sandon has written, serve as “a reminder of the catastrophe that English music suffered in the late 1540s and early 1550s, when a very highly developed, confident and ambitious musical culture and the infrastructure that sustained it were brought to an end virtually overnight, and most of its works and much other evidence of its activity were deliberately destroyed.”

This program presents five examples of the votive antiphon, an extra-liturgical form not part of the regular Divine Office but appended to it. Addressed most often to Mary, sometimes to Jesus, very occasionally to another saint, in England it was typically sung after Vespers and Compline in a separate evening devotion by a group of singers gathered before an altar or image. The Marian antiphon (according to Frank Llewellyn Harrison, the eminent historian of music in medieval Britain) “was the universal and characteristic expression of the devotional fervour of the later Middle Ages,” and the program includes two, Ludford's setting of the most popular of all, the *Salve regina* (you will find a contemporary English translation here) and Chamberlayne's *Ave gratia plena Maria*, a rather elegant, humanistic gloss on the Angelic Salutation or “Hail Mary.” *O Albane deo grate* addresses St. Alban, venerated as the first recorded British Christian martyr. The antiphon was very likely composed for the Benedictine abbey of St. Alban, with which Fayrfax maintained a connection for many years in later life and where he chose to be buried. *O Willelme pastor bone* combines an antiphon for St. William, Archbishop of York (d. 1154), with a matching stanza written as a prayer for Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York in the early 16th century and the founder of Cardinal College, Oxford, where Taverner served as *informator choristarum* (instructor of the choirboys) between 1526 and 1530. Taverner presumably composed the setting during his tenure at Cardinal College to be sung as part of the daily devotion to St. William which was prescribed in the founding statutes of the college.

Hugh Aston has been a favorite of ours ever since we sang his *Ave Maria dive matris Anne* on our first concerts in the fall of 1999, and his three Marian antiphons in Peterhouse feature on the first disc in our CD series. This is the first time we have sung this antiphon to St. John and we are delighted to be using Sandon's just-published revised reconstruction. The text is otherwise unknown and may well have been written for Aston's use; like some other texts set uniquely by Aston, it refers directly to the singers who raise their voices to a heavenly intercessor.

—Scott Metcalfe