



## Reading Between the Line(r Note)s: Tudor Church Music and Revisionist History

Over the past twenty years or so, the old stalwart “Whig” view of English Reformation history has been at least weakened, if not destroyed, by revisionist history. This view stated with certainty that the English people greeted with great joy and relief Henry VIII’s break from the “Roman” Catholic Church through the establishment of the Erastian Anglican Church under royal control. Further, this breakaway establishment was necessary for all the progress made in English government and society through the centuries. It opened new vistas of freedom from oppression for the people of England and led to consistent reform and improvement.

The revisionist view, led by Christopher Haigh, J. J. Scarisbrick, and summarized most famously in Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*, has offered a more nuanced view that although some were enthusiastic about Henry VIII’s reforms (and those of his heirs, Edward VI and Elizabeth I), many more were confused by or opposed to them. Those opposed suffered martyrdom, fines, imprisonment, exclusion, and exile. Even more deeply considered, Henry’s Reformation destroyed a culture: the culture of the liturgical year, the culture of the monasteries, the libraries, the art and architecture, and the musical culture of the English high Middle Ages. Perhaps it should instead be called the English *Deformation*.

But has this revisionist view caught hold of the popular imagination? Has it stepped outside the hall of academia into the streets? I would cautiously say that it is beginning to, and I would propose as evidence some of the exhibits featured in

London museums in the past few years—but even more, the recordings of Tudor church music by groups like The Sixteen, the Cardinal’s Musick, the Tallis Scholars, and others. The former laments the destruction of the Catholic legacy of art and architecture in England; the latter documents the survival of Catholic culture even during the recusant era. Composers like Thomas Tallis, Robert Parsons, Robert White, William Byrd, and Peter Phillips continued to develop the late medieval polyphonic

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style while adapting themselves to the changing musical demands in Tudor England.

Regarding the museum exhibits exploring England’s lost Catholic past, the most recent is the Tate Britain collection of religious works destroyed by Tudor and Civil War iconoclasm, “Art Under Attack”, that was on display from October 2, 2013 to January 4, 2014. In 2011, the “Treasures of

Heaven” exhibit at the British Museum reminded English viewers that relics and reliquaries were once part of their heritage too, until they were destroyed by the English Reformation. Even the British Library’s 2011–2012 purchase of the St. Cuthbert Gospel from the Jesuits of the British Province was a reminder of the great Catholic culture destroyed by Henry VIII and his successors. The current effort of Lord David Alton and Lord Nicholas Windsor to establish a Christian Heritage Centre in Lancashire to display the great collection of artwork, relics, sacred objects, and documents at Stonyhurst College is just another example.

The recordings of Tudor religious music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have also demonstrated both the loss and survival of the great musical culture of the late middle ages in England. Harry Christophers and The Sixteen recorded the Eton Choirbook which, as their website proclaims, “miraculously survived Henry VIII’s ransacking of the monasteries”: “Thanks to its survival, the sacred music of the English fifteenth-century is still with us, conjuring up the atmosphere and spirit of the glorious cathedrals for which it was written. It also gives a tantalising glimpse of a wealth of choral music which was lost.”

The Blue Heron Ensemble and the Byrd Ensemble are both working on projects to record the works in the Peterhouse Partbooks, representing unknown composers like John Merbecke, Hugh Aston, William Pasche, Richard Pygott, and many others from the early years of the Tudor Dynasty.

Andrew Carwood and The Cardinal’s

Musick completed their project to record all of the Latin works of William Byrd in 2010, having previously recorded the works of Robert Fayrfax and Nicholas Ludford, two luminaries of pre-Reformation English music. In 2012, the Cardinal's Musick toured England performing Byrd's Latin works. As Andrew Carwood explained on the *Gramophone* blog, "Each concert will feature one of Byrd's mass settings and then a selection of his motets, with a theme in each concert allowing us to explore the various feast days in the Church's calendar." The group even scheduled some concerts at venues specifically connected to leading sixteenth-century Catholic figures, including Arundel, the seat of the Dukes of Norfolk; Fotheringhay, the site of the trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots; and Stondon Massey, the place to which Byrd retired and where he died.

Carwood championed Byrd's music and his achievement in a March 7, 2012 interview in *The Telegraph*, commenting to Ivan Hewitt that some of Byrd's weight and intensity springs from the religious strife he lived through.

If you compare him to his great contemporaries, like Palestrina and Victoria, Byrd's life was one of constant anxiety. Palestrina had his personal tragedies, but was working right at the heart of the Catholic world, in Rome, so on that level he was secure. The Spanish composer, Victoria, was also based in Rome for most of his working life, until he chose to go back to Spain.

Carwood was even more direct in *The Tablet* (March 10, 2012): "It's like Shostakovich in Russia. . . . Byrd's life story is fascinating. You have this recusant Catholic living in reformed England yet writing overtly Catholic music." Since Dmitri Shostakovich is well known for his troubles with the Soviet authorities' censoring his music, hampering his artistic freedom, and condemning his works, Carwood evokes an aura of repression and danger in

Elizabethan England.

So the projects of The Sixteen, Blue Heron Ensemble, The Byrd Ensemble, and The Cardinal's Musick to record these complete works and editions from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries remind us that England has a great heritage of polyphonic liturgical music for the Catholic Mass.

Other projects have highlighted different aspects of sixteenth century liturgical music: the use of Latin even after the Act of Uniformity required all church services be in English, and the connections between Catholic composers in England and those on the Continent, living in exile.

"Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang: Latin Music from Tudor England", recorded by Magnificat and directed by Philip Cave for Linn Records, features CD liner notes referring to Eamon Duffy's revisionist works:

In comparison to the momentous religious upheavals imposed during the preceding reigns, those of Henry VIII followed by his Protestant son Edward VI and his Catholic daughter Mary, the Elizabethan settlement was relatively moderate. The Queen herself was no extreme Protestant, indeed more conservative than many of her bishops, keeping a crucifix in her chapel and evidently valuing ceremonial worship.

Famously quoted as having no desire to 'make windows into men's souls', she was also a lover of music, and tolerated amongst her Chapel Royal musicians at least one whose non-conforming religious convictions must have been well-known: William Byrd. She was herself conversant in Latin, and approved a Latin Prayer Book to be published by the churchman Walter Haddon in 1560, for use in Oxford, Cambridge, Winchester and Eton, all places where the language would have been understood. . . .

That the ecclesiastical changes introduced at the start of her reign would

prove to be permanent was not, of course, apparent at the time; the accounts that Eamon Duffy quotes in his ground-breaking studies *The Stripping of the Altars* and *The Voices of Morebath* bring to life the reality of country people once again hiding away the church's valuable artefacts and whitewashing over the images of saints as part of the Elizabethan "suppression of superstition". There is evidence too that these changes were not necessarily concluded overnight, that they were received with varying degrees of enthusiasm. . . .

The CD contains performances of the *Lamentations* by Robert White and Byrd; Robert Parson's great *Ave Maria*; the Compline hymn *Christi, Qui Lux es et Dies* (Christ, Who Are the Light and Day) by Byrd and White; and Psalm 15, *Domine, quis habitabit* (Lord, Who May Dwell in Your Tabernacle?) by Byrd and Parsons. The great anomaly on the recording is Byrd's *Quomodo Cantibus*, which Philip Cave notes has a definite recusant meaning, but otherwise these Latin works were relatively uncontroversial—except that they were in Latin!

Another vocal ensemble, Gallicantus, led by Gabriel Crouch, places Byrd's *Quomodo Cantibus* at the center of "The Word Unspoken" alongside music by Phillippe de Monte. Byrd and de Monte exchanged musical settings of Psalm 136/137 (Douai-Rheims translation):

[1] Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept: when we remembered Sion: [2] On the willows in the midst thereof we hung up our instruments. [3] For there they that led us into captivity required of us the words of songs. And they that carried us away, said: Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion.

[4] How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land? [5] If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten. [6] Let my tongue cleave to my jaws, if I do not remember thee: If I make not Jerusalem the beginning of my joy. [7] Remember, O Lord,

the children of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem. . . .

Phillippe de Monte travelled to England in the entourage of Philip of Spain in 1554 when his master married Queen Mary, the Catholic queen of England. He sang in the choir and might have met William Byrd, who was in the Chapel Royal. Some thirty years later, de Monte, a composer for the Imperial Courts, sent Byrd an eight-part motet of the first part of Psalm 136/137 (verses 1 to 3). Byrd responded with another eight-part motet of verses 4 through 7. According to Gabriel Crouch:

Exactly what occasioned this musical transaction is not known, but the words must have held particular resonance for Byrd at that time, as this famous psalm of captivity and exile would surely be interpreted as a barely veiled allusion to the dangerous situation that he and his fellow recusant Catholics were facing under a Protestant regime in England at a time when political tensions were aggravating the existing religious ones; perhaps word of these developments had reached de Monte, either in Prague or via his benefice at Cambrai, near the Catholic English College at Douai.

Gallicantus selected several other Byrd motets from his *Cantiones Sacrae* with similar veiled allusions to the status of recusant Catholics in England: *Tristitia et Anxietas* (Sadness and anxiety), *Vigilate* (Watch ye therefore), *Tribulationes civitatum* (We have heard of the tribulations), etc. The Tallis Scholars included the same motets on a 2006 CD (and DVD) titled “Playing Elizabeth’s Tune”, emphasizing Byrd’s challenge “to write music for the Protestant authorities when arguably his heart wasn’t really in it; and to find opportunities to write the kind of music he really wanted to write—for the Catholic liturgy—and not be arrested for it.”

The Sarum Consort and the Tudor Consort each recorded a CD of Peter

Philips’ *Cantiones Sacrae* for the Naxos label. Peter Philips also knew William Byrd, but unlike his older contemporary, he fled England for the Continent. Peter Walls, the conductor of the Tudor Consort, compares Philips to Byrd: “Peter Philips (1561–1628) stands with William Byrd (1543–1623) among the greatest composers of the Counter Reformation. These two English Catholic recusants composed sacred polyphony which is unsurpassed in sophistication and interest.” (“*Cantiones Sacrae/Quinis Vocibus*”) After leaving England in 1582 Philips found employment at the English College in Rome as organist; then from 1585 to 1590 he was in the household of Lord Thomas Paget, another Catholic refugee.

When Paget died in 1590, Philips remained in Antwerp, then in the Spanish Netherlands; he married and taught pupils how to play the virginals. If Philips thought he was safe from the Elizabethan authorities because he was in Europe, he was wrong. As Andrew Mackay of the Sarum Consort explains in his liner notes for “*Cantiones Sacrae Quinis et Octonibus Vocibus* (Antwerp 1612 and 1613)”:

In 1593 he travelled to Amsterdam to visit a famous organist and composer there—undoubtedly [Jan Pieterszoon] Sweelinck, who complimented Philips by writing a set of variations on his 1580 pavan. On his return Philips received a shocking reminder of his refugee status: he was arrested, accused of complicity in a plot to assassinate Elizabeth I, taken to The Hague and thrown into prison. After an anxious wait for evidence to arrive from London, during which he composed a *Pavan and Galliard Dolorosa*, Philips was found to be innocent and released. He was back in Antwerp in time for Christmas.

Remember that Philips was traveling in the Dutch Republic, which had previously been a protectorate of Elizabeth I, and was certainly still her ally in religion and in opposition to Philip II of Spain. Because

Philips had been travelling with the Pagets, he was accused of participating “in the burning of an effigy of Elizabeth I at the time when the barricades were put up in Paris”, according to Lionel Pike in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edition). Henri, the Duke of Guise entered Paris on May 12, 1588 as leader of the Catholic League; the resulting Day of the Barricades demonstrated opposition to Henri III’s selection of Henri of Navarre as his successor (among other things)—and Henri III fled Paris for Chartres. Philips had experienced the long reach of Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth’s spymaster.

As both Walls and Mackay note in their CD liner notes, Philips survived his period of imprisonment and went on to serve the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella, Philip II of Spain’s regents in the Spanish Netherlands. He was both organist and composer for the court chapel. Living in relative security, Philips chose a different path than Byrd, but both men endured to write music for Catholic liturgies and chapels, public or private.

These CDs and their liner notes tell the story of Catholic composers in England and on the Continent during the long English Reformation from the reign of Henry VIII to the reign of James I. Providing context for the recorded performances, the liner notes describe the destruction or near escape of pre-Reformation church music, the changes and even the dangers Catholic composers endured during the transitions of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties, and highlight the legacy of Catholic liturgical music in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They are examples of the emergent understanding of the English Reformation as being more complex than that ascribed by the old Whig interpretation of history and demonstrate some of the riches that England lost.

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