

Tudor music on the international stage

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In December 2014, the British Academy published an edition of Tallis and Byrd's 1575 *Cantiones sacrae*, a collection of Latin motets dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I and intended to serve as a cultural ambassador in continental Europe. The volume's editor, Dr John Milsom, discusses its origins, contents and significance.

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Displaying Elizabethan musical achievement

Music is often said to be a universal language that speaks across linguistic boundaries. When music becomes song, bearing words in a language that itself has wide currency – English in our own time, Latin in the past – then its potency increases further. Evidently this fact dawned on the court of Queen Elizabeth I, for in 1575 a collection of Latin-texted motets intended for export was published in London. Its contents, written by the two luminaries of the queen's Chapel Royal, Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585) and William Byrd (c. 1540-1623), were meant to impress European ears and eyes at a time when the English language was barely understood beyond Britain's shores; thus Latin-texted music could reach where Tudor poetry or drama could not. Modern choirs have long cherished individual pieces from this collection, but the latest volume in the British Academy's *Early English Church Music* series¹ shines the spotlight on the 1575 book itself – its origins, its printing history, and its role as a cultural ambassador.

Sets of motets published in 16th-century Europe often bear the title 'Cantiones sacrae' (sacred songs), but the Tudor book has a variant that has long puzzled the musicologists: *Cantiones, quae ab argumento sacrae vocantur* (Figure 1) – variously translated as 'songs, which by their argument are called sacred', 'songs which are called sacred on account of their texts', even 'motets

called sacred because of their texts'. This evasiveness may in fact be justified: some of the compositions in the 1575 book were definitely or probably not conceived as settings of Latin texts, and were converted into motets for the sake of giving them international appeal. Several began life as textless instrumental pieces; others may have been English-texted anthems before they became Latin-texted motets. Thus various musical genres are represented in the book, re-texted where necessary, in order to display the full breadth of Elizabethan musical achievement to singers and audiences across Renaissance Europe.

The collection also covers an impressively wide chronological range. At one extreme there are pieces by Tallis composed back in the reigns of Elizabeth's father Henry VIII (d. 1547) and her half-sister Mary (reigned 1553-8). At the other extreme, some motets by both Tallis and Byrd were clearly brand new when the book went to press in 1575. Historical depth therefore complements stylistic breadth; it allows the book to celebrate England's musical past as well as its present. The encyclopaedic agenda helps explain one aspect of the book that at first sight might seem strange: some of the motet texts are drawn from the pre-Reformation Sarum rite, and others set words from the Roman Catholic rite, yet the book is dedicated to the Protestant Elizabeth. The book's prefatory material, however, neither declares nor hints that the contents of *Cantiones sacrae* were meant for liturgical use in England's churches. Rather the opposite; the main criterion for inclusion is clearly artistic excellence, not liturgical relevance.

Origins

Whose idea was it to create this book? Not necessarily Tallis and Byrd's; others may have drawn them into the project. A key suspect must be the Bolognese-born Alfonso Ferrabosco, one of Elizabeth's court musicians, who doubled as a diplomat and spy; he and Byrd were close, and some of Byrd's 1575 motets directly allude to motets composed by Ferrabosco. Other prime movers may have been the book's publisher, Thomas Vautrollier, and his patron, the music-loving Henry Fitzalan, 12th earl of

1. *Thomas Tallis & William Byrd: Cantiones Sacrae, 1575*, transcribed and edited by John Milsom (*Early English Church Music*, 56). Further information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/pubs

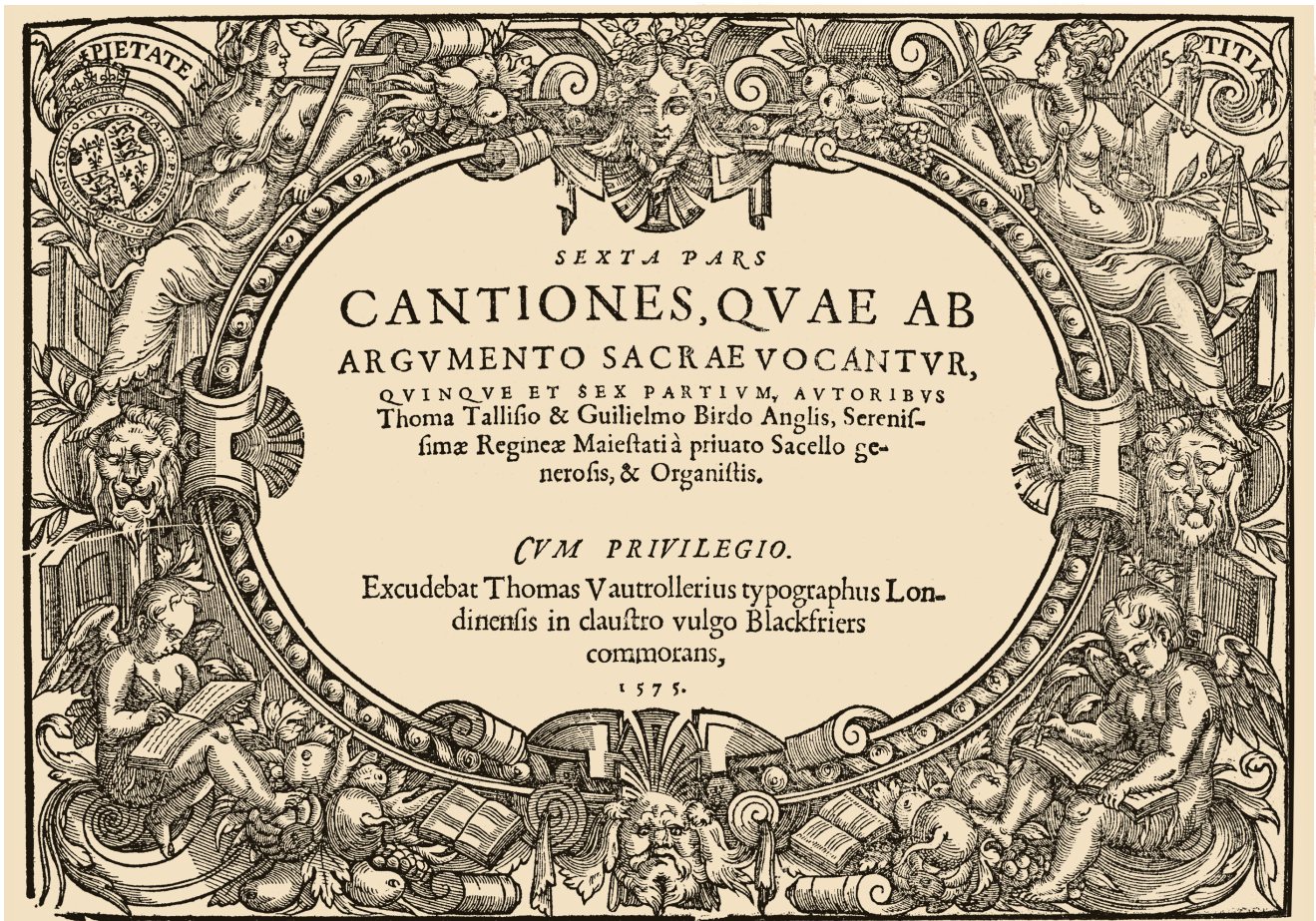


Figure 1
Title page of *Cantiones, quae ab argumento sacrae vocantur* (London, Thomas Vautrollier, 1575), *Sexta Pars* partbook.

Arundel, who was one of the queen's privy councillors. But Elizabeth herself must surely have had an interest in this book. It is dedicated to her; its contents are the work of royal musicians; she was a competent musician herself; the book's function as a cultural ambassador is clearly stated; and in 1575 Elizabeth granted Tallis and Byrd sole rights to print music in England for a term of 21 years, perhaps as an incentive to publish the *Cantiones sacrae*.

Do the book's contents reflect the repertory of Elizabeth's own Chapel Royal? This is a hard question to answer. On the one hand, Latin was permitted in services held at the royal chapels, and a motet would have been viewed as ancillary to a liturgical service, just as an anthem today can be sung as a supplement to Anglican evensong. On the other hand, no documents survive to shed specific light on the music sung by England's premier ecclesiastical choir in Elizabeth's reign. What we do know is that, in England, copies of the 1575 *Cantiones sacrae* fell largely into the hands of individuals, to be used as devotional song in the privacy of the chamber. How the book fared abroad is less clear, but copies were available at the Frankfurt book fairs, and one had reached Wrocław/Breslau by the late 16th century.

In appearance, *Cantiones sacrae* is effectively a French book. It uses fonts and music type designed by Pierre

Haultin, and the printer Thomas Vautrollier, himself a Huguenot *émigré*, employed a staff of foreign workers whose standards of production were high. Close scrutiny of the extant copies – almost two dozen of them – shows that great care went into the typesetting and proof-reading: there are many stop-press corrections, sometimes of trivial details (such as missing hyphens), and handwritten corrections and paste-over cancel slips emend some of the few substantive errors that had slipped through. The result is an elegant and largely accurate publication that reflects well on its printers, no less than the book's internal contents do credit to the composers, their nation, and their royal dedicatee.

Evolving

Because *Cantiones sacrae* was prepared and seen through the press by Tallis and Byrd themselves, it tends to be viewed as the definitive source of the works it contains; but this raises the question of what 'definitive' might signify here. Some of the book's contents circulated in manuscript copies long before 1575, and were revised or re-texted by their composers expressly for publication; these revisions are interesting in themselves. Other pieces were converted into English-texted anthems after 1575 – not necessarily by Tallis and Byrd themselves – to make

V. Voc. T. Tallis **TENOR** 2

Absterge Domine in sci enter iu uenis fe ci, & ignof ce pœniten ti, nã tu es De us me us, tibi so li fi dit tibi so li fi dit a ni ma me- a, ij tu es fa lus me a tu es fa lus mea, ij tu es falus me a, do lo re me um testãtur lachrimã me æ

Figure 2
Tallis, 'Absterge Domine', voice IV, opening, *Cantiones ... sacrae* (1575), Tenor partbook.

them fit for use by the choirs of England's Protestant cathedrals, colleges and churches. Thus the versions published in 1575 capture only a stage in what can be quite complex evolving histories. In recognition of this, the new edition in *Early English Church Music* gathers together all the variant states of each composition, and aligns them in parallel score, allowing the reader to see at a glance how music conceived as an instrumental fantasy might first become a Latin-texted motet, then an English texted anthem suited for use at evensong.

An example of this is the five-voice work by Tallis published in *Cantiones sacrae* as 'Absterge Domine' (Figure 2). Almost certainly this began life as an instrumental piece, scored for a consort of viols. Presumably it was Tallis himself who then devised a biblical-sounding Latin prayer, starting with the words 'Absterge Domine delicta mea'; this text, which is otherwise unknown, fits the music like hand in glove. Tallis then lightly revised this motet more than once before arriving at the version published in *Cantiones sacrae* in 1575. Around the same time, someone other than Tallis translated the motet's words into English ('Wipe away my sins, O Lord'), converting the piece from a motet into an anthem. In the 1580s it was adapted again, now to the text 'Discomfit them, O Lord', which probably refers to the Spanish Armada. In total, five discrete states of this work can be retrieved from printed or manuscript sources dating from Tallis's lifetime or soon after. All can now be viewed in *Early English Church Music*, aligned one above the other.

Among other things, the new edition invites thought about the notion of music as a 'universal language'. The motet printed in *Cantiones sacrae* as 'Absterge Domine' is musically equivalent to the anthems 'Wipe away my sins' and 'Discomfit them, O Lord', and originally the piece probably bore no words at all, yet in each of these states the work satisfies the ear. In effect, then, the music itself is linguistically ambiguous, neutral or even meaningless; only when bonded with words does it communicate actual concept. What it does possess in all its manifestations, however, is intrinsic interest that appeals to the listener and holds our attention as its musical argument unfolds; and on that count its quality might be judged. The fact that this piece was included in the *Cantiones sacrae* tells us that, in the view of the people who devised the 1575 book, this music was judged excellent: Tudor culture at its best, fit to be shared with the rest of the world.

The aim of the British Academy's *Early English Church Music* series is to make available church music by British composers from Anglo-Saxon times to 1660. The series includes work by anonymous and undeservedly neglected figures, as well as much of the output of acknowledged masters such as Thomas Tallis, John Taverner and John Sheppard. Further information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/pubs
