

Psalms for King James: Jean Servin's Music for George Buchanan's Latin Psalm Paraphrases (1579)

February 2009 marks the 400th anniversary of the death of the French composer Jean Servin. In the 1570s, Servin was a refugee from the Wars of Religion in France: Professor James Porter describes his visit to the court of King James VI of Scotland in search of patronage.

IN THE early autumn of 1579 the French composer Jean Servin (1529–1609), then resident in Geneva, travelled to Scotland to present his elaborate settings of Latin psalm paraphrases, *Psalmi Davidis a G. Buchanano versibus expressi* (Figure 1), to the thirteen-year-old King James VI of Scotland.

The main purpose of this journey was to seek preferment at the court, probably in connection with the Chapel Royal, which at that time was based, like James, at Stirling Castle. We can deduce as much about the purpose from Servin's lengthy dedication to the king (Figure 2), which refers to his three books of chansons published in Geneva a year earlier. He also mentions the author of these paraphrases that he had newly set for four to eight voices, namely George Buchanan, the renowned humanist, poet and historian, who had been, coincidentally, King James's preceptor in his early years.

We know about Servin's visit from two principal sources. First, he carried a letter of recommendation from Théodore de Bèze, Calvin's successor in Geneva, addressed to Peter Young, who had succeeded Buchanan as the king's tutor. In this letter Bèze refers to Servin as 'having lived among us now for some years [vixit apud nos aliquot iam annis], practising his musical art [exercens suam artem musicam], in which he is well esteemed among his peers [cuius peritus inter celebros musicos habetur], a dutiful and God-fearing man of a blameless life [homo sane pius et vitae innocentissimae]'. Servin could hardly have asked for a better character reference. But Bèze was also interested, of course, as was the rest of Europe, in the future of James as a Protestant monarch who would eventually ascend the more powerful throne of England. The second intimation of Servin's visit comes from an entry in the account

books of the Lord High Treasurer for November 1579, whereby Servin was paid £200 in gold for his part-books. Later that month he received a further £20, no doubt for expenses. We will come to the source of this money later.

The five part-books that Servin brought with him had been specially bound, possibly by the Royal Binders to Henri III. Fashioned in red-brown calf, gold-tooled and richly painted, with yellow silk ties, they include the royal arms of Scotland on the covers (Figure 3). The music pages, with their diamond-head notation and woodcuts of animals to guide the singers to their part, are redlined throughout. Three of these presentation part-books have survived: two (superius, bassus) in the British Library and another (tenor) in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. The remaining two (contratenor, quinta pars) are currently untraced. We are fortunate to have these three examples, for it was the bindings in particular that attracted the interest of book collectors. The ordinary, vellum-bound print run, also produced in Geneva (with a false imprint of Lyons so that they could be sold in France), survives in two complete sets: one in Trinity College Library, Dublin, and the other in the Bavarian State Library, Munich. Single part-books are scattered in libraries throughout the United Kingdom (Edinburgh, Oxford, St Andrews, and Cambridge).

The music itself (Figure 4) is cast in the form of motets, each paraphrase being divided into sections for a varying number of voices. The work is not liturgical but meant rather as moral or spiritual entertainment suitable for a Protestant monarch. In style it resembles that of composers in the Franco-Flemish orbit such as Orlando di Lasso, Jacob Arcadelt, Clemens non Papa, and Giaches de Wert. It

also owes something to the Venetian influence of Adrian Willaert and Cipriano de Rore, musicians originally from Northern France or the Low Countries: Servin's use of techniques such as fauxbourdon, cantus firmus, and coro spezzato (divided chorus) make for contrast, in these paraphrases, with the Parisian chanson and its note-against-note declamation. Angular vocal lines within unusual modal procedures show him breaking away from the rules of strict counterpoint, and his originality extends to the free use of madrigal idioms: in Psalm 30, for example, the voices imitate the strumming of a lyre. Servin's integration of such diverse techniques welds the *Psalmi Davidis* together in a discursive unity that is entirely convincing. In this regard, while looking back to pre-Reformation models such as Josquin, he is already a skilled practitioner of the *seconda pratica* or newer, word-oriented style that anticipates Monteverdi. And this is no minor masterpiece. In a modern edition the entire work, which covers only the first forty-one psalms, amounts to almost one thousand pages.

It is clear from the dedication that Servin, if he were to receive preferment, intended to complete all one hundred and fifty psalms. He arrived, however, at a wholly inopportune time. Judging by the date of the letter from Bèze (26 August), he would probably have reached Scotland in mid-September if we allow roughly two weeks for the journey. We do not know the route he took or the date of his arrival. But he found that the glamorous figure of Esmé Stuart, Sieur d'Aubigny, James's French cousin, had arrived at the court before him (9 September) armed with a gift of 40,000 gold pieces sent by the Guise family to plot the return to the throne of Mary, Queen of Scots, James's mother, then imprisoned in England by her cousin

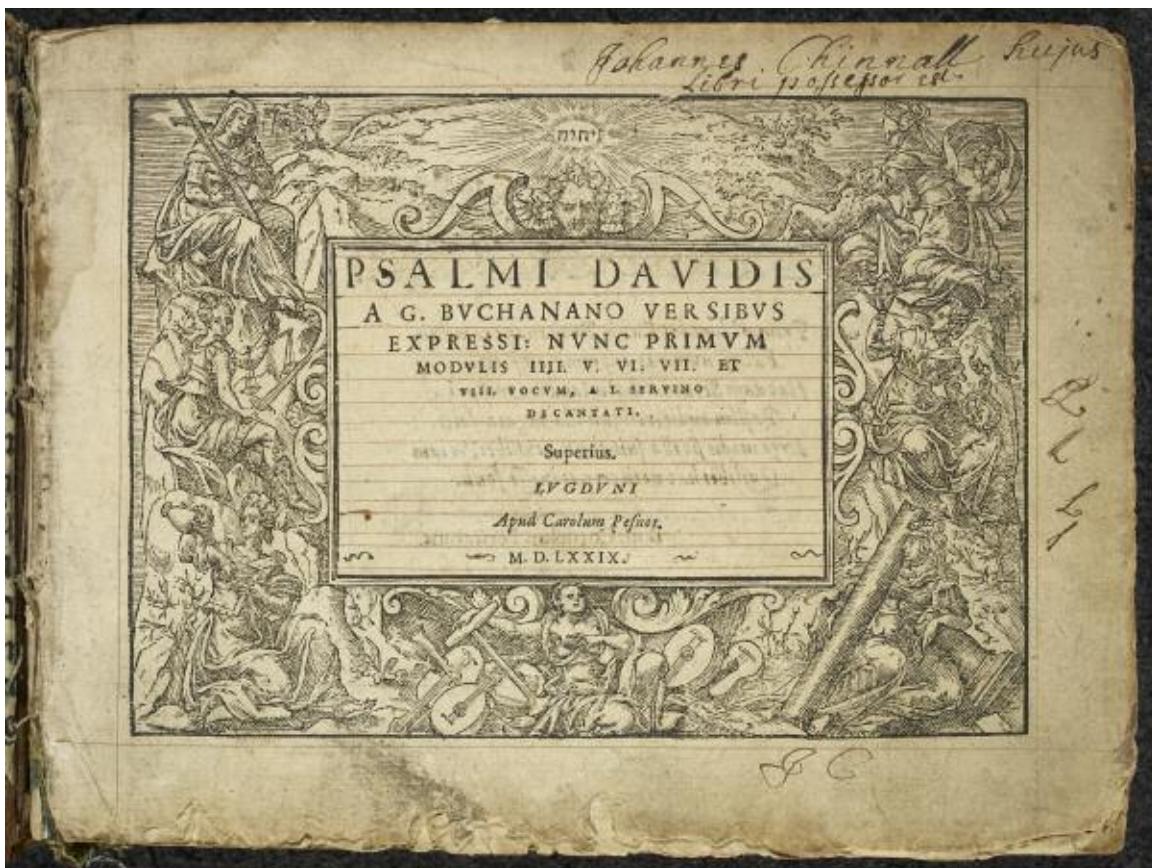


Figure 1: Title page, superius part-book. Photo: British Library.

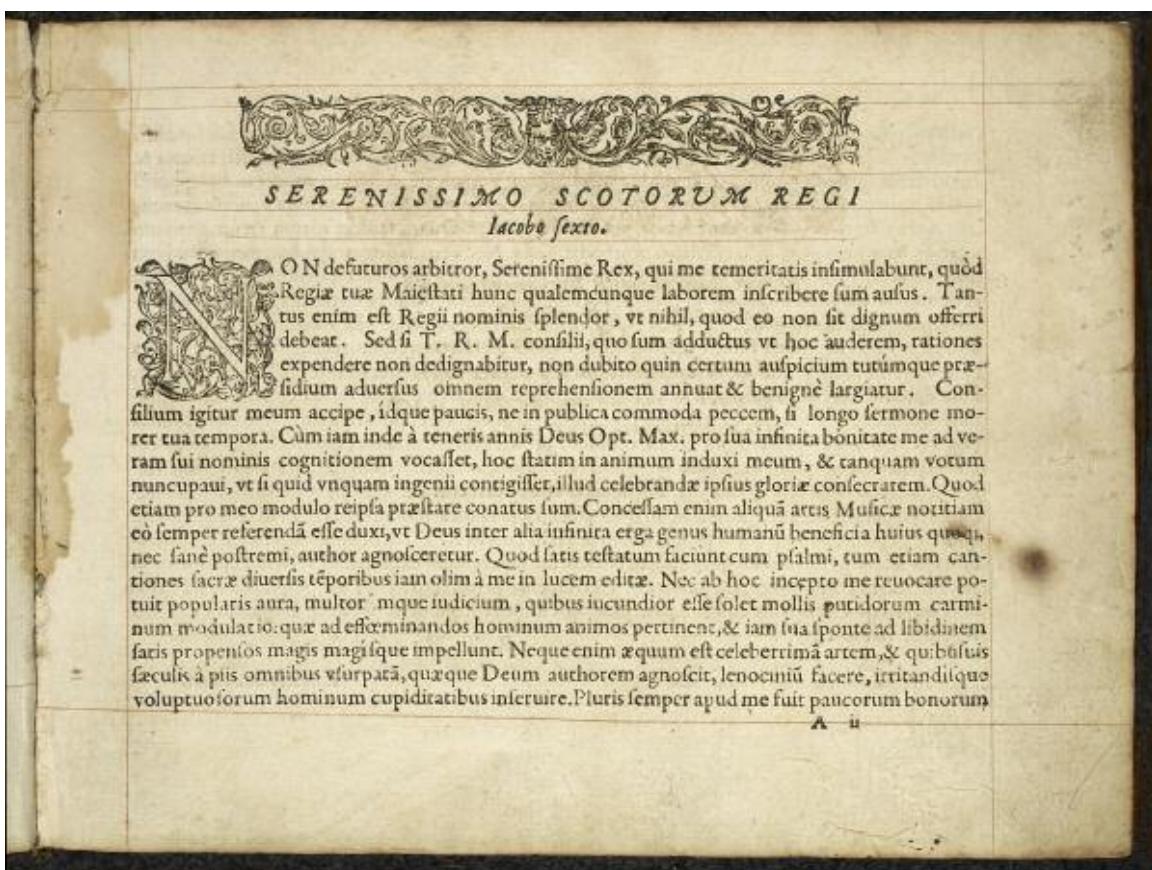


Figure 2: First page of dedication to King James, bassus part-book. Photo: British Library.



Figure 3: Binding of superius part-book.
Photo: British Library.

QVINQUE VOCVM. SS. PSALM. I. Beatus vir qui non.

Elix, Felix, Felix, ille animi,
quem nō de tra- mite recto Impia Impia sacrilega fle-
xit contagio turbæ: Non iter erroris renuit, fel-
lōve cathedræ Pesti- fera, faciem de- dit irrisoribus au- rem:
A iii

DR DB A iii

Figure 4: First page of music, superius part-book.
Photo: British Library.

Elizabeth. For an upright Huguenot such as Servin, this must have been a test of will-power and patience, for everyone could see the spell Esmé had cast on the young king. James was so enamoured of his French cousin, in fact, that he made him Earl of Lennox, although a few years later the latter was forced by events to leave Scotland.

It is ironic, then, that Esmé, who would hardly have relished having a Huguenot such as Servin with his Geneva connections in a position close to the sovereign, may have suggested to James that he pay him off from the hoard he had brought with him. The young king's coffers were chronically bare, and he was receiving an annuity of £4000 from Elizabeth I. For his part James, himself already an accomplished poet, may not have enjoyed being reminded, in these neo-Latin psalm paraphrases, of the harsh tutelage he had experienced under Buchanan. Having attained his regal majority in June, he was getting ready in September to leave for Edinburgh to assume his kingly duties. Besides, the positions for musicians at the court and Chapel Royal were probably all accounted for, and some measure of protectionism may have been involved. James's advisers, nevertheless, must have been impressed with Servin's work, for in November the Parliament passed an important Act to revitalize the musical competence of the Chapel Royal and the burgh Sang Schules.

Servin himself, bitterly disappointed, had to return to Geneva, where the opportunities

for a composer of his talent were limited. His Protestant contemporaries, Paschal de L'Estocart and Claude Le Jeune, were fortunate to secure from French noblemen patronage of the kind Servin had been seeking with the dedication of his first two books of chansons (1578) to Guy-Paul de Coligny, Vicomte de Laval, and Henri de la Tour, Vicomte de Turenne, both prominent supporters of the Huguenot cause. What we know of Servin's character from his chanson texts, that is, one not easily given to flattery or dissimulation, may have told against him in his search for patronage. To judge from hints in the dedication of the first book of chansons, he possibly had temporary employment with the Coligny family. But his personality and religious convictions seem to have marked him for the life of a refugee until he finally settled in Geneva.

Servin's early life is obscure. From a minor landed family in the region of Blois, he may have studied at the University of Orléans. It was there, in Orléans, that he published his settings for three voices of all one hundred and fifty psalms in 1565. Subsequently he seems to have sought refuge at the chateau in Montargis of Renée, Duchess of Ferrara, who gave shelter to several hundred Huguenots: one of his chansons, *Petit troupeau* [Little flock], alludes to life under her protection. Leaving there in 1569 he probably moved to Lyons, where the composer Claude Goudimel and master printers by the name of Servin were active. But the terrible events of St Bartholomew's Day in late August 1572 that

claimed Goudimel's life caused Servin to flee, eventually arriving in Geneva on 23 October, and it was here that he spent the last thirty-seven years of his life. Devout, but stubborn and sometimes at odds with the powerful Compagnie des Pasteurs, he was finally persuaded to assume the post of *chantre* (precentor) at the former Cathedral of Saint-Pierre from 1600 to 1604, a position once held by the noted composer of psalm tunes, Loys Bourgeois. Servin wrote no more music that we know of, and died, aged eighty, on 27 February 1609. More than any other composer, he described vividly in his chansons the turbulence of the times. The psalm settings, too, echo the anguish and spiritual exaltation of the psalmist as he faces both God and his enemies. We may reasonably speculate that Servin, like Buchanan, conceived these psalm paraphrases with their humanist tone as helping to heal a shattered world. Written against a backdrop of civil war and sectarian persecution, this deeply felt music still has resonance today.

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