

The Tudor Respond

The Church Music Society has recently published editions of three responds by Tudor composers: Taverner (*Dum transisset Sabbatum* I), Sheppard (*Verbum caro factum est*) and Tallis (*Honor, virtus et potestas*), whose texts are proper to Easter, Christmas and Trinity respectively.

The respond, or responsory (these titles are often loosely used without specific distinction), is a text found in several of the Offices that are a daily observance in the Catholic church. Its name reflects its structure, in which the main part of the text is interspersed with verses and then repeated. One of the most renowned examples is the set of responsories written by Tomás Luis de Victoria for the Holy Week Offices, outwardly simple but often performed with drama and high emotion. As a musical form, the respond became especially popular in mid-16th century England, in the hands of composers such as John Sheppard and Thomas Tallis; these composers are also known for their settings of the hymn texts used alongside responds in the Offices. It was observed by Paul Doe (*Tallis*, 1968, p.34) and further discussed by Joseph Kerman (*The Masses and motets of William Byrd*, 1981, p.25) that the two composers may have ‘had in mind some sort of annual cycle of office polyphony, which must surely have been for Mary Tudor’s chapel’, an intriguing possibility. Some of the music may even date from rather earlier, before the death of Henry VIII.

Most of these responds and hymns are based on plainchant, presented as a cantus firmus moving steadily in slower notes than the surrounding polyphony, which is propelled along by suspensions and resolutions, dissonance and consonance, which makes for an attractive and characteristic style. (Tallis’s *O nata lux*, and Byrd’s *O lux beata Trinitas* are among the few freely composed hymns in the 1575 collection.)

Very few manuscripts survive from the reign of Mary, and these pieces are extant only because later, Elizabethan, copyists and collectors recognised their musical worth even though they had by then become liturgically redundant. But the versions they made were textually incomplete in performance terms as they presented the polyphony but not the chant verses (which would doubtless have been supplied from another book). The editors of the Tudor Church Music series in the 1920s did not fill in this practical omission, and in any case the Sheppard volumes were never issued, having been delayed by the need to reconstruct the material lost with the tenor partbook of the set Oxford, Christ Church Library Mus. 979-83. So the modern editor has rather more to do than usual, finding a suitable Sarum Antiphoner to provide the chant verses as well as to confirm the structure of the respond. As ever, the surviving antiphoners differ in detail, especially in their rhythmic notation, so a number of versions are possible.

The source for Tallis’s *Honor, virtus et potestas* is the collection that he and Byrd published together in 1575, *Cantiones Sacrae*. We owe the survival of many of the other responds to collectors such as John Baldwin of Windsor (compiler and copyist of Oxford, Christ Church Library, Mus. 979-83, between 1575 and 1581) and Robert Dow (Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, calligrapher, compiler and copyist in the 1580s of Oxford, Christ Church Library, Mus. 984-88). We may wonder for whom these collections were made, and with what intention – and surmise that it was most likely an appreciation of this ‘old’ music, which was ideal for recreational music-making, then as now.

It is sometimes evident that revisions were made, for example to rework a respond into a motet suitable for a less specific context. The different openings of the word-text of Taverner’s *Dum transisset*, as well as the arrangement of it (possibly by the composer) for low voices in the Gyffard partbooks (British Library, Add. mss.17802-5), exemplify this; it would be possible also to modify the texts of the opening bars of *Verbum caro*, *Honor, virtus et potestas* and others to make a motet that starts with all the voices, rather than an incipit. Performers can easily make a shorter

motet by omitting the chant verses and polyphonic repeats, and singing the polyphony just once through.

If Tallis's contributions to the 1575 *Cantiones Sacrae* seem to exemplify the changing musical styles witnessed over his long life, Byrd's are those of a man early in his career. Sheppard, who died in 1558, belonged to a slightly younger generation; he worked at Magdalen College, Oxford as well as the Chapel Royal. His music is at last becoming recognised for its true stature - it speaks with a rare individuality, relishing the clash of 'false relations' and savouring lovely vocal scoring. The final chord of the Christmas respond *Verbum caro factum est* with its top voice split into a three-part chord is surely one of the most thrilling moments of this entire repertoire.

In recent times, these manuscripts have received attention from the Tudor Partbooks project (<http://www.tudorpartbooks.ac.uk>), led by Magnus Williamson at Newcastle University, and from DIAMM (the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music), led by Julia Craig-McFeely in Oxford. As well as looking at pages online (<https://www.diamm.ac.uk>), you can now purchase a set of facsimiles of the Dow partbooks, sing from them and wonder at the beautiful script of Robert Dow, and his thoughtful comments. And one day soon, there will be the Baldwin partbooks too, including a substitute for the lost tenor book containing reconstructions of that voice, the result of collaborative work by a group of scholars, and presented in a matching typeface. As one of the last generation of students to turn the pages of the original manuscripts (with cleaner hands than some), I am delighted to see the tremendous progress that specialised skills and digital restoration represents.

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