

Fifteenth-century English Composers

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THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY saw a considerable spate of musical composition in England. Plantagenet kings fostered the art: there were numerous occasions in the life of the English at which music was considered indispensable. The Church, unclouded by the theological strictures of Protestantism with regard to music, or to anything else, was the other great patron of composition. There is every sign that Richard III loved music; he would have been an abnormal king if he had not. Henry V and Henry VI are to be found in all dictionaries of music as competent practitioners of the art. Why, then, barring one phenomenon which I will describe in a moment, is the great output of music in fifteenth century England so much neglected? German and Austrian music of this period is easily accessible on records and in published scores, while Flemish and Burgundian early-renaissance music has consistently swept the board of musical history for years now. English music of this vital era, when mentioned at all, is very largely treated in an embarrassingly condescending fashion. The one exception to this rule has been John Dunstable (?–1453).

Probably more printer's ink has been spilled over this figure, more historical conjecture made, more intellectual ingenuity spent in explaining Dunstable than over any other musician prior to Bach. Anything seems to go in the Dunstable saga. He was, according to various accounts, a mathematician, an astrologer, a Scot, a Jew, and St Dunstan. Other authorities allude to him as the inventor of polyphony. More incredibly still, *A History of Music* hails him as 'the inventor of composition'.¹ That this statement is nonsense is shown by the skill (and the very existence) of such men as Francesco Landini (1325–1397), Pérotin (?–1220), Guillaume de Machaut (1300–1377) and Adam de la Halle (1230?–1286?). So why did Dunstable occupy such a Parnassian place? If it is true that he was a great composer and a forward thinker—and, though I speak as an enthusiastic layman, it is—was he the first in a field of one, as far as English music was concerned? Or was he merely the most cosmopolitan figure in an otherwise stay-at-home group of composers? The second alternative seems much the more likely. Most of Dunstable's manuscripts were originally unearthed in continental Europe, and this would tie in with the destruction of numerous manuscripts at Henry VIII's orders. The first alternative is most improbable, because (if true) it would be a unique instance of a great composer springing from a vacuum. I hope to show that the high quality of other fifteenth-century Britons' music provides a backdrop to Dunstable's skill, as well as being of great interest in itself.

We can quickly, though regretfully, dispense with Henry Abyngdon. Regretfully because, although his life span (1420?–1497) encompasses the period of most interest to Ricardians, and his biography is by fifteenth-century standards

an open book, not a single work of his has survived.² He was an important man—a graduate in music from Cambridge (one of the first, if not the first), a master of the Chapel Royal, and the subject of two eulogies by More—but for the present he must still languish in silent oblivion.

The work of Leonel Power (?–1445) is by comparison almost popular. Power, a gentleman of Canterbury (although he died at Winchester) and 'one of the most . . . inventive of fifteenth-century English composers',³ stood more in the line of Guillaume de Machaut than of the Burgundian composers. He substituted for the gentle melancholy and brooding quality of his Burgundian contemporaries, a more nervous and lithe (but still charming) style. The Gloria '*Jacet granum*', one of the few pieces of his to be recorded,⁴ shows the effectiveness of Power's musical language. Although in a sense Power's works mark the end of the road for such a style, seldom can a dead end have been approached so impressively.

In contrast to Power, who does not seem to have left his native land in his life, both Robert Morton (?–1475) and John Hothby (?–1487) were honoured abroad probably more than they ever were at home. Morton, whose relationship to Henry VII's notorious Cardinal has, mercifully, yet to be proved, had sufficient means to cross the Channel in 1457, presumably unflustered by the naval clash between De Breze and Warwick that took place in that year, and entered the chapel of Philip the Good. (As singer? As instrumentalist? We are not told).⁵ The friction in the late 1450s and the 1460s between Philip and his only lawful son does not seem to have bothered Morton, who knew his place as well as any other servant; in 1470 he became Charles the Bold's chaplain and remained in this capacity until his death. Johannes Tinctoris, the first and greatest scholarly champion of Dunstable, also speaks in glowing terms of Morton and what little of Morton's work has been preserved⁶ bears out such praise. Sweeter than a typical piece by Power, devoid of the dour ingenuity of the Flemings, its neglect is deplorable.

John Hothby was a more cosmopolitan figure, extraordinarily so in view of the fact that he was a Carmelite monk. Likely enough that he did not take readily to a conventional monastic existence, would it not have irked him, a graduate of Oxford and a musical theorist to boot? Instead he spent nearly twenty years (1467–1486) travelling, teaching (grammar, arithmetic and music) and writing about musical technique, finally settling down at Lucca, where he was known as Ottobi, Otteby and Octobri. Henry VII, whose interest in music was one of the few pleasant aspects of his reign, considered him important enough to warrant a special invitation to Tudor England (1486); he spent his few remaining months in the royal favour. Hothby's compositions are few and comparatively unimportant, but his treatises and other writings are looked upon as most significant in the history of music literature.⁷ Like Tinctoris, John Hothby was astute enough to realize the importance of Morton, a good five centuries before the general musical world has done so.

The other two composers of this period who were celebrated in European rather than English circles were Walter Frye (?–1475) and John Bedyngham (flourished early fifteenth century), both of whose careers are very shadowy. Frye's '*Ave Regina Coelorum*' is commemorated by numerous appearances in contemporary paintings.⁸ Like Morton, but unlike a number of his compatriots, Frye produced some secular songs which are still extant. Bedyngham—in his own

day known as 'Long-strides', an endearing biographical touch such as is all too rare in this era—is represented by a number of motets at Trent Cathedral. More importantly, one of his works provides an odd link with a piece by Dunstable. Bedyngham added 'concordantice' (extra parts, in this case four of them) to '*O rosa bella*', which survives in various versions and is usually attributed to Dunstable.⁹ However, Groves' *Dictionary* puts forward a case for '*O rosa bella*' being entirely the work of Bedyngham, in which case Dunstable's most famous composition turns out to be the work of an almost totally unknown junior contemporary. It is perhaps significant that none of Bedyngham's other pieces, sacred or secular, has reared its head in the *Gramophone Classical Catalogue*.

All this activity by expatriates does not mean that the English scene was a musical desert. Power and Abyngdon have been already mentioned, and they were by no means solitary voices crying in the wilderness. Henry VI, whatever his many faults, was deeply interested in cultivating an active musical tradition; during his reign John Plomer (?–1462?) was (1440) appointed Master of Song at the Chapel Royal, a post he held for twenty-two years, and was sufficiently well-known or well-travelled (or both) for his music to appear in manuscripts on the Continent. John Browne (1426–1498) was the most important English composer of his generation, which estimate is borne out by the comparative abundance of biographical data. He became rector of the parish church of West Tilbury in 1480; ten years later he abandoned his rural ministry to occupy no less a post than Canon of St Stephen's, Westminster.¹⁰ Browne, in common with so many of his countrymen, is represented in that vital compendium of English pre-Elizabethan sacred music—the *Eton Choirbook*.

Although the manuscript of St Edmunds Old Hall, Ware, Hertfordshire¹¹ is much more comprehensive than the Eton collection (Old Hall contains 138 works, Eton 43), the latter is still significant. It provides the only indication of the existence of several composers, such as Nesbett, Robert Wylkynson (one of whose contributions was a setting of the Creed, divided into parts for twelve soloists, each one representing an Apostle), and Walter Lambe (1452?–1500?). It is something of a miracle that it has survived at all, vandalism and general wear-and-tear having accounted for the disappearance of about fifty of the original pieces. 'Much of it (the music) is extremely beautiful . . . illustrating the technique of the pre-Elizabethan period'.¹² The Old Hall manuscript includes a considerable number of secular English works (which, as was remarked above, are not overly common in other sources) and two compositions by Henry VI himself, 'who did not need to hide musical deficiencies under the cloak of majesty'.¹³ One is tempted to ponder ruefully upon what the history of England might have been if Henry of Windsor's skill in statecraft had been on a par with his skill in the arts.

With the accession of Edward IV, and the great political turn-about that this entailed, musical composition seems to have lagged behind for a while (war, unlike economic depression, is rarely conducive to artistic activity). However, within a few years the musical *status quo* had been restored. According to Eric Blom,¹⁴ the year 1469 saw the granting of a charter to a Musician's Guild by Henry VI (*sic*), and two years later the standard of singing in the Chapel Royal was so high that the Duke of Milan sent his *maestro di capella* to choose singers from the Chapel. Edward IV seems to have been as fond of music as any Lancastrian king,¹⁵ although no compositions of his have survived, and even in the great upsets of the

early- and mid-1470s he had maintained the high achievement of the royal musicians. Two of these, Gilbert Banestre (1445?–1487) and William Newark (1450?–1509), entered the Chapel Royal in 1475, thus the year that marked the end of the old English musical era (the deaths of Frye and Morton) also saw the beginning of a new one. On Abyngdon's resignation (1478) Banestre was appointed Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal. Newark's talent was recognized in the next reign, when Richard III granted him an annuity of twenty pounds.¹⁶ Both composers remained in some measure of royal favour after Bosworth, as did the up-and-coming Thomas Ashwell (1463?–1518). Banestre's motet '*O Maria et Elizabeth*' (now at Eton) and Ashwell's five-part anthem 'God save King Harry' were heard at the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. Newark was rewarded with the princely sum of one pound for 'making a song' in 1493. Later in that year he obtained the post of Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, which post he held until his death.

His successor was William Cornyshe (1465?–1523), who, along with Robert Fayrfax (1464?–1521) and Hugh Aston (1480?–1522), is the first English composer to have a consistent grip—even if only a toehold—on the repertoire. The high summer of Henry VIII's first fifteen years on the throne saw a profusion of musical activities, and although musicians were still looked upon as being considerably lower than heretics¹⁷ they now had the priceless advantage of being able to disseminate their work by publishing it. A musical cornucopia indeed, yet it has been allowed to overshadow the output of the previous century in a way that it should never have done. The corpus of fifteenth-century music by Englishmen is still a generally untapped source of artistic pleasure. It should not remain so.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. C. V. Stanford and C. Forsyth, *A History of Music*, London (1916), p.149.
2. P. A. Scholes, *Oxford Companion to Music*, Oxford (1955), p.4.
3. D. Stevens, *Music in Honour of St. Thomas of Canterbury* (sleeve-note to Nonesuch Records H-71292).
4. Nonesuch Records H-71292.
5. For a discussion of music at the Burgundian court, aimed at the general reader, see Parrish and Ohl, *Masterpieces of Music before 1750* (Faber & Faber, 1973 edition), pp.43–44.
6. Philips Records 6500085.
7. For a list of these see *Dictionary of National Biography* (1908), Vol. 9, p.1308.
8. Turnabout Records TVS 34058.
9. Turnabout Records TVS 34058 (where, however, Bedyngham's extra parts are not credited).
10. G. Grove, *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London (1954), Vol. 1, pp.965–966.
11. Now in the British Museum, MS Add. 57590.
12. Scholes, *ibid.*, p.336.
13. Stanford and Forsyth, *ibid.*, p.147.
14. E. Blom, *Music in England*, London (1947), p.21.
15. P. M. Kendall, *Warwick the Kingmaker*, London (1972), pp.100–101; H. Cole, *Wars of the Roses*, London (1973), p.134.
16. In 1484 Richard III commissioned one John Melynek to 'ransack the collegiate churches of the country for the best singers' (Blom, *ibid.*, p.22.)
17. John Taverner was accused of heresy by Wolsey, but after having to endure great privation while in prison, was pardoned by the great cardinal, 'being but a Musitian' (Scholes, *ibid.*, p. 1013).