

## Program Notes

This program is part of Blue Heron's long-range project of performing and recording music from the so-called Henrician set of partbooks now residing at Peterhouse, Cambridge. The partbooks, originally five in number, contain a large collection of Masses, Magnificats, and votive antiphons. They were copied in the latter years of the reign of Henry VIII at Magdalen College, Oxford, by the professional singer and music scribe Thomas Bull, just before Bull left Oxford to take up a new position at Canterbury Cathedral.

Bull wrote down, within a very short time, a great quantity of music in plain, carefully checked, and highly legible copies intended for liturgical use, rather than for study or for presentation to a noble as a gift. (A presentation manuscript would demand decoration and fancy trimmings.) Why did Bull copy so much music so quickly? He appears to have been commissioned to supply Canterbury Cathedral with a complete repertoire of polyphonic music. The monastic foundation at Canterbury had been dissolved by Henry VIII in April 1540, one of nearly a dozen great monastic cathedrals dissolved in the years 1539-41. Most were refounded in short order as secular (i.e. non-monastic) institutions, which were subject not to an abbot—a member of a religious order who answered to the pope—but to a bishop and thence to the king, who had declared himself head of the Church of England. Now, monks sang mostly plainchant and did not generally attempt virtuosic polyphonic music, but the new foundation cathedrals aspired to considerable pomp and circumstance and so they needed to hire a choir of professional singers as well as recruit and train choirboys. By the late summer of 1540 Canterbury Cathedral had put together a roster including ten “queresters” (choristers, “quire” being the normal sixteenth-century spelling of the word), their master, and twelve vicars-choral, the professional singing-men. Thomas Tallis is listed first of the “vyccars”; Thomas Bull is sixth. But an addition to singers, the refounded cathedral required an entire library of up-to-date polyphonic repertory, and this Bull supplied, bringing about 70 works with him from Oxford.

The brilliant new choral institution at Canterbury would not last long. Henry died in 1547 and the Protestant reformers who came to power upon the ascension of his young son, Edward, took a dim view of such popish decorations as professional choirs and the highly sophisticated Latin music they sang. All the elaborate polyphonic music of late medieval English Catholicism became, at best, obsolete; at worst it was viewed as gaudy ornament to a despicable ritual. Many musical manuscripts were lost and many destroyed, and if a manuscript escaped deliberate destruction by zealots, it might yet be subjected to other indignities:

A great nombre of them whych purchased those superstycyouse mansyons [the former monasteries], reserved of those librarrye boke, some to serve theyr jakes [privies], some to scoure theyr candelstyckes, and some to rubbe their bootes. Some they solde to the grossers and sope-sellers, & some they sent over see to the bokebynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full, to the wonderynge of the foren nacyons.... I knowe a merchaunt man, whych shall at thys tyme be namelesse, that boughte the contentes of two noble lybraryes for .xl. shyllynges pryce, a shame it is to be spoken. Thys stuffe hath he occupied in the stede of graye paper [wrapping-paper] by the space of more than these .x. yeares, & yet he hath store ynough for as many yeares to come.

The Preface, “Johan Bale to the Reader,” *The laboryouse Journey & serche of Johan Leylande for Englandes Antiquitees* (1549)

Very few collections of church music survived the upheaval. The main sources extant from the entire first half of the sixteenth century are a mere three choirbooks, four sets of partbooks, and one organ manuscript. (Compare this paucity to, for example, the *sixteen* choirbooks owned in 1524 by a single establishment, Magdalen College, Oxford.) We do not know what happened to Bull's five partbooks (one each for the standard five parts of early sixteenth-century English polyphony: treble, mean, contratenor, tenor, and bass) between 1547 and the early years of the next century, but by the 1630s they had made their way to the library of Peterhouse, where they would survive yet another cataclysm of destruction, that wrought by the Puritans in the 1640s.

Or, at least, some of Bull's five partbooks survived. At some point the tenor book disappeared, along with several pages of the treble. Now, of the 72 pieces in the set, 39 are transmitted uniquely, while another dozen or so are incomplete in their other sources. The result is that some fifty pieces of music—a significant portion of what survives from pre-Reformation England—now lack their tenor, and some of these are also missing all or part of their treble. In the Peterhouse repertoire, music by the most famous masters of the early sixteenth century, such as Robert Fayrfax, John Taverner, and Thomas Tallis, sits next to music by less celebrated but nonetheless first-class composers such as Hugh Aston and Nicholas Ludford, and a number of wonderful pieces by musicians whose careers are less well documented and who have been virtually forgotten for the simple reason that so little of their work survives:

Richard Pygott, John Mason, Robert Jones, Robert Hunt, and others. Some of these men cannot even be identified with certainty. And, although Bull was quite scrupulous in providing ascriptions for the music he copied, two of the unique Peterhouse works are anonymous, including the mass we sing today.

We are able to sing the Peterhouse music nowadays thanks to the extraordinarily skilled recomposition of the missing parts by the English musicologist Nick Sandon. (Sandon also pieced together the story of the genesis of the partbooks that I have related above.) Sandon completed his dissertation on the Peterhouse partbooks in 1983, including in it recompositions of most of the missing lines; in the years since he has been refining his work and gradually issuing it in Antico Edition. For the anonymous *Missa sine nomine* and Robert Hunt's *Ave Maria*, Sandon recomposed the entire tenor line. In the case of Aston's *Ave Maria ancilla trinitatis*, both tenor and treble parts are entirely lost, and two-fifths of the polyphonic texture you will hear in this performance have been restored by Sandon in a brilliant feat of reimagination.

### **Hunt's *Ave Maria mater dei***

The Peterhouse partbooks are the only extant source of music by Robert Hunt. The composer has not been identified but may have been the chorister of that name at Magdalen College between 1486 and 1493; if so he would have been born around 1478. Only two pieces by him exist, this *Ave Maria* and a *Stabat mater* which will appear on volume 4 of our series of recordings *Music from the Peterhouse Partbooks*. Like the powerfully eloquent *Stabat mater*, Hunt's *Ave Maria mater dei* is a bit rough and craggy, and it shares with that work the characteristic of turning dramatically from one mood to another, achieved here by quick shifts between major and minor sonorities, close or simultaneous juxtaposition of two forms of the same note (B-flat versus B-natural, C-natural versus C-sharp), or sudden changes in the speed at which motives move or answer each other—or by all of the above at once, as at the words “sed tuam sanctissimam.” Note also the marvelous way the piece relaxes into the Amen, which lasts a full quarter of the length of this unusually concise antiphon.

### **A Mass without a name**

The anonymous *Missa sine nomine* is based on a plainchant cantus firmus. The copyist Thomas Bull gave a title to almost every Mass in the partbooks; in the case of a cantus firmus mass, the title is normally the first few words of the chant passage. Why he omitted the title in this case is something of a mystery, and the mystery is deepened by Sandon's failure (after decades of work on the partbooks) to locate a perfectly convincing match for the cantus firmus melody. The nearest he has come is a part of an antiphon from vespers on the feast of a confessor-bishop, and it is this discovery that prompted him to speculate that the Mass may have been dedicated to the local luminary St. Augustine of Canterbury, or, as a late fifteenth-century English source has it, “Saynt Austyn that brought crystendom in to Englund.” If so, perhaps there was something politically risky about a Mass dedicated to a saint who played a foundational role in establishing Catholicism in England—a man whose lofty stature and unquestionable authority as a leader of the church must have offered, to religious conservatives such as the new dean and chapter at Canterbury Cathedral, a telling contrast to the present king. And perhaps that is why the Mass was left without ascription.

Sandon himself is not convinced of this hypothesis, writing that “In reality, the omission of the composer's name and the work's title must surely be wholly innocent”—in short, the scribe probably omitted this information simply because he didn't know it. But the connection to Augustine via the chant quotation remains quite plausible, and with this possibility in mind, we introduce our concert performance with the introit from the Mass for the feast of a Confessor-Bishop, leading from that into the troped Kyrie *Orbis factor* and thence to the first of the four movements of the *Missa sine nomine*, the Gloria. (Sixteenth-century English polyphonic settings of the mass never include a Kyrie, leaving it to be sung in plainchant in one of several traditional, elaborate troped texts like “Orbis factor.”)

As for the composer, Professor Sandon can identify no likely candidate. The music, as he says, is “fluent, vigorous and imaginative,” but lacks features which would associate it with the style of other composers represented in the Peterhouse partbooks or in other manuscripts. The Mass may well be the work of a skilled and prolific composer whose music has disappeared, in part or altogether. Indeed, it is only due to the happy survival of the Peterhouse partbooks (about four-fifths of them, to be precise) that we know anything, or anything much, of Mason, Pygott, Jones, or Hunt, just to name a few composers whose music Nick Sandon has restored and which Blue Heron has been fortunate enough to sing.

Each movement of the Mass opens with a few measures of the same music before it pursues its own way, each coming to rest a short while later—pausing for breath, as it were, after the exordium of its argument. The cantus

firmus, which is recognisable as a sequence of long notes, is heard mostly in the mean, the second voice from the top, occasionally migrating elsewhere including to its traditional locus in the tenor (in the Sanctus at “in nomine domini”), and, strikingly, the bass (in the second invocation of the Agnus dei at “qui tollis peccata mundi”). The melodies tend to be quirky, angular, and busy, especially in sections of reduced scoring for two or three parts, such as the duet in the Credo that follows the opening passage for the full ensemble. There is one, and only one, instance of a “Gimel” or two lines written for one divided voice part: the texture of two trebles and one mean, answered by a trio of lower voices, is a beautiful surprise when it occurs early in the Gloria, and it is almost equally surprising that it never recurs. The piece features some arresting harmonic changes, notably at the end of each movement. And in every movement but the Sanctus the last section is written in a mensuration (a time signature, more or less) that implies a very quick triple meter—another surprise, especially for the final words of the Mass, “Dona nobis pacem.” All these things lend the piece a strongly individual character.

### *Aston’s Ave Maria ancilla trinitatis*

The last work on the program is by Hugh Aston, a favorite composer of Blue Heron’s since we sang his *Ave Maria dive matris Anne* on our very first concert in October 1999. Among the many marvelous and individual voices of the Peterhouse composers, Aston stands out for the emotional immediacy of his music, which seems to me to go directly to one’s heart. In *Ave Maria ancilla trinitatis* each “Ave Maria” is granted a unique character, yet all feel direct and personal. After all the salutations, an added text (by Aston himself?) addresses the Blessed Virgin on behalf of a single speaker, marvellously embodied here by a dozen singers, seeking her intercession “at the hour of my death,” before the music finally spills over into bars and bars of ecstatic vocalising in one of the most luxuriantly extended melismatic *Amens* imaginable.

### Vocal scoring and voice types

The five-voice scoring of pre-Reformation English polyphony employs four basic voice types: treble (sung by a boy with a specially trained higher voice), mean (sung by a boy with an ordinary voice), tenor, and bass. Tenor parts are further divided into tenor and contratenor, the latter a part written “against the tenor” and originally in the same range. Beginning around the 1520s English contratenor parts tended to lie slightly higher than the tenor. On the continent this bifurcation happened somewhat earlier: the higher part was called a *contratenor altus*, a “high part written against the tenor,” eventually to be known simply as *altus*. A contratenor was *not* a man singing in falsetto (like the modern “countertenor”) but a high tenor.

An anonymous early Jacobean document describes these five voice types succinctly:

Nature has disposed all voices, both of men and children, into five kinds, viz: Basses (being the lowest or greatest voices), Tenors being neither so low or so great, Countertenors (being less low and more high than tenors) of which three kinds all men’s voices consist. Then of children’s voices there are two kinds, viz. Meane voices (which are higher than men’s voices) and Treble voices, which are the highest kind of Children’s voices.

Charles Butler provides more detail (and some fanciful etymology) in *The principles of musik* (1636):

The Base is so called, because it is the *basis* or foundation of the Song, unto which all the other Partes bee set: and it is to be sung with a deepe, ful, and pleasing Voice.

The Tenor is so called, because it was commonly in Motets the ditti-part or Plain-song...or (if you will) because neither ascending to any high or strained note, nor descending very low, it continueth in one ordinari tenor of the voice and therefore may be sung by an indifferent [that is, average] voice.

The Countertenor or *Contratenor*, is so called, because it answereth the Tenor, though commonly in higher keyz [clefs]: and therefore is fittest for a man of a sweet shrill voice.<sup>1</sup> Which part though it have little melodi by itself...yet in Harmoni it hath the greatest grace specially when it is sung with a right voice: which is too rare.

<sup>1</sup> “Shrill” meant high or bright and did not carry the negative connotations it has now. The word might describe the sound of a lark or a trumpet, as in “the shrill-gorg’d Larke” (*King Lear* IV.vi.58) or “the shrill Trumpe” (*Othello* III.iii.351).

The Mean is so called, because it is a middling or mean high part, between the Countertenor, (the highest part of a man) and the Treble (the highest part of a boy or woman) and therefore may be sung by a mean voice.

The Treble is so called, because his notes are placed (for the most part) in the third Septenari [i.e. the highest of the three octaves of the normal composite range of human voices], or the Treble clefs: and is to be sung with a high cleere sweete voice.

Although not so well documented for earlier eras, the division of male voices into five types dates back to well before the Reformation. An entry in the early sixteenth-century Household Book of the Earl of Northumberland, for example, divides the “Gentillmen and childeryn of the chapell” as follows: “Gentillmen of the chapell viij viz ij Basses ij tenors aund iij Countertenors yoman or grome of the vestry j Childeryn of the chapell v viz ij Tribills and iij Meanys.”

As for our forces, since we are not bound by the old ecclesiastical prohibition against men and women singing sacred music together, our treble parts are sung by women, rather than boys. Charles Butler suggests the possibility in the passage quoted above, and indeed, no less a musician than William Byrd is known to have participated in liturgical music-making with a mixed choir. The English Jesuit William Weston, visiting the Berkshire country house of Richard Ford in 1586, described “a chapel, set aside for the celebration of the Church’s offices” and musical forces that included “an organ and other musical instruments and choristers, male and female, members of his household. During these days it was just as if we were celebrating an uninterrupted Octave of some great feast. Mr Byrd, the very famous English musician and organist, was among the company.”

While sixteenth-century English choirs employed boys on the “mean” line, on the continent parts in this range were sung either by adult male falsettists or by boys. Our mean is sung by one male falsettist and two women. Contratenor, tenor, and bass lines are sung by high, medium, and low mens’ voices, respectively.

In its size and distribution our ensemble very closely resembles the one pre-Reformation choir for which we have detailed evidence of the distribution of voices used in an actual performance, as opposed to a roster of the singers on staff. On one typical occasion in about 1518, this choir—that of the household chapel of the Earl of Northumberland—was divided very much as ours is, 3/3/2/2/3 from top to bottom. Grand collegiate foundations such as Magdalen College or cathedrals like Canterbury may have sung polyphonic music with larger forces. Between 1500 and 1547 Magdalen College usually maintained a complement of 16 boys and 9 or 10 men; the Canterbury staff list of 1540 includes 10 choristers and 12 men (13 counting the master of the choristers), whom we might imagine to have divided themselves 5/5/4/4/4, if the entire choir ever sang polyphony together. I know of no evidence, however, that connects a particular complement or distribution of forces to the performance of a specific piece of music.

As always, we are immensely grateful to Nick Sandon for his matchless skill in restoring this wonderful music and allowing it to sound anew. A thorough account by Sandon of the history of the Peterhouse partbooks and his restoration work, and a recording of Aston’s *Ave Maria ancilla trinitatis*, may be found in volume 1 of Blue Heron’s CD series, *Music from the Peterhouse Partbooks*.

—Scott Metcalfe