

Notes on Robert Parsons' Latin Works

by George Steel

Of the ten extant Latin works by Robert Parsons, only six survive complete. Three are missing at least one voice part, and one is but a fragment. [That fragment, *Magnus es Dominus*, is not included in the site; it is transcribed in Paul Doe's edition (see below).]

Early English Church Music Vol. 40, edited by Paul Doe, contains Parsons' complete Latin church music, but in scholarly editions. These are unsuitable for performance: they are in old long note values, they are untransposed, and the counter tenor parts are printed in the tenor clef. However, Doe has valiantly essayed editorial completions of all the missing voice parts (with mixed success).

The editions offered here are intended for performance. They do not, however, provide editorial completions for the defective works, with the exception of the Magnificat in a wonderful new edition by Jason Smart, and *Iam Christus astra ascenderat*, for which Francis Steele has made an excellent reconstruction. It is our hope that more will take up the challenges of reconstruction; we will post future reconstructions at the site as they become available.

For editorial reconstructions of the other incomplete works, the interested should consult Paul Doe's reconstructions, or any of the other editions, which are listed with the notes on each work.

These editions are greatly dependent variously on the work of Paul Doe, Michael Donaldson (who has made his own excellent private editions), and Robert Nosow.

for more information, see:

Doe, Paul, ed. *Robert Parsons: Latin Sacred Music*. Early English Church Music (EECM), vol. 40. London: Stainer and Bell, 1994.

Nosow, Robert M. *Respond Motets from Matins for the Dead by Robert Parsons*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of Texas, Denton, 1984.

Iam Christus astra ascenderat [Incomplete]

Iam Christus astra ascenderat is a simple six-voice setting of the hymn for vespers on the feast of Pentecost. In Parsons' setting, closely related to settings of the same hymn by Tallis and Sheppard, the liturgically dictated plainsong alternates with polyphonic verses. This is one of two of Parsons' Latin works that use the treble voice, an extremely high voice part that is peculiar to England in the 16th century and which was almost entirely absent from Reformation music.

Parsons gives the hymn tune *cantus firmus* to the treble voices, and weaves his lithe and somber polyphony around it.

This work survives incomplete, but the tenor has been reconstructed by Francis Steele especially for the Parsons Project. Paul Doe has also reconstructed the tenor part, for which see EECM, Vol. 40.

Credo quod redemptor meus vivit

Parsons wrote three pieces of music associated with burial services, which form an elegant group. However, it is not clear that they all date from the reign of Mary I. (Although she brought back the English prayerbook, Elizabeth allowed the composition of some Latin-texted music.) Parsons' setting is in the ABB form cultivated in England in the mid-century. Because of the concision of the writing (closer to one-note-per-syllable than not) and the absence of a *cantus firmus*, the work seems stylistically Elizabethan.

Peccantem me quotidie [Incomplete]

Peccantem me quotidie is a work that seems more clearly Marian. While Parsons has modernized the overall structure of the piece, it seems largely to conform to the liturgical needs of the Sarum rite. The plainsong *cantus firmus* is carried in the upper of two countertenor parts, which enter late into the piece. Parsons' music dramatically underscores the fervency of the text.

The music survives lacking a tenor part. A published edition, well-edited and reconstructed by Jason Smart, is available from Oxford University Press (TCM 127). Robert Nosow and Paul Doe have each also made reconstructions (see citations above).

Libera me, Domine

Libera me, Domine, the third of Parsons' funeral works, is also the grimmest in outlook. Fashioned again over a plainsong *cantus firmus* carried in the tenor part, the music vividly depicts the horrors of the final Day of Judgment.

Magnificat

By composing a large-scale Latin Magnificat, Parsons was joining a tradition that extended at least to the huge settings found in the Eton choirbook (from the late 15th century). Parsons' largest surviving work, this splendid *alternatim* (alternating plainsong and polyphonic verse) setting of the Magnificat can be considered a sibling to Robert White's music for the same text. (The White Magnificat has been reconstructed by Sally Dunkley and recorded by the Tallis Scholars.) The scoring is flexible from verse to verse, although the basic choir is six-voiced, with high trebles on top. Sonorous, contrapuntally ingenious, and grandly scaled, this is some of Parsons' finest music.

Perhaps Parsons' great masterpiece, this work survives incomplete (the treble part is about half missing). We are very fortunate that Jason Smart has provided

us with his wonderful reconstruction of the work, which allows it to be performed in all its glory.

The performance on the Parsons Project website, predating Jason Smart's editorial work) uses Paul Doe's reconstruction from EECM, but omits the "Esurientes" verse, in which a Treble gymel must be reconstructed; Paul Doe's admirable stab at reconstruction can be considered only a partial success.

Domine quis habitabit [Incomplete]

Domine quis habitabit belongs to a genre called by modern historians "psalm-motets," by which two things are meant: the music is a Latin setting of a portion of a psalm, and its liturgical use is unknown. This particular psalm (Psalm 15) was set by a large number of composers from this period (including Tallis, Mundy, White, and Byrd). It seems that these words then must have had a special liturgical function. The text seems particularly appropriate to solemnizing an oath or a treaty, and the music certainly seems calculated to impress; this and other settings of the same words would have embellished a state ceremony (perhaps consecrating a treaty) beautifully.

A tantalizing picture of just such a ceremony is preserved in the Old Cheque Book of the Chapel Royal from 1604, involving a treaty signing by the Spanish ambassador. It is tempting to imagine a work like *Domine quis habitabit* being performed at such an occasion. The details, including the use of a copy of the Latin bible, are interesting enough to be given here in full:

Then his Majesty [James I] coming into the Chapel, on his right hand went the Constable of Spain, and on his left the Spanish ledger Ambassador, and so they went up to the Communion table together.

Then his majesty went into his Traverse where he usually sitteth, and the Constable into the other, **and there they both remained till an Anthem was ended**, which began so soon as his Majesty and the Ambassador were in their Traverses, till which time the organs played.

Then the King and the Constable coming out of their Traverses stood near together upon the half pace, turning their faces the one to the other: being so placed, my Lord Viscount Cranborn, Principal Secretary, read the Oath, the King putting his hand within the Ambassador's in the beginning of the oath, and laid his hands upon a Latin Bible of vulgar translation the other part of the oath, the Bible being held by the Dean of the Chapel in a cope all the while the oath was read.

Then after the taking of the Oath, the King and Constable kissed each other, and then they went again in to their Traverses, **and there stayed till another Anthem was sung**.

—from *The Old Cheque-book*, Edward F. Rimbault, editor, Da Capo Press, 1966, pp. 151-152, emphasis added

In fact, all other settings of Psalm 15 by English composers (both Latin- and English-texted) have two parts, the first corresponding to Parsons' setting and the second completing the psalm. It is tempting to think that these paired halves provided the two anthems used in a ceremony like the one described above. It is

further tempting to speculate further that Parsons' setting had a second half that has not survived. Whatever the truth, Parsons' music is concise and brilliant, and the music suggests that he was familiar with Franco-Flemish psalm settings from the same period (which were almost always cast in two parts).

Musicologist Joseph Kerman has championed the idea that the "psalm-motet" was an Elizabethan development, and ascribes the emergence of the form to composers' new humanistic freedom in choosing texts.¹ I tend to agree instead with Frank Harrison, who responded to Kerman's assertion thus: "It is most unlikely that many of these pieces were written after 1559; most were probably composed in Queen Mary's reign, perhaps under the impulse of a new awareness of their cultivation on the Continent."²

The tenor voice is missing. The performance posted at the Parsons Project website uses Paul Doe's reconstruction.

Retribue servo tuo

The second of Parsons' surviving "psalm-motets" is the large-scale *Retribue Servo Tuo*. Unlike *Domine quis habitabit*, this music is more akin to the grand melismatic writing of the *Magnificat*. In two large sections, the work is further subdivided by texture, moving from two-voice writing at the opening to a five-voice *tutti* at the close of each section. With the *Magnificat* and *O Bone Jesu*, *Retribue* is one of Parsons' large-scale masterpieces.

O bone Jesu [score not posted at this site]

Parsons' setting of the text *O Bone Jesu* is unique in the English repertoire³. In fact, I can find only one other setting of the text, variously attributed to Loyset Compère, Francisco de Peñalosa, Juan de Anchieta, or Antonio de Ribera (according to the *New Grove*, 2nd Edition). It seems likely that this older setting (whoever wrote it!) came to England with the Capilla Real of Phillip II, Queen Mary's husband, and may thus have directly encouraged Parsons' setting. The two settings have formal similarities, though Parsons set more of the text.

¹ see Joseph Kerman, "The Elizabethan Motet: a Study of Texts for Music," *Studies in the Renaissance*, ix (1962): 273-308.

² Frank Ll. Harrison, "Church Music in England" in *New Oxford History of Music* (2nd Edition), IV: *The Age of Humanism, 1540-1630*, p. 479. There seems to be a lamentable habit among musicologists to avoid the ascription of works to the reign of Mary I. In fact, her reign would seem the logical birthplace not only of the "psalm-motet," but also of English polyphonic Lamentation settings. In his dissertation, David Flanagan goes far enough to link the psalm-motet and Lamentation settings and rescues the idea that the Lamentations were used liturgically; he stops short of ascribing them to Mary's reign, settling instead for "early in the reign of Elizabeth." See his excellent dissertation: David Timothy Flanagan, *Polyphonic Settings of the Lamentations of Jeremiah by Sixteenth-Century English Composers* (Ph.D. diss, Cornell University, 1990).

³ There are in fact many works—English and other—called "O Bone Jesu"; these are however settings of other texts that begin with those words.

The peculiar text of *O Bone Jesu*—a group of different psalm verses interleaved with “O” acclamations in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek—is a special devotional collection known as “St. Bernard’s Verses.” The pious legend surrounding the origin of the text runs thus: While reading his Bible, St. Bernard was approached by the Devil, who taunted him. The Devil claimed that there existed a secret formula of psalm verses that, if recited daily, would hold the Devil powerless. However, the Devil understandably refused to divulge these verses to Bernard. Determined to learn the magic verses, Bernard threatened that if the Devil did not reveal these apotropaic verses, he would recite the *entire* Psalter every day. When confronted with this threat of piety, the devil divulged the secret verses to Bernard and to posterity.

This popular devotional text (a regular in printed books of hours) was one of the “superstitious” devotions specifically abrogated by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, chief architect of the English Reformation, in his *Homily of Good Works*, published in 1547 at the beginning of the reign of Edward VI.

And briefly to pass over the ungodly and counterfeit religions, let us rehearse some other kinds of papistical superstitions and abuses, as of beads, lady psalters, and rosaries, of fifteen oes, of St. Bernard’s verses, of St. Agathe’s letters, of purgatory, of masses satisfactory, of stations and jubilees, of feigned relics, of hallowed beads, bells, bread, water, palms, candles, fire, and such other . . .

--quoted in *The Stripping of the Altars*, Eamon Duffy, Yale, 1992, pp. 448-449

St. Bernard’s Verses were restored to their former place under the reign of Mary I; Parsons’ choice of this text seems to carry a kind of defiant Catholic triumphalism in choosing a devotion specifically proscribed by the forces of Protestantism. It seems that Parsons too, like several of his musical contemporaries, might have harbored Catholic sympathies.

Sally Dunkley has made an excellent edition of *O Bone Jesu*, available from Mapa Mundi editions (Series C, No. 20). To encourage sales of her fine edition, we are omitting the score of this work from the Parsons website. The performance posted here was sung from her edition.

Ave Maria

Parsons’ *Ave Maria* is his most famous work to modern audiences, and is a glorious demonstration of the beauty of Parsons’ contrapuntal thought. It should be noted that this too was an unusual choice of text in 16th-century England. There is only one other English contemporary setting, by William Byrd, whose music (as part of his *Gradualia*) forms a part of the Roman Catholic Rite (different from the Sarum Catholic Rite). Parsons setting is properly thought of as a “votive antiphon” that would be the concluding movement of three devotional works sung after the evening service of Compline. The music, like several other English and Latin works of Parsons, is cast in ABB form.