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Museum Pieces? Sixteenth-Century Sacred Polyphony and the Modern English Tradition of *A Cappella* Performance

David Allinson

The audience of several dozen, sitting in hard pews, breaks into applause as a crocodile of singers, clad in black cotton clothes and black shoes, files neatly onto the chancel steps. The conductor takes his place in front of the choir, the applause dies away and an intense, still silence frames the polyphonic mass and motets that reverberate amid stone arcades. After an hour or so the music dies away; the audience is roused from focused contemplation to appreciation; the performers acknowledge the applause and depart for the pub.

This scenario will be familiar to any reader of the journal who has, like me, played the part of listener, singer or conductor at a concert of Renaissance polyphony. In this brief essay I want to look critically at the ways in which we currently perform and consume sacred polyphony composed between 1450 and 1650, in public and private listening contexts, by turning the spotlight on some longstanding conventions of programming and presentation, and examining the values and assumptions that underlie them.

As someone who buys CDs, streams music (and enjoys the incongruities of ‘shuffle’ mode), shares video clips on Facebook and listens through headphones in contexts such as on the train or at the gym, I certainly don’t confine my listening to ideal conditions. Moreover, with an Oxford music degree behind me and a well-worn set of black concert clothes in my wardrobe I am by no means set apart from my colleagues in the English early music choral scene. But I do want to share some disquiet, and to stimulate some debate about how – as conductors, singers and listeners – our approaches to the sound, presentation and consumption of the music choral singers and its audiences love might become more diverse, more contemporary and perhaps do greater justice to the original spirit of this music.

I am writing here mainly about the choral culture in the south-east of England, with its superb singers and directors from cathedral and university traditions, who exist in a symbiotic relationship with the concert life, recording industry and broadcasting

organisations in London, which exert a huge influence over amateur and professional singing of Renaissance polyphony worldwide. I want to examine the continuing disconnection, or disparity, between what scholars say about the likely original sound, performance context and meaning of this repertoire, and the ways in which it is recreated, sold and consumed in the present day. Obviously, sacred polyphony today is not performed and heard as it might have been by people in sixteenth-century Europe. Then its performance most often occurred within liturgical sequences of spoken and chanted Proper and Ordinary texts, springing out of the monophonic plain with all the vividness of a flowering Joshua Tree. Today, as performers and listeners, we gorge on rich polyphony and neglect the radiating supporting structures of liturgy, chant and doctrine. Modern concert and recording conditions mean that we hear this intricate music with unprecedented clarity and balance, for access and proximity was usually the preserve of the privileged in the sixteenth century: the majority of the laity would have heard polyphony as a blur, rising like incense from beyond a screen or would have eavesdropped upon it through the grilles of chantry chapels.

The Oxbridge/London *a cappella* sound has assumed a sort of canonical status, feeding back on itself to create an international default or standard – for vastly diverse repertoires spanning the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, originating from across western Europe. The sound of the most successful English groups has ‘fed back’ into the way

singers sing polyphony worldwide, and has conditioned the expectations and preferences of audiences.

Aided by leaps in recording, editing and playback technology, the aesthetic of recordings – of cleanly edited, balanced, digital perfection – has encouraged a move towards a rendering of polyphony as a ‘text’ rather than an ‘act’, to draw on Taruskin’s familiar distinction, because of the complete removal of context and function.¹ The process of recording – from first downbeat to final edit – creates a fixed entity, rather than a temporal ‘act’ of a time and space, because repeated takes are layered over one another like strips of papier-mâché. The pasting together creates a digital artefact – a sound file, or piece of ‘sounded writing’ suspended in translucent digital aspic, and a manipulable object available for repeated and detailed appreciation. Even the context in which a recording is made is disguised: twenty-first-century intrusions such as traffic and aircraft noise are removed, along with singers’ coughs and tiny errors, such as a misplaced consonant.

The perfection aimed at in recordings chimes with the problematic ways in which musicologists have traditionally conceptualised music: *as* its written notation, rather than as a multi-step process by which imagined and real sounds pass between composers, performers and listeners. In privileging the composer and the ‘documentary residue’ of music, many aspects of performing and listening have been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant, distracting or even injurious to the ‘music itself’. In this traditional conception of music, it is the notation that autonomously embodies the composer’s intentions, transcending time and place, and it is the performer’s duty to transmit those intentions faithfully – a concept known as *Werktreue*.²

Sixteenth-century masses and motets, it turns out, have submitted well to this anachronistic aesthetic, where textual sense is suppressed in favour of sonic sheen, and where references to the beliefs and power structures that gave birth to the music are muted. Cyclic masses (especially so-called ‘parody’ masses, i.e. settings of the Ordinary that are based on pre-existing polyphonic material, such as a chanson or motet) proved particularly susceptible to this treatment in the modern era: with the duration of a classical symphony, they conveniently fill a concert half or one side of an old LP, and with

their texts already familiar to listeners, they unfold like a set of variations. Alas, performances of motets, often with more dramatic or poetic texts, have tended to fall under the same impersonal, homogenised aesthetic.

Live or recorded, Renaissance masses and motets – which originally supported a liturgical ritual or themselves constituted an act of prayer – tend, in our world, to stand for themselves as aesthetic vehicles of sublime contemplation. Captured on physical media or in a digital file, listeners can summon them up in moments and contexts of their choosing, thus creating an infinite variety of potential receptions of the music. It is inevitable that the circumstances of listening will be far from the context of the listeners who first heard this music – today, the listener’s surroundings may be banal, incongruous or elevated – but, significantly, our contemporary listening is often undertaken alone (even when we’re in a crowd). The music is frequently employed as a means of mental and emotional escape, in contrast to the ways in which it expressed common beliefs and affirmed group identities at the time of its creation.³

In this way, Eton Choirbook antiphons, masses from Renaissance Spain and motets from Renaissance Rome have found admission to the ‘museum of musical works’ – as precious artefacts divorced from the ecology of their original surroundings in the same way that a spotlighted Renaissance altarpiece or a medieval devotional book is conserved for display behind thick glass, in controlled humidity and inert gas. They are a long way from home, and it is no longer possible for them to be accessed or used for their original purpose: they are saved from degradation by contact with religious adherents and iconoclasts alike. In the same way, we curate our flawless digital recordings of sacred polyphony on our shelves and in our devices, away from the dangers of guttering candles and doctrinal controversy.

Recording disconnects music from time, not only because the performers no longer need to be located in the same place as the hearer, but because the ‘site of production’ – the choir of singers’ resonating bodies – is rendered superfluous once the recording has been made. The music no longer belongs to the bodies that made it but has become a sonic hologram of

intertwining vocal lines. This abstraction mirrors the underlying anti-Romantic strain in the early music movement, and feels particularly acute in performances of music reliant on the voice.

This aesthetic ‘feeds back’ into live singing, firstly in the cleanliness and caution of choirs in concert. Schooled in practices from heavily edited recordings, and knowing that the audience’s ears have been conditioned to expect the same aesthetic in concerts, singers frequently strive for a flawless sheen. This can lead to a glorious ‘rightness’ in ensemble, blend and tuning, but it also creates artistic caution. If the priority is to recreate a technically perfect, meditative sonic entity, rather than music functioning to stimulate devotion, as might be sung by a choir which serves the daily round of liturgy, then the price is suppression of individuality in the singers’ voices, and personality in the moment. This surely links, at a deeper level, to a traditional English disdain for drawing attention to oneself through bodily movement or emotional display in formal situations, and also shows the power transferred from the singers to the conductor, who channels the shaping of a unified emotional response to the music.

Don’t misunderstand me: the achievements of this school of southern English choirs are world-class and utterly beautiful. Might not composers of the Renaissance period have loved the tone, tuning and technical precision (even if perplexed by the lack of instrumental participation)?⁴ Evidence suggests that, just like their counterparts today, composers of the past cared deeply that their carefully crafted works were respected and transmitted without error.⁵ But might they have railed against the changed spirit in which their music is performed and heard presently? The falling away of belief and declining knowledge of theology and music theory among musicians and listeners, as well as the institution of the concert hall and the technology of recording, have all inevitably changed the perceived import of the music when it is sounded – but does the music have to be framed in such an objective way?

And what of the body, the muscles in motion, the drawing and release of breath, and the tongue, the glottis, soft palette and teeth creating vowels and articulating them; the mucous membrane, the nose, the cavities and fluids manipulated to achieve resonance? What

of the beating hearts of the choir? If the consideration of such elements seems gauche, it partly illustrates how our conception of a *cappella* music – be it live in concert, edited on record or as conceptualised in writing – is intensely cerebral and disembodied. This, in itself, arguably reflects not only the continuing influence of the nineteenth-century concept of ‘autonomous music’ but also the continuing power of Protestant conceptions of spirituality as inward and personal – and of the body as a repository of sin.

Personally, I like occasional slips in live and recorded performances. I like to hear effort as well as ease, to hear the breathing as singers spur each other onward, and to notice momentary imperfections of tone and tuning as singers navigate breaks between registers. I like to see spittle fly and the bells toll; perhaps the sound of the city might break in ... in other words, I like to glimpse my polyphony in something like the ecology that originally sustained it, and for it to emanate from a body of singers located undeniably in the present.

A second way the cool ‘disembodiedness’ of recording ‘feeds back’ into concert singing is in the stance, dress and attitude of choirs in relation to their audiences. Choirs most commonly don the uniform of the anti-corporate rebel – all black. Professional and amateur singers of Renaissance polyphony generally avoid the morning suits and dinner jackets that signify the bourgeois values of the concert hall and opera house, and the music of the Austro-German canon. To wear cassocks – as I have occasionally seen continental early music choirs do – might be seen in a British context to signify institutional belonging (or even read as a badge of religious identification). So while cassocks or robes are almost compulsory for college and cathedral choirs, professional and amateur choirs that lack an institutional affiliation avoid them, lest their audiences be forced to confront the music’s working origins (whereupon patrons who describe themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ might be alienated).

So most choirs wear black. There are good practical reasons: decent black clothes can be bought reasonably cheaply, they conceal creases and are easy to match. Their ubiquity means professional singers, who frequently appear with several ensembles in succession,

need only invest in one wardrobe. But black clothing sends a deeper message, too; the audience is being told: ‘focus on the music, not the musicians’. The singers are rendered part of one corporate body – as visually blended and homogenised as their collective sound, since no individual ranks above another in the hierarchy, just as in the web of polyphony. Sometimes the conductor may be differentiated in dress – signalling their role as chief coordinator and interpreter – but black dress otherwise throws attention onto the musicians’ faces and leaves their sounding bodies in decent obscurity.

I think there is much more to be said about the ways in which clothing, stance and

even stage formations send out cues to audiences about the ways in which music should be received, but I would like to look now at the ways in which promotional images can express performers’ authority and artistic legitimacy.

For cathedral and chapel choirs, the buildings, dress and other accoutrements of their institution provide the perfect props to testify to the authority of their performances: these show that they serve the liturgy every day with this music. The pictures speak of a living tradition, rather than of a constructed, academic or historically self-conscious one.



Ex. 1. Canterbury Cathedral Choir in cassocks (by permission of David Flood).
Photographer: Alexa Kelly.

It has also been fairly common for choirs and conductors to portray themselves in a suggestively ecclesiastical or academic backdrop, such as a library or college cloister, thus reassuring the viewer of their credentials – of an intellectual hinterland. Where this is the case, the groups in question are more likely to exhibit a slightly pedagogical attitude towards their audience, through staging liturgical reconstructions, striving for historically informed tuning and pronunciation, and so on.

But for most touring and recording choirs, the tendency is to portray the choir as a cohesive, professional unit. In all-black dress, the bodies of the singers are rendered equivalent (as in the modern striving for blend) and most signifiers of social or religious affiliation are muted. Black clothing tones down gender differences and neutralises the personalities in the choir; and it suggests, too, that the music will be untainted by ego and individualism. Here, choirs continue to pay tribute to the anti-

Romantic impulse of artistic self-abnegation, which originally stimulated the early music revival.



Ex. 2. Alamire in Magdalen College, Oxford
(by permission of David Skinner)

Most arresting are pictures of choirs in which the bodies have been almost entirely airbrushed out. Here, the site of production is effectively removed – a visual analogue to the cleanly disembodied perfection of much recorded polyphony. At the same time, the frequent use of blank backgrounds means that the banalities of modern life are excluded, as many devotees of early music might prefer.



Ex. 3. Stile Antico, all in black against a white background (by permission of Matthew O'Donovan). Photographer: Benjamin Ealovega.



Ex. 4. The Tallis Scholars, all in black (by permission of Peter Phillips)

What is the unspoken message of these plainly dressed singers in front of blank backdrops? That the sounds are expressed afresh on a neutral canvas? That these singers are the vessels for timeless music purely remade for the here and now? This 'visual aesthetic' often chimes well with the pristine aural results, which do not demand that the listener understands the context and meaning of the music in order to appreciate it.

On the surface, this smacks of a retreat from wrestling with the old vexatious arguments about authenticity. But of course it *is* a position in relation to those debates – it's not neutral. It privileges a 'trans-historical humanness' above

specificity of time and place. Its message is that this music of centuries past can speak to you now – where you are – and it can enrapture and move you. The aesthetic is premised upon a surprisingly 'Romantic' idea: universality is achievable through a distancing of the music from its context, which elevates it above its original liturgical function. The visual as well as sonic abstraction promises the listener a glimpse of celestial glories in a dark and disorderly world: it is a distillation of purity, rather than a challenging disruption.

Now, part of me rather likes this aesthetic. To return to our museum-case analogy, the music is perfectly mounted and shown to best effect, so that the artistry of composer and performers can best be appreciated. Nor do I privilege a pedagogical, moralising approach, which attempts to control reception and predict listener response: if listeners seek relaxation and want the music to transport them away from everyday life, so be it. And I certainly do not buy into the pessimism of postmodern theories about the contingency of meaning, which deny the possibility that a great work can evoke a deep emotional response in hearers in diverse times and places. But I am disappointed that choirs and conductors don't often set themselves any goal beyond presenting the music in performances that are error-free, visually static and sonically beautiful.

Many of the most successful English purveyors of Renaissance polyphony have responded little to developments in musicology over the last thirty years, which have emphasised context and contingency in the making of musical meaning: a cyclic Mass is still likely to be offered as the choral equivalent to a set of symphonic variations. As in art, where a 'literacy of looking' can reveal additional layers of meaning, or in literature, where 'close reading' of a text brings out cultural resonances that would otherwise be lost to us, I think Renaissance music, in all its evanescent, numinous glory, deserves to be placed in a sympathetic cultural and intellectual context. This requires additional work and imagination, but the result doesn't have to be earnest; the choices we make about venue, dress, words, images and use of digital resources can all contribute fruitfully and evocatively to our advocacy of this music.

The fitful English response to developments in musicology is curious,

especially as some of the best scholars are also prominent performers.⁶ It indicates, perhaps, the strength of longstanding artistic traditions and commercial imperatives of performance, as well as showing how challenging it is to place music in new ‘frames’ for our (pretty conservative!) audiences. Perhaps we have fallen into complacency? In the last two decades, it has felt as if innovation in the early music movement has more frequently come from the Continent or North America (I’m thinking here of conductorless ensembles like Cappella Pratensis, that sing around choirbook facsimiles or attempt historical re-enactments on location, as in their DVD of Obrecht’s *Missa de Sancto Donatio*).⁷ This has not been the case among English exponents of secular repertory.⁸

Before finishing I would like to probe further beneath the sheen of the early music *a cappella* tradition as it exists today, to explore the social and cultural values it embodies. Among other topics, the following might be worthy of future exploration, to the benefit of a more diverse and self-aware performing culture: choir positioning, stance and formation within spaces (from intimate and functional to extrovert and presentational); the behaviour expected of, and encouraged from, listeners individually and collectively (by their quality of attention and the ways in which appreciation is shown, and the extent to which customs and norms have been drawn in from concert hall culture). It might be revealing, too, to examine the customary bodily movements of singers and conductors while performing Renaissance sacred music, identifying the kinds of emotional and kinaesthetic responses we hope, in turn, to stimulate or suppress in our listeners. There is also much more to be said about programming: of all the surviving music from the sixteenth century only a fraction is frequently performed and recorded. What kinds of works do we, as ‘curators’ and culture-makers, prize today and what do these preferences say about us? (Our taste is quite different from preceding generations – look, for example, at the complete reversal in Tallis’s reputation: the nineteenth century lauded him as the fount of Anglican church music; we neglect his anthems and treasure his Latin-texted works.)⁹

Finally, given the ‘sheerly beautiful’ nature of so many performances and recordings, I think we should examine the basic components

of the English *a cappella* sound, which most often goes unremarked, except when critics praise its beauty. The sound is not neutral; it is a product of shared backgrounds, common values and similar training among singers. There are strong conventions surrounding legato and blend, and the extent to which vibrato will be employed. Contemporary voice production and vowel placement is most likely a ‘close cousin’ to that of the sixteenth century, rather than its twin. The palette of vowel colours that ‘carry’ polyphonic melismata is primarily drawn from singers’ vernacular mode of speaking which, in this case, means that the English *a cappella* sound has embedded in it the collective background, socialisation and training of those in the Oxbridge/London scene.¹⁰

This homogeneity has captured the default global sound of *a cappella* groups. Polyphony from Iberia, the New World, the Low Countries, the Mediterranean, England – all are draped in the same vowel set, which is essentially well-spoken, white and privileged, so that, along with the quality of non-demonstrativeness, English social and class values are embedded in the modern sound of this music globally. If singers and conductors were sensitized to their particular sound palette and its potential connotations then it could be manipulated consciously in response to the geographical, social and institutional origins of the repertoire being performed.

While it’s enjoyable to fantasize about new modes of performance and recording (including the possibilities of multimedia and immersive technology) social and economic realities will, I am sure, continue to dictate the kinds of singers who will be booked to sing, how they will perform, the kinds of programmes that are offered and the possible modes of reception. In particular, it is unlikely that we will move on from a situation in which most professional performances and recordings are prepared on minimal rehearsal – the music almost being sight-read – in traditional ‘studio’ and concert settings.

Time will always be a luxury for professional singers and conductors, and so the complex task of creating interpretations driven, say, by an understanding of a work’s devotional context and affective content, its textual rhetoric and structural technique, is all too rarely an option. Moreover, those artists who have

pursued innovative, immersive interpretative approaches haven't generally achieved any great level of commercial success, so why should promoters and recording companies take the risk in a precarious market?

It may be that musicologists need to work harder to ensure that the evidence they're unearthing and the debates they're having reach and challenge performers and audiences: the end goal of research in music, after all, is to effect some change in repertoire, interpretation, sound and perception. For me, an intellectual sympathy with the idea of music unfolding as an *act* through time, in a particular space, can entirely change one's perspective. And my experience is that good amateur singers, and audiences, are very open to being 'let in' on such thinking. I frequently take polyphony to locations associated with composers or with particular historical events. But I also admit that the majority of my concerts are of two roughly equal halves, with the audience in reverential stillness as the choir faces them dressed, of course, in black.

I hope these preliminary thoughts have proved stimulating: my hope is to stimulate discussion and change in fellow performers,

scholars and listeners. We should all examine our motives as we pursue our activities of editing, publishing, performing, recording, marketing and listening to sacred music of the Renaissance period. How do we proceed in a way that balances the imperatives of modern performance with the equivocations of historical evidence? How do we achieve commercial and artistic success in the face of cultural, social and financial turbulence without doing damage to the spirit and substance of the music? How do we honour and sustain our magnificent Oxbridge and cathedral choral tradition while also becoming more self-aware of the cultural freight this tradition carries, and encouraging a plurality of sounds and approaches? Above all, are we brave enough to consider that our performances and recordings need not constitute definitive 'texts' but can be responses to, and mediations between, late-medieval and contemporary culture? If so, we can stop 'reproducing' the music as perfected, sealed notational structures and instead allow masses and motets to be active, sometimes imperfect utterances in time – to become the unstable signifiers of meanings and values beyond 'the music itself'.

¹ Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act* (Oxford, 1995).

² See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford, 1992).

³ It's interesting to contrast contemporary modes of consuming music with the ways in which early gramophone players were principally employed for family and group listening. See Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score* (Oxford, 2013), especially ch.11.

⁴ See Christopher Page, 'The English *a cappella* heresy', *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*, ed. Tess Knighton and David Fallows (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), ch.3.

⁵ See the testimony quoted in Andrew Parrott, *Composers' Intentions? Lost Traditions of Musical Performance* (Woodbridge, 2015), ch.1: 'Composers' Intentions, Performers' Responsibilities' (originally published in *Early Music*, 41 (2013), 37–43).

⁶ I'm thinking of paradigm-shifting books including: Dolores Pesce, *Hearing the Motet* (Oxford, 1998); Andrew Kirkman, *The Cultural Life of the Early Polyphonic Mass* (Cambridge, 2010); and Robert Nosow, *Ritual Meanings in the Fifteenth-Century Motet* (Cambridge, 2012), among others.

⁷ Published by Fineline, 2009.

⁸ By contrast, performers of Renaissance secular music have often pursued more inventive and risk-taking forms of performance and marketing: for example, Robert Hollingworth's interdisciplinary I Fagiolini, or Belinda Sykes' Joglearesa, which stands in the David Wulstan tradition, and also draws energy from the contemporary folk music scene.

⁹ See Suzanne Cole, *Thomas Tallis and his Music in Victorian England* (Woodbridge, 2008).

¹⁰ For two fascinating and contrasting critical viewpoints read the interviews with Paul Hillier and Peter Phillips; see Bernard D. Sherman, *Inside Early Music: Conversations with Performers* (Oxford, 1997).