Notes on the Program: The Three Sources

The music on our program comes from three English manuscripts: the Eton Choirbook and the Fayrfax manuscript, both copied c. 1500-04, and the Henry VIII manuscript, from c. 1522. They date from the reigns of the first Tudor kings, Henry VII (r. 1485–1509), and his son Henry VIII (r. 1509–47), and they allow us, through music, to recreate moments of life from that time: worship in the chapel, popular devotions, elegant courtly songs, and robust entertainments.

The Eton Choirbook was made for Eton College and—astonishingly—still remains there today, after more than half a millennium. (Eton is the school that Princes William and Harry attended.) Founded in 1440 to educate poor boys from age 8 to 18, Eton’s enrollment varied. In 1509-10, there were 56 boys, and the chapel had a staff with nine choristers (men), and many others who could sing polyphony as needed. Sometimes boy sopranos and altos, who must have been very skilled indeed, sang with the choir, but much of the music was for men’s voices alone. The chapel was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and the great choirbook was for use in two services each day: for Vespers, in late afternoon, there were 24 Magnificats; and for the Salve service in the early evening, there were 67 motets, or antiphons, in honor of the Virgin. These are Latin prayers or poems, old or new, set to music. The texts typically praise the Virgin extravagantly, and then humbly pray for her help amid life’s dangers and for salvation after death. Two of these motets are in the first part of our program, including John Browne’s six-voiced Stabat mater, perhaps the most outstanding masterpiece.

Most of the music in the Eton Choirbook is unique to this source, which makes it all the more precious. We have only the barest shreds of information about the twenty-five composers in the book, but this large number shows that the intricate Eton style flourished widely, not just in one spot.

After about twenty years of use, in the 1520s, the Eton Choirbook was set aside, probably because the style, ornate and difficult, went out of fashion. Before mid-century, the binding was evidently damaged, and many sections were lost. The indexes preserve the titles of the missing works. (Please turn to page 4.)
The Fayrfax Manuscript (British Library, Add. MS 5465) is the earliest and most important source of secular song from the early Tudor period. (There are only three of them.) Here, as Paul Hillier writes, "the carol . . . reached its highest expression." In all, there are 49 English part-songs, most of them for two or three voices, copied by a single scribe. Many take up elevated subjects of courtly love, in the tradition of Chaucer, but comedy also makes an appearance. Just under half of the pieces (21) have devotional themes, including eight carols on the crucifixion—the "Passion carols"—all grouped together. Sheryngham's "Ah, gentle Jesu," on our program, is one of them. The collection was owned by the Fayrfax family and has their coat of arms at the beginning. The distinguished composer Robert Fayrfax (1464-1521), who may have been the copyist, has seven pieces in the volume, two of them on our program. Fayrfax was a member of Henry VII's Chapel Royal by 1497, and there are other links to royal circles: one carol by Edmond Turges is a prayer for the safety of Prince Arthur, the heir to the throne. The prince died of a sudden illness (perhaps hantavirus) in 1502, at age 15, a melancholy fact that helps to date the manuscript.

The Henry VIII Manuscript (British Library, Add. MS 31,922), as its name proclaims, is a volume of secular music from the courtly circle of the next King Henry, who came to the throne in 1509. It is markedly different in character from the Fayrfax manuscript (they have only one piece in common): five scribes did the copying, not just one; it has more than twice as many pieces, 109; it contains some instrumental works, as well as foreign music from France and the Netherlands; and almost one third of the contents, 33 pieces, are attributed to the king himself, a Renaissance monarch proud of his musical accomplishments. The lyrics capture the court atmosphere. The manuscript must have circulated before the last layers and the binding were added, and it could not have been finished before 1522, when Henry was 31. Many of the "light and lively" texts—through clues such as allegorical figures and mottoes—reflect memorable events in the king’s life: the birth of a son in 1511; the invasion of France in 1513; a tournament, a disguising, and a play in 1522. Who owned the book? Its decoration, size, and contents suggest that it was made for someone "in the highest courtly circles . . . a noble amateur . . . closely connected with Henry's own childhood and youth, his courtly entertainments and dalliances, and the happenstances of court." The leading candidate is Henry Guildford, one of the king’s good friends, who was often the Master of Revels in the early years of the reign. William Cornysh, Jr., the composer (d. 1523), is another possibility.¹

¹ Ray Siemens, "Revisiting the Text of the Henry VIII Manuscript (BL Add Ms 31,922): An Extended Note," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 14, no. 3 (January 2009): 1-36 (available online). Siemens gives an erudite and deeply informed treatment of the history and scholarship of the book, full of colorful detail, and well worth dipping into. The quotations in this paragraph are from Siemens. (The article online is not paginated.)
Devotional Works

*Ave Maria, mater Dei*, by William Cornish [the Elder?]

This motet, like all of those in the Eton Choirbook, is dedicated to the Virgin. It is a musical setting of a short prayer in prose—unique, but similar to many others. The salient qualities of the "Eton style" are here: the ever-changing groupings of the voices, the richness of the individual lines in terms of embellishments and rhythms, and the employment of the full sonority to mark points of departure and arrival. The text is divided into two parts, with a stop on "miserere mei." The full texture of four voices is reserved for only three places: the opening invocation, "Ave Maria," which unites all the singers in calling out to the realm of the divine; and the concluding sections of the two parts—"Miserere mei," and "Amen." Most of the piece is set for intimate duos and trios that change unpredictably with each new clause of text.

In the first part, the Virgin is out called to, first in the opening "Ave Maria," (for the full group of singers), then in a series of four devotional names ("Mother of God, Queen of the Heavens, Mistress of the World, Empress of the Underworld"). The composer treats each name separately. The first two names are simply stated, but the last two names are given dazzling melismas, one for a high trio, the other for a low duo: a single syllable is sustained for many measures as streams of pure melody, intricately embellished, take flight. (The words are "do-mi-na" and "in-fer-ni.) In a typical melismatic passage, a voice line flies along for a moment in tandem with another part (in parallel thirds or sixths), weaves over or under it, follows it in close pursuit (imitation after a few beats), and bestows upon it from above tender little dissonant suspensions, quickly resolving. A modern listener is unprepared for this kind of wild, Gothic patterning, in which the patterns are evanescent: once perceived, they are gone. We do know how to enjoy the acrobatic courtship flights of birds or butterflies, however, and these musical flights of fantasy may be beheld with the same awe. Elsewhere, the composer uses different textures for expressive purposes. *Miserere mei* and *Amen*, the closing phrases, have close imitation in four voices, which suggests the clamoring of a crowd.

*Ah, Gentle Jesu*, by Sheryngham, on text by John Lydgate

*Ah, gentle Jesu*, from the Fayrfax manuscript, is a striking contrast to the style of the Eton Choirbook. It is not music for the chapel, but a pious carol in English, set in chordal style rather than in flowing lines. We all know the carol form: there are just two sections of music, the first one with a single text (the "burden"), and the other with a series of verses. The burden returns, usually after each verse.

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1 In the Eton Choirbook, the text of these sections is written in red ink, which has been interpreted to mean that soloists are called for. Doubling voices (if they were available) would enter just for the four-voiced sections in black ink. (The notation is not consistent.)

2 The carol form was used for all sorts of popular poetry and songs, and the Fayrfax manuscript has no fewer than eight carols on the subject of the Crucifixion.
The text of *Ah, gentle Jesu* portrays an internal drama similar to a conversion experience. A dejected sinner calls out to an image of Christ hanging on the cross; Christ answers him with powerful, comforting words; and the sinner vows to leave his sinful ways to gain mercy.\(^3\) The "burden" is a dialogue between them, representing this series of events. Verses 1 and 2 are the words of Jesus from the cross, his complaint to men for their lack of faith; and verse 3 is a concluding prayer for a group of sinners. The composer inserts a repeat of the cry, "*Ah, gentle Jesu,*" at the end of each verse, so that the sinner calls out to Jesus again and again.

In the musical setting of the burden, two pairs of voices, high and low, take the contrasting roles of the sinner and Jesus, and all four voices join together for the sinner's final invocation, "Jesus." In the verses, short units of text are passed around to different groups of singers. The words are crystal clear, sung with one chord per syllable, as in a hymn. The variable rhythms of natural speech are exaggerated, theatrically, to bring the phrases to life in an almost uncanny way: some words are slow and given poignant inflections ("I, a sinner" has the pathetic D-E flat-D sequence); others are quick and excitedly repeated ("Ah, I will, I will"), and some extended for emphasis ("gen - - - tle Je- -su- -"). The end of the burden sounds almost like a madrigal of the next century! About the composer, nothing is known. Only two of his pieces have come down to us, but his skill speaks for itself.

*Stabat mater dolorosa, for six voices, by John Browne*

John Browne is the "truly great" leading composer of the Eton Choirbook, both in the quantity of works (ten of the great motets are his), and quality. He is given pride of place in this magnificent collection, where his eight-voiced motet, *O Maria salvatoris mater* is the first piece in the volume. The *Stabat mater dolorosa* on our program is often considered to be Browne's masterpiece. The poem depicts Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion, which was so great that she became the perfect embodiment of sympathy, able to take pity on all of suffering humanity. The motet text has two parts, each of 24 lines. The first part is taken from a much longer poem of 60 lines, in tercets, that originated in the thirteenth century, probably in Franciscan circles in Italy, and became extremely popular. Historians record thousands of penitents marching through the streets chanting these verses at times of deep distress, when there were famines and plagues. The second half of the motet text has 24 new lines, in quatrains, possibly written by Browne himself. They appear only in English polyphonic settings, probably from the 1490s. Notes on this motet are found on the separate sheet with the full text.

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\(^3\) The scene was no doubt inspired by the conversion of St. Francis in 1206, when he received the stigmata—the starting point for a vast religious movement that emphasized Christ's forgiveness. John Lydgate (1370?–1451?) wrote the verses of *Ah, gentle Jesu,* but evidently not the burden. He was a learned Benedictine monk who spent most of his life in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, where staggering quantities of verse poured from his pen (about 145,000 lines). The famous abbey there, demolished during the Reformation, is a picturesque ruin.
Secular Works

The seven secular works on the program come from manuscripts of two periods. The first group, from the Fayrfax manuscript, reflects the atmosphere at the royal court of King Henry VII (r. 1485-1509) and that of his son Arthur, the Prince of Wales (d. 1502). Courtly love is the theme, and it entails the grace and refinement of manners that were cultivated in royal circles. These songs are for small groups of singers, two or three. Robert Fayrfax (1464-1521) is the composer of the first pair, and most likely selected the third piece, by Edmund Turges. Fayrfax had joined the royal chapel by 1497, and from 1498 to 1502, he was organist at St. Alban's Abbey, whose organ was the best in England. Later in life, Fayrfax became an eminent composer of church music and produced six polyphonic mass settings. He received a doctorate in music from Cambridge in 1504 (for which he presented a five-voice Gloria), and another from Oxford in 1511. On several occasions, he presented music to Henry VIII, and in 1520, he led the Chapel Royal on its famous visit to France, to the meeting with the French royal court at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. His early secular works have the elevated, serious tone one might expect of such a personage, who was an inspiration to a later generation of composers for the church—John Taverner and Thomas Tallis.

Very little is known of Edmond Turges, the composer of "Alas it is." He was tied to the royal courts around 1500, and some of his songs seem to have been the basis for motets by John Browne. One part-song by Turges is a prayer for the safety of Prince Arthur; after the prince died, Browne incorporated reminiscences of the song into the motet Stabat mater iuxta crucem (another piece in the Eton choirbook on the same subject as the Stabat mater dolorosa). Browne thus created a parallel between the grief of the queen and the grief of the Virgin at the cross. In general, the personal feelings in songs of the Fayrfax manuscript parallel sacred sentiments: lofty admiration, adoration, joy and grief.

The Henry VIII manuscript, completed c. 1522, evokes the atmosphere of the young king's court. Courtly love is still a theme, as in the lovely Madame d'amours, but there are others. Ah, Robin, by William Cornysh, Jr., is a setting of a poem of disillusionment by Thomas Wyatt (d. 1542), a famous poet remembered especially for his abiding love of Anne Boleyn and his imprisonment in the Tower on London, where he watched her execution through the grating of his cell window. Ay Robin was very popular, and Shakespeare used it satirically in Twelfth Night. The composer, William Cornysh, Jr., was active in many entertainments at Henry VIII's court, but also served the previous king. It is not clear whether the sacred works in the Eton Choirbook, such as the Ave Maria, mater dei that began our program, are by this composer or his father. The last two songs on the program are frankly comic. "I am a jolly foster" is a response to an earlier song in a play, where Venus banishes a decrepit old forester from the court of love. This old man is staying!