

# 'Enriched with the Englishman's Harmony': Reading the History of Anglican Church Music

*Suzanne Cole*

---

The compositional life of Thomas Tallis was exceptional in that it spanned 'Fower sovereigntyes'—Henry VIII, Mary, Edward VI and Elizabeth—and, in response to the dramatic political and liturgical instability of the era, his output encompasses a broad range of musical styles, from the most ornate and complex Latin polyphony to the simple homophony of the earliest English vernacular liturgies. Today he is probably most highly regarded for the former, but in nineteenth-century England the *Preces*, Responses and Litany, which are simple harmonisations of plainchant, were the most widely published and performed and most dearly loved of Tallis's works. Numerous editions were published in a variety of different versions,<sup>2</sup> and a lively debate about the best sources, the role and distribution of the plainsong and the number of parts was carried out in the prefaces to these editions, in treatises on church music and in journals such as the *Musical Times*. This popularity reflected the unique position Tallis's Responses held in the liturgy of the Church of England: they were seen as the beginning of the exclusively Anglican tradition of harmonising the plainchant of the responses, which Sir Frederick Gore Ouseley identified as 'the most important and characteristic feature in our choral service.'<sup>3</sup> Part of the importance of these harmonised settings of the Responses in general, and Tallis's in particular, arose from the belief that the English had a peculiar and instinctive affinity for harmony and that they were indeed responsible for its 'invention'.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, the source of this claim is found in the twelfth-century *Descriptio Cambriae* of Giraldus Cambrensis.<sup>4</sup> Both Hawkins and Burney discussed this in their *Histories*, and while Burney is quite scathing about Giraldus's credibility, he does

---

<sup>1</sup> Tallis's epitaph from St Alfege, Greenwich, cited in John Stow, *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster...* (London, 1720) App. I, 91–92.

<sup>2</sup> The British Library Catalogue of Print Music lists eleven publications of the Litany and/or Responses during the 1840s and a further twenty-four between 1850 and 1914. In comparison, the CPM records only two nineteenth-century publications of Tallis's popular anthem *If ye love me*, both as supplements to periodicals.

<sup>3</sup> F.A.G. Ouseley, 'The History and Development of Church Music,' *Church Congress Reports* 14 Oct. 1862: 176.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of assessments of the reliability of this account, see Paul J. Nixon, 'Giraldus Cambrensis on Music: How Reliable are his Historiographers?' *Proceedings of the First British-Swedish Conference on Musicology: Medieval Studies, 11–15 May 1988*, ed. Ann Buckley (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 1992) 264–89.

grudgingly accept evidence of very early harmonic practice in Wales. Hawkins was more willing to accept the *Descriptio Cambriae* at face value.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this article is not, however, to examine the credibility of the claim, but more its ethnic and religious implications, and the way that they continued to resonate in some nineteenth-century discussions of English Church music and of Tallis's Responses.

The association between Tallis's Responses, 'the Englishman's harmony' and Gerald of Wales is most clearly articulated in an article by the Rev. J. Powell Metcalfe, 'The Music of the Church of England, as Contemplated by the Reformers,' published in the *Musical Times* in 1865.<sup>6</sup> Metcalfe, a relatively minor figure in English musical circles, was identified at the head of the article as the 'Editor of the "School Round Book," "Metrical Anthems," and Joint Editor of the "Rounds, Catches, and Canons of England."' Although published in the primarily secular forum of the *Musical Times*, the article is strongly religious in tone. He begins by establishing the religious and nationalist foundations of his argument. 'What was the Reformation?' he asks.

Nothing more, yet nothing less ... than a movement to Anglicize the Church Catholic—to adapt ancient usage and universal doctrine so as to form the 'particular or national Church' ... of sober, thoughtful, independent-minded Englishmen.

The role of music in this reformation was to make the liturgy particularly amenable to English taste, to help it 'to touch the deeper feelings of the Englishman's heart.'<sup>7</sup> Hence the music to which the English liturgy is set must be quintessentially English; it must contain within it that which is most sympathetic to what he perceives to be a distinct English national character.

After this broad introduction he begins his examination of the music of the English church with the monotone, comparing it to the technique used by classical orators.<sup>8</sup> He then moves on to the Preces and Responses, locating their origins in the recitative used in ancient Roman drama, taking care to distinguish it from modern Italian opera, 'the source of all that is florid and brilliant and flighty.' While he considered the very antiquity of these origins to be sufficient to ensure 'veneration by our Reformers,' he argues that the harmonisation of the chant, 'while preserving the original character...yet render[ed] it more agreeable to the English ear—more moving to the English heart.' Early attempts at harmony, which he implicitly associates with pre-Reformation, probably Norman, Catholicism, consisted of 'intricate contrapuntal puzzles,' turning 'the lovely winning Polyhymnia into a parcel of dry bones.' Citing Giraldus Cambrensis, he argues that simple harmony 'was ... left for the unlearned—the common people, whose natural tastes had taught them harmonies to the burdens of their dearly loved ballads, even before the learned clerk had begun to potter over his fleshless musical arithmetic and cramp sweet sounds in the stocks of fugue.'

<sup>5</sup> Charles Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (1789), vol. 1, ed. Frank Mercer (New York: Dover, 1957) 482–84 and John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776), vol. 1, intro. Charles Cudworth (New York: Dover, 1963) 150–51.

<sup>6</sup> J. Powell Metcalfe, 'The Music of the Church of England, as Contemplated by the Reformers,' *Musical Times* 11 (1865): 157–60.

<sup>7</sup> Metcalfe, 'Music of the Church of England' 157.

<sup>8</sup> He divides church music into six styles: the monotone, preces, chant, services, anthems and the metrical psalms; an identical taxonomy was also used by Ouseley in his 'The History and Development of Church Music.'

The ancient Roman recitative and the English 'natural taste' for harmony were then brought together at the Reformation by 'those wise old Fathers of our Church': the Preces and Responses were 'clothed with the Englishman's harmony,' allowing the 'holy old words, instead of being bleared with fugging' to 'creep into the Englishman's heart on the breath of his native harmony.' He assures us that while Merbecke performed a great service in adapting the plainsong to the English liturgy, 'it needed the far greater work of a Thomas Tallis to fit it for the highest form of the English Churchman's worship.' He concludes with a typical example of the purple prose devoted to Tallis's Responses in the nineteenth century:

May we not take fresh confidence that God was specially over-ruling our Reformation, each time we think of the men raised up to bring the work to perfection. Probably, there never was an English musician in any age so fitted to settle the musical service of the church of his country as Thomas Tallis, the personal friend of Archbishop Parker ... To Tallis we owe that great perfecting of Merbecke's work that has given to our Church an heirloom that seems beyond the power of time to antique, that stands out the more majestically for each attempt to supplant it that successive generations of musicians have made.<sup>9</sup>

Although the echoes of this association of the English with simple homophony can be found in the fame of the *Contenance Angloise* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this acceptance of an inherent English musicality sits rather uncomfortably with more widespread appellation of England as the Land without Music.<sup>10</sup> It does, however, function as a musicohistorical version of a more widespread English historical narrative: that of an innate simplicity and purity corrupted by foreign Catholicism and restored at the Reformation. A brief examination of the traditional narratives of English ethnic and religious history helps illuminate the political and religious resonances of Metcalfe's argument.

The most influential of the myths about England's religious and ethnic origins were first articulated (if not actually invented) by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his twelfth-century *Historia Regum Britanniae* or *History of the British Kings* (hereafter *British History*). In summary, Geoffrey claimed that Britain was named after Brutus the Trojan, grandson of Aeneas, who came to the island in about 1170 BC. There followed a long line of British Kings,<sup>11</sup> who were extremely powerful, but were eventually overcome by the invading Saxons and retired to Wales and Cornwall, leading to an association of the Britons with Wales. It was prophesied that the Red Dragon of the Britons would one day rise up and conquer the White Dragon of the Saxons and the accession of the Welsh Henry VII to the throne in the late fifteenth century was seen by many as the fulfilment of this prophecy.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Metcalfe, 'Music of the Church of England' 158–59.

<sup>10</sup> See Bernarr Rainbow, *The Land without Music: Musical Education in England 1800–1860 and its Continental Antecedents* (London: Novello, 1967) and Robert Stradling and Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance 1860–1940: Construction and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1993) for two quite different analyses of the widespread anxiety about the lack of innate English musicality in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> In this article the term British is generally used to refer to the ostensible descendants of Brutus before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, rather than inhabitants of modern-day Great Britain.

<sup>12</sup> T.D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950) 7–9. For a discussion of the continued power of these beliefs and their role in later political and religious developments, see also Glanmor Williams, 'Some Protestant Views of Early British Church History,' *History* 38 (1953): 219–33 and Sydney Anglo, 'The *British History* in Early Tudor Propaganda,' *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 44 (1961): 17–48.

Over the following centuries a series of specifically religious myths was overlaid onto this framework, particularly relating to the establishment of the English church, possibly as early as AD 31, putting the founding of the English church before the churches of Spain and France (and, incidentally, before the writing of the Gospels and possibly before the Crucifixion!) and ensuring its historical independence from the Church of Rome.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the improbability of many of these claims, they were surprisingly tenacious, and were still popular in the sixteenth century when the Reformation brought the question of the origins of British Christianity sharply into focus. For if Christianity had arrived in the first century with Joseph of Arimathea, or, as was also claimed, St Peter, St James, Simon Zelotes or St Paul,<sup>14</sup> then the mission of St Augustine, under the authority of the Pope and at the request of the Saxon invaders, could be seen as an act of aggression, and the Reformation not a spurning of the one true church, but a purging of foreign contamination from an ancient and indigenous protestant heritage.<sup>15</sup>

The sixteenth century could therefore be viewed as a truly Golden Age when the Tudor Kings shook off the yoke of the Saxon oppressors and the Reformation returned the church to its native protestantism. As tensions between the Church of England and the Church of Rome mounted in the nineteenth century, the idea of an early, indigenous Protestant church took on renewed significance,<sup>16</sup> and these myths can, I believe, be traced in the way the nineteenth-century musicians and writers read the history of church music.

The musical and ethnic components of this argument are brought together in the passage cited by Metcalfe from Gerald of Wales's *Descriptio Cambriae*:

The Britons do not sing in unison, like the inhabitants of other countries; but in many different parts. So that when a company of singers among the common people meets to sing, as is usual in this country, as many different parts are heard as there are performers, who all at length unite in consonance, with organic sweetness. In the northern parts of Great Britain, beyond the Humber, on the borders of Yorkshire, the inhabitants use the same kind of symphonious harmony; except that they only sing in two parts, the one murmuring in the base, and the other warbling in the acute or treble. Nor do these two nations [ie English and Welsh] practice this kind of singing so much by art as habit, which has rendered it so natural to them, that neither in Wales, where they sing in many parts, nor in the North of England, where they sing in two parts, is a simple melody ever well sung ... But as not *all* the English sing in this manner, but those only of the North, I believe they had this art at first, like their language, from the Danes and Norwegians, who used frequently to invade and so occupy, for a long time together, those parts of the island.<sup>17</sup>

This account dates from the turn of the thirteenth century, postdating by about sixty years the *British History*, with which Gerald of Wales was acquainted.<sup>18</sup> Although contemptuous of some of its more extravagant flights of fancy, Gerald accepted its basic premises about the

<sup>13</sup> Kendrick, *British Antiquity* 16.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Kidd, *British Identities before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) 99.

<sup>15</sup> Kidd, *British Identities* 103.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, 'Some Protestant Views' 230.

<sup>17</sup> Translation taken from Burney, *A General History* 482–83.

<sup>18</sup> See Nixon, 'Giraldus Cambrensis' 274 and Kendrick, *British Antiquity* 4.

ethnic origins of the British people, and included Geoffrey's purely fictitious description of Carleon as though he had seen it for himself.<sup>19</sup>

In Gerald's description, the ancient Britons, along with their Trojan origins and proto-Protestantism, are identified as the possessors of an instinctive and natural musicality, transformed by Metcalfe into an intrinsically Protestant 'Englishman's harmony.' However, this passage offers a dual explanation of the ethnic origins of this natural harmony, which appears to have been simultaneously indigenous to the British inhabitants of Wales, and to have been introduced into the North of the country by the Danish invaders.<sup>20</sup> This is typical of the tension that has existed throughout English history between the need to embrace the characteristics of the various waves of invaders, particularly the Anglo-Saxons, and the wish to preserve the unique identity of the ancient British.<sup>21</sup> It is also part of a broader understanding of England as ethnically linked to the northern nations of Europe, which is central to the Anglo-Saxon identity, and which also played an important role in the Gothic revival of the late eighteenth century.

This same two-fold explanation of the source of harmony, locating its origins both within Wales and in a more general northern European setting, is central to an address to the Church Congress, 'The History and Development of Church Music,' given by Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley in 1862.<sup>22</sup> He begins his lecture by 'proving' that, due to the use of microtones in their scales, the Arabs, Egyptians and Jews could not have known harmony.<sup>23</sup> Melody is, in his mind, strongly associated with the nations of the South. He further subdivides this ancient southern melody into two categories: the oriental and the Greek. The Oriental, with its 'minute variations of pitch and pace,' was identified with the ornamental while the Greek melodies were simpler and more sublime.<sup>24</sup> Neither category of southern melody was, he believed, 'accompanied by harmony of any kind, neither were they easily susceptible of such accompaniment.'<sup>25</sup> The first melodies, possibly dating from the pre-Christian era, that were suitable for harmonisation were found in the North. Ouseley attributes the earliest examples of harmony to the Scythians,<sup>26</sup> although he also claimed that the Goths, the Scandinavians and

<sup>19</sup> Kendrick, *British Antiquity* 12.

<sup>20</sup> There is, however, no mention of this type of aboriginal musicality existing in the Norman dominated regions of the south.

<sup>21</sup> Kidd makes this point repeatedly, claiming that the tension was even more pronounced in attempts to reconcile ecclesiastical with temporal history, identifying 'a major ambiguity in English conceptions of nationhood' (*British Identities* 83). See also page 104 for the peculiarly religious aspects of this dilemma.

<sup>22</sup> Ouseley does not cite Gerald directly, but he does, however, refer to him in a later address to the Church Congress in Leeds in 1872, when he argues that, in general, hymns should be sung in unison except in 'the very musical part of England in which we are now assembled, where the people appear to sing harmony by Instinct, and to have done so from the time of Giraldus Cambrensis.'

<sup>23</sup> He appears to have based these ideas at least partly on the ideas of François-Joseph Fétis. Ouseley claims that his lecture is an attempt to overturn 'the wildest and most untenable theories [that] have been put forward ... concerning the music of the ancient Egyptians and that of the Jews and Greeks of old.' (161) Although it is not spelled out, the Jewish origins of plainsong would appear to be one of the untenable theories that he is seeking to disprove.

<sup>24</sup> Ouseley, 'Development of Church Music' 162. Ouseley was a late and ardent disciple of Crotch's division of music into three aesthetic categories: the sublime, the beautiful and the ornamental. See William Gatens, *Victorian Cathedral Music in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986) 71.

<sup>25</sup> Ouseley, 'Development of Church Music' 163.

<sup>26</sup> Ouseley, 'Development of Church Music' 164. See Kidd, *British Identities* for a detailed and sophisticated analysis of historical perceptions of ethnicity in the development of national identity, and in particular for possible connections between the Scythians and the Celts (188-94).

the Vandals had 'left traces behind them of a peculiar and harmonized species of music.' On the other hand, he also cited evidence that the history of harmony among the 'Celtic inhabitants of our own country' was equally ancient.<sup>27</sup> Thus Ouseley located the origins of harmony both specifically with the ancient British inhabitants of Wales and more broadly with the 'nations of the North' in much the same way that Gerald of Wales had nearly eight centuries earlier. England is therefore granted its own inherent musical ability, but in the context of a larger pan-Germanic ethnic grouping.

Many of these same arguments surface again in G.A. Macfarren's thirteen-part 'The Music of the English Church,' published in the *Musical Times* in 1867–68.<sup>28</sup> Macfarren also insists on the classical pagan origins of the chant, arguing that 'the fragments of Plain Song which are sung to the [Responses] and the Litany ... formed part of the religious rites in the Roman temples which stood upon the very ground now occupied by many of our cathedrals.'<sup>29</sup> He specifically challenges the association of Plain Song with Roman Catholicism and Popish error 'in the minds of those who have not traced [it] back to [its] classical source.'<sup>30</sup>

Macfarren also accepts the theory of the northern origins of harmony, although his discussion was generated by a less than satisfactory experience of spontaneous harmony in Scottish hymn singing:

I am aware, too, that the early inhabitants of this land of Britain, in common with those of the Northern countries whence they emigrated hither, had the gift of what may be called natural harmony; I mean that, whereas the Greco-Gregorian Plain-Song of the Church was chanted in unison, the priesthood who imported this classic pagan form of musical art into our latitudes found the peoples to whom they taught Christianity accustomed to sing their national songs in three-part harmony. ... Yes, the art of musical combination originated in the North, not among Greek philosophers, not among ecclesiastical scholars, but among the rude nations of these wild regions whose instinct for beauty was their only teacher.<sup>31</sup>

Harmonised settings of plainsong, by Tallis and others, were therefore seen as founded upon Classical antiquity, but with the addition of the spontaneous and indigenous harmony that was simultaneously distinctly British, and also broadly associated with the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. The simplicity of this harmony distinguished it from the artificial, clerical, pre-Reformation counterpoint,<sup>32</sup> and the association of this natural harmony with the ancient Britons reinforced the links with the classical past and early Protestantism. This link

<sup>27</sup>Ouseley, 'Development of Church Music' 163.

<sup>28</sup>G.A. Macfarren wrote a series of thirteen articles on the 'The Music of the English Church,' published in the *Musical Times* in 1867–68: 12 (1867): 445–47; 469–71; 13 (1867): 5–7; 25–27; 49–51; 69–71; 93–95; 117–20; 189–92; 215–17; 13 (1868): 247–249; 279–83. Macfarren was one of the few English musicians without some direct connection with the church, and in the first instalment he argues that this allows him a useful impartiality (445).

<sup>29</sup>Macfarren, 'Music of the English Church,' *Musical Times* 13 (1867): 69.

<sup>30</sup>Macfarren, 'Music of the English Church,' *Musical Times* 13 (1867): 69.

<sup>31</sup>Macfarren, 'Music of the English Church,' *Musical Times* 13 (1867): 26.

<sup>32</sup>See Howard Irving, *Ancients and Moderns: William Crotch and the Development of Classical Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999) 163–74, on the associations of the term 'Gothic' and harmony with learned counterpoint, in comparison with this 'natural' harmony. Although Irving does not specifically make the association, the ethnic implications of the term Gothic are entirely consistent with my arguments.

was further strengthened by Tallis's association with the Welsh Tudor monarchs,<sup>33</sup> and with heroes of the reformation, such as Archbishop Matthew Parker.<sup>34</sup> These factors must have contributed significantly to the popularity of this music among the type of cleric and musician who was looking to the past for a way forward into the future. And the existence of these early harmonised Responses could be seen as confirmation of the rightness of this view of English ecclesiastical and musical history.

In many ways, it is impossible to prove the connections that I have implied in this article. The ideas outlined here were hopelessly backward looking for the mid-nineteenth century (the *British History* had been discredited for centuries), but this does not necessarily prevent them from influencing, at some level, the underlying agendas of these writers. I am not claiming that these writers literally believed these Galfridian myths, or were necessarily consciously aware of the narrative similarities that I have described, but more that they resonated with their musical and political ideas about how the musical history of England should be. I believe a well-known example of this same pattern of thought can still be found today in the continuing popularity of Parry's setting of Blake's Jerusalem. We do not have to suppose that Blake, Parry or, indeed, any of the thousands of English couples who still sing this hymn at their weddings actually believe that those feet really did 'walk upon England's pastures green' to accept that these religious and historical myths still resonate deeply with English perceptions of their national character and their place in the world. An examination of the parallels between the legends of the *British History*, Gerald of Wales's *Descriptio Cambriae* and these nineteenth-century discussions of the music of the English Church gives an insight into the extra-musical considerations that influenced the way nineteenth-century musicians and writers read their musical history.

---

<sup>33</sup> A similar point was made by John Blacking as recently as 1973 in his *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), when he argues that 'the remarkable development of polyphonic music in England during the sixteenth century may have been stimulated ... by the advent of Welsh monarchs ... [as] Welsh popular music had been noted for its polyphonic technique since at least the twelfth century' 75 (cited in Nixon, 'Giraldus Cambrensis' 285).

<sup>34</sup> Williams identifies Archbishop Matthew Parker as an advocate of the *British History*, a believer in the origins of the English episcopacy with Joseph of Arimathea and the protestant nature of the early British Church ('Some Protestant Views' 226).