

Some English Composers and their Religious Allegiances: 1550–1650¹

CHRISTOPHER THOMAS

To say that someone has a certain religious allegiance treats of their world-view and their life style. These may touch recorded history as something written or dictated by them, or as recorded activity. The musician has an extra witness—preference for a *text*, a *patron*, or a *dedicatee*.

In the composers Richard Alison,² Robert Tailour,³ and Giles Farnaby,⁴ we find all the above, with the added complexity that they were all secular composers: musicians for whom church accounts record no payment. Their common denominator is that they each chose the Psalms, in metrical form, for a complete work of major importance in their musical output. In addition to this, in each case, we have a written clue as to their theological inclination, showing a degree of familiarity with reformation theology uncommon even among church composers, let alone among those we hold to be 'secular'. One may see in this a certain fulfilment of William Tyndale's much-quoted prophecy that the common people would come to know more of the Scriptures than did the clergy.

Unfortunately for us, a further common denominator is the absence, so far, of a published biography for any of these three composers.

Richard Alison's Psalter, printed in 1599, is the most interesting musically, being set in table-book format for four voices, with intabulations for 'lute or orpharion' and 'cittern'. The psalm paraphrases are what had come to be known, by this time, as the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalms, or 'Metrical Psalter'. This work had already been treated to Thomas Este's edition with four-part harmonizations by such leading composers as Dowland, Farnaby and Alison.

Alison's settings of his own *Psalms of David* were composed in a manner which was accessible to amateurs. But what is for us of greatest interest is the dedication to the devoutly religious wife of a leading Puritan statesman, Lady Anne Countess of Warwick. In the course of the dedication, Alison describes her late husband, the Earl of Warwick, as 'sometimes my good lord and master', thus already identifying himself over some time with a powerful and influential Puritan circle, which included also the Earl's brother, Robert Dudley

Earl of Leicester and the Lady Anne's father, the second Earl of Bedford. Moreover, far more telling than this, Alison's dedication to his patroness is full of theological content. We note in it the following features:

- preoccupation with right doctrine, including a list of the attributes of God and a theology of repentance drawn from the Psalms.
- a doctrine of 'heavenly consort', which combines spirituality and earthly pleasure, without Platonic over-tones.
- the assertion, echoed by many Lutheran composers, including J. S. Bach, that God is glorified and man refreshed by such musical activity.

Now all this might seem to be what was expected of a person engaged on such a 'sacred' task as setting portions of Scripture to music. But what of the use of theology in the introduction to a *madrigal* collection? I refer to Alison's dedication in his other printed work entitled, 'An Houres Recreation', of 1606.⁵ What is most interesting is that he quotes from Martin Luther's letter, of 1530, to Austrian composer Ludwig Senfl, as follows:

I will only allege one testimony out of an Epistle, which that ancient Father, Martin Luther did write to Senfelius the musician, which is so ample in commendation of this art that it were superfluous to add any other. 'Music', saith he, 'to devils, we know, is hateful and intolerable and I plainly think, neither am I ashamed to aver it, that next to theology there is no art comparable with music: for it alone next to theology doth affect that which otherwise only theology can perform, that is, a quiet and cheerful mind.' Now if music merits so high a place as this holy man hath given it, can we deny love and honour to them that with grace and bounty raise the professors thereof?

The dedicatee of this collection is Sir John Scudamore, a gentleman usher to Queen Elizabeth I, commissioner for the muster of recusants for the County of Herefordshire, a job he cannot have been too good at because his own daughter married a recusant and his eldest son became a catholic priest! The *Dictionary of National Biography* is confused when it says that Sir John Scudamore's 'standpoint over religion is not clear.' On the contrary, his Will of 1619 leaves us in no doubt as to his evangelical understanding of the doctrine of Salvation, as the phrase, 'hoping assuredly through the merits of Jesus Christ', would seem to suggest. Whether he sided with the Puritans or with the High Church faction in James I's persecution of the Puritans we do not know; though Alison's choice of him as dedicatee might itself be a clue as to wherc his sympathies lay.

We are told in the Weimar edition of Luther's correspondence that

copies of Luther's letter to Senfl circulated in manuscript; but not long afterwards it appeared in print, notably in the preface to a collection of Motets, written in 1559 by Mathias Gastritz, entitled 'Novae Harmonicae Cantiones'. Alison had an accurate translation of this preface, as we gather from his quotation of it referred to earlier, though it cannot be inferred that he was familiar with that particular edition, or its Latin original.

It would be interesting to speculate that, if the Library of the Earl and Countess of Warwick had survived, there might be found therein a copy of Luther's letter to Senfl, perhaps in English translation, since it was appended to printed editions of other works by Luther. Alison's apparent familiarity with Luther's theology, as exhibited in his 1599 preface, is not surprising, however, when one considers the number of theological works dedicated to Ambrose and Anne Dudley. Among them are several translations of the Reformers, and in particular, a translation of Luther's *A Treatise Touching the Liberty of a Christian*. Out of forty-nine books dedicated to the Earl and Countess of Warwick, thirty-one are religious works.

Now we come to Robert Tailour; in his *Sacred Hymns*, published in 1615, there is no dedication or laudatory poem to a patron, from which to gather his theological inclination; but the prose introductions to each of the psalm-paraphrases provide a great deal of evidence as to his religious allegiance. It is necessary first, though, to say a word or two here about the prose introductions to metrical psalms. Ever since the 1562 edition of the *Whole Book of Psalms*, by Sternhold and Hopkins, the precedent was set to preface each Psalm with a commentary of anything between one and four sentences of exegesis. Also included was a short musical treatise on how to sing in four-part harmony.

What then of Robert Tailour's Psalter? He does indeed provide prose introductions to each of his paraphrases, as we have observed, but his are of sometimes up to eighty lines in length! They are not stereotyped in content and show some independent thinking. This may be exemplified by looking at his introductions to Psalms 8, 22 and 40. It was already established in both Catholic and Protestant traditions, that Christ was prophesied in the Psalms, by for example the use of the term 'Son of Man', in Psalm 8 and the description in some detail of death by crucifixion in Psalm 22, the classic references to Jesus. So Tailour in his prose introductions to these psalms duly declares their reference to Christ. What is more interesting is his introduction to Psalm 40; here his treatment is unique, for he not only endorses the traditional application of it to Christ but further draws from it a point of doctrine touching on the theology of the Eucharist. In his reasoning he is clearly opposed to the High Church position, and certainly in opposition to the Roman doctrine of the Mass. I quote from Tailour's introduction:

The prophet David, an Ancestor and Type of Christ, in his thankful meditations of God's former merci [sic] toward him, passeth from thence into a profound admiration of the divine Grace, whereby the imperfection of the legal sacrifices being abolished, Christ their perfection was to succeed, a true accomplisher and teacher of righteousness.

What Tailour and Alison have in common is that they are both theologically informed 'secular' composers; so also was Giles Farnaby whom we must turn to now.

Giles Farnaby *did* hold the honorary position of Churchwarden, with the major task of taking care of the Bishop's visitation to his parish church, St. Peter's Aisthorpe, in Lincolnshire. Both Fellowes,⁶ and M. C. Boyd refer to his probable Puritan sympathies on the basis of the names he gave to his children. Two daughters were named Philadelphia (the first died before the second was born) and one son was named Joyous, both names popular among Puritan households during this time. His pre-occupation with setting the metrical psalms is also instanced as a Puritan tendency. He supplied harmonizations for Este's Psalter in both its 1592 and its 1635 editions, thus setting the whole of the metrical psalter twice over—a version favoured mostly by the Puritans. They included the Sternhold and Hopkins paraphrases, and many of the metrications were based on *Genevan* originals. But it is once again to a preface that our attention is drawn in Farnaby's *Psalmes of David*, c.1635. Only a trebles part-book survives of this work, in the Pennsylvania University Library.⁷ He dedicated it to Henry King, then the chief Prebend of St. Paul's Cathedral and later Bishop of Chichester. As a Doctor of Divinity and later himself a paraphraser of the Psalms, in a 1651 publication, it is improbable that anyone save a high-ranking ecclesiastic would presume to adopt a *pastoral* attitude toward Dr. King even in a private letter, let alone in a dedication manifestly being prepared for publication. Yet this is the nature of Giles Farnaby's dedication to the Prebend; I quote the beginning and the end:

To the right worshipful Henry King, by Divine Providence of God, Doctor of Divinitie, and chief Prebend of the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, the Glorious comforts of Grace here and the blessednesse of immortalitie and eternitie in Glory hereafter . . . I committ you with yours to the safe protection of the Allmightie, all waies begging before the Throne of His most Glorious Majestie, that He would in this life, infuse His Holy Spiritt with all His Grace into your heart abundantly, and, in the world to come, crowne you with the crowne of immortal Glory, and that for Jesus Christ His sake, our Lord and only Saviour, Amen. Your Worship's, in all duty, Giles Farnaby.

A facsimile is to be found in M. C. Boyd, *Elizabethan Music and Music Criticism*, though no reference is made to its nature and

content. The greeting and valedictory phrases are reminiscent both of the letters of the Apostles in the King James Bible of 1611, and of certain prayers in the 1559 Prayer Book. The format is similar to the prayer for the Monarch, but there the similarity ends, the words being an echo of the originals and not merely a quotation of them. What is remarkable is that Giles Farnaby's words appear to be genuinely his and cannot be found verbatim in either source; though individual phrases like 'our only Lord and Saviour' crop up ubiquitously in the Prayer Book, with variants. Moreover, one cannot help being struck by the boldness of the prayer, that God 'infuse His Holy Spiritt with all His Grace into your heart'. He presumes, as a mere *layman*, to offer such a *priestly* prayer for an ecclesiastical dignitary! Surely this gives us some insight into Farnaby's mind, as that of a true Puritan, with his doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers', as expounded in both Luther and Calvin—where clergy and laity have *equal access* to God through Christ, and *share* responsibility for *each other's* spiritual well-being.

Here then are three composers whose religion came to verbal expression in such a way that we can account for some of their output, for the advancement of sound doctrine, in addition to the achievement of artistic excellence. As this is so unusual among English musicians, it might help to compare briefly how the evangelical theology of Martin Luther influenced a contemporary musician in Germany whose thinking had a major influence on German music. I refer to Michael Praetorius,⁸ a figure who was close enough to Luther's time to have second-hand knowledge of him as a person through his grandfather Johann Walther, the Reformer's own Cantor, and of course to have extensive knowledge of his writings, as may be seen in passages he quotes in *Syntagma Musicum*, Praetorius's musical encyclopedia. Here are his own words:

Now may the dear Lord, in His lovingkindness and faithfulness be with us, as we begin during this transitory life, to blend our voices in different choirs—and sound heavenly songs of prayer and praise of the holy Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, and other saints, filled with God's Spirit. For there awaits us now the life everlasting, the celestial state that will never pass away! Soon we will stand before the Throne of the Lamb, at the joyful feast of our Heavenly Bridegroom Jesus Christ, with the choristers of heaven and those most perfect musicians, all the host of the heavenly angels and arch-angels . . .

The passage quoted above is from the section of the *Syntagma Musicum* entitled 'De Organographia',⁹ which is not an expressly theological section but is concerned with the science of musical instruments. We know and we can tell from this passage, and from his extensively published output that Michael Praetorius was a musician who moved happily in and out of what we call the 'sacred' and the

'secular' and for whom there were no boundaries, no restraints, no injunctions against elaborate church music, and no lack of resources as he worked in the Lutheran court of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel.

What Praetorius had in common with Alison, Tailour and Farnaby was a conviction, echoed by Luther resoundingly in many of his writings, that music, as a gift from God, is indeed 'next to theology'.

CHRISTOPHER THOMAS is director of music at St. John's, Hyde Park.

NOTES

- 1 This paper was based on a lecture given by the author at the Royal Musical Association Research-Students Conference held at Halliday Hall, Clapham Common, 16 December, 1988.
- 2 Richard Alison (c.1569–c.1620) was a lutenist and a teacher who was called upon, like John Dowland, to make his contribution to the burgeoning market for hymn-psalm books. He it was who arranged the tune 'Winchester Old', sung to the words 'While shepherds watched their flocks by night'. The tune first appeared in Thomas Este's *The Whole Book of Psalms* (1592) and Alison's own *Psalms of David* (1590) set to Psalm 23. The 1592 Psalter was re-issued in facsimile by F. Rimbault in 1844. Copies of the original may be seen in the Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library, and the British Library; the library of Kings College London has a facsimile copy. A facsimile of the 1599 Psalter is held at most major music libraries.
- 3 Robert Tailour (c.1575–c.1637) was a musician in the court of King Charles I. The words of the hymn 'The King, O God, his heart to thee upraiseth' are attributed to Tailour in the Yattendon Hymnal. They are adapted from Tailour's Psalm 21, 'The King, Lord, t'ward thy glorious face', with due attribution.
- 4 Giles Farnaby (c.1563–c.1640) is best known as a keyboard composer. Many of his pieces for virginal or harpsichord were included in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. Among them are 'London Bridge', 'Farnaby's Knot' and many Fantasies.
- 5 A modern edition can be found in the *English Madrigalists*, Vol. 33 (ed. P. Brett).
- 6 E. Fellowes, introduction to Giles Farnaby, 'Canzonets to Fowre Voyces' 1598 (*English Madrigalists* vol. 20).
- 7 Pennsylvania University Library, MS. in Rare Book Room 48, no. 593.
- 8 Noted especially for his arrangement, 'A Great and Mighty Wonder' (Es ist ein Ros 'entsprungen').
- 9 Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum* II: *De Organographia*, I & II; translated and edited by David Crookes (Oxford 1986).