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METHODS OF ANALYSING  
EARLY TUDOR SACRED POLYPHONY:  
THE WORKS OF ROBERT FAYRFAX (1464–1521)

2 VOLUMES/VOLUME 1

Submitted by Benjamin David Collingwood, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Music, 18 January 2008.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the different ways in which music of the early-Tudor period can be analysed. Approaching the analysis first from a performer's perspective, it takes the surviving works of Robert Fayrfax (1464–1521) as a case study. Fayrfax was chosen both because of the important rôle he plays within the chronology of changing style in early Tudor England, and because of the lack of a convincing analytical survey of his surviving works. Various analytical methods are developed by drawing upon three areas of investigation: (1) previous analyses of renaissance polyphony; (2) sixteenth-century music theory; and (3) hermeneutics. The basic issues and problems encountered when approaching early Tudor works from an analytical perspective are addressed in the Preface, and discussed in more detail in Chapters 1-3. These chapters form a theoretical basis for the work as a whole. Chapters 4-8 provide a detailed analytical interrogation of Fayrfax's works, addressing five areas of investigation: the selection and development of pre-compositional material; rhythm and metre; mode and cadential planning; texture and tessitura; and motif, imitation, and free counterpoint. Whilst this study focuses specifically on the works of Robert Fayrfax, it is hoped that works by other early Tudor composers can also be examined using the analytical methods developed.

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## PREFACE

In this study I hope to explore the different ways in which sacred music composed in early Tudor England can be analysed. My aim is to develop a set of analytical tools that can be used in order to investigate the music of Nicholas Ludford, Robert Fayrfax, John Taverner, and their Henrician contemporaries. In view of the nature of this study, it would be impossible to examine the works of a wide variety of early Tudor composers, and so I have decided to limit my study to the sacred works of Robert Fayrfax. Fayrfax has been chosen as a case study for a number of reasons: (1) he sits in a pivotal position in the development of early Tudor music, being an inheritor of the Eton Choirbook style, and having a major influence on Ludford, Taverner, and Thomas Tallis; (2) he was one of the first composers to show a decisive move away from the Eton style by curtailing the highly ornate and melismatic writing typical of the preceding generation of composers; (3) the high regard with which the composer's works are held now, and with which they were held by his contemporaries, within both the musical and royal establishments; and (4) the absence to date of a convincing large-scale analytical study of his works.

In order to ensure that the same basic analytical methods, or adaptations of them, can be applied to the chosen period, it is essential to identify features that are common to works of the early Tudor repertoire as a whole. My existing knowledge of this repertoire is derived from a combination of performance and prior academic inquiry and enables me to identify these features as follows: (1) the composition of large-scale polyphonic works; (2) the use of three familiar compositional genres – mass, Magnificat and motet; (3) the prevalence of a five-voice texture – although some are composed for four, six, eight or more voices; (4) the use of pre-existing material such as a cantus firmus or another

polyphonic work; (5) the influence of plainchant; (6) a clear division of works into two or three large sections, defined by a change in metre; (7) the use of different combinations of voices, and alternation of full and semi-choir sections; (8) the influence of numerology, including arithmetical planning and number symbolism; (9) the use of rhythmic and melodic motifs; and (10) a limited use of imitation. These areas of investigation will form an initial foundation for my analytical inquiry, but I shall also take into account a number of additional external factors discussed below and in more detail in Chapters 1-3.

Although a considerable amount of English repertoire from this period survives, it remains largely neglected from an analytical perspective. In view of this, I intend to outline four ways in which a new methodology can be developed. First, I will examine how tonal music has been investigated successfully since the beginning of the twentieth century, and see whether any of these techniques can be adapted to the study of renaissance polyphony. I will begin by providing a summary of these types of analysis, the specific techniques involved, and – where appropriate – an example of each method. Second, I will provide an overview of theoretical writings, from the earliest Greek scholars working around 350 BC – the reasons for which I will explain later – to the theorists of the sixteenth century. However, I will concentrate more closely on texts that are known to have been in circulation in England during Fayrfax's lifetime, particularly within the universities. This will enable me to identify aspects of music that contemporary theorists considered important. Third, I will consider existing models for the analysis of renaissance polyphony. Here, I will begin by providing a critique of previous research which has focused specifically on the analysis of Fayrfax's works, before broadening the study to include more general analyses of renaissance polyphony that have a plausible bearing on the analysis of English polyphony from the chosen period. By doing so, I hope to isolate the shortcomings of previous analyses, and show how

those that have been more successful can be used or adapted within my own study. Until now, a number of aspects of early sixteenth-century English polyphony have been intractable to detailed analytical inquiry. Where this is the case, I hope to develop analytical techniques through a close examination of the music itself.

The process of interpretation whereby our understanding stems from the text – rather than from an already formulated method or set of rules – has gained momentum in the fields of philosophy and theology since the 1960s, particularly in the form of hermeneutics. The work of the late German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) has been particularly influential in this regard, and it is his theories – expressed in his seminal book *Truth and Method* – that resonate most strongly with my own critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> From the early part of his career, Gadamer was concerned with the human understanding of art, and its connection with philosophy.<sup>2</sup> However, it was only in the latter part of his career – particularly with the publication of *Truth and Method* – that this connection was made explicit. Gadamer was reacting against a view that the scientific method was the only route to knowledge. In this regard, Gadamer himself was thinking and reflecting historically that philosophy is not abstract, but located at specific points in time. He was also reacting against the Romantic notion that in order to understand a work of art we have to get inside the mind of the artist. Instead, he believed that the only way in which art could be fully appreciated was by engaging with the work of art itself.

Within *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's aim is not to instruct us to view works of art in a particular way, but to suggest that a number of different factors determine the way in which we understand them. Although the book is complicated – covering the way that we understand the human sciences in

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum: London, 2004); first published as *Wahrheit und Methode* (Mohr: Tübingen, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, *On Gadamer* (Wadsworth: Belmont, CA, 2000) p 17.

general – four key concepts underpin Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, and the way in which we experience a work of art is dependent upon these concepts. I intend to identify each of these briefly, discussing the impact that they have upon our experience of early Tudor sacred polyphony, particularly with regard to analysis.

The first concept is ‘effective-historical consciousness’ (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*). Gadamer suggests that the way in which we experience things is conditioned by our own past. We can never ‘stand outside the historical process’,<sup>3</sup> nor can we forget – or perhaps ‘unlearn’ would be a better word – that which we already know. In Gadamer’s words: ‘To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us’.<sup>4</sup>

One of the problems with hermeneutics and musical analysis is in defining the text. The notes on the page do not change over time, but it is not possible for us now to see or hear the music through the eyes and ears of a sixteenth-century performer or listener. Although we can imagine putting ourselves in the place of a sixteenth-century performer or listener we can never become them. It is only with our tonally-tuned, twenty-first-century, Western ears that we can hear and begin to understand what the music means to us here and now.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* p 302.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 398.

<sup>5</sup> By this I mean those of us within the Western – and more specifically, English-speaking – musical academy for whom music of the common-practice period has had the greatest influence. Those from outside this musical tradition may choose to examine other aspects of renaissance polyphony which we now take for granted, as discussed below. Again, I am not proposing that this is the only way in which this music can be studied, but that on a personal level, I am only able to address Fayrfax’s works from my own perspective.



On a more fundamental level the conceptual problems encountered when analysing music in general need to be addressed. Is our analytical inquiry based solely upon the musical text, upon a single performance of the work under examination, or upon the way that we imagine the music by looking at the score? Within this study I believe that all of these aspects must be taken into consideration. It is important to identify audible compositional techniques – such as points of imitation – as well as those that are not obviously apparent to the listener in performance – for example, the extended use of a cantus firmus in the middle of the contrapuntal texture.

The questions that we ask about a work – and hence our interpretation of it – change over time. In the future the analysis of Fayrfax's works may be approached in a different way from that which I intend to pursue here, if scholars have a greater knowledge of the composer's life, the sources of his works, and of the period in general.<sup>6</sup> This greater depth of knowledge would change the questions that are asked about the music. In summary, the 'raw materials' of a hermeneutic stance will be far wider than those used in the types of structuralism that have characterised music analysis in the second half of the twentieth century. Gadamer suggests that rather than attempting to suppress our preconceptions, we should embrace them, but we should also be aware that they exist. From an analytical perspective, we need 'other' knowledge – knowledge other than that which comes from the text itself – in order to understand the text. This anti-foundationalist approach enables us to distinguish

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware that this contradicts Gadamer's view of looking at art forms in isolation, but within early Tudor polyphonic works, aspects of the composer's life frequently have a bearing upon the music. For example, the choice of a cantus firmus may be determined by the composer's place of employment and patronage, knowledge of which cannot always be ascertained through the music on its own. However, referring specifically to the issue of cantus firmus usage, the pre-existing material employed can also provide clues as to institutions with which the composer had previously not been associated; in this case, both musical and biographical details are intertwined.

the general from the specific.<sup>7</sup> To take a specific historical issue as an exemplary case in point, the fact that Fayrfax uses a cantus firmus, or that most of his existing works were composed for five voices are, for me, not the major points of interest. I know that most composers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries used pre-existing material and composed for five voices. Someone who had not come into contact with music of this period before would not necessarily have this historical knowledge. A person studying the music without this knowledge might spend more time examining why Fayrfax – and indeed other composers – used the cantus firmus technique, and what proportion of all surviving works from the period were written for five voices. To me what is interesting is the way in which Fayrfax uses the cantus firmus – and how it influences the voices around it – and the different groupings and patterns in scoring. This historical knowledge is of considerable use as it can act as a limiting factor for the parameters of my analytical approach.

My interest in early Tudor music came about as a performer, first as a singer and latterly as a conductor. Both of these rôles require different approaches to the music. As a singer my primary concern has been my own individual vocal part – in my case the bass line – although attempting to listen as much as possible to the other people in the group has of course been of utmost importance too. As a conductor, I have been more concerned with shaping the music in a way that will bring out important aspects of the work, challenge and enliven the singers, and engage the audience.

In both of these situations performance has been an act of interpretation informed by analysis. As a singer I note recurring patterns, points of imitation, obvious use of a cantus firmus, how my part relates to others within the overall

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<sup>7</sup> By 'foundationalism' I mean the view that knowledge can be begun from nothing by finding pieces of certain or infallible knowledge. See: Ernest Sosa, 'The Foundations of Foundationalism', *Noûs* 14/4 (November 1980) pp 547–64.

musical texture, and so on. I address the same areas whilst conducting, looking at all of the voices in the work and trying to understand how they relate to one another, rather than concentrating primarily on one voice. This is a view shared by many scholars and has been articulated particularly well by Arnold Whittall who says that 'all interpretation can be regarded as inherently analytical'.<sup>8</sup>

The way in which we approach analysis is dependent upon – among other things – our musical education, upbringing, social status, and economic prosperity, all of which condition how we think. How we think makes us who we are; who we are makes us approach analysis differently; and how we approach analysis depends upon our musical education, upbringing, etc. This is an example of Gadamer's second key concept: the 'hermeneutic circle'.<sup>9</sup> This was originally used to describe the way in which biblical texts were re-examined by different people over time, resulting in several different interpretations of the same text. One of its aims was to develop an understanding of an author through their works.

Looking at any text is an interpretative process; there are many different ways in which the musical processes found in Fayrfax's works can be interpreted. His music does not hold a single fundamental truth, which if discovered, would negate any further investigation. Different interpretations reveal different – and equally sincere – results. It is possible that on each reading of a text we find something new. Each time we hear a piece of music, look at a work of art, or read a book, we might notice something that we had not heard or seen before. By re-examining the text several times we will understand

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<sup>8</sup> Arnold Whittall, 'Experience, Thought and Musicology. Music Analysis: Who Needs It? Arnold Whittall Analyses the Analysts' *The Musical Times* 134/1804 (June 1993) p 318. I am aware that not everyone may agree with Whittall's statement. However, I am approaching this study from a performer's view, particularly that of a conductor. Whenever I prepare a new work for a rehearsal I attempt to find structural devices and other important aspects which I will then explain to the performers. It has been my experience that a greater understanding of a work's structure will improve the performance. When my preparation is conducted in this way then my interpretation is 'inherently analytical'.

<sup>9</sup> No value-systems are implied by these statements, they are just used to demonstrate that the hermeneutic circle is inescapable.

it more; the knowledge gained in our first reading will guide and inform further readings. In other words, as the context of the interpreter changes, so does the interpretation. However, we can never fully understand a text in a hundred readings, let alone one.<sup>10</sup>

The third of Gadamer's concepts is that of 'play' (*Spiel*). By this, Gadamer means the way in which we engage with a work of art and it engages with us. He states that 'When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself'.<sup>11</sup> This interaction between the work of art and the observer has no specific purpose or goal. Gadamer believes that we must lose ourselves in the work in the attempt to understand it, and in order to do so we must enter into a conversation with it.<sup>12</sup> The only way in which we can engage in this conversation is through language.

It is at this point that we encounter one of the main stumbling blocks when analysing renaissance polyphony. Here the boundary between language and method is very blurred. In order to construct a suitable method – or methods – we must first find the language that will enable us to describe the music in detail. Or in Gadamerian terms, we need to find a way to construct a language in order to initiate a metaphorical dialogue between analyst and musical text. So how can we construct such a language? I believe that there are four things that we can call upon: (1) the text itself; (2) early Tudor music

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<sup>10</sup> This represents a challenge to the concepts of Modernity which – beginning with Descartes – stated that absolute knowledge was eventually possible. See: Maurizio Ferraris and Anna Taraboletti Segre, 'Postmodernism and the Deconstruction of Modernism', *Design Issues* 4/1-2 (1988) pp 17–8. Within musical academy, this approach has been advocated more recently by scholars such as Kofi Agawu: 'the case against analysis has been made in part by people who fail to recognize that analysis is ideally permanently open, that it is dynamic and on-going, and that it is subject only to provisional closure. In an ideal world analysis would go on always and forever'. Kofi Agawu, 'How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In Again', *MA* 23/2-3 (July-October 2004) p 270.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method* p 102.

<sup>12</sup> Throughout this concept of conversation, Gadamer is speaking metaphorically.

theory and its precursors; (3) contemporary analytical theory; and (4) in Gadamer's words, our own prejudices.

Separating these four lines of investigation proves to be difficult. Our own personal and shared experiences will determine the specific elements that we look for in a work, and what we find in the work will determine which treatises we examine.<sup>13</sup> By using these methods concurrently, it should be possible to identify some of the areas that require further investigation. As these new areas are discovered, the questions that we ask about the work – and hence the way that we understand it – will change. This process is what Gadamer terms the 'fusion of horizons', his fourth key concept. This occurs when the interpreter's understanding changes after entering into a conversation with the work of art being studied. This dialectical to-and-fro movement is essential if we are to further our own understanding.

It is not my intention for this study to become a Gadamerian hermeneutic investigation of Fayrfax's works, but by providing a brief summary of the main concepts found in *Truth and Method*, I hope to have explained that the way in which I approach this analysis is dependent upon a number of different variables. It is clear that I am unable to begin to examine Fayrfax's works without any preconceptions. What I can do is to use my preconceptions as a starting-point for my analysis. Most importantly, I must be flexible in the way that I approach the music and have the ability to challenge and change my prejudices.

In summary, I would say that this thesis has two primary objectives: (1) to develop a set of analytical tools that can be used to study sacred works of the early Tudor period; and (2) to uncover some of the compositional processes used by one of the most celebrated composers of the period, Robert Fayrfax. I have tried to be systematic in my analytical methods, but these have been

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<sup>13</sup> Here again, we encounter another example of the hermeneutic circle.

restricted by time, my own knowledge, as well as my prejudices and horizons. I hope to have shed some new light on Fayrfax's works and to have given one interpretation of them.

Although I am looking at this repertoire from an analytical perspective, I believe that in order to understand Fayrfax's works it is essential to first place them within their historical context. Various aspects of the composer's life – particularly his places of employment – will have a bearing upon the works that he composed, and possibly upon some of the compositional techniques used. In view of this I will begin by examining what is currently known about Fayrfax's life, and the sources in which his music is preserved.

It may be possible in the future for my work to be used to investigate early Tudor sacred polyphony further, whether that is to expand and develop some of my methods, or to reject them. I hope that this study will be part of an ongoing process that will lead to a greater understanding of the works of Fayrfax and his contemporaries, but that I leave to others.

I would like to express my thanks to the following who have enabled me to complete this project: the AHRC and other people for their financial support; Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, and Lincolnshire County Record Offices; the National Register of Archives and Historical Manuscripts Commission; the Bodleian and British Libraries, Exeter Central Library, and Exeter University Library – particularly Robert Ford; Dr David Kelsall of the Muniment Room at St Albans Abbey; Professor Nick Sandon, Tim Symons, and Sabine Cassola for providing editions; David McKee and Laurence Blyth for their music typesetting skills; Carole Johnson and Dr Matthew Wright for their help with Latin and Greek respectively; Dr Mike Dobson for solving type-setting and computer-related problems; subscribers to the music-ir mailbase – and particularly Michael Schutz – for pointing me in the right direction regarding computational music analysis; Sebastian Bosley for material relating to Gadamer; the staff of

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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ABBREVIATIONS

<i>EM</i>	<i>Early Music</i>
<i>EMH</i>	<i>Early Music History</i>
<i>JAMS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Musicological Society</i>
<i>JMT</i>	<i>Journal of Music Theory</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Music Analysis</i>
<i>M&amp;L</i>	<i>Music &amp; Letters</i>
<i>MQ</i>	<i>Musical Quarterly</i>
<i>PRMA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association</i>
OUP	Oxford University Press
CUP	Cambridge University Press

For consistency the volume (V) and number (N) of each journal are recorded in the same way (V/N), even if they do not appear in that way in the original source.



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