

Notes on Robert Parsons's English Works
by George Steel (updated August 26, 2005)

The First Service

When in 1547, Edward VI ascended to the throne (on the death of his father Henry VIII), the forces of reformation began to work cataclysmic changes on the liturgy of the English church. In 1549, Thomas Cranmer's new *Book of Common Prayer* swept away the old Sarum Rite and all of its Latin-texted music. Almost overnight, a brand new liturgy—suddenly in English—demanded brand new music. The skills of England's composers were put to a severe test.

The Chapel Royal, at the epicenter of the reforming movements, was called upon to show all of England the way and, at the same time, show the international community that the new Protestantism was no less splendid than the old Catholic religion. At the center of the effort to create an entire new repertoire were composers like Thomas Tallis, John Sheppard, and Robert Parsons.

Parsons's First Service is his largest surviving work. This multi-movement piece contains the canticles for the new services of Morning Prayer (*Venite, Te Deum, Benedictus*) and Evensong (*Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis*), as well as a setting of the *Credo* for Mass following Morning Prayer. The performance available on this Website omits one small item: the *Responses to the Decalogue* (or Ten Commandments, often misleadingly referred to as the "Kyrie"). These comprise two tiny responses, seven and nine bars long. The music for these responses is however available [here](#).

Parsons's setting of the Service for the Book of Common Prayer 1549 was among the first ever, along with settings by Sheppard, Tallis, and some less successful parochial efforts by lesser composers. While the text shows some signs of having been modernized to accommodate the newer text of the 1552 Book of Common Prayer, there is sufficient textual evidence to conclude that the service was originally composed for the 1549 BCP.¹

At the time Parsons wrote this glorious music, composers were just developing the idea of a musically unified "Service," modeled after the old multi-movement mass. Sheppard's Second Service, which shares many features with Parsons's First, is the only other complete grandly scaled example before it and served as Parsons's model.

Parsons's First Service is scored identically to Sheppard's Second for antiphonal pair of choirs, *Decani* and *Cantoris*, and moves flexibly from a five-part basic texture (with two countertenor parts, one on each side of the choir) up to eight-parts, including many antiphonal effects.

¹ There is some contention about the dating of this service, as well as other of Parsons's works. (See the Preface to Doe's edition of the Latin Church Music, EECM, vol. 40). This is not the place for an extended discussion of the dating of early Reformation service music; I hope to undertake such a study in the future. Suffice it to say that there are almost as many text variants in early service music as there are settings.

Two important surviving manuscripts (the Wanley and Lumley partbooks) from the early Edwardian period preserve severe, often clumsy early experiments at setting the new English liturgy. Based on these books—intended for parochial use—it is often assumed incorrectly that all Edwardian music was severe and simple in style. In fact, the Chapel Royal required large-scale music that would preserve the grandeur of the monarchy while at the same time reflecting the new Protestant liturgy. Parsons's First Service, in the grandest style, must have accomplished this task beautifully. Its splendor paved the way (and coined many musical gestures) for later grand Service settings, including Mundy's "In Medio Chori" service, Byrd's "Great" Service, and Tomkins' Third Service.

Deliver me from mine enemies

Holy Lord God almighty

These two English anthems by Parsons are in a full style, and display Parsons's contrapuntal ingenuity. Written in six parts (SSAATB), "Deliver me from mine enemies" is built around a canon between two soprano parts. The five-voice Holy Lord God Almighty (SAATB) is written in the ABB form peculiar to English anthems in the mid 16th century. Both anthems are possibly Elizabethan. When measured against the rest of his output, these are the simplest of Parsons's English music to survive. However, both works are generously scaled and contrapuntally argued throughout.

The Second "Excellent" Service of Five Parts for Means

If the First Service shows a youthful Parsons, full of exuberant high spirits, this movement from his later (Elizabethan?) service seems to show a more mature composer at the height of his powers. The Te Deum has a very strong affinity to the standalone setting by Thomas Tallis, reconstructed by Leonard "Doc" Ellinwood (EECM vol. VIII). Tallis's Te Deum clearly served as an important model for Parsons's Service; it may itself have been a part of a complete service, now lost.

The *Te Deum* (a recording of which is available on the website) shows what a titanic work Parsons's Second Service is—a work without which Byrd's Great Service would be unthinkable. The scribe of one manuscript gives an indication of how this piece was viewed by Parsons's contemporaries: he heads it "Mr. Parsons: His Excellent Service."

Until now, it was thought that this music was too poorly preserved to be performed. Careful study revealed that piecing together widely scattered sources, including an indispensable organ reduction, would yield almost all of the music of the Service. I owe a great debt to Ralph Buxton, who has dedicated considerable enterprise and energy to this music, including turning up a reference to York Minster Music Ms. 13/4 (the Tenor Decani book), which has been enormously useful to the editions both of the "Excellent" Service and the First Service.

The Parsons Project website posts the full "Excellent" Service in Ralph Buxton's editions, including the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis written for this Service by William Mundy. The Venite survives in a worse state than the rest of the Service, (many of the sources omit it). Nonetheless, Ralph Buxton has made an

admirable reconstruction of it. One can easily see the condition of the extant music in his version by looking at only the organ part and the unbracketed voice parts.

In the future, we hope to add to the site an annotated works list, variant versions of the consort music, and editions of the incomplete Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis “in medio chori” (which survives only in the “Batten” organbook, Tenbury 791, though misidentified in the table of contents) and the “Litany for Trebles,” (contained in the Drexel manuscript collection in New York), a work very closely modeled on Tallis’s famous five-voice litany setting.

Until then, please enjoy these new additions to the site. Please feel free to download and perform them. However, please remember that the copyrights reside with the respective editors. Anyone wanting to record this music must request permission from the editors.