

Robert Parsons (d.1572), *The First Service: Magnificat and Nunc dimittis*

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COMMENTARY

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Robert Parsons is perhaps best remembered as the composer of a much-loved setting of *Ave Maria* who 'was drowned at Newark uppon Trent the 25th of Januarie...anno 14' (i.e. 1572, the fourteenth year of the reign of Elizabeth I). Although his origins are unclear, there is no evidence to associate him with his contemporary composer, William Parsons of Wells (fl. 1545-63), or with another West Country musician, Robert Parsons of Exeter (1596-1676).

His documented career spans scarcely more than a decade. He was admitted a gentleman of the royal household chapel of Elizabeth on 17 October 1563, where he remained until his death. Before his actual admission to the chapel, however, he had acted as a signatory for payments made to Richard Bower, master of the children of the chapel, in Michaelmas and Christmas quarters, 1560-1.¹ As Bower's assistant, he was probably 'usher' (under-master) to the children of the chapel prior to his formal admission to the chapel, first as epistoler, and then as gentleman.² In 1567 he was granted the crown lease of three Lincolnshire rectories: this, or a journey to recruit singers from Newark, or (possibly) some family connections with Newark, might account for his presence in Newark in the winter of 1571/2.

Although his documented career was brief, it nevertheless spanned an eventful phase in the Reformation, encompassing Elizabeth's accession (1558), the knife-edge passage of Reformation legislation through Parliament (1559), the enforcement of this legislation (throughout the 1560s), and the excommunication of Elizabeth by Pope Pius V (in the bull *Regnans in excelsis* of 1570). Only months before Parsons's untimely death, Convocation had considered a motion to abolish the use of organs within the Anglican liturgy (the motion was lost by one vote). The royal household chapel, recently the shop window of Mary Tudor's restored Latin liturgy, pioneered the revival of vernacular liturgy from 9 May 1559. But this was a peculiarly personal, and increasingly isolated, manifestation of Elizabeth's own elaborate ritual tastes.

¹ A. Ashbee, *Records of English Court Music, VI (1558-1603)* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1992), pp.13, 17, 174.

² P. Doe (ed.), *Robert Parsons: Latin Sacred Music*, Early English Church Music, 40 (London: British Academy/Stainer & Bell, 1994), pp.ix-x.

POLYPHONIC STYLE AND COMPOSITIONAL METHOD

The soundscape of Elizabeth's chapel was established during the first few months of her reign, when Chapel Royal composers were set to work to provide canticle settings for the vernacular Prayer Book (initially in its 1549 version), prior to the promulgation of the new liturgy in June 1559.³ Prior to his death in December 1558 or (at the latest) January 1559, Parsons's colleague, John Sheppard, had written his Second Service, which was subsequently to serve as a template for William Byrd's Great Service. Sheppard's setting also served as a reference point for Parsons: there are striking similarities between the two composers' essays, in terms of mode, scoring, overall planning and textural idiom (Parsons inherited Sheppard's predilection for suspended sixths at plagal cadences).⁴

In their settings, both composers adopted the 'full service' format, alternating between divided four-part choirs (Medius/Contratenor/Tenor/Bassus) and full five-voice ensemble (with a second Contratenor). Each composer explored in different ways the possibilities for textural invention which this format created. Sheppard maintained the distinction between *Decani* and *Cantoris* more consistently than Parsons, following the model of his own First Service (written c.1550); in Sheppard's hands, full eight-part scoring is reserved as a climactic device used only on two occasions ('He hath put down' and 'And to be the glory'). Almost from the start, Parsons allows his texture to expand, creating a more kaleidoscopic range of vocal colours; his rare use of eight-part scoring, however, follows Sheppard's model exactly (although the sources communicate this defectively in the Magnificat, bars 62-69).

At nearly all times, Parsons appears to cultivate textural richness, even at the cost of linear coherence. By the same token, the First Service is a relatively young composer's exuberant experiment in vernacular liturgical composition, at once more adventurous, but less sure-footed, than the older Sheppard's Second Service. Parsons had already cut his compositional teeth when he began work on the First Service. His accomplished six-part Latin Magnificat almost certainly dates from the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-8), and he appears to have been more at home in the melismatic style of the 1550s than in crafting the pithier phrase-structures required in the vernacular. If Paul Doe's identification of Catholic sympathies in Parsons's *Ave Maria* and *O bone Jesu* are correct, we may assume that his compositional aptitudes reflected his doctrinal preferences.⁵

These variations in quality between Parsons's Latin and English liturgical polyphony can also be detected in his use of canon, a device common to both genres. The Latin Magnificat comprises accomplished instances of canonic writing: in two parts at the

³ R. Bowers, 'The Chapel Royal, the First Edwardian Prayer Book, and Elizabeth's settlement of religion, 1559', *Historical Journal*, 43/2 (2000), pp.317-44; see the online Commentary to John Sheppard's Second Service.

⁴ Sheppard, in turn, had inherited the 6-5 cadential figure from John Taverner, who used it in *Christe Jesu [O Wilhelme] pastor bone* and in his five-part *Te Deum*, both written shortly before or after 1530).

⁵ Paul Doe (ed.), *Robert Parsons: Latin Sacred Music*, Early English Church Music, 40 (London: British Academy/Stainer & Bell, 1994), pp.xv-xvi.

octave, ninth and tenth, and in three at the unison; *O bone Jesu* is less ambitious, but equally lucid, with one canon between divided basses (bars 156-195 in Paul Doe's transcription).⁶ In the First Service, however, Parsons's approach was more piecemeal, and largely confined to the Medius part. His English anthem, *Deliver me from mine enemies*, is built upon a canon at the unison between two Medius parts, a peculiarity which might account for this anthem's exceptional popularity during the century before the Civil War. As in the First Service, however, the fact of writing in canon was seemingly of more import than the manner of doing so: in both cases, the need to set a syllabically dense English text evoked from Parsons correspondingly pedestrian phrase-structures.

These early Elizabethan service settings can therefore serve as representative exemplars of each composer's background and idiom. The comparative economy of Sheppard's phrase-structures, the assured competence of his contrapuntal technique, and his disciplined approach to vocal scoring, clearly reflect the work of a mature composer. Sheppard's first attempts to write English service music had been made under Edward VI (1547-53), when the experience of writing suitably plain service music had sharpened his compositional technique.

During those same years, Parsons had been a teenager: he shared neither Sheppard's maturity nor his prior, formative, experience of Edwardian austerity. In Parsons's case, surface richness occasionally masks internal contradictions, uncertain textual underlay and, in a few instances, howling incompetence. In a number of instances this clearly stems from Parsons's idiosyncrasies rather than corrupt transmission (indeed some manuscript variants stems from varyingly successful scribal attempts to correct compositional error). In one or two cases, therefore, a 'mistake' has been preferred over a 'corrected' one: for instance, in the *Nunc dimittis* (bars 25-26) where *Decani* and *Cantoris* are each internally coherent but plainly dissonant against each other. This is clearly an unsuccessful early attempt at eight-part antiphonal writing by Parsons, rather than an error by a later copyist.

SOURCES AND EDITIONS

This is not the first time that the *Magnificat* and *Nunc dimittis* from Robert Parsons's First Service have been published. The *Nunc dimittis* only, in reduced note-values and transposed up a major third, was included by Peter le Huray in his volume of *The Treasury of English Church Music*.⁷ More recently a complete edition of the evening canticles, transposed up a minor third and in reduced note-values, was published by Timothy Symons.⁸ The present edition differs from these earlier ones in a number of regards, however, both in the choice of pitch and in the resolution of some of the

⁶ Doe (ed.), *Robert Parsons: Latin Sacred Music*, pp.119-123.

⁷ *The Treasury of English Church Music, 1545-1650*, ed. Peter le Huray (Blandford, 1965; reprinted Cambridge UP, 1982), pp.33-44.

⁸ Robert Parsons (ed. Timothy Symons), *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis from the First Service*, Services: mixed voices, 1 (Guildford: Cantus Firmus Music, 1995).

contrapuntal anomalies discussed above. Thus the Tenor part is divided (Magnificat, bars 62-69), in order to create a full eight-part texture; and the Decani and Cantoris Alto parts are interchanged (Magnificat, bars 47-73), so as to rationalise the antiphony between Decani and Cantoris.

The First Service survives in three sources, two of them manuscript (at York and Durham), and one of them a slightly later printed source (John Barnard's *The First Book of Selected Church Musick* of 1641). The principal source, a set of partbooks in the Chapter Library of Durham Cathedral (MSS E4-E11), was copied at Durham early in the reign of Charles I, as part of a concerted campaign to revitalise the cathedral's past liturgical splendours.⁹ The partbooks, containing six complete liturgical cycles, were intended to serve on the principal feasts of the year.¹⁰ They were made to the highest specifications, and were most probably made as fair copy from exemplars already used by the cathedral choir. There are very few signs of wear and tear.

A number of variant readings have been adopted from five Jacobean partbooks in York Minster Library. The division of Decani and Cantoris Tenors (Magnificat, mm.62-9) is based on the reading from this earlier set. Textual underlay in the York partbooks is also more idiomatic and consistent than that of the Durham MSS.

The Durham and York partbooks are closely related to each other. In turn, John Barnard would appear to have consulted the Durham partbooks when he compiled the contents of *The First Book of Selected Church Musick* (1641), a set of ten printed partbooks of largely Elizabethan Anglican polyphony. Barnard's printed type faces (both text and notation) bear a marked similarity to the hand of one of the Durham copyists (who may therefore have designed Barnard's type).¹¹ As a minor canon of St Paul's Cathedral, London, and as a colleague of Adrian Batten, Barnard was well placed to locate and collate reliable manuscript sources, to correct any deficiencies in them, and thereby (so he claimed) to rescue their contents from 'manuscript obscurity'.¹² That said, *The First Book* includes many uncorrected errors, as well as variant and ungainly textual underlay, and does not substantially amplify the readings available from the manuscript sources.¹³

⁹ Brian Crosby, for instance, has compared E4-E11 in format and quality to British Library Add. MS 30520B, a fragment of a pre-Reformation Durham choirbook containing Mass *Sancte Cuthberte* by Thomas Ashwell (cantor at Durham Cathedral Priory, 1513-22) (Brian Crosby, *A Catalogue of Durham Cathedral Music Manuscripts* (Oxford: OUP/Dean & Chapter of Durham, 1986), p.64).

¹⁰ John Morehen, 'The Sources of English Cathedral Music, c.1617-c.1644' (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1969), p.50: in this schema, Byrd's 'Great' service was allotted to the Ascension.

¹¹ John Barnard, [*The*] *First Book of Selected Church Musick, London 1641*, facsimile ed. John Morehen, 10 volumes (Farnborough: Gregg, 1972), p.iv.

¹² *The First Book*, 1, dedicatory preface. See J. Bunker Clark, 'Adrian Batten and John Barnard: colleagues and collaborators', *Musica Disciplina*, 22 (1968), pp.207-29.

¹³ Morehen, 'The Sources', pp.296-301.

SOURCE LIST

Voice-part	Partbook (with symbol used in critical commentary)		Date
Soprano Decani	John Barnard, <i>The First Book of Selected Church Musick</i> , 10 vols. (London: printed by Edward Griffin at the sign of the three Lutes in Paul's Alley, 1641) [= Barnard], Medius Decani, ff.52-4	B1	1641
	Durham Cathedral, Chapter Library [= Durham], MS E4, pp.135-8	E4	c.1630
	York, Minster Library [= York], MS M13/1, pp.36-40	Y1	c.1618
Soprano Cantoris	Barnard, Medius Cantoris, 51v-3	B2	1641
	Durham, MS E5, pp.133-6	E5	c.1630
Alto Decani	Barnard, Primus Contratenor Decani, ff.53-5	B3	1641
	Barnard, Secundus Contratenor Decani, ff.53-5	B5	1641
	E6, pp.129-32	E6	c.1630
	York, MS S2(1)b (or M13/2), pp.36-9	Y2	c.1618
Alto Cantoris	Barnard, Primus Contratenor Cantoris, ff.52-4	B4	1641
	Barnard, Secundus Contratenor Cantoris, ff.52-4	B6	1641
	Durham, MS E7, pp.135-9	E7	c.1630
	Durham, MS E8, pp.135-9	E8	c.1630
Tenor Decani	Barnard, Tenor Decani, ff.50v-52v	B7	c.1630
	Durham, MS E9, pp.127-31	E9	c.1630
	York, MS M13/4, pp.34-7	Y3	c.1618
Tenor Cantoris	Barnard, Tenor Cantoris, ff.49v-51v	B8	1641
	Durham, MS E10, pp.129-32	E10	c.1630
Bass Decani	Barnard, Bassus Decani, ff.52v-54v	B9	c.1630
	York, MS M13/5, pp.35-9	Y4	c.1618
Bass Cantoris	Barnard, Bassus Cantoris, ff.51v-53v	B10	1641
	Durham, MS E11, pp.137-40	E11	c.1630
	York, MS S2(1) (or M13/3), pp.31-5	Y5	c.1618

EDITORIAL METHOD

The music has been transposed up a tone, rather than the once-customary minor third. This has two advantages. Firstly, it avoids the use of too many 'black' notes, giving a 'cleaner' score more concordant with the original notation. Secondly, the chosen pitch is arguably closer to the performing pitch intended by Sheppard. The question of pitch in Tudor church music has generated considerable disagreement among scholars. Recent research, however, suggests that the actual sounding pitch of Parsons's setting would have been just over a semitone above written pitch (i.e., F#).¹⁴

Original note values have been retained.

Ligatures are indicated by square horizontal brackets.

Accidentals have been applied sparingly. Editorial accidentals have been placed above the staff (except in the editorial additions to the organ part). Cautionary accidentals are placed within the staff, but in parentheses.

Slurs were frequently used by the scribes of both the Durham and the York partbooks. Where appropriate, these scribal slurs are presented unchanged. Crossed slurs are editorial additions, intended to clarify two- or three-note melismata.

Textual underlay follows either the York or the Durham partbooks (although variants are not listed in the critical commentary). In all surviving sources textual underlay is problematic, reflecting seventeenth-century norms of text-setting, rather than the style of sixty-to-eighty years earlier. Only very sparing attempt has been made to 'restore' now-lost early-Elizabethan underlay. Italics are used in the edition to indicate text that is not present in any of the surviving manuscripts, and spelling has been modernized.

¹⁴ This issue is discussed (and some tenacious misconceptions overturned) by Andrew Johnstone in "'As it was in the beginning": organ and choir pitch in early Anglican Church music', *Early Music*, 31/4 (2003), pp.506-25.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

All entries are listed in the following order: voice-part (capitals), bar(s) and notes (including rests), source (in brackets: see source list for abbreviations): note-value (lower case), note-name (in capitals), and textual underlay (in italic superscript).

Reference is made here to the vocal designations used in this edition, and not to the seventeenth-century voice-parts: in the sources the two Contratenor parts are distributed in conflicting pairings among four partbooks: Primus/Secundus Contratenor Decani and Primus/Secundus Contratenor Cantoris.

Note-values are indicated in lower case thus: q = quaver; c = crotchet; m = minim; s = semibreve; b = breve; l = long; m. = dotted minim (etc.). Note-names (but not specific pitches) are indicated in capitals, and refer to the **original** pitch (i.e. a tone lower than in the edition). 'R' indicates 'rest'.

Magnificat

AD, 1.1-4.1 (B3/B5): bR - sC^{My}-mC^{soul}-mC^{doth}-mD^{mag}-mDⁿⁱ-mE^{fy}-mE^{the}-mF^{Lord};
TD, 3.4 (E9/B7/B8): cE;
AC, 4.4 (B4/B6): sC;
SD, 5.3 (E4): cF^{Spi}-cF^{rit};
TD, 5.3 (E9): cF^{Spi}-cF^{rit};
AD, 12.4 (E7/E8), no ficta;
AD/AC, 19.2-3 (all sources): *sic* (unisons);
SD/AC, 19.3-4 (all sources): *sic* (unisons);
AD/BC, 19.3-4 (all sources): *sic* (fifths);
TD, 19.3 (E9): sD;
BC, 21.3-4 (B10): sC;
TD, 23.4 (E9): mE;
SD, 25.3 (Y1): marked 'Verse';
AC, 26.1-2 (all sources): *sic* (consecutive fifths against SD);
TD/TC, 29.1-3 (B7/B8): cD-cD-mG;
AC, 32.3 (E8): mD;
TD, 32.4-5 (E9): sG;
SD, 33.4 (Y1): no ficta
BC, 33.4-34.2 (B10): m.A-cG;
TD/TC, 34.1-2 (B8/B9): c.Bflat-qA;
BC, 34.2-35.3 (all sources): mBflat^{is}-mA^{on}-m.G^{them}-cF^{that}-mA^{fear} (cf. BD entry, 34.4-5, and BC underlay, 35.5-36.4);
TD/TC, 34.5-35.1 (B7/B8): mE-mR-mR;
TD, 37.3-4 (E9): cG-cA;
AD, 37.5-6 (E6/B3/B5): cE^{ra}-cE^{ti};
AD, 38.5-6 (B3/B5): mBflat;
AD, 39.1-3 (E6/B3/B5): mC^{ons/all}-mC^{ge}-mG^{ne}-cA^{ra}-cA^{ti};
BD, 39.3-4 (Y5): cD-cE;

AC, 41.4-5 (E7/E8): mA^{through};
 BC, 42.2 (B10): cG;
 SD/SC, 43.6-45.1 (B3/B4): cF^{all}-mF^{ge}-cG^{ne}-mE-s.F^{ra}-mF^{ti}-bF^{ons};
 TD/TC, 44.3-45.2 (Y4/E9/E10): mF^{ons} only;
 SC, 44.4 (E5): bF^{ons} only;
 SD, 47.1 (Y1): marked 'Verse';
 SD, 56.2-3 (E4): mE-sF;
 AD, 62.1 (all sources): sA^{hearts}-mR-mC^{He};
 SC, 62.1-3 (all sources): bC^{hearts};
 AD and AC, 63.1-73.1/73.3: inverted editorially;
 TD, 62.1 (E9/B7): bR omitted;
 AD, 65.2 (B3/B5), cF;
 AC, 69.1 (E8): mF^{their}-mF^{seat};
 BC, 72.1 (B10): mR omitted;
 AC, 77.3 (B4/B6): sBnatural;
 SD/SC, 77.3 (E4/E5): no ficta;
 TD, 77.2-78.1 (Y4): sG^{things}-mG^{with};
 SC, 79.3 (E5): cF;
 SD, 81.3-4 (all sources): *sic* (octaves against AD);
 TD/TC, 85.2-3 (B7/B8): sC;
 TC, 89.3-90.1 (all sources): *sic* (octaves with AC);
 TC: 91.1-2 (all sources): *sic* (fifths with AC);
 SC, 91.2 (E5), mF^{his}-mF^{mer};
 TD, 98.1-2, E9/Y4 (TD): mBflat^{ed}-mF^{to};
 AD, 103.4 (E6): no ficta;
 TD, 106.1-5 (B7): m.G^{Glo}-cG^{ry}-mF^{be}-cC^{to}-cC^{the};
 AD, 106.5-107.3 (B3/B4/Y2): mC^{the}-sBnatural^{Fa};
 SD, 109.3 (E4/B1): no ficta;
 AC, 109.3 (B4/B6): mF;
 BD, 112.2 (Y5): mA;
 AD, 113.1-3 (E6): m.C^{Ho}-cC^{ly}-mF^{Ghost}-cF^{the}-mF^{Ho};
 BD, 114.1-2 (Y5): sC;
 AD, 116.3-117.2 (B3/B5): bC^{gin}-mF^{ning};
 AC, 118.1-2 (E7/E8): sD^{is};
 AD, 120.3-121.1 (E6): mD^{end}-sD^{world};
 AC, 120.4-5 (E7/E8): cD^{now}-cD^{and};
 BC, 121.1 (B10): sF lacking;
 AC, 126.1 (B4/B6): sD;
 AD, 126.5-6 (B3/B5): mD^{end}-mC^{world};
 AD, 128.2 (B3/B45): mC lacking;
 SD, 129.4-133.1 (E4): sE^{end}/fermata/barline-bF^A-bF-bF^{men}; (Y1): sE^{end} (added)/barline
 (added)-bF^{end} (erased)-lF^A-bF^{men}; (B1/B2): sE^{end}-l.^A-l^{men};
 SC, 129.4-133.1 (E5): sE^(-out)-bF^{end}-bF^A-lF^{men};
 TD/TC, 129.4-133.1 (E9): sC^{end}/barline-bF^A-bF-bF^{men}/fermata; (E10): sC^{end}-bD^A-bD-
 bD^{men}/ferma; (Y4): sC^(-end)/barline (added)-bF^{end}-lF (stem added to bF)^A-bF^{men}/fermata;
 (B7/B8): sC^{end}-l.F^A-lF^{men} fermata

Nunc dimittis

TD/TC, 6.3-4 (B7/B8): mD^{to}-mD^{thy}
SD, 12.4 (Y1): no ficta
SC, 17.1-2 (B2): sF^{ple}
BC, 20.3 (E11): sF
TD, 22.4 (B7): mA
AD, 24.2 (B3/5): mA
AC, 25.3-26.1 (B4/6): sC
SC, 28.3 (E5): mBnatural
BC, 29.3 (B10): m.G^{ls}-cG^{ra}
TC, 36.1 (E10): sG
AD, 39.3 (B3/B5): cC
BC, 57.1 (E11): sBflat lacking
TD, 44.2 (B7 only: B8 concurs with other sources): cE
AD, 52.3 (all sources): mG
AD, 52.4 (E6/Y2): mC
AD, 52.4 (B3/5): mE
SD, 54.2 (Y1/B1): mF
AD, 54.3-55.1: mC-sD lacking
SC, 55.6-7 (both sources): c.C-qA
TD/TC, 56.2-59.1 (E7-9/Y4/B7): lG; (B8): l.G
BC, 57.1 (E11): sBflat lacking
SC, 58-59.1 (B2): b.F^A
