

Idiomatic Tendencies in Selected Keyboard Works by Thomas Tallis

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Believed to have been born in 1505, Thomas Tallis served as a gentleman of the Royal Chapel under the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward I, Mary Tudor, and Queen Elizabeth. His main duties consisted of composing music for church services. It is a well known fact that Tallis's compositions marked a rather eclectic style. Due to the abrupt changes in the state religion between 1547 and 1560, his liturgical compositions fluctuated between Latin and English texts. Although many of his works consisted of both liturgical and secular settings for vocal ensembles, a number of instrumental works, particularly for the keyboard, formed part of his creative repertory. Out of approximately 35 compositions for the keyboard, 18 of his works are collected in The British Library, London, as Add. 30513, or, as it is more commonly known, the Mulliner Book.

Tallis's works in the Mulliner Book can be classified into two main categories: arrangements of vocal works and idiomatic instrumental works. The vocal arrangements, or reductions, consist of Latin motets, English anthems, and Tudor part-songs, and are relatively similar to the vocal originals. The idiomatic works, on the other hand, consist of freely composed imitative pieces, called 'points', and pieces based on a cantus firmus. Three of Tallis's cantus firmus pieces, based on the plainsong *Clarifica me pater*, are particular points of interest; they may in fact hold a key to identifying the general characteristics of his idiomatic keyboard music. Careful analysis of these works reveals that Tallis's cantus firmus-based keyboard works share common stylistic and compositional characteristics with each other, and with other works of similar nature.

English Instrumental Sources and the Mulliner Book

Before beginning the analytical discussion, it is necessary to lay the foundation and general history of sources of English instrumental music. Although the Mulliner Book is distinctive for its unique mix of different composers and musical genre, it is only one of about 200 English instrumental sources. Many of these sources consist of instrumental ensemble music, particularly for a consort. Much of this music for instrumental ensembles is polyphonic in texture, and formed of cantus firmus settings, fantasias, or similar pieces. [1] In some cases, instrumental works are found in vocal sources. For example, the 'Dow partbooks' (Oxford, Christ Church, Mus. 984-8), includes sections of instrumental music by Byrd, Parsons, Stogers, and others. [2] Apart from the ensemble manuscripts, solo lute music makes up a significant portion: 1600 pieces in about 60 books, more sources than those for the virginals. [3] These sources, more so than the ensemble tomes, display the English affinity for dance music and song arrangements. [4] Most of these sources are in manuscript and contain the works of continental composers such as Narvaez, Francesco da Milano, Gorzani, and Melchior Neusidler as well as the 'sons of England', Taverner and Dowland. [5] [FN](#)

Sources of keyboard music comprise most of the English collection: 64 manuscripts and three printed sources, making a total of 67. These books, probably the best known of English musical sources, contain works for virginals, harpsichord, and organ. English keyboard music closely resembles that composed for the lute. The style of these compositions vary to include reductions of motets, anthems, and Mass parts; polyphonic works based on a cantus firmus or a melodic motive or 'point'; and dance music. In addition, unique genres such as the voluntary are found. [6] [FN](#)

According to Denis Stevens, editor of the modern edition, the Mulliner Book is unique among manuscript sources of the era in that its contents range across the whole gamut of sixteenth-century music. [7] The Mulliner Book receives its name from its compiler, Thomas Mulliner. According to employment records at Corpus Cristi College of 3 March 1563, Thomas Mulliner worked as *modulator organorum*, a church organist. [8] Nothing more is known of his life. Since organ music was not

readily available in print, Mulliner pursued the arduous task of creating his own anthology to be used for practical liturgical purposes. Although the works represented in this volume are relatively contemporary to Mulliner, his choices were unusual in that they consisted of works intended for Catholic services, verses for Sarum hymns, complete settings of anthems and offertories, keyboard score reductions of English anthems and part songs, idiomatic keyboard forms such as the pavane, fancy, and voluntary, as well as other non-classified types. The source itself contains 120 works by 16 named and attributed composers. Out of the total count, 19 works bear no name, possibly the fault of Mulliner's copying. Of the named composers, Redford comprises most of the volume with 35 pieces. Tallis and Blitheman make up the next significant portion with 18 and 15 works respectfully. The Mulliner Book also contains the only manuscript sources for works by Farrant, Heath, Newman, Shelbye, and Shepherd. [9] [Table 1](#) offers a full statistical perspective of the contents. Scholars have found it difficult to discover the exact dates of this source. [10] Many agree that the compilation occupied most of Mulliner's life, from ca. 1545-1570. The abrupt changes in the State Church may have impacted his eclectic musical decisions. [FN](#)

Analysis of the Plainsong *Clarifica me pater*

The most interesting aspect of Tallis's settings of the plainsong *Clarifica me pater* is that Mulliner neglected to title them in his original transcription. According to the *Liber Usualis*, the *Clarifica me pater*, part of Antiphons of the Benedictus and Magnificat, [11] is intended to be sung on Saturday at Lauds during Passiontide or Easter week. The text, as follows, commemorates the Sunday of the Feria on Feasts of the First Class:

Clarifica me Pater apud temetipsum, ciaritate quam habui, priusquam mundis fieret [12]

A prayer follows the chant:

*Proficiat, quaesumus Domine, plebs tibi dicata piae devotionis affectu : † ut sacris actionibus erudita, quanto majestati tuae fit gratior, * tanto donis potioribus augeatur. Per Dominum* [13] [FN](#)

The chant melody itself, in aeolian mode on D, has three distinct phrases, each related to a portion of the text (see [Example 1](#)).

Along with the flow of the text, brief cadential points distinguish the three phrases of *Clarifica me pater*. The first phrase consists of nine notes ranging from D to A. Phrase two, a melodic antecedent to phrase one, is shorter in range. The melodic line gradually descends from B flat to F then resolves up one step to G. The third phrase consists of two sub-phrases, marked by the musical breath mark and the comma in the text. For analytical purposes, the musical phrases in modern musical notation can be divided as illustrated in [Table 2](#).

[Ex. 2](#) displays the plainsong in modern musical notation. The chant focuses primarily on a pattern consisting of three repeated notes. This technique is found in several places in the chant line. Phrase one, for example, opens with three repeating Ds before the phrase unfolds melodically. Phrase three parallels this rhythmic-melodic feature beginning with three successive Gs and ending with the initial three-D pattern. Phrase two remains independent of this rhythmic-melodic feature. Subsequently, Tallis maintains this feature while, at the same time, creating additional melodic links between the chant phrases.

In each of Tallis's keyboard settings of *Clarifica me pater* the plainsong melody adheres to a conjunct, stepwise pattern rather than the sudden leaps of the original. The following analysis will shed light onto how Tallis treated the plainsong differently in each of his three settings, numbers 99, 101, and 104. However, we shall also see how these pieces share common characteristics in terms of cantus firmus variation as well as subject motive orientation, thereby establishing a general model for Tallis's idiomatic keyboard style.

Analysis of *Clarifica me pater*, Mulliner Book number 99

The most obvious characteristic of this piece (see [Ex. 3](#)) is its contrapuntal nature; more specifically, the exploitation of a single rhythmic-melodic motive. In Denis Stevens's edition, this subject motive is comprised of a scalar eighth-note pattern originating in the bass line. The alto voice answers the bass subject a perfect fifth higher, followed by the uppermost voice. Throughout this short piece, the subject motive appears in every voice, providing the work with a quality of perpetual motion. As this motive passes from voice to voice, a steady, first-species counterpoint provides harmonic balance. Elements of *fauxbourdon* are found in the work. In isolated areas, the lowest voice and tenor cantus firmus move together in thirds. Furthermore, Tallis presents the subject motive at the same time in two voices a third or sixth apart. This technique first occurs between the bass and alto voices, and recurs in the alto and soprano voices prior to the cadence.

The modality of number 99 is D aeolian, the original mode of the cantus firmus. In the middle of the piece, Denis Stevens suggests a brief modality shift to G, anticipated by the F sharp in the alto voice. Although this is an editor's marking, the subsequent E flat, original to the source, makes a strong suggestion of a brief shift of mode. In the last line of the piece, Tallis returns to a D-centered modality before cadencing on a D major chord. Throughout this *moto perpetuo* piece, one feels inclined to notice the presence of an underlying harmonic consciousness.

Tallis places the cantus firmus entirely in the tenor voice and presents it almost verbatim (see [Ex. 4](#)). The only exceptions result in an additional, stepwise G and neighboring B flat at the close of the phrase. Furthermore, Tallis maintains the steady rhythmic integrity of the original.

In phrase 2 (see [Ex. 4](#)), Tallis treats the cantus firmus in its strictest form; there are no melodic interpolations. However, Tallis creates an elision to bridge phrase 2 with phrase 3a. In order to achieve this, he substitutes the first G of the three-note pattern at the beginning of phrase 3 with the final G of phrase 2, creating an extended plainsong melody.

In phrase 3b (see [Ex. 4](#)), Tallis is at his most creative in the piece, knitting a melismatic line based upon the chant melody. Initially, Tallis creates a melodic bridge between the G of phrase 3a and the E of phrase 3b by inserting an F, thereby continuing the conjunct melodic integrity of his treatment thus far. Most important is the ascending motive from C to G in which the rhythmic cell is the same as that of the subject motive of the surrounding counterpoint. Furthermore, Tallis continues the technique of melodic interpolation and, at the end of the piece, briefly varies the descending F to E melodic figure before the cadence.

Analysis of Mulliner Book number 101

The general style of number 101 (see [Ex. 5](#)) vastly differs from the florid counterpoint of number 99. The modern edition of this piece is five measures longer than its predecessor. Although the basic style appears to be somewhat chordal, a closer look reveals that counterpoint is the key feature, signified by the excessive display of the dotted rhythm subject motive. Tallis's compositional style in this work abounds with the sequential overlapping of the subject. As one voice performs the motive, another voice enters almost immediately, occasionally sharing the same pitches with the previous voice. The effect of such a procedure is a gradually ascending chain of subject motive material. The last line of [Ex. 5](#) showcases this unique characteristic.

The modality of number 101 is also D aeolian. The *musica ficta* in this composition is particularly intriguing. For example, measure eight of Denis Stevens's edition indicates that the upper voice should perform a F-natural against the F-sharp of the alto. This voicing occurs again in measure 10 with the E-flat and E-natural juxtaposition. After close attention to such a phenomenon, it is easy to see that it is a direct result of the contrapuntal treatment of the subject motive. Throughout the work, Tallis adheres to the principal of resolving dissonances by half step, either up or down. In the excessive case of the counterpoint and motivic juxtaposition of this example, this rule is not lost, thus resulting in occasional, passing harmonic dissonance. In Tallis's counterpoint, exact repetitions of subject motives at any interval are custom to his style. Subsequently, such compositional procedures were, perhaps, not strangers to the English ear.

It is also worth noting that the subject motive of this piece is found in other Tallis works in the Mulliner Book. *Veni redemptor*, number 102 in the anthology, utilizes the same motive as number 101 (see [Ex. 6](#)); however, it is more reserved in its contrapuntal fecundity.

Of the three settings of the Passiontide plainsong, number 101 is the most reserved in cantus firmus treatment (see [Ex. 7](#)). Tallis does not offer the melismatic variation in this setting as he did in number 99. However, he does continue to employ melodic interpolations in order to connect the phrases together as a single, coherent melody. Consequentially, the plainsong is preserved in melody and rhythm. Tallis strictly states the cantus firmus melody in phrase 1. The only place in which he creates a melodic bridge is near the end of the ascension; the passing G offers a link between the F and final pair of As.

In phrases 2 and 3a, Tallis creates an elision in exactly the same way as in number 99, substituting the last G of phrase 2 with the initial G of phrase 3a (see [Ex. 7](#)). He omits the B flat of phrase 2 of the cantus firmus, beginning the keyboard setting on A. In much of the same way as the elision, the omission of the B flat links phrases 1 and 2 together, creating three successive As. Tallis also includes a melodic interpolation near the end of phrase 3a. In addition, a melodic interpolation is used to bridge phrases 3a and 3b before the subject motive arises as a variation of a portion of the plainsong. Prior to the cadence of the piece, Tallis creates a tag based on a fragment of phrase 3b of the chant. In the same way as in number 99, Tallis utilizes the highest degree of variation in the final phrase of the cantus firmus.

Analysis of Mulliner Book number 104

In the last setting of *Clarifica me pater* in the Mulliner Book, Tallis reverts to a simpler and more spacious contrapuntal style (see [Ex. 8](#)). Fourth species counterpoint prevails throughout, most of it derived specifically from the subject motive. In this work, Tallis presents a simple, four-note, descending subject. In specific places, Tallis creates a motivic chain in much the same way as number 101. In the second line of the modern edition, such a chain is found originating in the bass, carried on by the alto, soprano, tenor, and returning to the bass before the alto quickly picks it up again. The chain reappears in an even more closely knit form in the last line, where three voices are only separated by two beats between entrances.

The modality, as in the previous two pieces, is D aeolian. However, Tallis's use of *musica ficta* in number 104 is more reserved than in numbers 99 and 101. Tallis utilizes a C-sharp to provide melodic direction and to centre the work around D. In several areas, the presence of F sharp indicates the moment of a modal shift to G; however, this shift is slight. The dissonant results of Tallis's contrapuntal nuances are not present. While harmonic movement and *ficta* resolve to points of resolution, the lack of a strong, definitive cadence within the body of the work creates a slight degree of tension until the end.

Just as in number 101, evidence can be found of Tallis's recycling of subject motives. *Jam lucis orto sidere*, another cantus firmus composition by Tallis in the Mulliner Book, utilizes the descending, sighing motive of 104 (see [Ex. 9](#)).

The cantus firmus treatment of number 104 follows the same general patterns as numbers 99 and 101 (see [Ex. 10](#)). Phrase 1 is the strictest in representation, with the only variations stemming from various melodic links. Contrary to the previously analyzed pieces, Tallis does not connect phrases 2 and 3a with an elision. Instead, he creates a four-note link based on fragments of phrase 2, the cadential F-A-G formula. Furthermore, he implements the subject motive into the closing melodic pattern of the cantus firmus. As in the other two specimens, Tallis is most creative in his treatment of the final phrases. In phrase 3a, Tallis substitutes some of the notes of the original melody with other notes of his own choosing; notably, the A and two F sharps. This substitution provides harmonic support for the counterpoint, which, at this point in the music, centers around G aeolian mode. Before the close of the piece, Tallis uses F natural to connect melodically phrases 3a and 3b. The last phrase consists of the exact notes of *Clarifica me pater* in a steady rhythm. After a brief cadential moment, brought about by the C sharp, the subject motive returns before the piece

finally comes to a close.

Conclusion

Although these succinct pieces may not stand at the helm of Tallis's keyboard works, their stylistic and compositional makeup provide them with a quiet distinction. While there appears to be little difference between Tallis's idiomatic keyboard music and keyboard reductions of vocal works, this difference is not well observed. The vocal reductions maintain the general stylistic consistencies of the original vocal sources, emphasizing chordal textures, homorhythmic movement, and occasional contrapuntal interplay. These works, while popular in the keyboard repertory, offer little advancement towards an idiomatic style. In order to establish such an independent genre, a rediscovery and synthesis of existing forms had to emerge. To build a repertory, some composers sought to base their works upon dance forms, others upon the rules of counterpoint and formal invention. Apart from these forms, the cantus firmus basis for keyboard composition was the most frequently utilized. In the case of Tallis's three settings of *Clarifica me pater*, the synthesis of plainsong variation, a predominating contrapuntal texture and unifying subject material is the distinguishing, idiomatic characteristic. The independent personality of each voice is, ultimately, fastened to this tripartite thematic idea. Armed with this little pocket of information, perhaps similar works by other composers can provide new food for thought to curious minds.

Footnotes

[1] See Arthur J. Ness, 'Sources of Instrumental Music to 1630: The British Isles', in Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., vol. 24 (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001), p. 15.

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[2] Ness, 'Sources of Instrumental Music', p. 15. [Back](#)

[3] Arthur J. Ness, 'Sources of Lute Music: English Lute Music', in Sadie, ed., *The New Grove*, vol. 24, p. 52.

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[4] Ness, 'Sources of Lute Music', pp. 52-54. [Back](#)

[5] Ness, 'Sources of Lute Music', pp. 52-54. [Back](#)

[6] The Mulliner Book contains two such pieces by Allwood and Farrant. See Denis Stevens, ed., *Musica Britannica: A National Collection of Music vol. 1: The Mulliner Book*, 2nd ed. (London: Stainer and Bell, 1973), pp. 13 and 18.

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[7] Stated in Gerald Gifford, 'The Mulliner Book Revisited: Some Musical Perspectives and Performance Considerations', *The Consort* 58 (Summer 2002), p. 13. [Back](#)

[8] Gifford, 'The Mulliner Book Revisited', p. 14. [Back](#)

[9] Denis Stevens, 'Music of the 16th and 17th Centuries, Volume I: English Keyboard Music from the Tudor Age to the Restoration', jacket notes to *Music of the 16th and 17th Centuries, Volume 1*; Paul Wolfe, harpsichord; MHS 676. [Back](#)

[10] Gifford, 'The Mulliner Book Revisited', p. 14. [Back](#)

[11] According to *The New Grove*, these pieces are not antiphons in the strictest sense of the word as they do not embrace a psalm or canticle. Rather, these psuedo-antiphons are independent songs to be sung at certain feasts, ie: Palm Sunday, Purification, and Easter to name but a few. *Clarifica me pater* is only performed once a year.

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[12] See Benedictus of Solosmes, ed., *The Liber Usualis* (Tornai, Belgium: Desclee and Co., 1938), p. 1101. [Back](#)

[13] Benedictus of Solosmes, ed., *The Liber Usualis*, p. 1101. [Back](#)

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