



Winds of Change

Introducing "Aural Histories: Coventry 1451-1642"

By Helen Roberts and Jamie Savan

Research into the role of brass instruments in the soundscape of Early Modern Coventry features in a major AHRC-funded project now underway at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, UK. Here, principal investigator Jamie Savan and Postdoctoral Research Associate Helen Roberts discuss the project and some of the methods and approaches they are adopting to carry out this work.

Helen Roberts: Can you give us a brief outline of the project itself and tell us about the team?

Jamie Savan: It is a large, interdisciplinary team that brings together expertise in musicology, performance practice, acoustics, architectural history, music technology and VR modelling. Four academic institutions (Royal Birmingham Conservatoire / Birmingham City University, the University of Birmingham, London Metropolitan University, and the University of Newcastle) two professional ensembles (His Majestys Sagbutts and Cornetts and the Binchois Consort) and the community at Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, are all official partners. We are also working with the history and outreach team at St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry, and have an advisory board with expertise in all our research areas. The project is funded for three years until September 2025 and we have a varied and exciting work plan that includes archival work, practice-led research with our professional and community partners, digital acoustic and visual modelling, public engagement activities and live performances.

HR: Having grown up in the area, I know we don't often associate Coventry with a rich Early Modern musical heritage. Can you tell us a bit about why you chose this location for your work?

JS: It is true that twenty-first century Coventry is better known as a post-industrial city that was somewhat compromised by town planners in the aftermath of World War II than as the thriving medieval city it was at the turn of the sixteenth century. Bombing raids in the 1940s destroyed what was then the Cathedral Church of St Michael, one of our study locations, along with many of the remaining Tudor buildings and, as you can see in Figure 1, the ruins of St Michael's and the new modernist Cathedral now stand together as a powerful symbol of peace and reconciliation that is central to Coventry's modern identity. Like this fragmentary building, many of the sources

of information we are using to build up a picture of musical life in Coventry are also incomplete, as is so often the case with English records from around this time. But several important cornerstones of our work do survive, including the fifteenth century Holy Trinity Church (Figure 2), a beautifully preserved medieval guildhall (Figure 3), and just enough archival information to hint at the kind of musical practices that might have featured within and between these buildings during our study period. With a combination of Coventry-specific evidence and evidence from similar locations around England, we actually have a lot to go on, and the digging we have done in the first few months of the project has also turned up some unexpected and exciting new material.

So we can see that Coventry's historic buildings are clearly very important to

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Figure 1: The ruins of Coventry's old cathedral, St Michael's, and the new Coventry Cathedral, completed in 1962. Above: Medieval ceiling boss in St Mary's Guildhall.





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Figure 2: Holy Trinity Church, Coventry.

this project. Perhaps you can explain how these buildings fit in with research into musical practice?

HR: The buildings are key characters in our work, as some of the main research questions we are looking to answer relate firstly to the function of music within its architectural context, and secondly to the experience of music for the Early Modern listener and performer. Our aim is to build virtual acoustic and visual replicas of three of these buildings (St Michael's Church, Holy Trinity Church, and St Mary's Guildhall) and to model some of the musical practices we know took place in each. Whilst we often consider historic buildings, particularly churches, as static objects, monuments almost to our history, their use over time was dynamic. We know, for instance, that Holy Trinity Church, like many Parish churches, was furnished with a rood screen and many banners, streamers, and other soft furnishings before the Reformation. Records tell us that rushes were used as a floor covering in summer and peas straw in winter. Whilst we can't easily model these changes to the space physically, we can make interventions in our VR model to alter the acoustic and visual properties of the space and test the effects of these changes on the performer and listener using 3D audio technology. Christian Frost, our architectural historian, will also be working on physical models of certain lost

aspects of our spaces to create exhibition materials for public engagement activities towards the end of our research.

The project has a very long timeframe. Could you tell the readers why we have chosen this particular period?

JS: The project spans a period of immense social and political change in English history, from the reign of Henry VI, through the Wars of the Roses, the Reformation, the upheavals of the Marian revival, into the seventeenth century and towards the outbreak of the Civil Wars—quite a rollercoaster! Music, of course, also changed a lot in this period. A Catholic mass setting from 1451 and Protestant service music from the 1630s, for example, present completely different performance practice possibilities and challenges. But it was important to us to be able to take this long view of English music in its urban context, because alongside these shifting cultural sands there are elements of continuity that it is difficult to fully appreciate when looking at a single historical moment or a narrow window. For example, whilst the prevailing religious sentiment changed over time, singing and playing on instruments remained an important aspect of religious observance. As I mentioned above, the structural fabric of our historic buildings remained broadly consistent throughout our period, but the way these buildings were used, how they were decorated, how they looked, and how music sounded within them, changed, sometimes quite dramatically. And several key civic institutions, particularly that of the town waits band, was a consistent feature of Coventry's soundscape well beyond our study period, but the instruments they played, their repertoire, and their civic function underwent significant change. The extended timeframe allows us to map these changes, and some of the points at which they intersect with reference to a broad cultural overview.

HR: You mention the town waits band, which brings me neatly to my next question! How do historic brass instruments feature in your research?

JS: There are two key aspects of historic brass performance practice that we are interested in. The first of these is the role and function of the waits, whose presence is fairly well documented throughout

our study period. We know how many musicians the group included at various stages, and whilst we don't always know specifically which instruments they played, we have a few bits and pieces to go on and can use evidence from elsewhere to complete the picture. There is a reference to the purchase of a tenor cornett and a "double Curtall" for the Coventry waits in 1627, and we can reasonably assume that shawms, sackbuts and treble cornetts probably also featured in the band's line-up around this time. In 1439, so just before our study begins, records tell us that whoever played the trumpet "shall have the rule of the whaytes and off them be Cheffe." The big question is whether the trumpet around this time is likely to have been equipped with a telescopic slide; contemporary imagery from elsewhere certainly suggests that shawms and slide trumpets might have been a likely combination for Coventry's wind band into the sixteenth century. In fact, trumpets are recorded as contributing to the soundscape of Coventry throughout our period, with both local players and visiting trumpet bands participating in civic and semi-secular occasions such as Coventry's pageant plays, the town lottery, and several royal visits. There is trumpet iconography aplenty in our surviving historic spaces and if you click the images of Holy Trinity and the Guildhall in Figures 2 and 3, you'll be able to look around the digital twins of both these buildings and perhaps even spot a trumpet or too (top tip: you'll need to look up!).

A second strand of research involving brass instruments relates to their participation in liturgical music, with enough evidence spanning our period to suggest that experimentation in this area could prove really interesting. Before our study period begins, the musicians—specifically the trumpeters—of both the Earl of Warwick (Warwick is located just 12 miles from Coventry) and the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield are associated with the performance of polyphonic vocal music—again suggesting the use of slide trumpets—possibly in a liturgical function at the Council of Constance (see more in David Fallows, *Dufay*, revised paperback edition (London: Dent, 1987), p. 19). In 1475 and 1541 we have records relating to Trinity Sunday, a major festival of the Corpus Christi Guild in Coventry, suggesting that the city waits were employed together with the singers of St. John's Bablake, Coventry's guild church, contributing to the celebration of this important day. Circumstantial evidence places wind instruments in early Elizabethan parish

churches, and we know that English cathedrals from the early seventeenth century onwards were regular employers of cornett and sackbut players. Whilst we are certainly dealing with fragmentary evidence for Coventry itself, our VR spaces give us the opportunity to ask, for example, "if these practices happened, what might they have sounded like in their architectural context?" and to ask ourselves and our research participants for responses to these scenarios. There are also many research questions around vocal performance practice, and the use of organs spanning our time period and we will be using our case studies to examine the interaction between voices and instruments at several key moments of change. And whilst this project may sound very "virtual" at first, we will be integrating live performance into our work. Would you like to give the reader some details on that?

HR: Absolutely! Although the workflow for adding performances into our virtual spaces involves primarily studio recording, we will be bringing some of our research repertoire to live audiences in the Coventry area at several stages of the project. We will be presenting a promenade concert featuring performances in St Mary's Guildhall, Holy Trinity Church, and the streets in between in the summer of 2024 to enable local people to experience a wide cross-section of the musical styles and practices we are working with. His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts will be participating in an evensong at Holy Trinity later this year, and we are planning a closing project concert at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in 2025 showcasing some of the virtual models the project will produce. Our partnership with the outreach team at St Mary's means that our planned educational workshops for school children will be co-facilitated by expert public engagement professionals and our [new website](#) means that everyone involved in the project or with an interest in Coventry's cultural heritage will be able to keep up to date with what we are doing. Live performance is an integral part of ensuring that our project involves local people in research about the place in which they live, and we are very lucky to be supported by our Coventry-based partners in this respect.

JS: And finally, can you tell me what excites you most about this project?

HR: As a cornettist researching English performance practices, I often find myself dealing with tiny corners of our repertoire, many of which are quite rarely



Figure 3: Interior of St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry, showing minstrels gallery (reached by modern staircase) and carved angel musicians on ceiling.

represented in modern performance despite the widespread use of the cornett in civic and cathedral bands and in court ensembles (Henry VIII owned 18 of the things!) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. So, I'm particularly keen to explore the possible, the probable, and the plausible in the use of the cornett in English music from this period and to embrace the possibility of undocumented uses of instruments in a variety of contexts. The concept of research in a virtual space also fascinates me and I'm looking forward to thinking more about what we gain and lose from this type of work in historical musicology. How about you?

JS: For me the most exciting aspect is the opportunity to bring our work on historical wind instruments and performance practices into dialogue with other disciplines—so that we can better understand their role within the context of much broader historical changes, be they social, political, religious or architectural. These changes were profound, yet somehow the Coventry waits retained a central role in civic life from the earliest records in the fifteenth century right through to the English Civil War and beyond. They were clearly an integral part

of the communities they served, and I find their story of resilience against the odds something of an inspiration!■

Jamie Savan is Professor of Performance-led Research in Music at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, Birmingham City University, where he leads the AHRC-funded research project "[Aural Histories: Coventry c.1451-1642](#)". His research interests are principally in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century performance practice and applied organology. As a performer he is best known for his work as founder-director of [The Gonzaga Band](#) and as a member of His Majesty's Sagbutts & Cornetts.

Helen Roberts is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Associate Lecturer in the Arts and Humanities at the Open University. She runs Septenary Editions, a small publishing house for critical performance editions of historical repertoire, and developed [Passaggi](#), the improvisation and ornamentation app for historical performers. She has published on [seventeenth-century English cathedral wind bands](#) and on the wind instrumental music of the [Loosemore Organ Book](#). Helen is also a member of His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts and enjoys a varied international career as a freelance cornettist.



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