

# Midsummer Music for Medieval Coventry

Sunday 23rd June 2024

St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry

7-8pm

The Binchois Consort

Members of His Majestys Sagbutts and Cornetts

## 1451

Walter Frye (d. 1475?) – Ave Regina  
caelorum

John Dunstaple (c.1390-1423) – Puisque  
m'amour

Ian Harrison – Basse danse 'Caput'

Te Deum (faburden)

Anon – Missa Caput: Kyrie & Agnus Dei

## 1528

Anon – The Base of Spayne

Hugh Aston (c.1485-1558) – Maske

Robert Fayrfax (1464-1521) – O lux  
beata trinitas

Hugh Aston – Gaude virgo mater  
Christi

Laudate pueri (faburden)

This concert is part of the 'Aural Histories: Coventry 1451-1642' research project, exploring the experience of music in late-medieval and early-modern Coventry. Next week we will record this music so that it can be heard within digital reconstructions of Coventry's historic buildings as they might have appeared at various stages in the past. The music in this evening's programme focuses on two chronological 'slices' at the early end of our period: 1451 and 1528.

## Wind music

Coventry employed a band of four professional wind players known as 'waits' from at least 1423 until 1615 when their number was expanded to five. A city decree from 1439 stated that the leader of the ensemble should be a trumpeter, and we can assume that the band would have included at least two shawm players at this time. The fourth part could have been assigned either to another shawm or trumpet, and we have chosen the latter because there is evidence that musicians in the orbit of Coventry were in the vanguard of the development of chromatic brass instruments in the early decades of the fifteenth century. At the Council of Constance in 1415, for instance, the trumpeters of the Earl of Warwick caused astonishment for playing 'together in three parts, in the way that one normally sings'; while in 1416 the trumpeters of the Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield played together with singers at Vespers for the Feast of St Thomas. We can assume, therefore, that these were not just ordinary 'natural' trumpets: they must have been equipped with slides to be able to participate in the sophisticated polyphony of the day.

Coventry's four-part line-up is slightly at odds with the prevailing three-part texture in much secular polyphony of the mid-fifteenth century. In our selection of music that might have been played by Coventry's waits in 1451 we include Walter Frye's famous *Ave Regina caelorum*, which was originally a three-part setting, but exists in a Verona manuscript with an added fourth part, adapted here to fit the range of the slide trumpet. Similarly, Ian Harrison has composed a fourth part to John Dunstaple's rondeau, *Puisque m'amours*. We imagine that a skilled wind player of the time might have improvised such a part. Extending the idea of what might have been 'improvisable' in this period, Ian Harrison has devised an ingenious *basse danse* based on the tenor of the *Missa Caput*.

By the 1520s the instrumental line-up is likely to have changed somewhat. The double-slide trombone (known as the sackbut in England) had by now superseded the more cumbersome single-slide trumpet and by virtue of its additional length could now play true bass lines. At the treble end of the ensemble the cornett was known in England from at least the early 1500s, especially in courtly circles. Two alto shawms complete the line-up for 1528, covering the inner voices. We present two different dances: the anonymous *Base of Spayne* is another *basse dance*, of the type that would have been familiar at court (it is preserved in the famous 'Henry VIII Manuscript'; while Hugh Aston's *Maske* is based on a ground bass pattern, and since Aston is known to have lived and worked in Coventry around 1520, it is not out of the question that it might have been played – and danced – in St Mary's Hall around this time. Transcriptions of vocal music were, however, still likely the staple fare of wind players at this time so we finish this set with a transcription of Robert Fayrfax's *O lux beata trinitas* which lends itself beautifully to an instrumental setting.

Jamie Savan

## Vocal music

### 1451

The anonymous English *Missa Caput* was one of the most revered compositions of the fifteenth century. This much is clear enough from the fact that it has survived in no fewer than seven manuscripts, more than for any other Mass composition written before the 1480s. But its importance is measurable in far more than just the number of copies that have happened to escape destruction. It was also a piece that had a major impact on other composers of the day. At least two composers – Ockeghem and Obrecht – used it as a model for Masses of their own. Its impact went a lot further than this, however: it was a key work in spawning a whole range of Masses by Continental composers constructed on similar lines, and it seems to have been one of the earliest pieces to have added a fourth, low bass part to the three-part texture that was standard around the time that it was composed (probably in the 1440s), and was hence an early forerunner of our standard modern texture of soprano, alto, tenor and bass.

Most English manuscripts of music of the period were lost to the destruction of the Reformation; only fragments remain, and it is therefore particularly exciting that one of them survives in Coventry, in the form of a single leaf including part of the Mass's *Agnus Dei*. The Coventry origin of this leaf, all but guaranteed from its use as binding material for the Coventry Leet Book, begs questions as to its use in this important city, the repeated setting in the 1450s for the Lancastrian royal court. While devotional and ceremonial contexts for the *Caput* Masses were surely diverse, one likely application was as implicit praise to a king, a 'head' of the church here on earth as follower and adumbration of the ultimate 'head', Christ. We are unlikely ever to know for sure any

specific occasions on which this great and influential piece was heard. One known possibility presents itself with real plausibility, however: the High Mass performed in St Michael's church (the former Coventry Cathedral) attended by Henry VI in 1451 and described in the Leet Book in whose binding the fragment was found. It is as part of our re-enactment of this great occasion that we showcase it in our project, and in the context of which we present two movements (the *Kyrie* and *Agnus*) this evening.

A grand entry into the church by the King would surely have involved a festal *Te Deum*: we present for you tonight our notional reconstruction of this salient greeting to a great personage, using the contemporary technique of *faburden* (parallel chords extrapolated from the plainchant, in our performance a counterpoint 'square' from the somewhat later Gyffard part books). The whole panoply of voices and instruments available to the City would surely have been drawn into this great paean, including boys (here represented by female voices) and wind instruments, along with organ as the King entered the building, bedecked as it surely would have been by banners and tapestries.

Andrew Kirkman

## 1528

The 1520s were the high-water mark for English church music, especially for civic churches such as St Michael's and Holy Trinity. Church musicians' jobs were plentiful, diverse, rewarding, respected and seemingly secure, and parishes invested heavily in their musical traditions. The biggest single investment was in the purchase of organs, and the contract of 17 December 1526, between the churchwardens of Holy Trinity and the builders John Clymmowe and John Howe, is one of the most important documents around Tudor organ-building. Guy Speke, one of the churchwardens, had been a singing man at the neighbouring Benedictine cathedral priory of St Mary since 1515. Speke lived in Cross Cheaping according to the 1522 muster roll, one of a series of revealing tax records compiled in response to Cardinal Wolsey's fiscal experiments.

Organ-playing was one of three core skills that Guy Speke and his musician colleagues were expected to acquire. The basic skill was in singing and reading plainsong (indeed, 'song' was synonymous with primary education). Singing plainsong was the backbone of a Tudor choir singer's daily workload. The next skill was in improvising simple polyphony or 'faburden' upon the chant. After that came 'pricksong', or singing pieces composed in more complex rhythmic notation. Organ playing and the craft of composition were taught to the older and more advanced learners. This skill set is specified in the employment contracts of Tudor choir trainers throughout England and beyond.

Two items in today's programme illustrate *faburden* and *pricksong* as they might have been experienced in 1528. One of the most distinctive events in the church calendar was the procession after Vespers on Easter Sunday, when the clergy and choir processed down the nave of the church to the font at its west end. On the way there and back they sang processional psalms 113 and 114 (*Laudate pueri* and *In exitu Israel*). These were commonly embellished with *faburden*, based on rhythmicized melodies (or 'squares') derived from the chant. One source for these squares is a Processional given by Archdeacon William Admondeston to Lichfield Cathedral in the 1420s. In this book, the plainsong verses (2, 4, 6, 8 etc) has been erased and replaced with 'squares' for the improvising singers, while the odd-numbered verses have been marked 'Organa' - a clear allusion to the tradition of alternating organs and voices; in this evening's performance the role of the organ is taken by the wind instruments.

The second item is an ambitious piece of ‘pricksong’ by a native of the West Midlands, Hugh Aston. Aston is known among musicologists as the man who declined Cardinal Wolsey’s invitation to become the inaugural choirmaster of Cardinal College (now Christ Church), Oxford – that post was taken up in 1526 by the equally reluctant John Taverner of Boston. Aston remained at the lavish collegiate church of St Mary Newarke, Leicester, until its dissolution in 1548. He may well have begun his career in Coventry, however: in 1520, the dean and chapter of St Mary’s, Warwick, paid Aston’s expenses to and from Coventry when he advised them on the purchase of a new organ. Aston’s five-voice *Gaude virgo mater Christi* is a classic example of an early-Tudor ‘votive antiphon’ or motet of praise and prayer addressed to a named saint (in 90% of cases, the Virgin Mary). In this case, two versions of the text survive, one addressed to Mary, the other to her mother, Anne, whose cult flourished in the late middle ages. The long text is segmented and then set to contrasting sections of polyphony, with sections for full choir alternating with ‘counter-verses’ for reduced numbers of voices.

Magnus Williamson

‘Aural Histories: Coventry 1451-1642’ is an interdisciplinary research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Hosted by Royal Birmingham Conservatoire at Birmingham City University, with academic partners at the University of Birmingham, Newcastle University and London Metropolitan University, it brings together researchers with specialisms in musicology and historical performance, architectural history, acoustics and sound recording, 3D computer modelling and computer games design. Holy Trinity Church is a community partner, with the Binchois Consort and His Majestys Sagbutts & Cornetts as collaborating ensembles. The project runs from 2022-25. Please follow the QR code below for further information about the research as it unfolds.

## The Binchois Consort

Amy Haworth – soprano  
Katie Trethewey – soprano  
David Allsopp – alto  
Tom Lilburn – alto  
Dominic Bland – tenor  
Nick Madden – tenor  
George Pooley – tenor  
Matthew Vine – tenor  
Jimmy Holliday – bass  
Sam Mitchell – bass

Andrew Kirkman - conductor

## Members of His Majestys Sagbutts & Cornetts

Helen Roberts – cornett  
Ian Harrison – shawm  
William Lyons – shawm  
Jamie Savan – slide trumpet  
David Yacus – slide trumpet and sackbut

 **Aural Histories**  
Coventry 1451-1642



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