

Church music in English towns 1450–1550: an interim report

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In the towns of late medieval England (where perhaps 10 per cent of the population may have lived) the parish churches were being continuously expanded, adapted and decorated. Chantry and fraternity chapels were added between the nave pillars, or at the eastern ends of the aisles and here, as well as at the high altar, masses were celebrated and prayers recited with incessant devotion by the living for the repose of the souls of those who had died. These intercessory services, together with those of the usual liturgical round which took place in the choir and in the nave, were increasingly accompanied by complex polyphonic music involving several singers, both men and boys, and the playing of organs which were becoming ubiquitous in medieval parish churches. The development of this dynamic parish music has been detected, but not much studied. In part this is the result of the failure of urban historians and musicologists to talk to each other. Historians of late medieval religion have recently been exploring the diversity and sophistication of parochial devotional practices and have reaffirmed the importance of religious guilds and chantry foundations in enriching the liturgical practices of the parish, but they have paid little attention to music, and none to the impact of church music on civic ceremonial and the legitimating processes of urban rulers.¹ Musicologists who have worked on the music of the English church have been, until very recently, comparatively uninterested in what happened beyond the interior of the church and, in any case, more interested in the great royal and collegiate foundations from which some music has survived.² The surprising conclusion is that, for both urban historians and musicologists, the connected argument that links religious ritual, broadly defined, with the spatial and social dimensions of life and work in towns barely yet exists.

A group of historians (Caroline Barron and Clive Burgess) and

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¹ There are very few references to music to be found in one of the most adventurous recent assessments of pre-Reformation piety, E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992).

² For example, most of the complete, or near-complete pre-Reformation English manuscripts of polyphony, including the Old Hall manuscript (London, British Library, Add. MS 57950), the Eton Choirbook (Eton College, MS 178), and the Lambeth Choirbook (Lambeth Palace, MS 1).

musicologists (Andrew Wathey and Fiona Kisby) based at Royal Holloway, University of London, decided to try to bring these two approaches together. In 1999 they successfully applied to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a two-year grant to explore the evidence for urban parochial music in later medieval England, and to consider the impact of musical developments both on the practice of the liturgy inside the churches, and on the development of civic ceremonial and ritual in the social institutions of the towns. The funding ended in 2001, but a further one-year grant has been made by the AHRB to explore further some of the issues which the research has raised, in particular to consider the role played by patrons such as monastic houses, bishops and guilds in developing church music in towns.

The original research focused on particular towns: London, Bristol, Reading, Lynn, Warwick, Winchester, Louth and Boston. The results of this work will, in due course, appear in a four-part monograph which will comprise 'Urban identity and urban geography' to be written by Andrew Wathey, 'The musical workforce in the parish church' by Clive Burgess, 'The practice of the liturgy inside the parish church' by Fiona Kisby and 'The impact of church music on the urban spaces' by Caroline Barron. It is intended here to give a brief account of how the team has gone about its work, together with some idea of the questions we have posed of the material and some preliminary findings.

In looking at 'Urban identity and urban geography' Wathey has noted significant advances in three closely-related areas of late medieval study. Religious historians have rehabilitated the late medieval English church and have examined parish life and management to explain the striking popular response to spiritual imperatives in the localities;³ urban historians have mapped the community and cultural dynamics of pre-industrial towns;⁴ and musicologists have begun to study the roles played by musicians in towns,⁵ and have increasingly sought urban contexts for repertoires and activities that were formerly studied largely in the setting of the court.⁶ The first tasks have been to analyse current

³ On the doctrine underpinning this responses, see C. Burgess, "'A fond thing vainly invented": an essay on purgatory and pious motive in late medieval England', in S. Wright (ed.), *Parish, Church and People* (London, 1988), 56–84; for case studies of London and Bristol, see idem, 'Shaping the parish: St Mary at Hill London in the fifteenth century', in J. Blair and B. Golding (eds), *The Cloister and the World: Essays in Medieval History in Honour of Barbara Harvey* (Oxford, 1996), 246–86 and idem, "'By quick and by dead": wills and pious provision in late medieval Bristol', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), 837–51.

⁴ F. Kisby, 'Musical culture in English towns to c.1600: research perspectives, sources and methodologies', in A. Edler and J. Kremer (eds), *Niedersachsen in der Musikgeschichte zur Methodologie und organization Musikalischer Regionalgeschichtsforschung* (Augsburg, 2000), 83–104.

⁵ See F. Kisby (ed.), *Music and Musicians in Renaissance Cities and Towns* (Cambridge, 2000).

⁶ See F. Kisby, 'Royal minstrels in the city and suburbs of early Tudor London: professional activities and private interests', *Early Music*, 25 (1997), 199–221; idem, 'The music and musicians of early Tudor Westminster', *Early Music*, 23 (1995), 223–41.

constructions of the 'map', in both historical and musicological traditions, and to review the potential contribution of different forms of evidence. We have sought to essay a tentative framework for the study of vocal polyphony in English urban environments, testing the assumptions implicit in the standard model of production, circulation and consumption against the realities of the way in which the musical repertoires were used.⁷

It is arguable that the wealthy were more generous towards the English church in the century or more preceding the Reformation than at any time since. In musicological studies, the consequences of this influx of resource are only just beginning to be examined. Earlier attempts to frame the 'map' were more restrictive, constructing institutions as isolated, constitutionally-defined entities, and paying little attention to their capacity for interaction, even in dense urban environments such as London.⁸ Institutional size and wealth were important, but they were not the unique passport to an involvement with composed polyphony. Nor can a linkage – often presumed – between hierarchies of size and of musical sophistication in consumption be substantiated. Parishes and hospitals, for example, acquired polyphonic music (some of it highly elaborate) by a variety of means.⁹ In many cases churches appear to have acquired new polyphony by borrowing or copying from other institutions.¹⁰ Networks of personal connections between towns, and between singers and parishioners within towns, were inevitably vital to this process. Consumption has thus been reconstructed as a workforce issue, particularly where provision was informal, or performance was not based on written copies. So it has been found that the consumers were not churches but, at one level, singers themselves and, at another, those members of urban communities who supported the experience of which composed polyphony formed a part.

It is this workforce of singers which has formed the focus of Burgess's research. The problem here lies in the limited nature of the available evidence. Much of the surviving material which has been used for this study was created by the laity for purposes other than depicting contemporary liturgical practice. Wills were concerned about arrangements at death and largely take for granted the liturgy that would have been available in any given parish. But they do, often, yield valuable information about the numbers of priests or clerks available for post obit

⁷ For a preliminary discussion of these 'maps', see C. Burgess and A. Wathey, 'Mapping the soundscape: church music in English towns, 1450–1550', *Early Music History*, 19 (2000), 1–46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9–19.

⁹ A. Wathey, 'Lost books of polyphony in medieval England: a list to 1500', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 21 (1988), 1–19; *idem*, 'The production of books of liturgical polyphony', in D. Pearsall and J. Griffiths (eds), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475* (Cambridge, 1989), 143–61.

¹⁰ Burgess and Wathey, 'Mapping the soundscape', 37–8.

services, and about chantry foundations.¹¹ Churchwardens' accounts (which survive for some one hundred urban parishes from the period before the Reformation) were compiled to prove the care with which the laity of the parish had maintained the buildings and endowments, and the vessels and vestments necessary for the seemly celebration of the liturgy. The accounts, therefore, may reveal when extra singers were paid to sing at specified feasts, or the amounts spent on purchasing music or for the upkeep of musical instruments, but they are far from telling the whole story.¹² A careful reading of these accounts reveals just how much is left out: much of the liturgical provision in churches appears to have been the responsibility of a group of 'elder statesmen' in the parish (sometimes known as 'the masters' or 'the worshipful') who were responsible to the whole body of parishioners but whose accounts very seldom survive.

But if the information to be derived from wills and churchwardens' accounts is combined and then considered in conjunction with other material kept in parish archives, such as inventories, deeds and memoranda books, then it becomes clear that urban parishes benefited from generous endowments and expanding incomes. This money was used to pay for extra permanent staff and to buy music, instruments and extra musicians when required.¹³ A high level of musical competence in urban parishes was not only deemed desirable but also necessary. So, not only were urban churches employers of musicians on a large scale, but the linked study of the records of a variety of parish churches and other religious institutions has revealed the flexible nature of this urban workforce. The same singers can be found in different churches, and also working in royal and collegiate institutions: William Wytney and William Brigeman, from All Saints Bristol, sang also at Warwick and at Eton.¹⁴ It was these singers who often doubled as copyists, because their musical skills were required to ensure the textual integrity and coherence of the final product. So these men not only took their performance skills from one urban parish to another, but they also took with them their music. In this way the flexible urban workforce of skilled musicians not only homogenized musical performance in towns but also carried new liturgical practices and devotions from one parish to another.

Fiona Kisby has been studying this interplay of musical and liturgical innovation within the urban parish church. Although several towns have

¹¹ See, for example, H. Baillie, 'A London church in early Tudor times', *Music and Letters*, 36 (1955), 55–64.

¹² The limitations of churchwardens' accounts are explored more fully in C. Burgess, 'Pre-Reformation churchwardens' accounts and parish government: lessons from London and Bristol', *English Historical Review* (April 2002, forthcoming).

¹³ For the ways in which a comparatively poor urban parish made provision for additional music, see C. Burgess (ed.), *The Church Records of St Andrew Hubbard Eastcheap c.1450 – 1570* (London Record Society, 1999), index, under 'music'.

¹⁴ For Wytney, see Wathey, 'Lost books', 11; for Brigeman, see Burgess and Wathey, 'Mapping the soundscape', 34.

been studied, the focus has been particularly on Reading which had three parishes all of which have left some records from the medieval period.¹⁵ There are also over a hundred wills and some administrative and financial records from the town itself.¹⁶ In the past musicologists, interested in parochial music, have not explored such a wide range of documentation. A close reading of the surviving churchwardens' accounts from the parish of St Lawrence, when compared with the extant pre-Reformation Sarum service books, sheds light on the cycles of feasts of the *Temporale* and *Sanctorale* that constituted the main liturgical calendar which provided the main framework for parish worship in Reading. To a limited extent entries in the accounts reveal the ceremonial customs, both sacred and secular (including annual plays and community games) associated with these celebrations. This provides some indication, in the absence of surviving music, of the feast days when polyphony (both pre-composed and improvised) was likely to have been performed for both the Mass and the Office. But to obtain a fuller picture it is necessary to use also the surviving wills which fill out the picture of liturgical provision and practice. Moreover the detailed parish inventories of St Lawrence's (1503, 1517, 1523–24) and St Mary's (1473) churches reveal the role played by parishioners in maintaining and embellishing the liturgy and its associated musical ceremonial.¹⁷ But this study will focus particularly on the shape and arrangement of the church buildings in Reading, particularly St Lawrence's where the number and variety of its chapels and shrines not only determined the parameters of religious ritual and ceremonial, but also defined the acoustic environment and the locations in which music was performed.

It is becoming clear that the richness and variety of musical provision within urban churches in the medieval period was not confined within their walls or even their churchyards or their parishes. The liturgical practices, the music itself and the performers moved out into the urban environment at large, and influenced the development of civic ceremonial in a variety of ways. Although the focus of Caroline Barron's research has been upon London, civic ceremony in other towns has also been considered.

In the fourth section the ways in which English towns began, from the fourteenth century onwards, to develop civic ceremonial to express their sense of autonomy and self-government has been studied. It seems clear that towns used the forms of ceremony and liturgy to be found in the church to create the visual drama that was largely, although not exclusively, out of doors and perambulatory. It had been customary in

¹⁵ Berkshire Record Office, MSS D/P 96/5/1; 98/2/1–3; 97/5/2; 97/5/1.

¹⁶ Most of this material is preserved at the Berkshire Record Office, and is usefully listed and described in P. Rixon, 'The town of Reading 1200–1542' (unpublished University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1999).

¹⁷ Berkshire Record Office, D/P 97/5/2 pp. 41, 67, 61 and D/P 98/6/2/2.

England, from the late eleventh century, for the celebrations on Palm Sunday to include a procession in which a tabernacle containing the Host was carried outside the church by clerics, flanked by men and boys carrying flags, palms, crosses, incense, relics and torches. At Hereford in the mid-fourteenth century, the sacrament and relics were taken outside the city walls on Palm Sunday and were then brought back amidst chants, to be greeted by a small choir of boys on top of the city gate singing *Gloria Laus*.¹⁸ But the major extra-mural procession of the medieval church was that of Corpus Christi and by the early fourteenth century 'in most towns and parishes a processional enterprise dominated the day'.¹⁹ The Sarum processional provided the liturgy, using hymns such as the *Salve festa dies*.²⁰ Increasingly these Corpus Christi processions were taken over in towns by groups of lay people who used the occasion of the great festival procession to express and emphasize concerns of their own.²¹ The importance of music at Corpus Christi celebrations can be seen in the payments for singers recorded in the accounts of churchwardens.²² As the church festivals developed their extra-mural aspects, not surprisingly these religious processions came to have an influence on the character of civic ceremonies of royal welcome, or the inauguration of a town's elected bailiff or mayor. And the role played by music in these ceremonies is becoming increasingly apparent.

In London it is possible to pinpoint the year in which music became a part of the annual mayoral election process. In October 1406 the mayor, John Wodecock, decided that before the election of the next mayor took place in Guildhall, the outgoing mayor, aldermen and 'as many as possible of the wealthier and more substantial commoners of the city' should first attend a mass of the Holy Spirit to be celebrated with music in Guildhall chapel, so that the commoners, whose task it was to nominate two aldermen from whom the aldermen themselves would choose the next mayor, might be able to carry this out 'peacefully and amicably . . . by favour of the clemency of Our Saviour'.²³ All went according to plan and the commoners were able, without dispute, to nominate two men to the mayor and aldermen who 'by the guidance of

¹⁸ E. Bishop, *Liturgica Historica: Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western Church* (Oxford, 1918), 279–88.

¹⁹ M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), 243.

²⁰ T. Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and the Western Church* (Toronto, 1971), esp. ch. 2.

²¹ For a rich discussion of the development and meaning of these urban Corpus Christi processions, see Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 243–71; see also, G. Rosser, 'Myth, image and social process in the English medieval town', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 5–25, esp. 18–19.

²² See, for example, C. Burgess (ed.), *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints' Bristol: Part 2: The Churchwardens' Accounts* (Bristol, 2000), index, 377.

²³ H.T. Riley, *Memorials of London and London Life* (London, 1868), 565–66. It is possible that the Londoners may have been influenced in introducing a mass of the Holy Spirit by the practice of Bruges where, in 1395, John de Waghenare had endowed a foundation to celebrate a Holy Ghost mass in St Donatian's church on the day of the renewal of the magistracy: see A. Brown, 'Civic ritual: Bruges and the Counts of Flanders in the later Middle Ages', *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), 277–99, esp. 284.

the Holy Spirit' chose Richard Whittington who was presented to the assembled commoners in Guildhall. It was then decided that every mayoral election in future should be preceded by a 'solemn mass with music' to be 'solemnly chaunted by the finest singers in the chapel aforesaid'.²⁴

Guildhall chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, St Mary Magdalen and All Saints had been expanded into a College for five priests in 1356, and in the intervening years it appears that the establishment there had been augmented by at least a further three chantry foundations, so there would have been a reasonable core of singers able to provide the polyphonic mass of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ Before his death in 1442 the Common Clerk (town clerk) John Carpenter agreed with his executors that they should hand over some of his very extensive estate to the mayor and commonalty of London to fund in perpetuity 'four boys born within the city of London who shall be called in the vulgar tongue "Carpenter's Children" to assist at divine service in the choir of [Guildhall] chapel on festival days and to study at schools most convenient to them on ferial days'. Carpenter went on to make detailed provision for feeding and clothing the boys, who were to be provided also with a tutor to oversee their washing and shaving.²⁶ Although it is likely that the funding of four boy choristers/scholars at Guildhall chapel began soon after Carpenter's death, the property to support this bequest was not finally handed over to the mayor and Commonalty until 1477 under the will of John Don, mercer. The Guildhall chapel was being slowly rebuilt during the 1430s and 1440s and its unfinished state may have made Carpenter's executors reluctant to hand over his property to the College whose priests served the chapel. However, the rebuilt chapel was dedicated in October 1444, just two years after Carpenter's death, and the warden and priests were commanded to perform the divine service daily with music.²⁷

On the eve of the Reformation it would seem that the minimum complement of staff at Guildhall College was the warden, two priests, one tutor, four boys and two clerks (presumably singers).²⁸ But these were only those staff funded out of Carpenter's bequest and there were earlier endowments of the chapel which would have provided further priests. Moreover in 1525 William Lewes, lately a verger at St Paul's cathedral, was appointed to look after the choir and to play the organ in the chapel at an annual salary of £4, and John How, 'the most important

²⁴ Riley, *Memorials*, 566.

²⁵ C.M. Barron, *The Medieval Guildhall of London* (London, 1974), 23–24 and n. 67.

²⁶ P.E. Jones (ed.), *Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls 1458–1482* (Cambridge, 1961), xi–xiii, xix–xxi, 127–31.

²⁷ Corporation of London Record Office (CLRO), Journal 4 f.53v, 54, 55v.

²⁸ See the chamberlains' accounts for 1585–86: B.R. Masters (ed.), *Chamber Accounts of the Sixteenth Century* (London Record Society, 1984), 105–16.

organ builder in England throughout this period',²⁹ was paid 2s a year in 1536 for 'keeping and tending the organs in the Guildhall chapel'.³⁰ So it would have been possible for the mass at the mayoral election, and the services on other feast days, to have been sung in some style. When Mary restored Catholic worship in England in 1553, the Court of Aldermen resumed the payment to the guild of Parish Clerks of their 'old accustomed fee' of 6s 8d for singing the Mass of the Holy Ghost on Michaelmas Day in Guildhall chapel before the election of the new mayor.³¹

But it is clear that it was not only Colleges like that at the London Guildhall which were able to provide groups of singers to perform polyphonic music. There was, of course, the large complement of minor canons, vicars choral and chantry priests serving St Paul's cathedral, and the members of the royal household chapel were often to be found singing at a range of different services in the city. The fluidity of the urban musical workforce, to which reference has already been made, enabled the civic governors to draw on a wide range of talent operating in English towns.³² Moreover in London the professional lay singing men, or parish clerks, formed themselves into a fraternity or guild, dedicated to St Nicholas. It is clear that, certainly from 1384 and probably earlier, 'the clerks of London' performed plays at Clerkenwell north of the city, apparently depicting, over several days in the summer, the story of the Creation, the Passion and the Day of Judgement.³³ It may be significant that at exactly the time when John Carpenter was providing for choristers to sing in Guildhall chapel, the fraternity of the Parish Clerks in London agreed with John Chichele, the chamberlain of London, that they would fund a priest to sing at all the services in Guildhall chapel.³⁴ The Parish Clerks formed a professional 'union' for

²⁹ Baillie, 'A London church in early Tudor times', 55–64, 58.

³⁰ Barron, *Medieval Guildhall*, 40 and n. 195. Mr Lawes was appointed because 'good service is greatly decayed in the chapel at Guildhall', CLRO, Repertory 7 f.59; Masters, *Chamber Accounts*, 120.

³¹ J. Christie, *Some Account of the Parish Clerks, more especially of the Ancient Fraternity of St Nicholas now known as the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks* (London, 1893), 127.

³² Burgess and Wathey, 'Mapping the soundscape', 9–24.

³³ The scattered references to these performances between 1384 and 1410–11 are conveniently collected in I. Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain: A Chronological Topography to 1558* (Toronto, 1984), 113. It may be that the guild began to perform indoors also by the end of the period: a message which had belonged to the clerks called 'Le Wrastlers', in the parish of St Ethelburga just inside Bishopsgate, was sold in 1553, *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward VI 1547–53*, vol. 5 (London, 1926), 43.

³⁴ 22 Dec. 1443. In addition to providing a priest, the fraternity paid the city £20; in return 28 of their members were to be admitted to the freedom of the city (since it was not possible for them to achieve the freedom via the usual route of apprenticeship): see Christie, *Some Account of the Parish Clerks*, 108–9. The clerks secured their first charter in Jan. 1442 and, in their second charter seven years later, they agreed to maintain two chaplains and seven poor people to offer prayers in Guildhall chapel. In 1475 the number of chaplains was reduced to two because of the poverty of the fraternity: *ibid.*, 25–9.

all the clerks who were employed, not only in the city's churches and colleges, but also in the Chapel Royal.³⁵ John Fisher was a member of the fraternity in the 1490s and was employed later in the Chapel Royal; Walter Fry joined the guild in 1455/56, was employed in the household of Anne, duchess of Exeter, and may well also have had a link with St Paul's.³⁶ Judging by bequests in wills this guild was, without doubt, the most popular guild in medieval London.³⁷ This was because testators wanted the clerks to sing in their funeral processions and at their burials. Alderman Nicholas James who died in 1498 specifically requested that the brotherhood of Parish Clerks of the City of London should accompany his body to the church and attend the funeral mass.³⁸ It was the parish clerks, above all, who took the music of the churches out into the streets and urban spaces of London.

Our initial work has revealed the richness of the material which can be brought into play to answer questions about the musical provision in medieval urban churches. It is clear that the quantity and the diversity of musical activity have been underestimated by the traditional approaches to music and liturgy in English institutions. The quest for documentary certainty may in part be responsible for this. It may also be the result of historians and musicologists working on largely separate tramlines. It is now clear to us that the urban church (and the music performed within it) was much more fully integrated than previously thought, into its surrounding community, and it was also effectively linked to other churches, and to collegiate foundations, religious houses and the royal court. We have spent two years mapping the music of urban parish churches and it is our intention to produce a published study, based on this research, which will place those musical performances on the map, and the agenda, of urban historians.

³⁵ See the guild ordinances of 25 Jan. 1529: *ibid.*, 65–71.

³⁶ Burgess and Wathey, 'Mapping the soundscape', 21–2.

³⁷ H. Baillie, 'A London guild of musicians, 1460–1530', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 83 (1956–57), 15–28.

³⁸ R.R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London 1258–1688*, 2 vols (London, 1890), vol. 2, 598.